

Mr. Contentment and your five wooden cups

from United4Truth

How far have we fallen?

It was a late fall Sunday afternoon in Columbus, Wisconsin. The local neighborhood was dotted with colorful oak and maple leaves blowing back and forth between the sidewalk and the roughly paved street. In the distance you could hear the sounds of kids playing, dogs barking, and sometimes parents yelling.

Sit here for a few minutes in silence and you can't help but feel an atmosphere of quiet satisfaction among the residents.

A strange and unlikely setting for the beginning of one man's simple yet culture defying quest. But remember, God-sent reformation can begin in the most unlikely of places.

So, come with me on a journey to Christ-like simplicity and sincerity. Please leave your luggage behind, all that is needed is you.

Let's begin by taking a right on Maywood Street where you will notice a fairly large, but old, light blue house, second on the left. Walk around back and you will see a man in his late forties slouching in an old rocking chair with his feet resting on the faded white porch rail.

He is kept warm by thick blue jeans, a gray hat, and a buttoned up flannel shirt. His face looks experienced and worn, but at the same time loving and kind. His hair is partially gray and his face is covered with a light beard.

His name is James Contentment. He lives with his family at the old house on Maywood Street. He has been married to Theresa for thirteen years and has two children. Joey is a wide-eyed, blond-headed seven-year-old who has already developed a love for fishing and pine-comb battles with the neighborhood boys. Two-and-a-half-year old Susie has patchy brown hair and has a special fondness for her parents, pets and sometimes her older brother.

James works for a large steel company with offices in Milwaukee, Allenton, and Columbus. He was recently promoted to the position of foreman, managing a crew of twelve welders at the Columbus facility. Theresa was once a full-time kindergarten teacher, but for the past several years has been working part-time at the school because of the added responsibilities of her growing family.

Their story is an interesting one. Years ago, when James was in High School a classmate by the name of Theresa, whom he had teased but inwardly respected, shared the gospel with him and James became a Christian at the age of eighteen. After graduation he planned to

spend a few years in the military, which turned into almost twenty years of his life. He lived alone for a long time until he saw Theresa on a trip back home.

Neither James nor Theresa had been married before. They both giggle at how much older they are than the other parents in the neighborhood who have kids the same age as theirs.

They each share a kind, calm, and gentle demeanor. Theresa marvels at how patient James is during the everyday frustrations of life. Her father was a very angry man, but she has never heard James raise his voice in anger, not even once.

They both go to a Church down the street that consists of a little over a hundred people during Sunday worship. They attend frequently throughout the week and enjoy praying and worshipping together at Church and at home. You can't help but notice a unique sense of unity between the two of them when you are in their presence. Some say this is because of their age. Others say that they just do well together.

Today would seem like any other Sunday afternoon in the Contentment home. Church clothes hung on the back of chairs, a cool breeze blowing through two open windows, the kids playing outside, and a Christmas movie on in the dining room. An overall atmosphere of relaxation seemed to settle through the household.

James sat contently in the rocking chair that his grandfather left him after his death. He could hear the kids playing in one of the rooms toward the back of the house.

While he sat, he began to notice the sound of footsteps drawing closer and louder toward him. Suddenly the screen door to the back porch opened swiftly with a loud screech. There appeared Theresa standing in the door and staring at him. She had an interesting look on her face. She seemed kind of cheerful and her mind was obviously involved in something.

Breaking the silence, "Hey," he said. "Hey," she said and smiled. He smiled back at her and said "What?" laughingly.

She replied, "I don't know. Well, I have an odd question for you." They were now both smiling at each other, "What?" he asks again.

"If you were to die today, what would you want engraved on your tombstone tomorrow?" Theresa asked her husband.

The smile left. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Just humor me," she said lightly.

"Well," he let out a deep breath and let his mind run a little. "I don't know, Theresa, why?"

"Oh c'mon, James, it's not that big of a deal. Just tell me what first comes to your mind."

"I can't just come up with something like that on the spot. Besides, what would it matter? I would already be dead?" said James.

"Well, let's just pretend for the moment it did matter, and you had to decide right now."

"So what is your split second answer, Mr. Contentment?" Theresa put her hands on her hips, smiled and leaned over pressingly towards James.

James took another deep breath.

"I don't know.... Maybe...."

"I tried to love and serve God. I tried to love and serve my family, but, I am afraid I have failed miserably at both."

Theresa stood, stunned. Her smile left immediately. James looked forward in a blank stare. "Why on earth would you say that?" she asked.

Theresa waited for an answer, but James made no reply. She prodded him a second time in a firm voice. "James!"

"I'm not sure, Theresa," he answered.

Uncomfortable, James quickly stood up, smiled and said, "Honey, don't worry I'm fine. I think I just got a little down on myself for a second."

Theresa still looked worried. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said through a smile. "We should check on the kids."

Though James does not know it, he has for the first time stumbled upon a door that leads far and away from the land of quiet contentment and into an unknown territory that has been almost totally uncharted by modern day Christians.

Throughout history this door has been widely recognized, rarely walked through, and quickly ignored. The door out of this peaceful and content land is old and unappealing. It has no beauty at all that anyone should desire to open it or even place their hand on the knob. The door has even grown dusty due to its lack of use. Yet, it still remains and always will.

A few weeks went by in the town of Columbus. They were normal weeks, nothing major or eventful had taken place. James had taken Joey fishing the past two Saturdays and even brought Susie along once. Family and Church life continued as usual, and the comment that James made that one Sunday afternoon began to fade into the realm of slowly forgotten memories.

The next Friday was a productive day at work for Mr. Contentment. His crew finished a project that they had been working on for the past few months. He got home from work just after 6 p.m. to find Joey and Susie rushing to the door to greet him with excitement, even though he was interrupting a television show that they were attentively watching.

That evening was a little busy, but fun. Both James and Theresa got in bed at around eleven. Theresa fell fast asleep, as did James, for a few brief minutes. But suddenly, he became alert and found himself staring straight up at the ceiling.

It was during these moments that James claimed to have heard the voice of God, though he did not come to this conclusion until a few weeks later and perhaps not fully until a few years later, after all the message was confusing. Not only that, but the voice spoke with a quite whisper through his mind or perhaps it was his heart. Had he heard a loud, audible voice, sure he might have been initially frightened but it would have been far easier to commit to its' legitimacy.

James sat up in bed and whispered, "What do you mean?"

There was no answer, only silence. Within a few minutes he laid back down and fell asleep. The next morning he woke up and the thought of the voice from the night before rushed through his mind immediately. "What was that?" He thought. "Was it God's voice? Then, what on earth did He mean?"

That day James spoke with Theresa at lunch about the peculiar message. Likewise she was just as puzzled as to its meaning. Theresa told James that she would pray and fast for the Lord to give him insight and clarity into what was spoken to him.

A few days passed, but James could not shake the thought of what he had heard that night. He prayed and sought the Lord with no answer. At night he and Theresa would pray together. Theresa would continually pray, "Lord, please show my husband if that was your voice and the meaning of the message. If it wasn't, I pray that he will quickly forget about it."

For days James struggled with the Issue. Theresa was faithful in her fasting. It was not until two weeks later that light would be shed.

It was another Sunday afternoon. The family had just finished eating lunch at the round oak table in the living room. The kids were running around rambunctiously while James and Theresa sat in mostly silence with brief comments spoken every so often. James was slouched in one of the old wooden chairs. Theresa sat up straight with her elbows on the table clutching a wadded up paper towel.

Theresa glanced at the old fireplace and then upward toward the family photos hanging on the wall above it. "I think I might actually miss this place," she said. James snickered "Funny, to hear you say that, but I guess I know what you mean."

It was a little difficult talking over the kids as Joey and Susie chased each other around the house.

"Did you talk to the realtor, yesterday?" Theresa asked in a slightly louder than normal voice. "No, but I can call him Monday," replied James.

After a period of brief silence other than the kids playing, James sat up and looked helplessly at Theresa and said with a loud whisper, "Have you gotten anything?"

Theresa looked at James for a few seconds without saying anything. She timidly said, "This is going to sound strange, but I think He might use one of the children to speak to you."

"One of the children?" asked James. "But, do." The kids were now running around the table. "Hey, guys, can you go play in your room for a few minutes, your Mom and I are talking."

Joey grabbed the bottom of his dad's shirt and began to pull it, "Let's wrestle!" he yelled. James grabbed Joey's hand and pulled it off his shirt and said "OK, just give me a few minutes buddy."

He looked back at Theresa and little Joey began playing with his Dad saying, "chickeeeen boc boc bac boc."

"Let's wrestle!" Joey said again.

James looked at his son trying to act serious but couldn't help laughing. "That's it! Your gonna get it!" Joey ran and his Dad followed him quickly with purposefully loud footsteps into the upstairs bedroom. Theresa smiled while she heard the two of them laughing and playing together on the bed.

Susie ran into the room, and they both began to slowly wear out their dad. While James wrestled and tickled his kids on the bed, the words of his son echoed through his mind again and again. "Let's wrestle! Let's wrestle!"

Suddenly he realized that God was inviting him to wrestle. He then stood up and walked slowly back to the living room while each child held tightly to one of his legs. Theresa was now clearing off dishes into the plastic trash can in the kitchen. James walked to the edge of the dining room and said, "Theresa, you were right. He spoke through one of the kids... Joey."

Theresa looked up at him with a surprised and excited face. "What did He say?"

James looked at her with a straight and bewildered expression. "Well... I think God is challenging me to wrestle."

Theresa looked at James. "Like Jacob," she said. "Well, what do you think that means sweetie? How are you supposed to wrestle with God?"

James put his right hand under his chin. "Surely He will show me."

He stood for a few moments while his children pulled tightly on his jeans, Joey then said, "C'mon! Are you ready?"

Suddenly and impulsively, Mr. Contentment fell to the floor and knelt with his face to the ground. He was left in an awkward position in front of his family. His knees were in the dining room, and his face was pressed against his hands on the kitchen floor. Theresa froze with a bewildered look on her face and an old rag in her hand.

The children began to climb on his back. He neither scorned them nor pushed them away. He seemed undistracted while he whispered with his face to the ground.

"Yes"

Only a simple word. But on the inside, of a greater reality it was far more than that. At that moment James sent out an open invitation to the Lord Jesus Christ. The God who throughout history has consistently called those who love Him to abandon almost everything that could be considered their own and follow Him.

Why James? He certainly lived what he professed. Yet, deep inside there was a voice of quiet discontentment and desperation that had reached its climax at that moment on the kitchen floor. Perhaps you could call it a nagging sense, a feeling that something in one's life is a little off, distorted, or incomplete.

Theresa knelt down and put her hand on her husband's shoulder. Feeling her hand, he looked up at her while leaning back to sit on the hard floor. He held Susie in his left arm and Joey in his right.

"What are you going to do?" asked Theresa.

James replied with a gentle smile. "I'm going to fill up a bottle with water, grab my Bible, and stay up in the attic until we are finished."

Theresa replied "Okay, but it's getting late and you have to go to work tomorrow. Maybe it would be better to just spend some time each morning in prayer."

James slowly lifted his head, looked upstairs and replied with a whisper, "I can't. He's calling. I can feel it."

Theresa looked upstairs. Then James turned his attention toward Joey and Susie who had now both settled down leaning on his lap. "Hey guys I need you to listen to me for a second."

"Daddy is going to go to the room upstairs and stay there for a while. He really needs to spend some time with Jesus right now. So, I want you both to be good and do whatever your mom tells you to. OK?" They both looked at him, and Susie nodded and said, "OK, daddy."

"But for how long?" asked Joey.

"I don't know buddy, probably just an hour or two, but it could be longer than that." James looked up at Theresa. "Make sure to lock the back door tonight if I haven't come out before bed time."

Theresa nodded and then said, "But, what if you are still in there tomorrow? What about work?"

James responded, "Well, then could you call Jerry and just let him know that a situation came up and that I won't be coming in. I can't remember the last time I was even late, I'm sure he will understand. But to be honest, I feel like I will be out within an hour, maybe a little longer, no need to worry."

James then did just as he said. He filled an empty two-liter bottle on the counter with water, grabbed his bible, and slowly began walking upstairs. As he walked, exciting thoughts began racing through his mind. He began to reason that this could be the day that God would call him in to full-time ministry. He began picturing himself as a missionary in a foreign land leading Bible Studies. Or perhaps God would call him to a Bible school where he would study to become a local pastor. That thought didn't really appeal to him, so his mind began to drift back towards, missionary. He had traveled all over the world in the military and could see it as a building block that God would use to call him into the mission field.

James walked into the attic and closed the door behind him. They referred to this area as the attic, but it is really only a small, unfinished room at the end of the second floor. Two-by-fours stretch at a downward angle across the ceiling. There is a window that overlooks the local neighborhood. The dusty floor is made with a very rough looking hardwood. A light bulb hangs from the ceiling over a small wooden desk with four legs and no drawers. Stationed under the desk is a wooden chair that was painted black years ago but has now faded into an almost dark gray.

James looked at his watch, noting that it was about a quarter past seven. He then opened the door and tossed his watch outside of the room onto the hallway floor. He shut the door and walked over to the little desk. He placed the bible down on the desk and pulled the old wooden chair back to sit down. He slowly sat and let out a deep breath. He then began tapping the desk with his right index finger, debating in his mind what to do next.

He used to visit this room quite often to read and pray, but over the past few years he has opted for the back porch in the evening or living room in the morning.

James leaned over with his forehead on the desk and said softly, "Lord, I love You, and I'm here."

An hour slowly crept by as he thumbed through his Bible, looking over different verses and reading a few chapters in 1st Kings that he randomly chose with child like simplicity. He stood up after hearing thunder and slowly walked over to the window. He looked out and noticed the night was quite windy as leaves fell swiftly from the scattered trees in the neighborhood.

He stood there for a few blank minutes, crossed his arms, and slowly paced back and forth in the small room. He began to sing in a soft voice, "I love You, Lord, and I lift my voice, to worship You. Oh, my soul rejoice. Take joy my King, in what You hear. Just let it be a sweet. Mmm hmmm sound in Your ear..... I love, You, Lord and I lift mmm emm."

James sat back down at the old desk and opened up his Bible to 1st Samuel. He read through the first two chapters and then came upon the third where little Samuel was lying in bed and heard the voice of God calling him, but he thought it to be his spiritual father Eli. Eli then instructed him to go back to bed and upon hearing the voice again, simply say, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

Immediately after reading chapter three verse eleven, James put his bible on the desk with it open to the verse he had just read and got on his knees with his elbows on the desk and prayed, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

At that moment, nothing happened..... A few more minutes passed by, and he said again, "Lord, please speak, for your servant is listening." Ten more minutes passed before he noticed his knees were getting more and more uncomfortable. However, he determined to hold the position longer until the Lord spoke.

Half an hour passed by where he spent much of the time making up voices in his mind and trying to convince himself that it was God. After forty-five minutes to an hour in this position, he let out a sigh and stood up. Sad, he thought because it would have been neat had the Lord spoken to him in that moment, but he did, however feel great relief in his knees.

He walked over to the door, picked up the bottle of water, and took a few swallows. He sat down on the floor next to the door with his arms resting on his knees. He could softly hear the sound of the kids being put in bed, which meant that it was somewhere around 9:30. For a brief moment he thought about Theresa's comment to pray a little each evening instead of expecting everything all in one night.

James yawned, then stood up and walked back toward the window.

