

The  
Deepest  
Longing  
of  
Young People

Loving  
Without  
Conditions

Jerry Goebel

Saint Mary's Press®

I read this book with something approaching awe. It is so full of compassion for young people, so eminently practical, and written with such heartfelt passion that you cannot help yourself from saying, "There is truth here."

For more than thirty years Jerry Goebel has been working with young people in gangs, juvenile detention centers, and prisons, and his philosophy can be summed up in just a few words: Listen thoroughly, and speak only when you know the right questions to ask. This same philosophy of life has been stated by spiritual teachers in different ways throughout the ages, and Jerry's book is a potent reminder of the need to listen with an open heart and mind.

Every parent and everyone who works with youth should read this book.

—Katherine Ketcham, coauthor of *Teens Under the Influence*



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# Dedication

This book is filled with stories. They are stories of real young people, and most of the stories took place while I was writing this book. Every story is a cluster of hurt, abandonment, and finally, hope. Every story is a poignant reminder that we still haven't taken the Gospel to the ends of the earth—or even to our own neighborhoods.

One particular story talks about a map of my city that shows the reports of child abuse as dots in yellow and red. “It’s like our town has the chicken pox,” said a friend.

This book is dedicated to every young person attached to each story within these pages; it is also dedicated to the many dots of yellow and red that we have yet to reach.

I dedicate it to the mentors who so faithfully work with me. I also dedicate it to the staff at Walla Walla County Juvenile Detention Facility, who work so hard to bring hope to each story and every yellow or red dot that they encounter.

“God, make us authentic . . . to them.”

# Author Acknowledgments

I want to thank my family, who, for the last few months, tiptoed around my closet while I typed away in reclusive silence (with the exception of a few artistic outbursts).

I also want to sincerely thank Laurie Delgatto, my editor, throughout this lengthy process. Laurie, thank you for your wonderful gift of keeping me focused; you may be receiving multiple phone calls from others who would like your secret.

Finally, I don't know if this is customary, but I really wish to thank God, whose presence I felt in a very personal way during this process. I realize what an honor it is to have the opportunity to share what you believe . . . and even more to be able to incorporate what you believe into one's daily life. Like Francis of Assisi, I want to open each day and close each evening with the delicious prayer: “My dearest God, who are you? And, who am I but your useless servant?”

Thank you, dearest God, for this opportunity.

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# Foreword

As fate would have it, I'm on tour for one of my own books as I write the foreword to this one. A close friend is traveling with me, and the two of us have been reading Jerry's book together. It has become the devotional for this journey, a road trip of hamburgers and coffee cups, deep questions and reflections.

I have not always been a writer, and I miss some things about my old life. I used to spend my mornings talking to people, making phone calls—connecting. Now I go into a quiet room, shut the door, and spend my time alone in worlds of my own making. It's hard to close the door, to feel your sense of community slipping. People stop calling you.

I share this odd bit of information with you because you've picked up a book that was written by a writer, someone who by his very nature must find vast stretches of time to be completely alone. What I've learned from Jerry—who lives in my town—is that being a writer is no excuse for being a disconnected member of my community. The book you are about to read took a lot of time to write, but it didn't stop Jerry from serving people each and every afternoon while he was busy getting in his two thousand words a day. The people came first, the words followed. This is a lesson I needed to learn.

I sometimes go through periods of time when I can't find any meaning in the ancient words of the Bible. I read them, then read them again, then go for a run and try to think happy thoughts. It's a problem. The wonderful thing is that God honors my effort with moments of clarity. Jerry's book is chock full of moments of clarity—those times when you read an explanation of a passage and in a flash you're changed. You understand. It's hard to find books that teach hard lessons and challenge me to change. This book accomplished both.

Jerry and I share a mutual friend who spends a lot of time visiting prisoners at the Washington State Penitentiary. It's a pretty rough place. I asked our friend why he chose to go to the prison and meet with some of the men there, and he told me that it was in the prison where he found Jesus. It makes sense when you think about it. If you go to the same kinds of places Jesus did, it's more likely that you'll find him there. It's this observation, if none other, that should give you encouragement to read this book. It came out of a daily life

of service. It was born and nurtured and raised in a juvenile center. The fingerprints of Jesus are all over it.

There were a hundred times in my reading of this book when I was given that rare and wonderful gift—the gift of feeling that Jesus was talking to me, calling me close, moving me to examine myself, my motives, my values. This book is full of the best kind of hard teaching. It's made me rethink my values.

