

31 DAYS TO LIVING



A DEVOTIONAL COMPANION TO LOVE IDOL

Jennifer Dukes Lee



Hi Friend,

You've heard the voices—the ones that say, "You've got something to prove."

Those noisy voices taunt you: "You aren't enough. You don't belong."

They command you: "Climb higher. Get skinnier. Do better. Prove yourself."

But what if we could hush all those loud inner critics? What if we could turn our backs to the noise and listen to the whisper of our Father? He is saying to us:

"You don't have to try so hard anymore. You have nothing to prove to anyone, including Me. You are already approved — PreApproved! — through My Son, Jesus Christ."

That's the voice we all long to hear—the Voice of everlasting truth.

Friend, you really have nothing to prove. Believe again that you are beloved.

God's everlasting love for each of us is the heart-fuel behind this devotional, *31 Days to Living PreApproved*. This ebook is my gift to you. Each word was written with you in mind because we all need a friend to remind us who we really are: Loved, beautiful, His.





I invite you to open these pages every day, for the next 31 days, to find words of truth about your truest identity.

Regular readers of JenniferDukesLee.com may recognize some of this content from a popular series on “Living PreApproved” that we published on the blog in 2014. Many of you encouraged us to make that content available in ebook form. So here it is!

Each day’s devotion begins with a Scripture which points back to our identity in Jesus. Every Scripture in this devotion formed the foundational backbone of my book, *Love Idol*. Each devotion also includes questions for personal reflection. I hope that you’ll find this ebook to be an encouraging companion to all that you learned through *Love Idol*. However, even if you haven’t read *Love Idol*, this ebook will lead you into a place of true connection with God. Each day’s devotion points you back to your identity in Christ, while helping you quiet the inner critic that is pestering you.

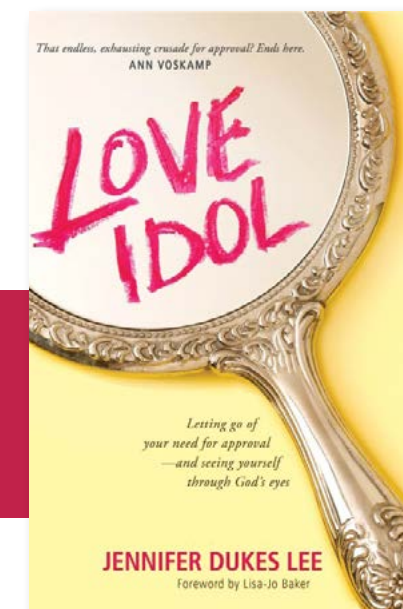
I pray that this 31-day journey will help each of us make peace with our imperfections, and that we will rediscover the astonishing joy of a life lived in authentic love.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Find *Love Idol* [here](#).

The book includes a four-week discussion guide.



DAY ONE

HOW THE BIGGEST LOSERS
ARE THE REAL WINNERS





"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."
~ Matthew 10:39

I stood on a stage in front of about a thousand college students a few weeks ago. The room was swollen with promise. I could sense so much hope, so much moxie.

Standing there, I remembered what it was like to be one of them with my whole life before me. My hands found the edge of the wooden podium and I gripped both sides. Then, I scanned the width of the crowd, left to right, and I remembered being 20. At that age, my heart beat wildly with ambition. I remembered how badly I hungered for the sweet taste of validation, how I was sure it would come somewhere on the other side of my college degree, out where my feet would be planted in the soil of the American Dream.

I was going to prove something to the world, and I was going to prove something to myself.

The microphone amplified my voice across rows of students, up into the balcony: "Culture has built a multi-billion industry to make you think you're quite un-amazing. Just look at the ads," I said. "And how does the world tell us to amaze? To shrink into a smaller dress size, grow into a bigger income bracket, and climb your way to the top. All of it apart from God. The ads will tell you: Go big or go home."

I told the students what I'm going to share with you today as we begin our journey toward living preapproved. The ads will tell you that you've got to be a winner—and that you're not even close. The glossy covers will convince you that you've got to keep up with the Joneses—and that you're getting it all wrong.



In a cold sweat, we sink our money, energy, and time into what we think will give us joy, applause, acceptance, and a little bit more respect.