He looked up at the night sky as the outside of the window filled with raindrops. In a soft voice, he said, "Lord, I'll go wherever you want. I'll do whatever you want, Jesus just give me the word and I'm gone.... Wherever.... Whatever. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

James began to conjure up mental images of walking in to work and telling Jerry that he and his family were leaving Columbus, that God had called them into the mission field and opened a door for their departure. He began to picture himself in an exotic place and began

thinking about how rich the experience would be for Joey and Susie. He cracked a slight smile and felt a butterfly of excitement flapping in his chest.

“Lord, who would I need to contact? How would we make money? Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

James heard nothing. Two hours passed filled with pacing in a small circle, sitting at the old desk, lying on the floor and staring up at the ceiling or standing next to the window watching it rain. Thoughts raced through his mind, thoughts consisting of foreign lands, bible studies, language courses, fund-raising ideas, preaching to local natives, budget estimating, communication options with aunts and uncles back home.

But, soon his eyelids became heavy as he laid down on the hard wooden floor. The thoughts began to slow steadily until there were no more. It was now somewhere around midnight. James drifted to sleep after he whispered a few more times “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.”

James awoke the next morning to rays of sunlight streaming through the window across the little room. He walked over to the window and noticed that Theresa’s car was already gone. That meant it must be around 7 o’clock. He walked out of the room into the hallway, entering the first door on the right to use the restroom. He then returned to the attic and shut the door letting out a deep and almost exhausted breath. His back and neck were a little sore from the long night on the hard floor.

He took off his flannel shirt and placed it on the old desk with his Bible. James was a little cool with only a white tee-shirt on, but it helped to wake him up a little. He folded his hands together on top of his head, and walked slowly over to the window. He then said in a soft voice “C’mon, Lord.”

He stood by the window for a few minutes wishing he could remember a dream from the night before. He walked back over to the desk and picked up his shirt. He hung it on the back of the chair and sat down.

“Lord, why aren’t You speaking? Or, why can’t I hear You?”

He sat for a few minutes, beginning to feel a little puzzled and uncomfortable. “What am I doing?” he thought, wondering if it was selfish to sit in this room expecting God to speak to him. Was he trying to make God fit into his own schedule, into his own plans? His thoughts drifted to a time when a pastor once said to him that we pray when we want to and God answers when He wants to.

He then said in a soft voice, “Lord forgive me when I run in front of You and not behind.” He stood up, let out a brief sigh, and grabbed his shirt. He began to feel like he should have sat for a few minutes yesterday evening in the kitchen and listened to Theresa’s reasoning. He left his Bible on the desk and walked over to the door to leave and go to work.

As he placed his hand on the faded brass doorknob, he suddenly stood perfectly still for a few seconds. The phrase “don’t give up” entered into his mind. He stood there thinking... contemplating... “That has to be my own voice,” he thought. “Has to be,” he whispered out loud.

He then slowly began to turn the knob, froze still, and suddenly let go.

James is tired, hungry, and confused, but if you were to look through the lens of eternity and into the life of Mr. James Contentment you would likely reason that at that particular moment he may have made one of the greatest decisions in his life. Perhaps had he left the room, the match would have continued at a later date... Perhaps.

James walked back over to the desk and sat down. He reached out and grabbed his Bible with both hands. "Lord, I don't know what to do, but I am not leaving until You say that we are finished."

He then got down on his knees with his hands on the Bible and repeated his request, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

A few minutes passed in silence. He uttered again, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

A little over five minutes passed before he let out a sigh and stood back up only to sit down once again at the old desk. He grabbed his Bible and opened it up to Matthew, chapter one. He began reading and kept reading. Two hours passed by slowly before finishing the book. He stood up to walk around and took a drink from the water bottle. He prayed a little and sung a few songs. Then found himself again sitting at the old desk.

James continued reading with the book of Mark, chapter one. Another hour passed before he then stood up and stretched out his arms to the ceiling in a moment of great drama and cried, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." His arms grew tired after the few minutes of silence, so he put them back down at his side.

The day seemed to slowly creep by.

Never had he read so much of the Bible in a single day. After reading through Luke and finishing the book of John, he closed his Bible with plans to keep it closed for a few weeks. It was now late evening. He could hear the kids running around downstairs and Joey asking his mom in a purposefully loud voice, "When's daddy gonna come out?"

James sighed. He began to pace back and forth, fighting a growing feeling of hunger and restlessness. He was a little surprised at how much he missed his family even though he had only gone one day without them. Maybe it was because they were so close by, and he could not see them. Glancing out the window he noticed the setting sun and figured the time to be around 7 o'clock. He then looked down and felt a little sour at the possibility of spending another night away from his wife and sleeping on the hard floor.

He ended the discouraging thoughts and spent the next half hour walking around the little room and singing with a broken voice

"Lord, prepare me.
To be a sanctuary.
Pure and Holy.
Tried and true.
And with thanksgiving.
I'll be a living.
Sanctuary for You."

Over and over he sang that song and felt a sweet presence of love that seemed to fill the little room. He began to sing in a whisper while kneeling with his face down to the floor.

James cried out in a soft voice, "Master, You are so precious to Me."

He then slowly began to sing one of his favorite songs in a cracked whisper.

"Jesus. All Glorious.
Create in us a Temple.
We are calm as living stones where
Your enthroned.
As you rose from death to power.
So rise within our worship.
Rise upon our praise and let the hand that saw you raised.
Clothe us in Your Glory
Draw us by Your grace,"

James stood and wept with his arms wide open and sang the rest of the song in a carelessly loud voice. Theresa and the kids stood motionless downstairs while looking up in bewilderment.

"OH THE GLORY!
OF YOUR PRESENCE!
WE YOUR TEMPLE!
GIVE YOU REVERENCE!
SO ARISE FROM YOUR REST!
AND BE BLESSED! BY MY PRAISE!
AS I GLORY IN YOUR EMBRACE!
AS YOU PRESENCE NOW FILLS THIS PLACE!"

James fell to his knees and wept. He laid down on the floor with a tear stained face and slowly looked up at the ceiling and said softly, "Jesus, You're the best thing that could have ever happened to a bum like me."

He stayed there in still silence for a few minutes.

He then reached over, and grabbed his Bible, and laid back down on the floor with his head resting on his flannel shirt pushed up against the door. Having already read the four Gospel accounts, he thought it natural to open his Bible to the book of Acts.

He read the first chapter with an attentive mind, but the next two were hazily read through heavy eyelids. As he began reading through chapter four, the text simply became words on a page with no meditation involved whatsoever.

"Live it out!"

James' eyes were now wide open. He could feel his heart pumping faster.

"Live it out!" again the voice echoed through his heart. His arms covered with goose bumps as he quickly went over the verse that he had just read before hearing the voice.

Before he could even read the scripture, the voice thundered in his heart again

"Live it out!"
"Do you hear me!?"

“Live it out!”

His hands were shaking as he picked up his Bible and went back over the verse.

Acts 4:34 “Nor was there a destitute or needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses proceeded to sell them, and one by one they brought back the amount received by the sells.”

His heart was racing. His chest was pounding. What was this? And what did it have to do with becoming a missionary?

“Lord, I don’t have any land to sell?”

A whisper resonated in his heart, “Live it out.”

James said desperately, “How? What do you want me to do?”

He was answered with only silence...

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Then came the last words he heard during those rich moments. They were said with a gentle whisper into his heart.

“I have spoken. Do as you will.”

James sat still for a few seconds then got up, opened the door, and walked out. He left his Bible and coat on the floor. When he took the first few steps down the hallway, he could hear the kids racing to the bottom of the stairwell. “Dad!” yelled Joey. “Hey buddy!” said his dad with a large grin.

They all went into the living room. It was a little after 9 o’clock. The four of them cuddled together on the couch. James held on to Joey and Susie tickling them every few minutes. Theresa smiled and said, “We enjoyed your song,” James laughed and said, “Thanks.” He laughed again and let out a deep breath.

“So.....,” she said. James responded, “Well, for a while I wondered why I was in there, lots of reading. I did not hear the Lord until just a few minutes ago.”

“What?” she said.

James explained. “It was in Acts chapter four. The verse where it said that there were not any Christians who were needy among them because owners of lands would sell their property and give it away. The Holy Spirit told me to ‘Live it out.’”

Theresa said, “But we don’t own any land.” James looked at her and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he said.

“But, I’m starving.” He then got up and walked to the kitchen. Theresa told him that she had a box of fried chicken in the fridge waiting for him to heat up when he came out.

He walked over to the fridge, and grabbed the box of chicken. “I called Jerry this morning to let him know that you wouldn’t be coming in,” said Theresa. “What did he say?” James replied.

Theresa answered, "He was a little concerned because it seemed so unlike you, but wished you well and said to tell you that he looks forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"Also, I got a call from Lucy at the bank. She said that once we have a buyer for this place there shouldn't be any problem in getting the loan on the new house."

James stood still while he looked toward the living room. "What do you think the cost difference is?" James asked his wife. "Well," said Theresa. "Here at 5% the note is around \$600 a month and there it will be about \$950."

James replied "So, we would save \$350 a month by staying here."

Theresa felt immediately stunned. Why would he say that? she thought. We both love that new house and so do the kids.

She then said out loud, "Are you trying to say something, James?"

He closed the refrigerator and stood still for a few seconds.

"Yes," he replied.

Theresa was sitting on the couch in the next room looking back at him. She then looked away, and they were both silent for a few moments.

James then walked over to the microwave to heat up the chicken. Theresa called together Joey and Susie to get ready for bed after hugging and kissing their dad goodnight. She brought the kids upstairs while James sat down at the small table in the kitchen to eat.

After about ten minutes, Theresa came back downstairs and sat at the table while James ate. James looked at her with a smile and she returned to him the same, but hers seemed concerned.

"Hey," he said. "Hey," she said. Theresa let out a deep breath and placed her chin on her hands with her elbows on the table. "So what's going on?" she asked in a soft voice.

After a period of brief silence, he finally said, "I just don't think we should move." He looked back down at his food and continued eating.

Theresa's face turned slightly sour and she said in a confused voice, "But you know that we can afford the extra payment."

James looked at her and in a serious and desperate tone, he said, "But, we don't have the right to spend that."

She was taken aback by his response, as was he.

"Honey, you work hard for your money, and its OK to spend it," said Theresa.

James leaned back in his chair and put his napkin on top of his plate. "Remember the mission trip last year to India? Remember those kids who hauled bricks for twelve hours a day to be paid two dollars at nightfall.... They work hard for their money."

"So, you're saying that you don't work for your money?" asked Theresa.

“No,” said James, “But, what does that have to do with spending it on myself?”

Theresa sat with a surprised look on her face. “On your family,” she said quickly.

James replied, “But now, I can see that our family is larger than the four of us.”

James let out a deep and uncomfortable breath. Theresa looked off to the side, thinking. After a minute of silence, she asked, “So, what do you want to do?”

James sat quietly for a moment looking at his food. He then took his napkin and wiped his mouth. Looking up at Theresa he said softly, “If we can afford the note on the new house, I think we should pay it.”

“What?” Theresa asked in a confused voice.

“But continue living here,” said James.

Theresa let out a deep breath, resting her head in the palm of her right hand. “So the extra three hundred and fifty dollars a month we....” held her hand up in the air waiting for James to reply.

“Spend,” he said.

“On?” replied Theresa, leaning toward James with her eyes open wider than normal.

“Our family,” he said.

“Joey and Susie?” said Theresa.

James responded, “No, Joey and Susie already have parents who love them, a house to live in, and food on the table.”

Theresa looked inquisitively at him for a moment and said, “James, I am trying to understand where you are coming from. But, this is just such a sudden change. You have always said that you wanted the best for our kids.”

“That is the best,” said James quickly and affirmatively.

Theresa looked at him a little puzzled.

James continued. “Does giving them more show them that we love them, or does it teach them how to be selfish.”

Theresa let out a slow breath and looked toward the window.

James said, “Theresa, one of your favorite scriptures is where James calls this life a vapor or simply a puff of smoke. In light of that, doesn’t this make sense. C’mon, honey, we can do this. It’s right. I know it is.”

Theresa looked back at her husband and simply said, “OK James.”

She then looked back toward the window processing her thoughts. Outwardly her face looked almost wind blown by what was occurring. However, inwardly she noticed that there was a tiny feeling of fear and excitement that surprised her.

James stayed quiet for a few minutes and let her think. He then said, "Are you sure this is okay with you, Theresa?"

"Yes, I think so," she said with a tiny smile. She looked away and then toward him again and asked, "So do we just give the extra money to the Church?"

"No way, I think we already give plenty to the Church," said James.

Theresa looked at him, a little surprised. James said, "Don't get me wrong. I love our Church, but honestly I think if they had more money they would just buy a bigger building." "Tomorrow I am going to stop by the bank to open up a new account," James said to Theresa.

"A new account?" she asked.

"Yes, for our family," said James.

Theresa looked at him with a slight smile and said "and by that you mean, our whole family in Christ, right?"

James smiled and nodded his head.

They both remained seated at the table for a few minutes in silence. Theresa then let out a deep breath, stood up and said "C'mon Mr. Contentment, let's go to bed."

They slept soundly through the night and finally woke up the next morning at around seven. They laid in bed for a few minutes before getting up. Theresa looked up at the ceiling while holding on to a pillow and said to James, "You know what?"

"What?" said James.

"I feel clean," she said.

James laughed. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I don't know, I just feel clean," said Theresa again. He laughed and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. "I'm glad," said her husband.

James then got up to go wake Joey for school. "I can handle this, I like this house," said Theresa.

James laughed as he left the room and said, "Good, I'm glad." Theresa stayed in bed and quietly looked around the room.

James left that morning to go to work and did just as he said. During lunch he stopped by the bank to open up a new account. He walked in to find Lucy sitting at one of the desks welcoming him with a large grin.

"Hey! I just talked to Theresa yesterday," she said to James

He smiled and said, "Yes, she told me."

"Have you already found a buyer for your house?" asked Lucy.

"No, we decided to just stay where we are," said James.

Lucy seemed a little surprised. "But I thought you guys really liked the new house."

James sat down and said, "We do, but we feel like we are fine where we are."

"All right, well, what can I do for you?" asked Lucy.

"I need to open up a new account," said James.

"No problem," said Lucy as she handed him a few forms to fill out, marking the places where she needed a signature.

James began filling out the forms while Lucy started typing in the new account information into her computer.

"Do you want a debit card for this account?" she asked.

"Yes," replied James.

"OK," she muttered while she typed.

"And what is the purpose of this account?" she asked.

"Just a place to store extra money," said James while he continued filling out the forms.

Lucy continued typing and said to James, "Well, it must be nice to actually have, extra money."

James stopped writing, looked up slowly and said, "Maybe we all do, we just don't know it." He then looked back down at one of the forms and continued writing.

Lucy slowed her typing, glanced at James and then looked back at her computer and said nothing. James finished filling out the forms and handed them to Lucy.

"OK, we're just about finished," she said.

She stopped typing and then spun her chair around to look at James. "Would you like to add a word or anything describing this account so the two of you don't confuse it with your other one?" she asked.

"OK.. hmmm... Would the word be placed on our checks?" asked James.

"Yes," said Lucy.

"All right. Well, how about the initials R.O.?" said James.

Lucy replied, "OK, I can do that."