I learned one other thing between cups of coffee and getting lost as I read Jerry's book, and maybe it's the most important thing of all. If you're looking for a way to change young people, then this book is probably not a very good choice. If, on the other hand, you want to understand how to change yourself so that you can minister to young people in your community, then you now hold a treasure in your hand. It is that change, and the blessing that comes with it, that makes it possible to heal a broken world. What more can we ask for from a book?

Patrick Carman  
Author of the Land of Elyon series  
September 13, 2005

# 1 This Is My Beloved

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16–17)

This book is about the greatest hunger in our hearts, a hunger so deep it gnaws at us daily and longs to be fed. This book is about the only love that can fill that hunger and lead to the purest joy that we were destined to know—both in this life and eternally. Within these pages, I hope you will find the knowledge—but even more importantly—the power to live out the Great News of Jesus Christ, to be blessed as he was blessed, and to love like he loved.

My prayer is that this book will enrich the conversations you have with God, but also with those around you, empowering you to name (and help young people name) their most significant values and how naming those values can help protect the young people you care for from being manipulated by others or distracted by a false happiness that would steal their integrity. This book is about passing on the greatest blessing that God desires to give to every life; it is what I simply refer to as the “beloved blessing.”

## I Am So Wonderfully Pleased with You!

It is hard to embrace the idea that the same God who created the universe, who changed chaos into order, who painted the sky with stars and stirred the deep waters with life, that this breathtaking God

was also a great parent. God raised a child who made himself completely available to serve others, who cast aside his own will to become the perfect sacrifice, and to embrace us while we were yet sinners. Could we imagine becoming so strong in our faith that nothing could dampen our love of God, nothing could steal our joy, and nothing could distract us from our core values? That is the first part of “becoming the blessing,” when we accept the name “beloved.”

As we look at our heavenly parent and see how our God raised Jesus, we can see important clues into how God wants us to transition into beloved and blessing. The first time we see God speak directly to Jesus (in front of witnesses) is when God gives Jesus the “beloved blessing” of the Jordan (see Matthew 3:16–17). There, Jesus abandons his career as a respected craftsman of Nazareth and the comfort of his earthly family’s home, and becomes totally available to the call of God. It is at that very moment that the heavens part and God’s holy voice lifts in blessing, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Here is eternity’s most marvelous blessing, a blessing that every man, woman, and child has longed to hear since the day of our creation: “I love you so very much, I am so wonderfully pleased with you.”

How I wish we could only understand how much pain and suffering is caused in the lives of our young people by the absence of this beloved blessing. If we would even taste that pain, we would want nothing more from life than to run from door to door trying to insure that every child would hear and understand the wealth and beauty of the beloved blessing. We would want every young person we know to experience the richness of those words: “I love you so very much, I am so wonderfully pleased with you.”

If I had to pinpoint what truly fills our streets and jails with defeat, breaks down relationships, and binds shame and hatred to broken lives, it would be the lack of this beloved blessing.

This book emphasizes how accepting that blessing can translate into becoming a blessing to all those around us, especially the young people we minister to and with. Accepting the name “beloved” is the first part of God’s gift; becoming the blessing is the second. We could impart this blessing to an entire future generation if we could just embrace the title “beloved” ourselves. All young people desperately need both aspects of the beloved blessing if they are going to become mature, faithful adults.



Imagine the fulfillment in the lives of those around us if we could bless them like God blessed Jesus? Imagine offering young people an unconditional blessing, not based upon what they will someday have or do but based instead upon who they are in the eyes of the one whom Jesus called Daddy. Imagine the strength we could give young people if they knew that their belovedness was not based upon the approval or rejection of their peers, or even the comforts or stability of the world around them. Imagine how resilient those young people would be if they were able to call upon this beloved blessing in the midst of feeling peer rejection, making difficult life decisions, or trying to remain compassionate in a harsh and chaotic world.

What God blessed on that incredible day was Jesus's willingness to set his needs aside and become a servant to all.

It was the free decision that Jesus made to make himself utterly available to do God's will—whatever the circumstances, whatever the costs. The blessing of God was not based upon the accomplishments of Jesus but instead upon his availability to be God's servant.

It is also imperative that we understand that God's blessing does not lead to personal comfort in our Lord's life. In fact, the blessing results in Jesus being *led* (which literally means "arrested") by the Holy Spirit and delivered to the desert for intense testing by Satan (see Matthew 4:1). Jesus is not blessed for a life of leisure but for a life of self-sacrifice and service.

