

**Charles B. Bugg**

# A Faith to Meet Our Fears

How your faith can bring peace,  
forgiveness, wonder, . . .



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**A FAITH**  
TO MEET OUR FEARS

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Charles B. Bugg



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TO MY DAD

Whose gifts of love and listening have been a constant source of strength.

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## Foreword

**R**obert Frost once confided that “all poetry begins as a lump in the throat.” The words that have found their home inside the walls of this book must have come from somewhere in that same vicinity. They carry with them the quiet power and unvarnished honesty of words that must have gotten their start as “a lump in the throat” of this gifted writer, preacher, professor, and minister, Charles Bugg.

Dr. Bugg’s words seem to travel to somewhere deep within our own pain and joy because they seem to emerge from somewhere deep inside his own pain and joy. On these pages, “deep calls to deep,” as the writer’s words travel from the depth of who he is to the depth of who we are. What must have started out as a lump in Chuck Bugg’s throat, becomes help and hope for you and me—not maudlin, starry-eyed help and hope, but genuine, clear-eyed help and hope that is undergirded by honest, livable biblical theology.

To recast the line from Frost, “All good preaching begins as a lump in the throat.” From somewhere in that vicinity, the words that wait inside these walls have found their way to your eyes and mine. They will speak to the lump in our throat and to the pain in our lives, and they will point us in the direction of strength and hope . . . the kind of strength and hope that really matters in our kind of world.

Charles E. Poole  
First Baptist Church  
Washington, D.C.

# Acknowledgments

Cicero said, “Gratitude is the parent of all virtues.” The Bible doesn’t say it exactly the same way, but it certainly stresses the power of gratitude. On the last night of his earthly life, what did Jesus do? He took the occasion of a simple meal with his disciples and gave thanks for what he had. I wonder how I would have responded given the same set of circumstances? I want to take this opportunity to say thanks to some people, and my prayer is that my saying thanks arises out of a life that is becoming more thankful.

I am grateful for the people across the years who have listened to my sermons. They have given me the gift of their attention. What a gift! I think of the folks at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, who have given ears to the sound of my voice as together we have sought God’s face each Sunday. These people have cared for my family and me and have encouraged me beyond what I deserve.

I’m thankful for my administrative assistant, Linda Burris. Not only has she endured my scratchy handwriting, but also she has told me how much the sermons have meant to her. Those of us who preach know how much this means, especially when we put our words into writing. I always feel I could and should have done better.

I am especially grateful for Diane. We married twenty-eight years ago. I became her husband and by default her preacher. She sees me Monday through Saturdays. Diane knows my limits better than anyone else. My wife knows that if a minister has to embody the fruit of the Spirit all through the week in order to climb into the pulpit, I would be disqualified on most Sundays. Yet, Diane has been my best friend and the best fan of my preaching. She thinks I’m the best, and I certainly am not going to try to change her mind.

I have so much for which to be thankful. I am trying more to give thanks and to live thanks.

## Chapter 1

# Do We Have to Be Perfect?

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11: 28-30)*

I have a brother who is a trial attorney. He spends most of his time defending people or companies he represents. Suppose today I took my brother's place and became the attorney. I'm here to defend "perfectionism." I believe I can make a good case for it.

Most of us grew up with the admonition, "Do your best," ringing in our ears. We went to school and learned that the "A" students were the ones who were usually noticed by the teachers. In fact, it was even better if you made 100 percent. Some of us learned our lesson well. Anything less than absolute perfection was not acceptable.

When we finished school, we went off to live life that way. We were going to be perfect spouses, perfect parents, perfect ministers, perfect accountants, perfect homemakers, perfect in everything. Deep down we knew we weren't perfect. In fact, we criticized ourselves unmercifully for every mistake. We lived with constant anxiety. Our doing and being became meshed. When we did something wrong, we were all wrong as persons. We didn't tolerate others' shortcomings very well either because it reminded us we weren't perfect.

Our daughter was born when I was a seminary student. One of my good friends had a child born about the same time. Would you believe his daughter was walking well before Laura Beth? My child

crawled well, but she didn't walk. For me it was competition. I was losing the race for the "perfect" child.

Of course, I can make a good case for perfectionism. What if we turned the world over to people who were just content to get by with the minimum and who weren't bothered by mistakes. Our world is impressed by "shakers and movers." We like "self-starters." Who wants to hire somebody for a job when the applicant's first questions are, "Do you have pencils with big erasers?" and "How long is the lunch break?"

I can make a case for perfectionism. If I were an attorney, I would say, "What would the world be like if we didn't have perfectionists?" I can also make a case against it. Are you a perfectionist? Then you know the downside. For those of us who have perfectionistic tendencies, we know the anxiety, the anger and the self-depreciation that come with the territory. Spiritually, we hear the call of Jesus to "do" something far more clearly than the call to "be" something. Grace is a concept. Works is the reality by which we live.

That's why I have always been so fascinated by these words of Jesus. They were spoken in the midst of his ministry to an audience identified simply as the "crowd" (v. 7). Jesus wasn't speaking to a convention of perfectionists, but He could have been. These words have a soft sound. They're inviting, intimate words.