Lucy typed in the initials and stood up. "Alright, that's it. Here are your temporary checks. Your debit card and personal checks will arrive within 5 - 7 business days."

"Great, thanks Lucy," said James. He reached out, shook her hand, smiled at her, and began to walk away.

"Hey James!" said Lucy.

James stopped and looked back "Did I forget something?" he asked politely.

"No," she said. "Just curious... what does RO stand for?"

"Run-Off," James replied.

Lucy's facial expression made no change as she said with a polite smile, "OK, have a great day." He smiled and walked out of the bank.

James left the bank with a bright face. He looked excited and felt inwardly free. He hummed as he walked toward his truck, standing a little more upright than usual. He opened the door, got in, and started the engine. Suddenly, the humming and smile left as doubts began to fill his mind.

He simply decided to deposit all of their extra money into this account to then be given away. But he suddenly realized that it could be difficult to decide what is and is not run-off? The thoughts continued, "Maybe, even the house we are in now is run-off... Does that mean we should live in a camper or a big tent?"

"Where is the line?" he said out loud.

A voice then whispered into his conscience, saying, "It's right where your heart is."

"This is not a matter of the law, but of the heart," the voice said again.

James then whispered out loud. "Lord, that sounds good, but please help me understand."

He drove along in silence, waiting.

"James, you could give away everything you own with selfish motives." He then heard the voice resonate again, "Did you know that the Pharisees thought they had given their lives to me?"

James immediately thought of the 23rd chapter of Matthew, and the Lord Himself calling them blind fools. He was now only a little over a mile from his work and his mind was racing. He then felt the voice again.

"The answer to your question is in our heart."

James stiffened with his head back. "Our heart? I am definitely making this up," he said out loud.

He then pulled into the plant and parked as always toward the west side of the building. He grabbed his bag and got out of the truck. As he walked to the door he noticed a friend and co-worker coming outside.

“Eddie Black, my friend,” said James with a bright smile.

Eddie replied, “Hey James, did you hear about this new commandment?”

“New commandment?” asked James.

“Lunch break is off the clock now,” said Eddie.

They both stopped walking before they passed each other. “Oh well, but to be honest, I thought that was going to happen a few years ago,” said James.

“Yea, well its’ happened now,” said Eddie, looking back at the building in disgust.

James looked down and mumbled, “Yea.” He then looked back up at Eddie and said, “They’re calling it a new commandment?”

Eddie looked a little puzzled and said, “No, just another new regulation.”

“Well, why did you call it a new commandment?” asked James.

Eddie laughed and said “I don’t know James, I guess it just popped in my head.”

James smiled and said, “Oh. So, are you coming to Church tonight?”

“I think so,” said Eddie.

“Alright, see you there,” said James shaking the hand of his friend.

“The New Commandment,” he said to himself, while walking into the building. He walked in and greeted a few employees before sitting at his desk. He noticed a few missed calls, but he immediately dialed home to talk to Theresa.

“Hello,” answered Theresa.

“Hey,” said James.

“Hey honey,” said Theresa.

“Did you go to the bank?” she asked.

“Yes, I opened the new account. It will be just like our other one except the initials R.O. will be on it,” said James.

“What is R.O.?” asked Theresa.

“Run-off,” said James.

“Run-off?” she said with a voice expecting James to explain.

“I’ll explain later. Can you do something for me?”

“What?” asked Theresa.

“Are you at the computer?” he asked her.

“Yes.”

“Could you open up the Bible Search and look for the phrase ‘New Commandment’?”

“Okay, hold on a second.”

A little over thirty seconds passed before he heard Theresa say, “John 13:34.”

“Really, what is it?” James asked enthusiastically.

She responded, “I give you a new commandment: that you should love one another just as I have loved you, so you too should love one another.”

James was silent on the other end of the phone.

“James?” asked Theresa.

“I think God just spoke to me again,” said James.

“What?” asked Theresa.

James responded, “Let me think about it some more and I’ll tell you tonight.”

“Okay, love you,” said Theresa.

“Love you too,” said James before hanging up the phone.

James sat for a second and then realized that he did not have the time to sit and ponder the scripture any longer, at least for now. But, a few hours passed when he finished showing a new employee the ropes around the second floor shop. He then had Ray; an older welder, take over for him.

James walked over to the large window overlooking Central Street. He stood there for a few moments thinking about John 13:34. Then, movement on the sidewalk in front of the building caught his eye. He watched a lady with a dark complexion and old clothes pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk.

He noticed that she was wearing, old, faded white, and almost brown tennis shoes. He could even tell they were untied from his viewpoint. There was nothing inside of her shopping cart, but what looked like half of a broom handle. She walked slowly, looking down, while leaning forward with her elbows on the cart. He then looked away but instantly felt inclined to look back toward the old woman.

When he did, he noticed a small neon green fish symbol on the side of her little cart. At that moment, the presence of God fell on him in what seemed like an almost physical sensation. Waves of His presence rushed through his inner being. He reached out his right hand, placed it on the glass. He whispered in a broken voice, "She is part of my family, that's my sister."

James immediately discovered that the New Commandment found in John 13:34 is not something to be learned or even understood, but to be realized.

Three years later.....

Now that you are in Columbus, Wisconsin, simply take a right on Maywood Street where you will notice a fairly large, but old, light blue house, second on the left. Walk around back and you will see a man in his early fifties slouching in an old rocking chair with his feet resting on the faded white porch rail.

His name is James Contentment. He lives with his family at the old house on Maywood Street. He has been married to Theresa for sixteen years and has two children. Joey is a bright-eyed ten-year-old who loves to play football and ride his bike around the neighborhood with his friends. Susie is three years younger than her brother, loves to sing praise songs in her bedroom, and watch Bible cartoons. She is very fond of two pet rabbits and a turtle, who live together in a small chicken wire fence that her dad built for her in the backyard.

James sat in the old chair, rocking occasionally during a late fall Sunday afternoon. Usually you would find him there reading the Bible or another book by Vincent Maxwell who is one of his favorite authors.

Today he sat with no book in hand. He was relaxed while looking out into the back yard and dismissing any thoughts that tried to walk through his mind. He smiled at Susie as he watched her kneeling down to pet one of the rabbits that she had named Mr. Whiskers.

Joey was at one of his friends' houses, but should be coming home soon as it was almost time for supper and was starting to get dark. James stood up to go back inside. As the screen door screeched open, he looked to his right and noticed Theresa writing a note on the refrigerator.

Hearing James come in, she glanced at him and said, "Have you decided if you are going to speak next Sunday?"

"No, I don't think so," he replied.

Theresa looked a little upset. She had never known him to speak publicly and was a little curious to see him do so. She looked at James and said, "Honey, Pastor Larry just wants you to talk for a few minutes about giving. God could really use you. So, why not?"

James looked away, inwardly frustrated but outwardly at ease.

He answered with a tiny grin, "I just don't want to or feel like I need to. It's no big deal, Cutie."

Theresa looked at him and laughed "Cutie!" she said with a big smile and impulsively threw the rag in her hand at him. James ducked and laughed as the rag sailed over his head and hit the back of the couch in the living room. He then picked it up and walked over to place it in the sink. But, with a quick and surprising hand movement, the wet rag found itself draped over his wife's face.

Startled, she jumped, then laughed while chasing James around the Dining room, into the kitchen and out the back door.

Hmmmm.... Surely Mr. Contentment would have much to say on the topic of giving. He is living it, and after all, is this not needed in the culture of 21st century America?

But, James is a quiet man.

Perhaps this is because of his abusive father or all of the time he spent by himself in the country as a child. Maybe all of those military outposts where he was simply told to be quiet and do his job played a factor. Who knows why, but speaking in front of a Church or anyone else for that matter is quickly and easily declined by Mr. Contentment.

“Hey Mom! Hey Dad!” yelled Joey as he walked through the back door, carelessly letting his bike fall over on the back porch. James walked into the kitchen to throw the rag into the sink. “Hey buddy,” said James.

“Where’s Mom?” asked Joey. “Hey, Honey!” said Theresa, walking into the living room and kissing her son on top of the head.

“Mom!” squealed Joey while pushing away. “What’s for supper?”

“Fried chicken,” replied his mom.

“Cool! Hey, Dad,” said Joey. James was grabbing a large plastic cup from the cabinet over the right side of the sink.

He looked over at Joey “Yep?” he answered.

“You know what we need, Dad?” said Joey.

Dad laughed and said, “What?”

Joey replied with excitement, “Two new four wheelers!”

Putting ice in his cup, James asked, “Why do we NEED two new four wheelers, Joey?”

Joey paused for a second and said, “When we go hunting we could get to more spots faster and it’d be more fun.”

James looked at Joey and smiled. “C’mon, Dad,” pleaded Joey.

James walked over by his son rubbing him on the head. “You know we have plenty of fun without one. Besides, that money could be spent on people who really need it. But, I tell you what. Next year, if I see a good deal on an old, used one, maybe we can buy it and fix it up,” said James.

“But! Sammy’s Dad bought two new four-wheelers last Christmas! Can’t we afford a new one, if we save our money?” pleaded Joey again.

James replied “Sorry buddy, but that wouldn’t be our money to spend.”

Joey looked a little frustrated, and James noticed his confused facial expression. Joey frowned and began to walk upstairs. “We never get to buy any really cool stuff,” he mumbled. James sighed for a second and looked over at Theresa, who smiled slightly and said to him, “It’s okay.” James let out a deep breath with both arms folded together.

Susie had just walked in from the back yard and gave her mom a hug.

“Hey, Daddy,” she called to James. “Hey, sweetie. Go wash your hands. We’re about to eat.” Susie walked over to the sink and began washing her hands. James looked at Theresa and said, “Somehow I need to explain to him why we don’t buy all of that cool stuff.” His wife replied, “Well, I think God will show you a way.” James semi-smiled, nodded his head, and began setting the table for supper.

A few hours later, James laid next to his wife in bed. His eyes were wide open as he stared at the ceiling.

“Square cups,” he said out loud.

Theresa sniffed and pushed herself up to look at James. “Did you say something?” she asked. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Please go back to sleep,” said James.

Theresa laid back down and muttered with a hint of laughter in her voice, “It sounded like you said Square cups’ or something like that.”

James said, “Yea, I’m going to make five square cups.”

Theresa mumbled, “Okay, honey, night, night.”

James smiled and was fast asleep within a few minutes.

The next afternoon he left work early. He stopped at the store to buy a few woodworking tools that he needed. Arriving home at just past 4:30, he walked into the house to get something to drink and grab a granola bar. For the next few hours, Mr. Contentment could be seen out back under the tin roof with goggles over his eyes and woodchips flying carelessly through the air.

A little over a week later, he had four nicely polished, square, wooden cups of generally the same size and a fifth that was almost finished. He had also fastened together a small wooden box to place them in.

After finishing the fifth cup, he took the goggles off, which were now resting on his forehead. He held up the last cup and smiled as he noticed a ray of sunlight shining through the trees directly on the cup. He then placed it on the shop table with the others and grabbed the wooden box that he painted green. He went behind the shed to grab a can of white paint that he thought they had but did not.

So, he missed supper with the Family that late Friday evening as he drove to the store to buy a small brush and some white paint. He pulled back into the driveway at around 7 p.m. He shut the door and immediately walked over to the little shop out back under the tin roof. He reached over to turn on the light that hung from the ceiling and suddenly heard the back door quickly screech open.

“Hey, Dad,” said Joey.

“Hey Buddy!” answered his father.

“Will you come wrestle with me and Susie?” said Joey from the porch.

James said “Okay, but I need you to wait about twenty minutes. Allright?”

“Allright,” said Joey.

James heard the door screech again as Joey went back inside.

He then let out an easy breath and thought back to that Sunday evening a little over three years ago when his son challenged him to wrestle.

James placed the five square cups inside the little green box and closed the lid. He took his brush, dipped it in the white paint, and proceeded to write on top of the box. He then blew on the paint a few times, reached over to turn the light off, and walked up the back porch with his little green box and five wooden cups.

Upon opening the back door, he was initially shocked to see a large white object spinning through the air towards him with great speed. He quickly ducked, lost his balance, and slipped on the floor almost dropping the green box. Resting with his right side against the kitchen counter, he took a deep breath and noticed Joey giggling and running upstairs. James smiled and looked outside where he noticed a white pillow in the backyard.

"I should have seen that one coming," he said to Theresa while on the floor. Theresa was cleaning off dishes in the sink and snickered, "Boys will be boys," she said.

James stood up and placed the box on the kitchen counter. He walked outside, grabbed the pillow, and came back in very quietly.

"Pssst." he said to get Theresa's attention.

"Did you say something honey?" she asked loudly while still cleaning off dishes.

James slowly crept over to the sink toward Theresa and reached out to pull on the back of her shirt. When she looked at him, he placed his finger over his nose and whispered, "shhhh."

"What?" she asked softly.

"Listen, I'm going to yell to Joey, 'Hey! That was a good one, buddy. But it's not over yet. I have to go to the store real quick for your mom, but when I get back you'd better be ready buddy!'" said James with a grin.

She turned off the sink and smiled at him. He proceeded, still whispering.

"Then I'm going to go out the front door and walk around the house out back. You then wait for five minutes and tell Joey that he has to go get the pillow that he threw in the backyard. That's it, okay?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Theresa.

James responded, "I'm just going to surprise him."

Theresa said, "Tell me what you are going to do!"

James let out a deep breath and said softly, "I'm just going to hide in the bushes with the water hose."

Theresa no longer whispering, "No way! It's 30 degrees outside!"

James frowned and muttered, "awww," and walked away. He then grabbed the pillow and slowly crept upstairs. In a few minutes Theresa heard a toilet flush, a bathroom door open, and her husband yell, "AHHHH!" which was followed by a loud scream from little Joey.

Theresa laughed while listening to them from downstairs.

She felt a cool breeze, and looked over and saw that the back door was slightly cracked open. She walked over to the door with a paper towel while drying her hands off. She shut the door and noticed a green wooden box on the counter with the words, "My Five Wooden Cups" painted across the top.

"Hmm..." she said, as she opened up the box to see five well crafted square cups. She took one out to get a better look. After holding it for a few seconds, she placed it back in the box and took it upstairs to put in their bedroom.

The next day was a lazy, relaxing Saturday. It consisted of a little yard work, children playing, and book reading. James spent the early morning hours in prayer. He planned to talk with Joey that day and hoped that the five cups that he had made would help him explain the family's position on spending and giving.

Later that evening, after the family had eaten, Theresa left to go to a prayer meeting at the Church. James was left with Joey and Susie and felt it to be a good time to have the talk. He could hear the kids playing a game upstairs in Susie's room.

James walked into the kitchen and opened one of the bottom cabinets. He pulled out a large plastic pitcher and filled it with water. He pulled a few paper towels off the roller and then walked out into the garage to grab a large metal tray that he made a few years ago. He walked back into the kitchen and put the pitcher and paper towels on the metal tray. He picked up the metal tray and began walking upstairs.

He walked into Susie's room, where she and her brother were both playing Connect Four, a game they played frequently when they were younger and had become re-interested over the past few days. Susie and Joey both looked up momentarily, and said, "Hey Dad." They then resumed concentrated game play.

"Hey guys," said their Dad, who knelt down placing the tray containing the water and paper towels a few feet away from them in an open space on the floor. He then walked out as both Joey and Susie looked over at the new object in their room and then back at each other. Joey stood up and walked to the door.

"Dad! What's this?" he calls out to James.