## From Cursed to Blessing

Our world offers so many false blessings to our young people. They are the false blessings of Satan who constantly badgered Jesus, "If God really loved you (if you are the Messiah), then prove it." "If you really are God's beloved, then do this. . . ." When Satan finds that deception is impotent against our Lord, he switches tactics and says, "All right, if you will worship me, then you can have anything you want."

How often do young people hear that false blessing in their own lives—and are fooled into thinking it is the real thing. "I will love you if . . ." "The more you have or do, the more important you are." It is a false blessing based upon having or doing but not upon being. God, the compassionate Father, blesses us for being his beloved children. (We will explore this in more detail in chapter 5.)

To bless like God blessed takes unparalleled maturity. Many adults in our society simply don't have the blessing themselves, let alone the capacity to offer such deep unselfish love to young people. But you and I—together—we will change that. We can stop that progression even if it has always been a part of our own inheritance. We can change from a lack of blessing in our lives to becoming a fountain of blessing to the young—indeed, to our communities.

Earlier this week I sat with fourteen of our mentors and fourteen incarcerated youth, and we talked about being “accepted without conditions” (the beloved blessing). These young people's lives are so filled with rejection and violence that I now realize those characteristics are the lenses through which they view their world. One young lady named Kelly spoke of her mom's anger on the day Kelly had finally realized that she too was named “beloved of God.” Her mother cursed Kelly and shouted, “Does this mean you aren't going to do heroin with me anymore?”

As we spoke about acceptance without conditions, Kelly said, “I don't think that my mom will ever accept me like that, but I think I can finally accept her without any conditions.”

Kelly has now become the blessing of God. Despite being cursed, she has become a beloved blesser. God has moved into her heart and expanded it beyond the incapacitating boundaries of this world's anger, hurt, and rejection. She now holds the key to a blessing that no one will ever be able to take from her.

Isn't that what we want for all our young people? Isn't that what we long for ourselves? Isn't that the beloved blessing we so desire for all the Kellys of our world to carry with them throughout their lives? from heroin user to follower of Christ. from incarcerated to freed. from cursed to blessed.

We can help young people become beloved blessers and, in the end, this is the only blessing that is truly enduring and empowering. For even if daily we tell young people how wonderful they are and that we love them—that they are lovable—until they are able to love and bless others, they will never know they are loved. Until that point they are like bottomless cups and no matter how much love we pour into them, the cup will always be empty. We are beloved and we can bless. That's the commission of God to Jesus. That is the blessing God longs—even delights—to pass on to all of us and to all our Kellys.

The beloved blessing is the bottom to our cup. To truly experience the awareness that God is “well pleased” with us is the first step to being able to overflow with that blessing onto the lives of this generation.

Give, and it will be given to you, A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:38)

## Blessed Are Your Circumstances

For over three decades, I have worked with church youth, street youth, and incarcerated youth; with youth ministers, teachers, and parents; I have traveled all over the world asking groups and individuals some variation of the following question: “Are you leading young people in such a way that you will pass on God’s most important values to them?”

Let’s break that question down into two components:

- What does God want (or value) for you to teach to the young people you lead?
- Are you modeling a lifestyle that will help young people recognize that vision?

The generation preceding us might have responded to that first question by saying, “We want our children to be better off than we were.” But I hear a different cry from this generation of parents, ministers, and educators. Today, I hear parents say they want happiness for their children, and when asked what they mean by *happiness*, I hear them say words like *well-being*, *balance*, *joy*, and even *blessed*.

But do we understand what we mean by *blessed*?

To the Hebrew people, a blessing was the greatest gift a father would ever give to his first-born son (the Hebrew culture was very patriarchic). In the blessing, the eldest son received the right to the family name. It was the legal authority to lead the tribe and make covenants with other tribes. Once given, the blessing could never be taken away!

However, the word for *blessing* was much richer than personal happiness; to be blessed was to be given the responsibility of the whole tribe—the “house of God.” In fact, that was the first term for

church. The church was a nomadic people on a journey—not a building or a place. The blessing was always communal and never individual.

Christ uses two words for *blessing* (when translated into Greek). The first word, *makarios*, is circumstantial, it is like our word *happiness* and is akin to the word *luck* or *happenstance*. This blessing happens to you; it is not something you make, but rather something that you are given. It would be like saying, “Blessed are your circumstances.” The second word is *eulogeo*. (We will talk more about this word in the “Blessed Are Your Choices” section.)