But no matter how much we get—or how good we are—there’s always someone doing life better, writing her story more poetically, speaking her words more eloquently, living her days more gracefully, being promoted more regularly. (And she probably has better hair.)

I know, because I’ve found myself trying to be the winner. I’ve scurried up corporate ladders, only to find the rungs never reach high enough to satisfy. I’ve tried to do everything perfectly and make others happy—all because I wanted more love.

So what is the chief end of all my striving to be a winner? Has it brought me lasting joy?

In some ways, I was a raging success. I was winning at the American Dream. I was winning at “status,” as a nationally award-winning news journalist. And all of that winning? It was killing me. I was bone-tired and lacking a sense of direction.

***“Am I really enough for you?
Would you be okay with actually
losing your life, and never
winning back the life you had?”***



Then, it all went away. My husband and I moved back to the family farm in northwest Iowa. *Poof!* I no longer had my high-profile news-reporter job, my prestige, my clout, my friends, or my position to give me my identity. I felt like I had lost my life. I wowed no one.

But in the quiet of my stripped-away life, God spoke straight into my “knower,” that perceptive part deep within each of us.



God asked my knower this: "Am I really enough for you? Would you be okay with actually losing your life, and never winning back the life you had?"

God is asking us that same question every day. He is saying to each of us: "There is greatest hope for the biggest losers. People who lose their lives for the sake of Christ end up winning, so that they might live the life for which they were created."

Do you want to be a real winner today? Be willing to lose your life.

Jesus said it like this: "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)

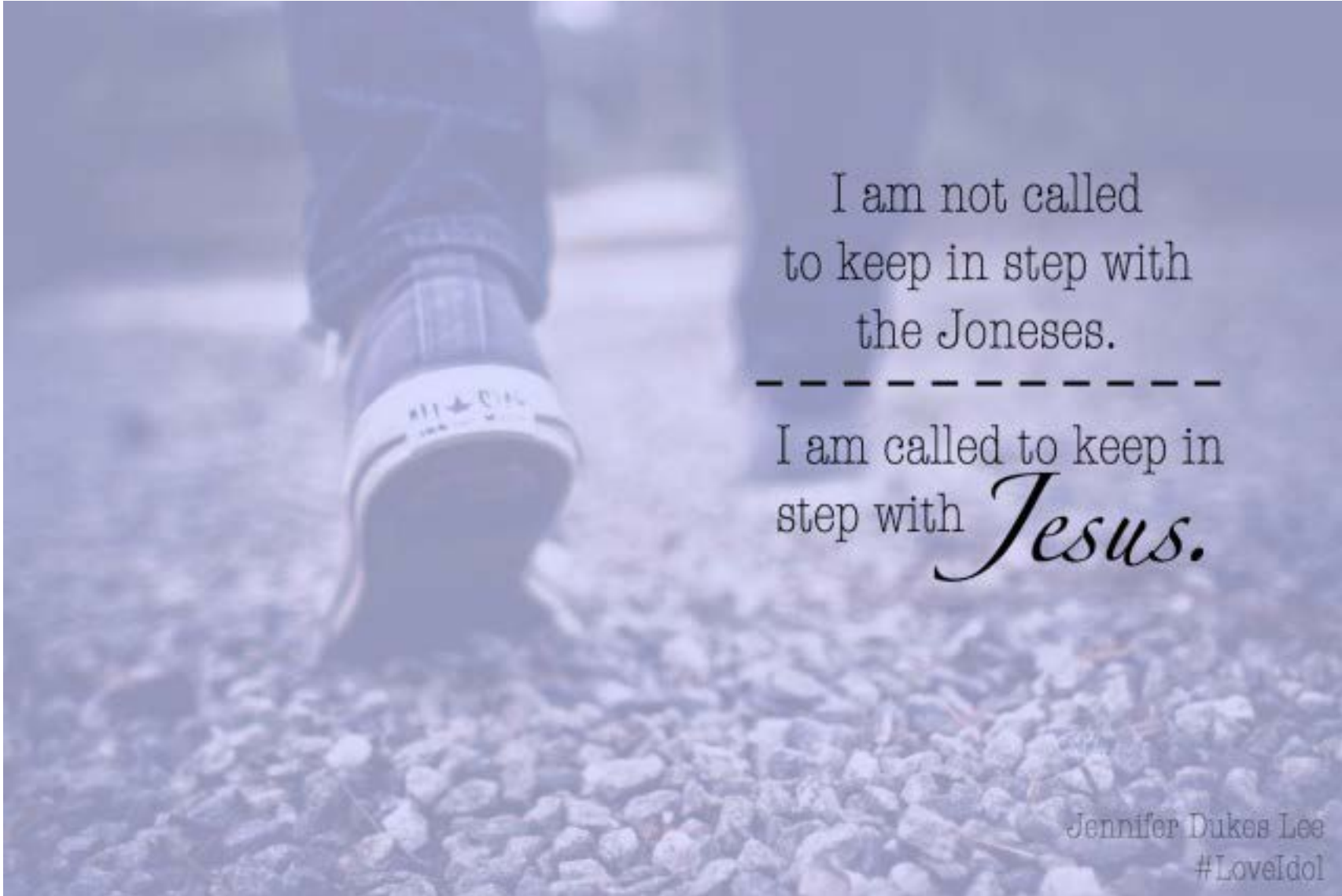
You don't have to "go big or go home." You can go small, as you walk your path home.