"Give me a second and I'll show you," James replied.

A few moments later, James walked into the room holding a green wooden box. He then sat down on the floor next to the tray.

"Joey, I want to show you something," said James.

"What?" Joey asked curiously.

James took the paper towels off the tray and set the pitcher on a shelf to their left. He then opened the green box and pulled out four of the five square cups.

"I saw you making those!" Joey said while lying on his stomach with his chin almost touching the metal tray.

"Yep," said his Dad.

"Why did you make em?" asked Joey.

"You'll see in just a few minutes, buddy," replied his Dad.

James placed four of the cups in a square group on top of the metal tray and pressed them tightly against each other. He looked over at Susie for a second and smiled. She held on to a checker in her right hand and was still laying by the game. She sat quietly and watched the two of them from a few feet away.

James was a little nervous. He was not fully sure on how to approach the subject so that his son could understand. Joey was a very bright student, so he knew that it would be best not to talk down to him.

James took a deep breath and grabbed the pitcher. "Joey, let's pretend that instead of water, this is money."

"Okay," said Joey in agreement.

Joey was already beginning to look a little restless, but still kept quiet and listened. James then grabbed the lone fifth cup out of the box.

"Pretend this cup is our family."

"Mmm-hmm," said Joey. His Dad then placed the Family cup by itself on the metal tray away from the other four.

"Who are those other cups?" asked Joey.

James put his right hand over the four cups that were grouped together and said, "These are Christians and others who are in need." Joey nodded, confirming that he understood.

James then reached over and grabbed the pitcher filled with water.

"Joey, do you remember what this is?"

"Money," Joey replied.

Then very slowly, James began to pour into the lone fifth cup that represented their family. While he was slowly pouring, he said, "Look, God is giving us a home to live in, food to eat, clothes to wear and even a game like that one to play." said James. He continued pouring and said, "He has even given us money to buy that old fishing boat that we fixed up to take out on the lake to go fishing."

Then James stopped pouring as the water had now reached the top of the cup. James paused and looked at Joey. Then his face changed to a deeply serious expression.

"Son, what comes next is one of the most crucial decisions that we have the choice to make in this life."

James then broke eye contact with his son, picked up the pitcher, and slowly began to pour into the family's cup again.

"Look, there's a new and larger home." He continued pouring while the water crept out of the cup onto the metal tray.

"Here's a new car for mom and a new truck for Dad."

He continued pouring.

"Here is one of those new video game systems with a few new games each year." He continued pouring.

"Two new four wheelers," said James and then he stopped.

Joey looked down at the water collected at the bottom of the metal tray. James looked at his son and paused for a few seconds. Susie, who was still seated by the game, said in an unusually loud voice, "But, the other cups don't have any daddy."

James smiled, then very slowly picked up the lone cup and placed it on top of the other four. He began to pour into their family's cup again.

"Look, Joey, a new home."

James continued pouring while Joey watched the water run off the sides of the cup and down into the other four filling each of them.

"A new truck for Dad and a new car for your Mom."

He continued pouring.
“A new video game system.”
He continued pouring.
“A four-wheeler,” and he stopped.

All five cups were now full.

James reached over and placed his hand on the top cup. He looked at his son and spoke very slowly,
“Joey, we could easily place our cup by itself and forget about the empty ones around us.

Or maybe move a little closer every now and then and splash a little water in their cups while we overflow. But, Joey, please remember this buddy.

“If we choose to do that, we are not turning our backs on people we don’t know. We are turning our backs on our very own brothers and sisters. And worst of all, on Jesus Christ Himself.”

James waited a few seconds, hoping this was making sense. Joey looked at the cups and then back at his Dad, who continued,
“Remember Son, by the grace of God we have been invited into God’s family. To call ourselves Christians, and neglect them down here...” James paused and took a deep breath, weighing his words very carefully. He then said softly “There is no greater selfishness.”

“Do you remember that story in the Bible about the sheep and the goats?” asked James.
“Yes,” replied Joey.

James moved his legs to the side and laid on his stomach facing Joey across the metal tray. He then looked at his son and said slowly, “Joey, perhaps sooner than we think, that day will be here and now, and no longer a distant time in the future. And in that moment, when the Son of Man comes in His Glory, our indulgences,”
“Indulgences?” interrupted Joey.

James replied, “When we buy nicer things simply because we can afford them. Do you see? So, instead of buying something that will do what we need it to, we pay extra for the nicer object that basically does the same thing. We may justify buying it, but for the most part, the extra money was spent on our own lust. And the whole time children starve, ministries close their doors.

Or when we get carried away into too many hobbies that all cost more money. In most cases we need to only simplify and give that money to those who really need it.” James paused, let out a deep breath and said, “Joey, self indulgence is sneaky, it hides, it justifies itself, but in the end, is so incredibly costly. When the Son of Man comes in His Glory, those extras will produce only tears, but the extra we give to Him, to His hurting children, will be joy unthinkable.” James then pointed to the cups on the tray and said, “Do you see?”

“Yes” answered Joey.

Twenty five years later.....

Welcome to Columbus, Wisconsin. Please come along while we enter into an old neighborhood consisting of mostly retired plant workers and a few scattered young couples.

Take a right on Maywood Street where you will notice a fairly large, but old, light blue house, second on the left. Walk around back and you will see a man in his late seventies slouching in an old rocking chair with his feet resting on the faded white porch rail that runs along the back porch of the house.

He doesn't move quite as fast as he used to. He is a patient, kind, and gentle man who dearly loves God. His name is James Contentment. He has a lovely wife whom he adores. Her name is Theresa. She spends the majority of her time reading, praying, or working on different crafts. They have two children, Joey and Susie.

Joey went through a period of rebellion, mainly during his late teen years. However, this episode ended abruptly while drunk at a party one late December night. A group of young Christmas carolers came to the door to sing a few songs and spread some holiday cheer. The majority of his friends laughed and teased the youth who then quickly left and began walking to the next house.

The mockery bothered Joey's heart. That night he didn't talk much to anyone at the party. He sat alone in a corner opening up a new bottle of beer every half-hour or so. After a while he thought about his Dad and began crying. It was during this moment that he said he heard the voice of God. To this day he says the voice was clearly audible. Maybe so, maybe the voice echoed so loud in his heart that he could hear it everywhere. But, in either case the voice simply said,

"Come back."

Joey is now a pastor at a large non-denominational Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Susie has a deep love for both God and the Bible. She married relatively young at the age of eighteen. Yet, she and her husband are happily married with two children. They both minister to the poor in a small section of Northern Europe.

James and Theresa get to see Joey and his family usually once or twice a year. Contact with Susie on the other hand is very limited. But, they were able to take a trip to England two years ago where they met their grandchildren for the first time.

Back at the old house in Columbus, James sat in the familiar old rocking chair as he had done many days before. He sat contently watching the leaves fall to the ground in the backyard. He loved to watch them dance in the air whenever the wind picked them up. He had not taken the time to appreciate this acrobatic display when he was younger, but now found himself enjoying it immensely.

Slowly the wind began to die down and the leaves were laying still. As, thoughts began to fill the mind of Mr. Contentment, the smile on his face began to fade. In just a few short days they would have to say a final goodbye to the old house on Maywood Street.

Joey had convinced them that it just didn't make sense that they continue living in a home with so much upkeep. They knew he was right. Their health was deteriorating, and the walk upstairs seemed to grow increasingly more difficult. He and Theresa both knew that the one-bedroom apartment in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, would likely be their final destination.

Florida would be a major change, but James looked forward to the possibility of hearing his son preach every Sunday and playing with the grandkids as often as he could.

However, during those moments on the porch he felt saddened at the thought of leaving. For twenty years in the Navy, he did not stay in any location for a period longer than six months, but he had lived in the old home on Maywood Street with Theresa for over thirty-five years.

His thoughts were immediately interrupted when he heard the phone ringing. He got up as fast as he could to go inside and answer the phone. He knew Theresa was napping, and did not want the ringing to wake her up.

“Hello,” said Mr. Contentment breathing faster than normal.

“Hey Dad,” answered Joey on the other end.

“Joey! Hey Buddy!” said James in a loud and enthusiastic voice.

“Hey, how are things coming along over there?” asked Joey.

“Oh, were doing pretty good I guess. We just have a few more boxes to pack then I think we’ll be ready.”

“Good, do you know what time Susie is coming in?” asked Joey.

“I don’t know. Wait, here is a note on the fridge; Susie Friday 2:24 flight 546. Okay so 2:24 on Friday it looks like.”

“Excellent, I fly in at 1:30. Do you know when she is leaving Ft. Lauderdale?” asked Joey.

“No, but I can have your Mom call you when she wakes up. I’m sure she knows. So, how is the Church?” asked James.

“Doing great, thirty-five new members joined last Sunday,” replied Joey

“Wow. Great!” said James.

“Hey Dad, one more thing and then I need to go.”

“Okay,” said James.

Joey asked, “Would you like to meet Vincent Maxwell?”

James laughed “Of course, you know that I would. Why do you ask?”

“Well, he has a home in Orlando and has invited twenty pastors to come to his home and discuss a missions project he is planning,” replied Joey.

“Okay,” said James.

Joey continued, “I have been invited and would be more than happy to take you and Mom along since you will both be here.”

A few seconds of silence follows on the other end of the phone.

“Dad?” said Joey.

“Really?” said his Dad.

Joey laughed, “Yes, Dad, really.”

“When?” inquired James.

Joey answered, “About a week after you arrive here.”

Immediately upon finishing that last sentence, Joey heard the phone drop.

“Dad?” said Joey
He heard in the distance, “Theresa! Honey!”
“Yes,” she answered in a woken-up and slightly agitated tone.
“We’re going to meet Reverend Vincent Maxwell!” exclaimed James.
“What?” she asked from bed.

“We are going to meet Vincent Maxwell in Florida with Joey!” James said again.

James raced back to the phone as best he could.
“Joey! Sorry about that, buddy!” he said.

Joey giggled, it was rare to hear his Dad so excited.

“Hey, Dad, I’m glad you’re excited. I really need to run, but I will talk to you later. Love you,”
said Joey.

“Love you too, buddy!” James told his son before hanging up the phone.

James slowly walked out back. What a surprise this was. Reverend Vincent Maxwell was known by some as ‘The Champion of the Faith’. He had written over fifteen books, almost all of which James had read. He was without a doubt his favorite author. James couldn’t wait to meet him. His thoughts ran wild for the next half-hour before going back inside to talk with Theresa.

The next few days were not quite as busy as you might think that they would be in the Contentment home. After all, they had lived in this same house for over thirty-five years. They must have acquired all sorts of little nick-knacks and trinkets that flooded dresser drawers and cabinets, but that simply is not the case here.

They just don’t have much stuff. Over a few days they had packed several boxes, clothes, keepsakes, and left a few pieces of large furniture in place for the movers.

Friday came and what a pleasure it was for Theresa to have the whole family together again in the old house on Maywood Street. Joey flew in that day at around 1:30 p.m. He rented a large moving truck and hired two movers to lift the heavier furniture out of the old house. Susie got in around an hour later.

Joey was looking very forward to seeing his sister. It had been just over three years since the last time they both saw each other. They all greeted each other in the airport with hugs and tears before driving back to the house. The rest of the day was simply spent relaxing in one another’s company. Both James and Theresa were eager to hear everything they could about the Church Joey was pastoring as well as the mission field that Susie was called to in Europe.

The next morning was bright, sunny, and cold. Just after ten o’clock, the movers arrived. The plan was to load everything up today (Saturday) and pull out Sunday morning after Church. Joey would drive with Dad in the truck and Mom and Susie would follow in the car. They would hopefully arrive in Ft. Lauderdale Monday evening and spend Tuesday setting everything up in the apartment. Susie would have to leave Thursday morning to get back to the mission Church in Europe.

It took the movers less than an hour to move the furniture out of the house and into the truck. Joey gave them a big tip, realizing that the two gentlemen had planned to be there longer

and are paid by the hour. Joey said, "Good day," to the movers and walked out back to the truck.

He laughed.

"What?" asked Susie who was sitting in Dad's old rocking chair on the back porch.

"So much empty space," said Joey. Susie got up and walked over to the truck.

"Hmmm," she muttered in agreement. The truck was only about a fifth full at the most.

Susie said, "We used to have much more furniture than this. I wonder where it all went."

"I don't know. Maybe it just got old, and they threw it out," said Joey.

They both peered into the abundant amount of empty space in the back of the truck.

Joey broke the silence, "I could have rented a mini van."

Susie laughed and they began to walk back inside.

Just before reaching the back steps, Joey grabbed his sister's arm and pointed to the place where her rabbit pen used to be.

Enthusiastically he said, "Hey! You remember the time I hid your two rabbits and put two rolls of toilet paper in their place?"

Susie shook her head and said, "Yes, and you told me that you were actually a wizard and thought that you should turn my pet rabbits into something useful."

Joey laughed. "That was so funny. You wouldn't stop crying. You really believed me!"

"I was four!" exclaimed Susie while opening the back door to their old home.

Later that day,

"Are you and Mom ready to leave?" asked Susie.

"Not yet. First we want to help you with the boxes left upstairs," replied their dad.

Joey smiled and said, "Dad, why don't you just let us take care of it and you and Mom go have fun."

"Are you sure?" asked James.

"Of course dad, please let us take care of it," said Joey.

"Yea Dad, it probably won't even take us twenty minutes," said Susie.

Theresa walked downstairs into the kitchen. She was wearing a dress with an overcoat and scarf around her neck.

"Hey beautiful," said James. Theresa smiled.

This was their last night in Columbus. James insisted that he take her out on a date, just the two of them.

"We should be back in a few hours, honey," said Theresa before kissing Susie on the cheek.

"Love you Mom," said Joey.

"Love you to sweetie," she said.

"You sure you guys will be all right?" asked James.

Joey smiled and said, "We'll be fine, go have fun, last night out."

James smiled "Okay buddy. See you guys later."

"Love you Daddy," said Susie.

The door shut, and Joey and Susie looked at each other for a second.
“Well, you want to go ahead and bring those boxes down?” asked Joey.
“May as well,” said Susie.

The two of them began taking the boxes down from upstairs and out to the truck. There were only about ten or maybe twelve in all. Joey had already made several trips out to the truck when he began walking back upstairs and noticed that he did not hear Susie moving around. He reached the second floor and turned to the right to enter Mom and Dad’s room.

When he did, he noticed an empty box and piles of paper all over the floor. He stopped and saw Susie hunched over looking at one of the papers. Susie lifted her head up and looked at Joey.

“What’s all this? What happened?” asked Joey.
“I don’t know. I picked up the box and the bottom fell out.”

“What are you reading?” Joey asked his sister as he walked over and knelt down next to her.

“It’s kind of a love letter from Mom to Dad,” Susie told him.

Joey noticed that his sister’s eyes were tearing. He reached out his hand and said, “Can I see it?”

Susie handed him the letter and started picking up all of the other papers. Joey looked at the letter and recognized his Mom’s handwriting.

Dear James,

Thirty years ago my heart was set on our family moving into a new home. In my mind I had already picked out the curtains to hang over the front windows, positioned our furniture, and even selected a new set of silverware and dishes that I was going to buy with the money Aunt Ruthie left me before she died. During those days, the possibility of a new home was my favorite daydream.