Luke tells us that Jesus takes the Apostles aside and gives them a very personal message about the pathway to the Kingdom of God (see Luke 6:17–49). Jesus intimately calls the disciples around him and shares with them the blessed attitudes of being in the Kingdom of God. These words were not yet meant for the crowds. The Apostles had just left everything (including their largest catch of fish) sitting on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in order to follow an itinerant rabbi. However, in exchange for their radical availability, they literally see the Kingdom of heaven begin to flower around them in the healing of the crippled, the blind, and the lame who are touched by the beloved child of God. As a result of their availability to Jesus, they are told:

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

(Luke 6:20)

Because they had left everything behind to follow Jesus, because they even became poor to follow him, they are blessed by their circumstances. Christ tells them they should be happy—because they were allowed to be among the first to witness the revelation of God’s Kingdom.

## Blessed Are Your Choices

The other word for blessing is *eulogeo* (as in *eulogy*). Most of us might think of a eulogy as a ten-minute summary given by the officiate of a funeral. That brief ten minutes (or less) can summarize decades of a person’s time on earth. In essence, a eulogy says, “Here were this person’s circumstances, and this is what he or she chose to do with them.” This is *eulogeo*.

When we say we want our young people to be blessed, isn't *eulogeo* the type of blessing we desire for them? Don't we want them to know they can be blessed, they can find joy—even choose it—in spite of what is happening in the world around them? To be faithful, mature adults, we must learn to self-initiate joy, self-initiate love, and self-initiate change—and it is an ability both adults and children in our society sorely lack.

To self-initiate joy in our lives requires that we move from waiting for others to feed our emotions to taking the initiative to name our values and pursue them. Like the disciples, we are no longer in the audience, we are in the game. We must take personal responsibility for the lack of joy or love in our lives.

So often I hear kids tell me the reason they committed a crime or took drugs was, "I was bored." This is the primary sin of an "entertain-me culture." Adults and children alike wait for joy to come to them, as if we will someday be able to gain entrance through God's gates by standing at them and shouting: "Hey, no one called me. No one gave me directions. It's not my fault."

When I am in jails or juvenile centers, I confront this attitude all the time. If I hear someone tell me, "I'm bored," I am always very direct with my response: "You aren't bored, you're boring! It is not life's job to entertain you."

I can walk into any jail or any church and see two people sitting inches from each other. One is wrapped in the joy of Christ; one is wrapped in a cloak of boredom, even hostility. They are both in the same room, both in the same environment, both in the same circumstance, but one has found the ability to self-initiate joy and the other is waiting for someone to entertain him or her.

I often tell inmates that they can choose to be a "prisoner of the county" or, like the Apostle Paul, a "prisoner for Christ." It is similar to the two criminals whose crosses were only meters apart with Christ in between. One sees Christ through the eyes of hope and compassion; he finds both the Messiah and salvation. The other sees Christ through only the eyes of his own bitterness and blame. When he saw Jesus, he saw a criminal, just like him. One is blessed, the other cursed; which do we want to model and lead young people to find in their lives—even in their direst circumstances?

That is the emphasis in this book, leading young people (in fact, all people) to find a sustainable, self-initiating joy. We want those around us, like Kelly, to be able to love like Jesus loved—no matter what circumstances life throws at them.

## Self-Initiated Joy: Becoming the Beloved Blessing

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4–9)

I might be able to rejoice like Paul on a good day, but could I rejoice like he did while under arrest and facing death? Could I take the worst tyranny of my era and use it to turn my life into a life that praises God? Paul goes on to say:

Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11–13)

This is the ultimate blessing—a rejoicing that is not based upon my immediate circumstances, but based instead upon a deep, inner strength, unshakeable by external influences. In short, we long for those around us to be blessed [*makarios*] and to be a blessing [*eulogeo*], and in the blessing be blessed. Isn't that the desire of our heart of hearts? Isn't that what we long for and value most for Kelly and, indeed, for every child of God?

# Acknowledgments

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It is seldom that you find a book that is simultaneously profound and practical. Here it is! Jerry Goebel is offering us real wisdom and guidance for those of us who care about the next generations.

—Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Here is a deeply evangelical presentation of the spiritual hungers of at-risk youth and lessons learned from years of experience and commitment.

—Dr. Michael Carotta, author of *Sometimes We Dance, Sometimes We Wrestle*

With this book, Jerry Goebel hits the mark. With a profound understanding of young people and their potential, he provides wise and compelling insight about how lives become transformed. I admire his faith in the goodness of young people and his counsel on how adults, both inside and outside the Church, can help this goodness trump hardship and our “entertain me” culture. I highly recommend this important book.

—Peter L. Benson, PhD, president and CEO, The Search Institute