### COME . . .

Jesus said first, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens." When I taught preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I developed a strong interest in the relationship between proclamation and the preacher's own spiritual formation. Most of the homiletical books I read dealt with preaching as a "craft." Attention focused on issues such as the structure and delivery of the sermon. The formation of the sermon was the focus. What concerned me was the lack of attention to the formation of the one who preached. After all, a sermon is never separated from its spokesperson. We hear not just preaching, but a "person preaching."

By nature, I'm not a particularly pious person who spends long periods in prayer. I like activity. I measure myself by my "doing." So I wanted to test my theory about the importance of spiritual

formation. I signed up for a prayer retreat in which much of the time was unstructured. I remember how hard that was for me, especially at first. Frankly, it seemed like a waste trying to find God in the trees, the pine cones, and the cloud formations. I kept thinking about the people back in the real world who probably needed my presence.

Yet, one thing the leader of the retreat had said at the beginning kept gnawing at me. “What is your own image of God?” he asked. “Not what do you tell people about God as a preacher, but what is your own functional image of God?” “Think,” the leader had said, “about how you see God. That will tell you much about how you pray or don’t pray.”

I have not forgotten that question. I’m not speaking so much about the shape of God. Who knows that? I’m not talking about philosophy of religion where we debate God as the “First Cause” or the “Unmoved Mover.” I’m really thinking about a more primal level. For example, can God be trusted with my life? Can I rest in God? Is God always calling me to do something, or can I simply be and receive?

“Come . . . all,” Jesus said. All—winners, losers, successes, failures, good, bad—all! Come! It’s an admonition, but it’s gentle and filled with grace. Eugene Peterson has a wonderful phrase: the “unforced rhythm of grace.” Perfectionistic people keep trying to force things. We force ourselves and those around us to live up to impossible expectations. Those days of retreat as I pondered trees and pine cones, I really thought about my image of God. Do I trust God? Can I come to God and simply “be” loved by God for who I am and not what I do? Will I ever learn to be and to receive the unforced rhythm of grace?

### TAKE . . .

Jesus gave a second admonition that day, “Take my yoke upon you.” Jesus’ first-century hearers would have been familiar with his image of a yoke. A yoke was a harness or collar that fit over the neck and shoulders of an animal. The owner of the animal used the yoke to guide the animal as the owner wanted.

What do perfectionistic people often experience? Anxiety? Why? Well, when you set impossible expectations, you can’t meet them.

The amount of anxiety we feel is usually the distance between what we expect of ourselves and what we achieve.

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you." In other words, let me guide and direct your life. Then Jesus made a remarkable comment: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Perfectionistic preachers seldom talk about these words. We are into challenge and costly discipleship. Invite us for a revival because we preach the demands of Jesus and call the church to be more. When we preach, we can leave everybody anxious.

Of course, Jesus' preaching does have demand. He calls us to follow him, which is no small task. But Jesus' preaching is also filled with compassion, care, and acceptance. We are called not to worry. We are told to trust in a God who comes as gift and grace. We are asked to take his yoke, and then Jesus says, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Not long ago, I took a trip out of town with my wife. We had three days together, just the two of us. We left our son, the chair of the deacons, the head of the finance committee, and the church staff. In other words, the idea was to get away. However, I did take the briefcase. I took several books I wanted to read, sermons to work on, and some writing I wanted to do. By the second day, my wife was laughing. I wasn't. I was already behind what I had expected to do. "Why didn't you leave the briefcase back home along with the chair of deacons?" she asked. Diane doesn't understand. I feel undressed without my briefcase. I also felt very anxious with it and everything I had crammed into it.

### LEARN . . .

"Come," Jesus said, "take my yoke," and then Jesus gave one more admonition. "Learn from me," he said, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus was a masterful teacher. His images are unforgettable. The disciples, the crowd, even Jesus' enemies all seemed to agree that he had the gift to teach. Even without formal education, Jesus had people such as the well-trained Nicodemus say, "We know that you are a rabbi come from God." Jesus taught with words.

He also taught by example. "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Rest. That

word's not in the vocabulary of people driven by perfectionism. Do you know what I really believe? Some of us begin to think we are indispensable to the work of the Kingdom. That's why I always carry a bulging briefcase with too much to do. After all, who's going to bring in the Kingdom if I'm not well read and well prepared. There's also more than a hint of egotism. How can you rest or be gentle or be humble if everything is on your shoulders?

This story is slightly morbid, but it has a point. When I went to teach at Southern Seminary, I was surprised to learn that one of the fringe benefits was a family burial plot in the nearby Cave Hill Cemetery. That's right. Seminary teaching didn't pay all that well to live, but I knew things would be taken care of when I died. Unfortunately, I lost that benefit when I left the faculty.

Sometimes I would tell my preaching classes about my space at the cemetery. I assured the students I hadn't come to the seminary for the sake of the cemetery. But each time I drove by Cave Hill, it was a reminder of my mortality and the fact that the Kingdom of God would go on without me or my briefcase. I had a few students who also thought they were indispensable and had come to the Kingdom for such a time as this. I wanted them to know that a great secret to life is to know that we depend on God, and that God is not nearly as anxious as we that everything is just right.

It's true. I can make a case for perfectionism. I've spent much of my life making that case. The fact is I really don't want to keep doing life that way. It's too tiring. I don't like the constant anxiety. I don't like being angry with everyone around me who doesn't get it all right. I want to change. "Come, take, and learn from me," Jesus said. I'm ready to listen. Are you?

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