When you initially spoke to me about other possibilities. I felt very hurt. Inside I grieved for a few days, perhaps weeks. I don’t remember. It seems like such a long time ago. But, deep down inside there was a voice that whispered to simply let go. So I did, the best I knew how at that time.

Now, we are considered old people, I suppose. Oh! But what a joy it is to be old! Sweetheart, these past thirty years have been the greatest adventure of my life. The money that God has blessed us with to give to the poor and sow into the mission field is now one of my favorite daydreams. The beautiful delight that we find each day in Christ and in each other is such consistent joy.

Oh! What a privilege it is during our last days not to see our lives decorated with a past of self-indulgence. What a privilege it is in our last days to know that we spent our resources on souls and the future bride of Christ! What a privilege!

James, I am an old woman now, but a happy woman and a free woman! Thank you for not being afraid to ‘live it out’. When the moment comes, I will be ready to see my Savior’s face.

With ever-growing and fruitful love.

*His and Yours,
Theresa*

Joey placed the letter over to the side on the floor.

"This is amazing," said Susie.

"What?" asked Joey.

"Tax returns. In 1994, they gave away twenty-five thousand dollars," said Susie.

"What? That's a tithe on a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar salary. What was their gross?" asked Joey.

"Um. Sixty thousand," replied Susie.

They both paused and stared at each other briefly. Susie then continued to shuffle through the stack of papers.

"In 1995, they gave away half their income. In ninety-six, a little less than half. Wow, did you know they gave this much away, even when we were kids?" asked Susie. "No, what are those?" asked Joey as he pointed to a group of papers that he noticed with pictures attached to them.

Susie picked one up. It was a letter from a young girl in the Middle East thanking James and Theresa for buying her food to eat and clothes to wear. Susie read over the letters with wide-open eyes.

"These are all children that they have adopted through this organization," said Susie as she held up a brochure with information on feeding and clothing impoverished children in foreign countries. Susie continued looking through the letters.

"It looks like they pay twenty dollars a month per child. That supplies the children with food, medicine and school supplies," said Susie.

Joey began to thumb through the small stack of letters from children. "These are all different kids," he said handing them to Susie.

"Yea, there must be fifteen or twenty of them," said Susie.

Joey let out a deep breath and said, "About as much as a new car note."

"They have never had a car note, at least that I can remember," he said again.

Susie stopped and looked up at her big brother.

"You're right, they have always had used cars," she said.

They looked at each other for a second and then both continued sorting through the stacks of papers while on their knees.

"What's that?" asked Susie.

Joey responded, "It's a letter from a missionary in Turkey thanking Mom and Dad for the funds they sent to help build their Church."

Susie said, "Here's a letter from a women thanking them for a new refrigerator."

"Refrigerator?" asked Joey.

Susie looked at him and shrugged her shoulders as they both continued sorting and reading.

"This is fascinating," said Joey.

Susie came across a stack of receipts from different Churches and ministries in the U.S.A “A hundred dollars, fifty dollars, twenty five,” said Susie with enthusiasm. For the next hour Joey and Susie read over receipts, thank-you notes, letters from missionaries, Churches and children.

Susie looked up at Joey and said, “You remember the little green box?”

“Hmmm?” said Joey.

Susie responded, “Remember, when Dad explained to you why we give away so much. The five wooden cups in that little green box.”

“I think I remember, but Vaguely,” said Joey.

Susie replied, “C’mon! I remember it so well. He poured into a cup on top of four others so that whatever ran-off would spill into the lives of other people. You really don’t remember?”

Quite for a few seconds, Joey looked toward the window scratching his chin.

“I think I can remember now,” he said. Susie nodded and they continued looking through the papers. A few minutes later, Joey looked at Susie and could tell that she was very touched by a letter she was reading. “What is it?” he asked.

Susie looked at him with watery eyes. “It’s a really neat letter from a lady named Lynn to Mom and Dad. I think her family is moving into our house.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Joey.

Susie replied, “Well, at the end she says that ‘words can’t describe how thankful I am that my family will be moving into a home, I can’t thank you enough’.”

“So you think she bought the house?” asked Joey.

“I guess,” said Susie.

“Well, then why is that letter in the giving box?” asked Joey.

“The giving box?” said Susie.

“Yea, this box is like one giant record of giving. So why is it in this box? Shouldn’t it be in a selling box or something?” asked Joey.

“I don’t think they have a selling box,” replied Susie.

Joey paused for a second and said, “Do you think it’s possible that they actually gave away our house to someone?”

Susie looked away and said, “I don’t know. I guess it’s possible.”

Joey stood up, walked over to the window, and said, “How could it be possible? How could a retired foreman in a steel factory and a part-time kindergarten teacher give away a house? How could that be possible?”

Joey thought for a minute. He then took a deep breath and said, “We need to put all this back in the box.” Susie stood up and helped Joey stack the papers in the box and taped it shut.

The next day the family all said one last goodbye to the old house on Maywood Street. They then attended their local Church for the last time where they were given a memorable and passionate farewell from the pastor and Church body.

The drive to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, from Wisconsin would be a long one. Joey drove the lightly packed truck with his father James riding in the passenger seat beside him. Theresa and Susie followed them in the old sedan. A few hours into the drive, Joey began thinking about yesterday evening and the letters he and his sister had read through. He was anxious

to find out more about the family moving into their old home and kicked around a few ideas in his mind on how he might bring it up.

Finally after about fifteen minutes of deep consideration, Joey simply said, "Dad."

James looked over at Joey with a grin, "hmm?" he hummed.

"Who is Lynn Carlyle," asked Joey.

James responded, "Oh, her family is moving into our old house."

"Oh, Okay, so they're the buyers, huh?" asked Joey looking at his Dad.

James was quiet for a few seconds then said, "They're really neat people."

Joey looked at his Dad for a moment and then looked back at the road with both hands on the steering wheel while debating what to say next.

"That's good, did you give them a good deal on the house?" asked Joey.

"Oh definitely," replied James.

Joey looked at his father again before letting out a deep breath. "So, what did you guys get for the house?"

James looked at his son and smiled. "Joy," answered his Dad.

Joey looked at his Dad, giving him a slight smile and an even slighter head nod before looking back at the road and pressing his left palm against his forehead. A few minutes passed by without any further discussion.

Finally, Joey sat upright and holding the steering wheel with both hands, glanced at his father across from him and said, "Dad, did you give away the house?"

"Yep," said James.

Joey shook his head. "Dad, you worked in a steel factory for thirty years. Mom was a part-time kindergarten teacher. As far as I know, the two of you aren't rich. So, how could you just give away our house?"

His Dad paused for a few seconds then replied, "Son, Lynn Carlyle is forty years old. Her husband died from a stroke last year and was left alone with three young children. She has no use of her right arm because of a car accident she was involved in five years ago.

Perhaps the question is, how could I sell it?"

This was the closing and final statement made regarding the giving away of the Contentment home.

The family arrived in Ft Lauderdale early Monday evening just as planned. James and Theresa walked in to the small apartment for the first time and were pleased with its simple and quaint nature. Theresa immediately began considering where to place the furniture. James walked out through the sliding glass door to the ten-by-eight-foot porch.

He felt a gentle breeze that instantly caused him to recall the old porch at his former home in Wisconsin. He picked out the spot where he would place the old rocking chair that his grandfather had made him. He also began putting out a few plants and a birdhouse that he brought from home.

In the meanwhile Joey had two men from his Church volunteer to help his parents move in. They were more than pleased to find an almost empty truck and only four or five pieces of furniture. James and Theresa only needed a day or two before they felt settled in. Thursday morning they drove Susie to the airport. She gave her family hugs that seemed to last a long time but not long enough.

Tears flowed down her cheeks as she waved goodbye to Mom, Dad, and Joey before getting on the plane. The next few days went by slowly while James and Theresa began adjusting to their new surroundings. They both attended Church Sunday morning. The Church Joey pastors is quite large having over three thousand members. The building is ultra modern and impressive in appearance.

James and Theresa were almost overwhelmed at the size of the Church, but they were welcomed in by the people with much love. For James, it was a dream come true to listen to Joey preach. During the sermon that morning, the large smile that rainbowed across the face of Mr. Contentment never seemed to leave.

Afterwards, they went out to eat with Joey and his family before being dropped off at their apartment. James and Theresa walked inside and sat down next to each other on the couch in the living room. James let out a deep breath and held Theresa's hand while they sat together quietly.

James looked at Theresa. "Are you looking forward to Tuesday night?" he asked. "Sure, that should be fun. How about you, honey?" she asked with a grin.

James laughed. "I can't wait. I just want to sit at that mans feet and learn. That's all." Theresa smiled "You're silly," she said in a loving and joking voice. "And you're cute," replied James before kissing her.

Tuesday came quickly. James spent most of the morning and afternoon on the little porch finishing up a book that was written by Vincent Maxwell entitled, "Opening the Book of Revelation." The book of Revelation had become one of James' favorites, and he thoroughly enjoyed reading the insights pertaining to Revelation by Reverend Maxwell.

He could hear the sound of Theresa calling him through the cracked sliding glass door. "Sweetie, Joey is going to be here in ten minutes."

"Okay," said James as he slowly stood up to walk inside. He saw Theresa take an apron off that she was wearing while baking cookies to take to Reverend Maxwell and his family. "Are you bringing your Bible?" asked James. "Do you think we will need it?" asked Theresa.

James responded, "I don't know. I thought he might have a bible study?" Theresa responded, "Honey, I think tonight is just planned for the pastors and promoting the project Joey spoke about." James looked at his Bible and said softly, "Well, I think I'll bring mine just in case."

Within ten minutes they were ready to go and shortly heard Joey knock on the door. James opened the door to find his sons bright smile welcoming him.

"Hey, Dad!" said Joey.

“Hey buddy,” said his Dad with a big smile and hug.
Theresa started to walk out, “Hey honey,” she said kissing him on the cheek.
“Hey, Mom. You guys ready?” asked Joey.
“Yes, sir. Let’s hit the road,” said James with a smile and soft giggle.

The three of them pulled into Rev. Maxwell’s neighborhood a few minutes before six.
“This is where he lives?” asked James who was looking out the window attentively from the front passenger seat. Joey was driving slow looking for 3419 Birch Street. “Yea, it’s somewhere in here,” replied Joey.
Theresa spoke from the back seat, “These are very nice homes.”

Joey chuckled. “Yea, I guess he sold a lot of books, right dad?”
James looked quietly out the window of his sons SUV.
“I guess so,” he replied.
A crack in his dad’s voice caused Joey to look in the direction of his father. He noticed his father sitting a little awkwardly with both of his hands folded on his lap. He had a look that he had never seen his father wear before. He looked almost like he was going to cry.

Joey looked back at the road, keeping an eye out for Birch Street. As they drove through the nice neighborhood, he began to think about the box that he and his sister had sorted through and the reality of his father’s life suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. He quickly saw a mental picture of himself lying on the floor next to his Dad and five wooden cups. He remembered James placing one on top of the other four and filling the top one with water.

Then he recalled his dad’s words with crystal like clarity. “Son, what comes next is one of the most crucial decisions that we all have the choice to make in this life.” Joey came up to a stop sign where he reached the corner of Birch Street. He took a left and noticed 3419 a few houses down. His heart felt unusually heavy.

“Well, this is it,” said Joey while putting the car in park. He took the keys out of the ignition and looked at his Dad who was staring at the very elaborate home of Reverend Maxwell. “All right,” said James before opening the door.

They got out of the car and started walking up the driveway. “Honey, did you say tonight you are meeting about mission work?” Theresa asked her son in a voice that sounded slightly confused.

Joey replied, “Yes, I think he is trying to get local pastors to back a nonprofit organization he recently formed called The Master’s Heart.”
“What is The Master’s Heart?” asked Theresa as the three of them walked up the steps to Vincent Maxwell’s home.

Joey responded, “It’s some kind of foreign outreach ministry. I think they deliver food and clothing to impoverished people in Islamic ruled countries. I would imagine he is looking for financial backing from Churches.”

They waited quietly for a few seconds on the front porch after ringing the doorbell. Theresa said “Well, if worse comes to worse he can always put up a for sale sign.”

Joey looked back at Theresa and said, “Mom, I know that I don’t need to worry about Dad, but you be on your best behavior tonight.” Theresa smiled and said, “Don’t worry, sweetie, I’ll be good.”

The door suddenly opened and there appeared a woman in her late forties wearing a black suit with white trimmings. "Hello, and who might you be," said the woman with a big smile. Joey stuck out his hand. "Joey Contentment, pastor at New Sunrise. This is my father James and mother Theresa."

"Wow! Mother Theresa," said the woman jokingly. Theresa laughed and said, "No, not quite," as she handed the woman fresh cookies she had baked earlier that day.

"Well, thank you. It's a pleasure to meet all of you. My name is Teri. I'm Vincent's little sister. Please come in, everyone is outside in the back."

Joey smiled and nodded before they followed Teri over a squeaky-clean hardwood floor that seemed to converge well with the nicely selected artwork on the walls. They made their way into the kitchen and noticed a large group of people standing outside.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" asked Teri.

"I'm fine. Mom, Dad?" asked Joey.

James answered, "Yes mam. I would love a glass of ice water, please." Teri smiled and said, "Okay, just give me one second."

Theresa walked around the corner of the kitchen and noticed a spacious room with an incredibly large television in it.

James sipped his water while looking out the kitchen window. He was bewildered to see what looked like two men driving by in a golf cart. "What are they doing?" he asked the hostess while pointing at the two men outside.

Drying her hands with a towel, Teri walked over to the window. "Oh, they're playing golf. That is the ninth hole at Eagle's Nest Country Club." James smiled, nodded his head, and said, "Oh, all right."

Theresa came back into the kitchen when she heard the group coming in from outside.

Reverend Maxwell came in first and was immediately greeted by Joey who reached out his hand and said, "Reverend Maxwell, it's a pleasure. Joey Contentment pastor at New Sunrise."

"Hi, Joey. Glad you could make it," replied Reverend Maxwell.

Joey then pointed in the direction of his parents and said, "This is my father James and mother Theresa." James reached out his hand to shake Vincent's and said, "It's an honor to meet you, sir. I'm a big fan of your writings."

"Thank you," answered Reverend Maxwell politely.

Reverend Maxwell then directed his attention toward Theresa. "Joey, I had no idea you were going to bring Mother Theresa," Joey laughed, as did the small group of pastors who were now inside. Theresa playfully poked Joey in the ribs and said, "From now on you introduce me as your mom Theresa."

Reverend Maxwell put his left arm around Joey's shoulder and said, "I hear of great things at New Sunrise." Joey said, "Yes sir," and began telling him about the new building, outreach ministries they were starting, and the number of people who joined the Church last Sunday. For the next half-hour or so the pastors all mingled with one another.

In the meanwhile you will notice an elderly couple standing just outside of the group, two jewels of faith who seem to go almost totally unnoticed by the young pastors. James and Theresa stood there wearing meager dress and content smiles. James couldn't help but feel a little intimidated in the presence of these men. They were very bold in their demeanor, and each seemed to possess a very dynamic and charismatic personality.

However, he was more than happy to spend the evening quietly admiring the young pastors and conversing with his life-long friend Theresa. She whispered to him, "Did you think that he lived in a home like this?" James smiled uncomfortably, looked down, and whispered, "No." Theresa continued, "I don't want to judge, but." James let out a deep breath and said, "He's a good man. He has done great things for the Church."