You don't have to keep up with the Joneses anymore. You can keep in step with Jesus.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: What does it mean to you to "lose your life?" Do you, like me, ever let your accomplishments define your identity and worth? How hard would it be to "lose" some of our performance-based identity today, in exchange for more of Jesus?

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's foot wearing a dark sneaker with white laces and a white sole, stepping onto a surface of small, light-colored gravel. The background is blurred, showing more of the gravel path and the lower leg of the person. The entire image has a light blue overlay.

I am not called
to keep in step with
the Joneses.

I am called to keep in
step with *Jesus.*

Jennifer Dukes Lee
#LoveIdol

DAY TWO

THE SECRET TO STOP FEELING LIKE A FAILURE





"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." ~ Colossians 3:2-3

I always wanted the A.

Anything less felt like failing.

But back during freshman year of university, I unfolded my mid-term grade report, smoothing it out on my desk.

That day, I found this fat D+ on the grid of my mid-term report. I was nearly failing math, and I took it personal. I felt a single letter wrap its whole self around my identity, and I *became* the D+.

Sometimes you can make the grade. And sometimes, *the grade can make you.*

Fast-forward.

We grow up, but still feel 18 on the inside.

We trade mid-term reports for the soft middle of middle-age. We still go around looking for proof that we're making the grade.

We know better. We are the Jesus people. And we know that our worth isn't defined by magazine covers and report cards and the approval that the culture is hawking.

We don't want what they're selling.



But we are buying anyway.

How easy it is to believe *what we don't really believe*: that our value lies somewhere out in the lists of who's who.

Even among Christians—despite what we know in the depths of ourselves—there is great enthusiasm for being noticed, perhaps at the expense of the quiet acquisition of virtue. We risk making rankings a religion.

Chuck Colson said it like this in 1984: “The church is in almost as much trouble as the culture, for the church has bought into the same value system: fame, success, materialism, and celebrity. We watch the leading churches and the leading Christians for our cues.”

How easy it is to believe what we don't really believe: that our value lies somewhere out in the lists of Who's Who.

Decades earlier, A.W. Tozer wrote: “Promoting self under the guise of promoting Christ is currently so common as to excite little notice.”



Go back further, to a dinner table where Jesus of Nazareth broke bread with His closest friends. The clock was ticking toward Jesus' betrayal and death, but a dispute arose among the disciples “as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.” (Luke 22:24)

It's part of our human condition: We want to be known. We want to be great.



And God is whispering it to our love-hungry hearts: You already *are*. You are known. You are loved. You are approved. *Look how much*. The cross bears witness to the depth of God's love for each of us.

And God is extending an invitation to all of us—an invitation to focus on the inward life, hidden with Christ in God.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Look back on your life. Where have you felt like you haven't made the grade? How have you been tempted to "prove yourself" to your peers? Read Tozer's quote again. Do you see evidence of his assertion in today's Christian culture? How can each of us be "hidden with Christ" today?