Reverend Maxwell then spoke in a loud voice that easily carried over everyone else's. "Excuse me friends. We will get started in a few minutes. But, first I would like to show you around our home. Please come with me." He began to walk out of the living area followed by the group of pastors. James and Theresa followed along in the back.

At the end of the hallway is a door that the Reverend Maxwell opened and quickly flipped on a light switch to his immediate left. The group then filed into a very large and immaculate room. The ceilings in the room were at least twelve feet high. In the corner stood a very attractive black piano. The walls were lavishly decorated with different styles of paintings.

"This is my prayer room, we just finished it last February," said Reverend Maxwell.

"It's gorgeous," said Joey.

"Incredible," voiced another pastor who was then followed by what seemed like a chorus of ooh's and ahh's.

"Is this a Di Vera?" asked a pastor pointing to a painting. The group glanced at the painting and then quietly watched Maxwell for his response.

"Yes, sixteenth century," replied Maxwell with an impressive grin.

"Where did you find it?" asked the pastor.

"At an auction in Brussels," replied Maxwell.

"Incredible," said the Pastor.

Reverend Maxwell walked over to the painting and pointed at a small road that winded between two trees. "If you stare at this road it will appear to change directions,"

"Wow, I see what you mean," replied one of the other pastors. The group all stared at the painting looking for the same effect. The same pastor spoke again, "I've only seen Di Vera in magazines and art museums. How much did this set you back, if you don't mind me asking." Reverend Maxwell smiled and replied, "It should have gone for ten, fifteen thousand. I got it for six."

"That's an excellent price," replied the pastor. Vincent Maxwell nodded and smiled proudly.

Suddenly silence and a strong sense of uneasiness filled the air. Everything turned awkward, and everyone grew uncomfortable. They each looked toward the formerly unnoticed, elderly couple in the back. Theresa pressed her right hand over her mouth in a state of total shock.

Vincent Maxwell looked intense while he thought, "Who would have the nerve to speak that way to me? Surely not this man. I think he is a welder from Wisconsin. Who does he think he is?"

You could cut the air with a knife. Joey's face was almost white. He knew that his Dad would be uncomfortable in the lavish home, but he also knew that James would be polite, soft spoken, and keep to himself throughout the night, which was the case, until now. After all, Joey had never heard his dad speak in public, not even in front of his own Church. Joey began to think a little frantically during the uneasy moment, "How could this be? Here we are in the home of one of Church's most powerful and influential leaders. Vincent Maxwell has been called 'The Champion of the Faith' by many. There are head pastors here from large ministries all over the U.S. I can't believe this. I feel nervous.

My palms are sweating. My dad just told Vincent Maxwell in his own home,

“You build your palace and you forget the Word of God.”

Joey looked at Reverend Maxwell to see him staring directly at his dad. He then noticed his dad staring directly back at Reverend Maxwell. Everything was silent, and the air continued to grow thick and heavy. Joey looked at his Dad in astonishment, waiting for him at any moment to apologize and then look down to the ground in his customary fashion, but it just wasn't happening.

Vincent Maxwell then said in what sounded like a sympathetic, but at the same time, controlling tone of voice,

“Mr. Contentment, is it?” asked Maxwell.

James nodded his head, and Reverend Maxwell proceeded to tell him,

“Mr. Contentment, what you see here is the hand of God and the blessing of God on my life and on my ministry.”

A few seconds of silence followed. Maxwell then looked away feeling an inward sense of triumph.

Just before Maxwell was going to make a comment in front of the pastors that would break the ice and make light of the presently awkward situation, the voice of an old retired welder thundered again,

“What I see here is selfishness!”

The temporary smile immediately left Reverend Maxwell's face. Joey stood next to him stunned. Theresa stood next to her husband with her right hand still over her mouth. She quickly realized that this was the first time that she had ever heard her husband raise his voice in over thirty years of marriage. Surely, this must be over, she thought, but it was not.

“On your walls I see children starving! Families on the mission field struggling to make ends meet and coming back home! Church's closing their doors! Ministries dying! For this?! For this?!”

“God has made me rich!” yelled Reverend Maxwell. “It is his good pleasure to bestow upon me wealth, and I am very and will always be very GRATEFUL!”

James returned in a loud voice “Remember the fourth chapter of Revelation? Remember what He said to the Church of Laodecia? You wrote about it in your book. ‘You say that you are rich, but can't see that you are actually poor, miserable, naked, and blind!’”

Vincent Maxwell's face was red and fuming.

“I have been in full-time ministry my entire life! How do you, an everyday welder, set yourself in a place to judge me?” yelled Reverend Maxwell.

James did not cease eye contact with the man. He then said in a soft, but firm voice, “I do not set myself in a place to judge you Reverend Maxwell, but to remind you, that our precious savior is also the judge of all the earth and everything that goes on in it. And His judgement is righteous, and fair, and pure, and true.”

“Judgment?” said Maxwell with a slight smirk.

“There are no special cases,” replied James. “The Church is hungry, bleeding, and dying.”

“You're telling me about the Church!” interrupted Maxwell.

James simply continued, “He asks us to love and care for his sons and daughters in need, our brothers and sisters.” James then held his hands up in the air and said, “This is not love.

This is neglect and it will be judged.” Mr. Contentment then paused for a second while the room was in complete silence and said, “And His judgement is righteous, and fair, and pure, and true.”

No one in the room spoke. Reverend Maxwell made no response. He simply stared at James with stunned disbelief at what was occurring. After a few moments of silence, James spoke again saying, “Reverend Maxwell I mean no disrespect by my statements. I will always be thankful for the gifts that you have used for the Glory of God. And I appreciate your hospitality.”

James nodded, and Reverend Maxwell said, “You are welcome, sir. However, I think it would be best for you and your family to leave.”

James responded, “Yes, I understand.”

He then said to his son Joey in front of the group, “Joey, perhaps your mom and I can just wait out in the car until you are finished with the meeting?”

Joey replied in front of the group, “No sir, I’m with you dad.”

Joey reached out to shake Reverend Maxwell’s hand and said, “Thank you for your hospitality, sir.”

“Joey,” replied Reverend Maxwell nodding his head and shaking his hand.

The family of three quietly walked out of the large room closing the door quietly behind them. In silence, they walked out the front door, down the long driveway to Joey’s car. James opened the front passenger door and insisted that Theresa sit in the front. She did so reluctantly. James sat down in the back seat while Joey started the car.

They began driving through the neighborhood as the silence continued on in the car. James was sure that his outburst had upset Joey, and the thought of that produced watery eyes and a sting in his throat. Theresa sat silently looking directly forward with her right hand over her mouth again. Joey pulled out of Reverend Maxwell’s neighborhood onto the main highway.

The quiet and reflective atmosphere quickly came to an end when Joey suddenly spoke, saying, “Well, we sure told him, didn’t we, dad?”

James looked at his son from the back seat a little confused. Theresa suddenly started laughing out loud almost uncontrollably. James then looked at his wife with the same look of confusion, but watching her laugh made him smile.

Joey chuckled a little and said, “Mom, are you okay?”

“Yes, honey, I’m fine,” she said in a broken voice while wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. Then she started laughing again, causing James and Joey to chuckle. “What’s so funny?” asked James in the back seat.

The commotion started to die down, and Theresa said, “I’m sorry, honey. That was just so unexpected. I don’t think I have ever felt so nervous in all my life. But, I was praying for you the whole time, at least once the shock started to wear off anyway.”

“So you aren’t upset,” asked James.

“Definitely not!” said Theresa.

Then Joey said, “No, Dad, I think you said what you knew to be true. It was just such a shock.”

Joey looked at his mom in the passenger seat and said, “Did you see everyone’s face turn red when he first said the thing about the palace?”

Theresa replied, “No, I was afraid to. I just stared at that expensive painting the whole time.”

Joey enthusiastically said, "What was it again? 'You built your palace and forgot about God's word'?"

Theresa quickly said, "No, I think it was, you build your palace and you forget the Word of God."

"Dad, where did that come from?" asked Joey.

James replied, "I don't know. It suddenly popped right out."

Joey dropped his mother and father off at the little apartment and gave them hugs goodbye before he returned to his home. That night James and Theresa took time talking to Jesus together. This was a habit that had developed spontaneously over their years of marriage. They would both lie in bed on their backs and tell the Lord whatever happened to be on their hearts. Sometimes their prayers lasted only a few minutes, at other times they communed for over an hour.

Five years later.....

If you are in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, find the exit for Sunrise Boulevard just after the interstate splits. Take a right down Sunrise, and you will notice a small apartment complex about a block down on the left. Around back look for 5:16, where you will find an elderly man sitting on an old rocking chair on his back patio. His name is James Contentment.

He lives alone with a box turtle that he saved trying to cross the road to the park one Sunday morning. He has two children. Joey is a pastor at New Sunrise Church in the Ft. Lauderdale area. Susie ministers to the homeless in a remote section of northern Europe. His beloved wife Theresa died of a sudden stroke last year.

He misses her deeply and quietly hopes for the Lord to take him home also. He thoroughly enjoyed spending each day in the Presence of God and in the presence of his wife. Now he spends each day in the presence of God and in the presence of his pet turtle named Henry.

James sat contently in his rocking chair while reading a newly published book from Reverend Vincent Maxwell. He heard the phone ringing inside and slowly got up to go answer it. "Hello," answered James.

"Hey Dad!" said Joey.

"Hey, buddy!"

"Dad, I think you're getting younger. The phone only rang eight times before you picked it up."

"Ha ha," replied James.

Joey chuckled, "So, how's Henry?"

"Well, he doesn't complain or remind me that I'm old," James replied.

Joey laughed and said, "Good, Dad. I wanted to call you and let you know that I'm having a get together at the house this evening. A few friends are coming over. Would you like to come?"

"Sure, will the kids be there?" asked James.

"Just little James. Zack and Sarah are with their Mom at Granny's house in Orlando for the weekend. I have to preach tomorrow, and I also have an elders meeting so I couldn't go along."

"Oh, okay, well I would love to come over," James told his son.

"Great, I have some bread and you can go out back and feed the ducks if you want," said Joey.

James chuckled, "Really? You will let me feed the ducks by myself, Joey?"

Joey laughed. "I'll pick you up in about twenty minutes, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too," said James before hanging up.

James stood up, happy with the sudden and spontaneous change in his day. He walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinet to the left of the refrigerator. He grabbed a loaf of white bread just in case Joey was only kidding and didn't really have enough bread to feed the ducks. He then tore off a small piece of bread and threw it on the back porch for Henry.

No more than fifteen minutes later, the front door opened, and Joey yelled, "Hey, Dad!"

"Hey Buddy! I'm coming," said James from the bedroom.

"Grandpa!" yelled Joey's son whom they call little James. He just turned ten last week.

"Hey, little buddy!" said Grandpa, giving his oldest grandchild a big hug.

James then walked into the kitchen and grabbed the loaf of white bread that he had placed on the counter.

“What’s that?” asked Joey.

“I thought we may need it,” answered James.

“Dad, we have plenty of bread to feed the ducks. Why don’t you just keep that here for you and Henry?”

“All right,” said James, placing the bread back on the counter.

They pulled into Joey’s home and little James quickly asked, “Hey, Dad, can I go to Brian’s house?”

“Sure, but be back before dark.”

“Okay,” said little James before opening the car door and bolting across the street. James and Joey walked inside and talked for a few minutes. When Joey had to make a phone call, James slipped out the back sliding glass door with a loaf of bread in his hand.

Joey’s house overlooked a small lake in the back. Toward the end of his backyard was an old metal bench where you could sit and admire the view. Usually in no more than a few minutes, ten to thirty ducks would appear, eager to see if you had any food to give away. James smiled while he walked outside toward his favorite bench. Joey was on a cordless phone in the kitchen. He too smiled when he looked out the back window and noticed his Dad already venturing out to join the ducks.

Over the next half-hour, eight guests arrived at Joey’s house for lunch. They were mainly pastors and businessmen in the local community. Joey had known them all for years.

“Joey,” said Louis.

Louis Arnold is a pastor at a large Church in Miami. He is in the Ft Lauderdale area for a series of meetings, and Joey wanted to make sure that they connected while he was in town.

“Yes,” replied Joey.

“By an chance is that your dad sitting outside on the bench?”

“Actually yes it is. Have you met him?”

“No, but I remember him. Would you mind if I went outside to speak with him?”

“Please, go right ahead,” answered Joey, drying his hands off with a towel.

James continued to enjoy watching the ducks around him. He took his time feeding them with small pieces of the bread. He said that he did this so they wouldn’t choke, but truthfully, he just wanted the ducks to stay around him longer. James smiled at his feathered friends while he broke off tiny pieces, trying to make sure each duck had enough.

“Excuse me, Mr. Contentment.”

James looked over his right shoulder than his left.

“Yes sir,” he replied.

“Hi, I’m Louis Arnold, pastor at the Faith Shack.”

“At the who?” asked James.

“The Faith Shack. It’s a non-denominational Church in Miami,” answered Louis.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a picture would you?” asked James.

Louis, who was still standing, reached around to remove his wallet out of his back pocket.

“No, well let me see. Wait, yes, here it is,” said Louis handing the elderly James his business card.

“That’s not a shack,” replied James.

Louis laughed and sat down on the bench next to James.

“No, we started out in a tiny building with five people and thought the name was easy to remember and fun. Long story short, the Church has now more than five thousand members, and we kept the name the entire time.”

James smiled brightly and looked at Louis, “That’s great, congratulations,” he said. He then looked back down at the ducks and continued feeding them.

“Do you enjoy watching the ducks?” asked Louis.

“Yes, do you?” asked James. Louis smiled and said, “Sure.”

A few minutes went by and James said nothing more to the pastor of the Faith Shack who was still seated next to him on the bench.

Suddenly Louis said, “Mr. Contentment, I was there the night you spoke with Reverend Maxwell.”

James paused for a second and then looked up at the pastor and said “Oh,” stretching the word out a little longer than usual.

“Fireworks that night,” said Louis with a polite grin. James nodded once and then looked back down at the feeding ducks.

Louis sat for about a minute waiting for the elderly man to say something. James continued to enjoy the ducks as if he didn’t have a care in the world. Louis started to grow agitated because of the lack of responsiveness and James’ fascination with the ducks. He stood up to walk back inside thinking this would get his attention. However, he became inwardly frustrated again when the old man didn’t even seem to notice.

Louis then said, “Good day, sir.” James then looked up with an old, but bright face and said, “Thank you pastor, and good luck with your Faith Shack.” Louis nodded and began walking back to the house while the elderly man continued to admire and feed the ducks. Louis made it about halfway to the house, then stopped, placed his hands on his hips, and let out a deep breath while he bit the right side of his lip.

He thought back to that night a little over five years ago. He did not appreciate Maxwell’s comments once Joey and his parents left. He also felt a deep stirring in his heart the night after the meeting. Louis remembered that night battling with his own authenticity and consistency as a follower of Christ, but since then, nothing had really changed.

For the past five years, the events that took place that night would occasionally stroll through his mind. He even came close to calling Joey and asking if he could set up an appointment with his dad, but he felt uncomfortable doing that, so he never did. He slowly managed to forget about Mr. Contentment’s comments that night until today.

And now he had a perfect opportunity to talk to him face to face, but the old man seemed far more interested in feeding ducks than in talking. Louis then looked back at James who was still sitting on the bench handing out bread to the fat ducks.

“What drove him to respond so strongly to Maxwell that night?” Louis wondered.

Louis sighed as he realized that Joey’s dad was probably too old to discuss these things now. Age was probably the reason why he said so little and would prefer to sit on a bench contently feeding a group of ducks. Louis then continued to walk back to the house, figuring that he was too late and had missed his chance. The elderly man’s mind had most likely grown dull.

Louis placed his right hand on the handle of the sliding glass door and froze when he looked up. He stood there perfectly still, staring at his own reflection in the glass. After a few seconds, he glanced at the old man on the bench who could also be seen in the reflection.

The next thing he knew, he had taken his hand off of the door handle and found himself walking back across the yard to sit next to the old man on the bench once more. As he sat down, James looked up and smiled.

“Hi, Pastor Louis.”

“Hi,” said Louis returning the smile.

James held out a piece of bread and asked, “Would you like some bread to feed the ducks?”

“No Sir, I’m fine,” replied Louis.

James smiled and said, “Okay,” then continued feeding the large group of ducks.

Louis sat patiently for a few minutes wondering how he might stir up a conversation with the old man. He thought of several options before he gave up and simply said, “Mr. Contentment, why did you speak so strongly to Reverend Maxwell that night?”

James rubbed his hands together, shaking some breadcrumbs to the ground. He then looked at his new friend and said, “Pastor Louis, I appreciate Reverend Maxwell. I can’t tell you how thankful I am for such a mighty servant of God. I truly love and embrace him as my brother. And that is why I said what I said that night.”

Louis quickly grew restless and let out a deep breath while rubbing his hands over his face. James’ answer was totally unexpected. He then leaned forward toward the old man and said in a firm voice, “Mr. Contentment, do you know what Maxwell said once you and your family left? He looked at us and said ‘Gentlemen, call me idealistic, but I have a dream that one day the Church will be free of self righteous, judgmental Christians.’ That’s what he said, Mr. Contentment. Then we all smiled and carried on as if nothing had happened.”

James looked at the pastor and nodded. He then looked forward. Louis could tell that Joey’s father was in a state of thought, which pleased him. However, he became disappointed when he noticed the old man’s attention slowly gravitating toward the ducks again as a content smile resurfaced over his face. James grabbed the loaf of bread and said, “Pastor Louis, do you want to feed the ducks with me?”

“No, I don’t want to feed the ducks. Aren’t you going to defend yourself!” exclaimed Louis.

“To who and why?” asked James staring at the pastor.

Louis held his hands up and said, “Well, Reverend Maxwell...”

James quickly said, “Reverend Maxwell is my brother and a wonderful man, but he forgot about his family.”

“His family looked just fine,” said Louis with a slightly puzzled look on his face.

The old man locked eyes with Louis almost as if he was staring inside of him.

“Who is his family?” asked James.

Louis looked away while crossing his legs and placing his hands on top of his knee. He replied, “Well, he has a wife and three children. Other than that I don’t know.”

James responded, “Did you know that he has a sister who lives in India?”

“India?” said Louis, a little confused.

James said, “Yes. India. She was once a prostitute, who found the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. Now she is disabled and can’t find any work. She has no family and has survived on the street for the past five years, begging for food at times. Did you know that?” Louis replied “If that’s true, it’s outrageous. I had no idea he has a sister who is homeless.”

The old man looked at Louis and said, "So do you. So do I."

Louis stared at him with a bewildered but intrigued expression.

"I am not sure I fully understand your theology," said Louis.

James answered, "I don't know much about theology, Pastor, but, I do understand this simple truth. Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, all speak of our adoption into the family of God. It's a simple truth. His son's blood has united us into one family with a new Father. And while the family is down here, we look after one another. There is an abundance of needs among the followers of Christ. And there is an abundance of needs among those who don't yet know Christ. Self-indulgence in this life will never be the will of God. Never."

Louis leaned forward with both elbows on his knees. "So you don't feel like it was God who blessed Reverend Maxwell?" asked Louis.

James replied, "I know for a fact that it was God who blessed Reverend Maxwell. God blessed him with gifts, and Reverend Maxwell has been obedient in using them. He is then blessed with finances, that he has the free will to use as he chooses." James voice grew slightly louder during his last statement.

James exclaimed, "Does God purposefully feed a child more and more even though he is already big and fat while He let's another one of His children starve to death? Is that God?" James paused staring at Louis.

Louis then said, "Our heavenly Father will feed His children."

James replied, "Yes, and who is our Heavenly Father?"

"The Lord," answered Louis.

"The Lord?" asked James.

"Jesus Christ," said Louis.

James then said, "If you were to feed me, how would you give me food?"

"With my hands," replied Louis.

"And your hands are part of your?" asked James.

"Body," answered Louis.

"And who is the Body of Christ?" asked James

Pastor Louis looked at the old man and said, "We are."

James responded, "Yes. 1 Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians, we are the body of Christ. We are the hands He trusts to feed His children."

Louis leaned back and crossed his arms. "Seems like a heavy responsibility. Do you wonder why He doesn't just take care of everyone Himself, instead of relying on us?"

James replied, "I think the same reason He doesn't preach the gospel to every man, woman, and child in need of salvation. We are part of His family and He trusts us to be about our Father's business. We have to take care of our family, which is His family. Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats?"

"Sure," answered Louis.

James said, "What was one thing that both the sheep and the goats had in common?"

Louis thought for a moment, but could not think of an answer. "Not sure," he replied.

James said to the Pastor, "Remember, both the sheep and the Goats knew Him as Lord."

After a few seconds of silence, James looked forward toward the lake and said softly, "What you did not do to one of the least of these My brothers. You did not do to Me."

Pastor Louis looked away and said, "Well, just to add an insight to this discussion. What about when Mary Magdalene poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and Judas called it a waste, that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus said leave her alone, you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me."

James replied, "Yes, and Jesus Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father. None of us will have the opportunity to pour perfume on the feet of the Son of God before his crucifixion. That was one moment in history, but we do have the opportunity to care for his hurting body, the Church."

Louis replied, "I understand. But God has blessed my family. As a matter of fact my wife and I just bought a new home. Some would probably consider it upscale, and I am very thankful for it. I think the key is to recognize the blessing, know where it came from, and be thankful."

James smiled and looked at Louis with a loving and sincere expression that extended from his heart. "Pastor, sooner than you think, you will have all the time you want to walk on golden streets and enjoy paradise. All that matters then is what you do now. Surely you know Matthew 6:20 as well as I. So just let all of that stuff go. And use the resources God gives you wisely, don't waste them lavishly on temporal things."

Louis felt slightly uncomfortable with Mr. Contentment's reply. He responded, "Perhaps God doesn't call it waste. Perhaps He calls it prosperity."

James then looked away from Louis back toward the lake. The smile on his face slowly left.

James let out a deep breath and said,

"Five or six year before Theresa died we spent a few weeks in a small town in southern Mexico. On the western side of this town is a village of people who build cinder block homes on top of a partly covered landfill. The stench is awful. These people were born into poverty and this is the only land that they can afford.

"Dirt floors, whatever they can find to make a roof, and the constant smell of human waste. We met a ten year old girl there named Alexandria." James smiled while remembering her, but the smile left as soon as it came. "She owned one shirt; stained brown, a pair of shorts, some old tennis shoes that were far to big for her little feet, and a copy of the new testament that was worn out from here reading it everyday."

James sighed. "The water there is polluted and often Alexandria has to search through garbage to find food for herself and her little brother." James turned towards the pastor and said, "Would she call your new home prosperity?"

When Pastor Louis heard that last remark, he immediately closed his eyes and sat completely still. James then turned his attention to the lake and the now setting sun. After a minute or two of total silence, Louis asked, "What should I do?"

James said in a slow and gentle voice, "Sell your house. Get rid of all the excess and teach the people in your Church to do the same. Learn to replace the desire for new things with the desire to care for your family. They are hurting, starving, and dying all over the world." The old man paused while gazing at the pastor and said, "And Jesus says you will have treasure in heaven, Louis!"

Pastor Louis broke eye contact with Mr. Contentment and began staring at the few remaining ducks. James looked at the man with admiration.

"Do you remember the rock on which He built His Church?" asked James.

"Sure, Peter," replied Louis.

“Remember the last chapter in John? Here is the creator of the entire universe eating fish on a beach with His friends. Remember his last instructions to the rock upon which He builds His Church?”

“Yes,” said Louis softly.

James nodded and replied, “If you love me than feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. That’s His family!” exclaimed James in a loud whisper. “He is serious. The same number of times Peter denied Him, the Lord says ‘do you love me’? Peter said ‘yes’ and Jesus said ‘then’. Did He ever repeat Himself before? Do you think this matter is important to the Lord? He asked the Church three times to simply take care of His sheep, to take care of His family, His bride!”

Pastor Louis grew uncomfortable and seemed to almost disengage for a moment before he said, “Amen, as a matter of fact the Church I pastor tithes ten percent on all revenue to the mission field.”

“That’s good,” replied James.

There was silence for a few seconds before Louis slightly stretched out his arms and yawned.

“Well, Mr. Contentment, I better go back inside, or I am sure they will eat without me. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you,” said Louis, reaching out his right hand.

James smiled and said, “Thanks for talking to an old man, Pastor.”

Louis shook James’ hand and stood up to walk back inside. Joey was inside looking out the window when he noticed that his friend was about to come in. He smiled when he noticed that his dad was still sitting on the bench, throwing bread to a few ducks while a gorgeous sunset broke across the horizon.

On the way home, Joey asked his Dad if he enjoyed himself. James responded that he did very much so.

Joey asked, “How was your talk with, Louis?”

“It was good. He’s a good man. I really enjoyed talking with him.”

Joey smiled, “Did he tell you the name of his Church?”

“The Faith Shack,” replied James with laughter in his voice.

Joey said, “Yea, when he first told me I had to bite my lip because I wanted to laugh so badly. Not that anything is wrong with the name. It just surprised me.”

Joey pulled to the front of his dad’s apartment.

“I love you dad. Sherry will pick you up tomorrow for Church?”

James leaned over to give his son a hug. “Son, you are an incredible man of God, and there aren’t any words that could describe how much I love you and how proud I am of you.”

Joey said, “Thanks dad,” in a slightly soft and broken voice.

James opened the door of the fancy SUV and got out. Joey started backing up as his dad waved to him. As James walked inside, he felt inclined to reach for a pen on the Kitchen counter and a small notebook. He then went to the bathroom and sat in the bathtub to pray. Joey insisted that he stop doing this because of his old age, but James continued to manage just fine and would not depart from his special prayer time in the bathtub.

As James sat in the tub, he felt like writing a letter to the Lord instead of talking to him as usual. So he grabbed his pen and paper and wrote.

Hi Lord,

How are you? I am happy, kind of. I enjoy spending each day with you. But, right now I am old, tired, discouraged, and I miss my wife. Sometimes I feel totally useless. Now is one of those times. For thirty years I have done my best to live in obedience to the direction you gave me that night in the attic. But, I have failed miserably in teaching anyone else to do the same, not even my own son, incredible as he is.

I had a rare opportunity today. A man named Louis whom you called to tend some of your sheep in Miami sat next to me on the bench at Joey's house. At first I did not say much to him because I thought he was there to enjoy watching the ducks like me. But, when he came back a second time he began asking me questions.

I held his hand and we started hiking up Preservation Mountain. Though he grew tired along the way we both reached the cliff together. He shut his eyes and I told him that it was now time to jump. It is what our Lord asks of us. But he did not jump with me. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his tithe, smiled contently, and tossed it over the cliff. Then he shook my hand and walked back down the mountain.

My heart is heavy. Nothing seems to change. I have done my best. I love You and I'm ready to leave... (if You will have me)

Three months later.....

Now that you are in Ft Lauderdale Florida, find Gables Street. At the intersection of Gables and Stuart Boulevard, you can't miss St Angeles hospital. Go through the main doors and up the elevator to the third floor. Take a right and at the end of the hall enter room 34b. You will notice an elderly man lying down on the hospital bed with a Bible next to his right hip. His name is James Contentment.

His beloved wife Theresa passed away a little over a year ago. He has a son named Joey; the apple of his eye. Joey pastors a large and growing non-denominational Church in the Ft Lauderdale area. The other apple for his other eye is a daughter named Susie. She ministers to impoverished people in a remote section of Northern Europe. Communication with Susie has been very limited.

Mr. Contentment fell down a week ago while trying to lie down in his bathtub to pray. Joey and his wife were out of town for a few days and did not discover James until the day after his fall. He can speak, but is physically weak. The doctor informed Joey that his father could pass away over the next few weeks or even days.

Joey had spent the last few nights lying in a cot next to his dad, weeping over the potential loss of his life-long mentor and friend. His Dad was like an anchor for him that was always there. There were times when he felt like he wanted to quit the ministry. He would go to his dad and pour out his heart and his frustrations, hiding nothing. James would hug him tightly and encourage him with different passages in the Bible. He would then give his son a gentle push to press on.

There is not much noise in room 34b. James does not like to watch television. This shocks the nurses who all enjoy visiting him. He has a kindness that feels magnetic. Joey has spent a lot of time reading to his Dad. They pray and talk to Jesus together. They also enjoy laughing at experiences and stories from their past.

Friday 10:45 a.m.

Joey stood up and leaned toward James.

"Dad, I have to go pick up Susie at the airport. We should both be back here in about an hour."

"Okay, son," said James.

Joey kissed his Dad on the forehead, and Mr. Contentment smiled.

"Dad, I just talked to a friend of mine named Louis Arnold on the phone. You actually met him a few months ago at our house. Do you remember? He walked outside and sat by you on the bench while you were feeding the ducks."

"Faith Shack!" said the old man with a smile.

Joey laughed and said "Yes, that's him. He's in town and insisted on seeing you. I told him the best time to come would be while I am picking up Susie at the airport today. I spoke to Louis on the phone and he just pulled into the parking lot. He should be up here in a few minutes."

A large smile came over the face of Mr. Contentment. "He wants to see me?" asked James.

"Yes dad, but I told him he could only stay for the hour that I am gone. So, don't you die on me, I'll see you when I get back. I love you Dad," said Joey with teary eyes and a playful smile.

"I love you," said James.

Joey nodded his head and reached into his pocket to grab his keys while walking out of room 34b and into the hallway. This was the first time he had to leave and felt extremely uncomfortable in doing so.

James put his head back on the pillow, closed his eyes, and started praying for Pastor Louis.

Just a few minutes later he heard a knock on the door to his room.

“Come in, dear friend!” said the elderly James with as much voice as he could muster.

Pastor Louis walked in the room and sat down in the chair next to James’ bed.

“Hello, Mr. Contentment.”

James smiled and held out his right hand. Louis returned the smile and shook James’ hand, but the elderly man would not let go. He gripped Louis’ hand tightly the second he felt it in his palm and then held it firmly against his chest.

“Have you considered jumping?” asked James.

Louis could immediately feel the presence of God and his eyes began to tear.

“I don’t understand,” he replied.

“Have you forgotten about our sister in Mexico?” asked James.

“No sir, I remember. Our Church tithes on all revenue to the mission field and other ministries. I personally tithe and teach our members to do the same. As a matter of fact, I think we do send money to a ministry in Mexico.”

James looked at Louis and said, “Pastor, Mark 12:41 through 44. Would you mind reading it to me?”

Louis said “Sure,” as he reached for the Bible that was on the tray over James’ bed.

“I may need my other hand, Mr. Contentment,”

James pressed Louis’s hand harder against his chest, “No!” said James.

Slightly puzzled and a little uncomfortable, Louis looked at the old man. He used his right hand to flip to Mark chapter 12.

“Okay Mr. Contentment, here it is.”

James nodded and Louis began to read.

“And He sat down opposite the treasury and saw how the crowd was casting money into the treasury. Many rich people were throwing in large sums. And a widow who was poverty-stricken came and put in two copper coins, which together make half a cent. And He called His disciples and said to them, Truly and Surely I tell you, this widow, she who is poverty stricken has put in more than all those contributing to the treasury. For they all threw out of their abundance; but she, out of her deep poverty, has put in everything that she has, all that she had to live on.”

Louis closed the Bible and looked at the old man. James spoke as best he could, but slowly.

“Pastor, Jesus watched the wealthy men give their money to the synagogue. Surely most of them were tithing. Giving ten percent was the tradition. But, the Son of God had no interest in this. He was pleased with the widow. She gave all she could and even in that case, all she had. She jumped, Louis. The wealthy gave a little out of conviction, while for the most part, overflowing. This form of giving is almost invisible to Jesus.”

The truth of the old man’s statement hit Louis’ heart like a ton of bricks. He looked off intently toward the window. James continued to press Louis’ hand tightly against his Chest.

“Louis!” said James in a loud raspy voice. “This is a matter of the heart. Christ in us. What if you were locked in a prison cell along with five of your brothers. The six of you are all starving. But, the master of the house takes one of the six to a separate room. The separate room is a comfortable room with big couches and a television set. Each day, the lone brother is given enough food and drink for himself and his five brothers. But, he hoards most of it and insists on staying in the comfortable room. Meanwhile, his brothers are starving to death.

Guilt stricken, once a week he visits the prison cell with a few pieces of bread and two cups of water, which they receive with much joy.”

“So now, instead of six healthy brothers, you have one who is fat, and five who are slowly dying. My question is this: If you were one of these brothers, which would you be? One of the five in deep need or perhaps the sixth brother?”

The old man looked more serious than ever. “Louis, it’s a matter of the heart, Christ in us. Would you read James 5:5.”

Louis turned to the scripture with his right hand and read out loud, “Here on earth you have abandoned yourselves to soft prodigal living and to the pleasures of self indulgence and self gratification. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”

Louis closed the Bible and looked intently at the elderly man. “You see Louis, a matter of the heart. James made a strong statement. But, the Son of God made an even stronger one. ‘Truly I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven.’ Do you see? I have heard people try to explain away this verse in so many different ways. But in the end, will we find that he meant just what he said? Will hanging on to wealth, in the middle of so much need, inflate your soul, making it too big to enter the narrow door that leads to eternal life? Like a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle.

“Does that seem impossible, Louis? After all this is the culture we live in. Our way of life is normal and Jesus is our friend.

But He is also our Lord. And we do not understand the depth of our crime because we live in our own worlds and do not see the reality of our decisions directly in front of our face. It makes it no less real. Take heed, Pastor Louis. Look at me, I am proof that this will be over for us all one day. When that day comes for you, do you want a selfish life on your conscience? Or the knowledge that you cared for God’s children and gave them all you could.”

Silence ensued for a few seconds while two brothers separated by age and health looked each other square in the eye. “Don’t make it harder than it needs to be, Louis. Just let go. The nice cars, expensive home, release those things for the sake of God’s family. For the sake of something far greater than your own pleasure. Store up treasure in heaven, Louis. Let go and teach your Church to also.”

Louis still had his left hand pressed against the elderly man’s chest. Louis seemed saddened while he sighed and hung his head down.

“I’m afraid to let go. Or worse, I’m afraid I would try only to later fade back into my former lifestyle.”

Louis slowly lifted his face toward Mr. Contentment and said with a heavy heart, “When I was fourteen, I remember crying several nights from hunger pains. My dad had left years before, and my Mom spent most of her welfare check on beer and cigarettes. By the end of the month, we usually did not have enough money to buy food. I felt so helpless. I hated living like that.”

Louis rested his face in his right hand and said after letting out a deep breath, “I like nice things.”

Mr. Contentment stared at Louis and felt the deepest urge to reach out his arms and give him a hug, but he was just too weak. He smiled slowly and said, "Don't we all? But, who do you love?"

"Jesus," replied the pastor with watery eyes.

"Then the only reason you will fail is if your love for Him fails. Jesus said if you love Me you will keep my words."

Louis looked toward the wall and said with an exhausted tone of voice, "And if I don't, I could go to hell?"

The old man gazed at Louis intently and lovingly, "I have no answer for that, nor should I. God alone will judge every soul. I am only a simple man. But, I do understand this simple truth. Would you open my Bible to Matthew 16:24 - 26 please."

Louis let out a deep breath and flipped James' amplified version of the Bible to the scripture and read it out loud.

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to be My disciple, let Him deny himself, disregard, lose sight of, and forget himself and his own interests and take up his cross and follow Me, cleaving steadfastly to Me, conforming wholly to My example in living and in need be, dying also.

"For whoever is bent on saving his temporal life; his comfort and security here shall lose eternal life; and whoever loses his life, his comfort and security here for My sake shall find life everlasting. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his blessed life in the Kingdom of God?"

Louis stopped reading and looked at James. The elderly man said in a soft voice, "Have you lost sight of yourself? Have you given up your comfort and security here? Or is this verse covered up by our half hearted devotion and tithing?" James paused for a brief moment and then said, "Louis, keep in mind that the next verse is real and we can all count on it happening one day."

Louis stared at Mr. Contentment for a few seconds then looked back down at his Bible and read verse twenty-seven out loud.

"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory, majesty, splendor of His Father with His angels, and then He will render account and reward every man in accordance with what he has done."

"Hear me!" said the old man in a loud and intense voice.

"Keep that Day in front of you! When the moment arrives and the Son of God is getting ready to do just what he said He would in His word. Will you look back and smile at the memory of expensive cars that you enjoyed driving for four or five years at a time? Or will you weep when you see the cold hard reality of a life filled with self-centered decisions. Ministries closing their doors, children starving! People dying! What is this? Are we blind?"

James face was red while tears streamed over it.

"I'm tired Louis! And my heart breaks more and more over this every single day! Nothing changes! Louis, what will we hear on that day? What will we hear? Read what Jesus has already said, Luke 6:24 and 25."

Louis read it out loud.

"But woe to you who are rich, abounding in material resources, for you already are receiving your consolation, the solace and sense of strengthening and cheer that come from prosperity and have taken and enjoyed your comfort in full, having nothing left to be awarded you. Woe

to you who are full now, for you shall hunger and suffer want! Woe to you who laugh now for you will mourn and weep and wail!”

“Louis! Do you know what woe means? Destruction! We are walking around blind! We actually think this verse is impossible, that Jesus enjoys watching us be happy in our big homes and nice cars. But, this is how He really feels.” exclaimed James pointing to the Bible in Louis’ right hand. “Because He sees the children whom he loves just as much as you and I, poverty stricken! And we just go on giving a little and consuming more and more and more of His provision.”

Mr. Contentment suddenly lost his energy and his loud voice turned into a whisper. “Look at me. Nothing here will last. Everything is dying and eternity is just around the corner. Release those things that you are holding onto and Jump.”

Louis quietly stared at the old man. He felt the presence of the Holy Spirit as a tear slowly streamed down the left side of his face. His left hand was still tightly pressed against James’ chest. Louis looked away and then suddenly, he jumped. He pushed away the chair that he was sitting on and knelt down next to the old man’s bed. With his left hand on James’ chest and his right hand on the open Bible, he bowed his head and said a simple prayer.

“Lord, here,”

James then let go of Louis’ hand as Louis opened both palms heavenward.

The next few minutes were silent. The old man quietly wept, as did Louis. James breathed a deep breath. Pastor Louis waited for a few moments then looked up at the elderly man and slowly stood to his feet, wiping his face. They locked eyes, but said nothing to each other. Mr. Contentment then nodded one time at the Pastor. Louis smiled and nodded before grabbing his briefcase and slowly walking out the door.

A few minutes later Louis walked outside of the hospital to parking lot B where he was parked. The Sun shone bright that day. He noticed that his pace seemed unusually slow, almost like he was strolling through a park. He whispered out loud, “Thank you for freedom,” twice before reaching his car. He opened the door and got in. Louis let out a deep breath and started the ignition.

He looked to his right staring at the leather seat. The old man’s voice echoed through his mind, “So now, instead of six healthy brothers, you have one who is fat, and five who are slowly dying. My question is this: If you were one of these brothers, which would you be? One of the five in deep need or perhaps the sixth brother?”

He closed his eyes and leaned forward resting his head on the steering wheel. He stayed motionless for a minute before finally lifting his head.

When he looked up he noticed a lady with a dark complexion and old clothes pushing a shopping cart down the sidewalk. She was wearing old faded white and almost brown tennis shoes. He could even tell they were untied. There was nothing inside of her shopping cart but what looked like an old broom. She walked slowly looking down, while leaning forward with her elbows on the cart. Louis stared at a neon green fish symbol on the side of her shopping cart.

“Family,” he whispered.

He then put his arms and head back on top of the steering wheel.

“Well, I believe it’s time for a change, Lord,” whispered Louis.

He immediately began to weep as truth and conviction filled his heart and the sweet presence of God seemed to hold him like a mother would hold her only child.

A minute or two later the moment was interrupted by a ringing cell phone. Louis slowly leaned back against the seat and reached for his phone.

“Hello”

“Louis!”

“Joey?”

“What’s going on with Dad!?” Joey asked in a panicked voice.

“Wha-nothing he’s fine I just left him in..”

“Louis! We just got a call from the hospital! His heart stopped! Go back now!”

“cshh...!!” Louis yanked the keys out of the ignition in a fury. He quickly opened the car door and jumped out. Without taking time to shut the door, he was already sprinting across the parking lot and squeezing through the slowly opening automatic door at the entrance to the hospital.

“Where are your stairs!” he yelled to a nurse.

“Second door on your right down that hallway,” said a woman behind a large desk, standing and pointing in the direction of the hall.

Louis raced up the stairs, skipping steps and pulling the rail with his right arm to propel him up as quickly as possible. He yanked open the door and almost slipped while sprinting around obstacles to reach the thirty’s hallway.

He ran to 34b and stopped in shock when he saw how dramatically the scene had changed from just a few minutes earlier. There were two nurses, a doctor, and two men in white suits giving the patient shock treatment. The room was chaotic. Louis held on tightly to his cell phone.

“Joey, are you there?”

“Yea, we’re just now leaving the airport. What’s going on?”

“I’m back in your Dad’s room. They are trying to revive him. Excuse me! Is he alive? I have his son on the phone, what’s going on?”

A nurse leaning over the bed administering oxygen, briefly looked at Louis and said, “His heart stopped. We are getting some, but little response.”

Joey yelled on the other end of the phone, “Louis! We have to talk to him!”

“His son wants to talk to him!” said Louis in a loud voice that carried over everyone else. The same nurse looked again at Louis and said in a firm voice,

“Sir, he is not coherent enough to speak on the telephone. He is dying! Please wait outside!” Louis could hear Susie on the phone crying in the background.

“Louis!” yelled Joey. “Don’t you let them throw you outside! Please brother! What I say to you now I want you to yell loud enough for him to hear it.”

“Okay,” said Louis.

“Tell him I love him. Tell him that I have been around hundreds of Christian leaders and so help me God, I have never known a man with more love, character, and passion for Jesus! Tell him his close friend is waiting to welcome him with open arms!”

“Mr. Contentment!” yelled Louis which immediately caused the nurse to glare at him and say in a strong voice, “Sir, wait outside!”

“Joey wants you to know! He loves you. He wants you to know that He has been around hundreds of Christian leaders and he has never, never! Known a man with more love, character, and passion for Jesus! He wants you to know that your close friend is waiting to welcome you with open arms!”

The hospital staff ignored the yelling.

“We have some response!” a nurse exclaimed looking at the monitor.

The old man’s head turned and he seemed to whisper “love Joey.”

“He said He loves you,” Louis said to Joey.

“Louis, I am going to give the phone to my sister.”

“Okay,”

“Tell him I love you Daddy.”

“Susie says I love you, Daddy,” yelled Louis. The hospital staff continued to surround James and ignore Louis. Louis could see part of his face through a small opening. He could see that his eyes were slightly cracked open looking toward him.

Louis listened to Susie attentively.

“Mr. Contentment, your daughter says that she remembers the five wooden cups. She says thank you for the example of your life, because you showed them practically and consistently that it did not belong to you. That we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.”

“Mr. Contentment, she wants you to know that something amazing has begun in their work.”

The dying man’s eyes seemed to open slightly wider while Louis tried to make sure he caught every single word Susie said.

Louis said loudly, “Two wealthy business men sold their large homes for smaller ones. They gave the money away. They sent some to the mission field and with the rest they helped the Church and addressed needs on the N.T.R. bulletin.”

“What is the N.T.R. bulletin?” asked Louis. Louis listened to Susie’s response then said in a loud voice,

“N.T.R. stands for New Testament Revolution. The bulletin is sent out weekly to people in the community who ask to receive it. It’s a list of the current needs of our brothers and sisters in the community and in the world. A yearly elected group of seven individuals from the Church handle the bulletin and decide on what needs are legitimate and should to be included.”

Louis continued to listen to Susie while staring at Mr. Contentment.

He said loudly, “Mr. Contentment, she has never seen so much unity among Christians! Social classes are being destroyed! Selfless and genuine love for one another is flowing! They worship together with joy and glad hearts!”

At that moment everything seemed to grow quiet and still. Louis’s eyes were locked with Mr. Contentment. He then heard Susie say one last message on the phone, which Louis then relayed slowly in a soft voice,

“One mind. One accord. It’s beautiful Daddy.”

Suddenly the same content smile that James remembered having on the old porch in Wisconsin, visited him once more during that last moment in the chaotic hospital room. A tear slowly streamed down the right side of Mr. Contentment's face before the monitor let out a long beep and the heart of God's humble servant pumped for the last time.

One Year later.....

Hello, my name is Eddie Wilson. Welcome to Wesley's Cemetery in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. I know who you are looking for. Just drive down the main road that cuts through the center of the property. At the fork you will notice a large World War II memorial surrounded by short and blooming Hibiscus trees. Take a right and continue on for about a hundred yards.

Look for three granite benches on your left. At the center bench head directly out into the field. Then look for two large pine trees. Head to the one on the right and you will find the grave that belongs to the man you are looking for. His last name is Contentment. His son Joey is one of the leaders in a local community of fellowships; part of a network called 'A New Sunrise'.

From what I understand, his children could not decide what to write on their father's tombstone. So, the great Reverend Vincent Maxwell asked to write the epitaph. I don't know the man in the grave, I have never even heard of him, but he must have been somebody important. The tombstone simply reads,

**James Contentment
Champion of the Faith.**

*One night over forty years ago Mr. Contentment heard a puzzling message that bothered him greatly. He simply heard the words
"How far have you fallen?"*

*Mr. Contentment held your hand while the two of you hiked up Preservation Mountain. Did you jump off? Are you getting ready to? Or have you already started hiking back down?
Perhaps you are standing at the edge of the cliff, motionless.*

Thank you for reading the life of Mr. Contentment and for taking the time to learn about your five wooden cups. Do, as you will.