DAY THREE

YOU ARE PREAPPROVED





But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” ~ 1 Samuel 16:7

Last spring, I didn’t look at myself in a mirror for the entire season of Lent.

I didn’t look at myself when I brushed my teeth or when I blow-dried my hair. I didn’t take that one final peek before stepping out the door to go to church or a speaking engagement. I bravely (or perhaps ridiculously) wielded a mascara wand without the help of a mirror.

The whole experiment was a huge lesson in trust. With these four words— “How do I look?”— I was daily entrusting my physical appearance to two small humans and my husband, a farmer who raises pigs for a living.

But I gave up mirrors anyway. I gave them up because I was tired.

I was tired of the self-degradation that we engage in as women. I was tired of how we women judge ourselves by the externals, even though God tells us He favors the heart.

This was our battle cry: “We’ve had enough of the not-enoughs.”



And I was tired of all the ways that we tell ourselves that we’re not enough—or let our bathroom scales tell us that we’re too much.

So I covered my mirrors with words that tell me how I am loved, cherished, chosen and “PreApproved” by God.



The day after I covered my mirrors, our youngest daughter, age nine, asked if she could cover hers, too. She didn't want me to take this journey alone.

Every morning, Anna and I read tangible reminders of who we are in Christ. When we were focused less on the self, we reflected more on the Savior. Together we were saying, "fewer mirrors, more Messiah."

This was our battle cry: "We've had enough of the not-enoughs."

Since then, thousands of other women have joined us in our battle cry. Each of those women is telling herself that she is "PreApproved" and loved by God. We call ourselves the "Love Idol Movement."

And you can join us, too. (Just so you know, you don't have to cover your mirrors. We promise. 😊)

Here's how to join a nationwide movement of women who are Living PreApproved:

1. Go to loveidolbook.com and scroll down to find our free PreApproved printables.
2. Print and cut out.
3. Tack or tape those reminders of your PreApproved status anywhere you struggle with idols of love and approval. Put them anywhere you are feeling "not enough." Tape them to your mirrors, bathroom scales, refrigerator, cubicle walls and computers—so that you'll remember you have



nothing to prove. Share with us on social media by using the hashtag #preapproved. Tag me [@dukeslee](#) on Instagram! Find the [Love Idol Movement](#) on Facebook.

4. Believe that you are PreApproved!

The truth is, everybody in life wants to know that she's loved. The truth is, we already are.

Say it with Anna and me: We've had enough of the not-enoughs!

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Where do you need to be most reminded of your "PreApproved" status in Christ today? Go to [loveidolbook.com](#) to print out your printables. Tack reminders anywhere that you feel like you're "not enough" in life. We are with you. We are cheering you on. Together, we can say it out loud to ourselves and out loud to the world: **We've had enough of the not-enoughs!**

DAY FOUR

THE WAY OF APELLES





"Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ." ~ Romans 16:10

I found Apelles in Scripture a few years ago, while doing research for *Love Idol*. When Apelles and I met on the pages of my Bible, it was the happiest accident.

Go ahead: Flip to the tail end of Romans to find Apelles. But don't blink or you might miss him. His name is plopped, unpretentiously, in the middle of a list of names. He's neither first nor last. He's in the middle.

Apelles is us—*dwelling in the ordinary middle*.

In Romans 16, Paul closes his remarks with a long list of greetings to friends like Phoebe, Mary, Junia, Urbanus. Paul's got a lot of nice things to say about his friends, writing about how hard they've worked and how outstanding they've been.

This is all Apelles will ever be known for, that he was 'approved in Christ.' And in the end, it may be all that really matters.



But then, Paul writes this of Apelles: "Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ."

That's it. No other mention of Apelles in all of Scripture. No other remarks about his performance or his good works.

Paul had lavished praise on a lot of other folks, complimenting them for their good and faithful service.



But Apelles? He's not the star of the list. At most, he's Honorable Mention. He merits only five words: "Tested and approved in Christ."

But I drew in my breath when I read those words.

Because they may be the most important words of all. These are life-changing words: "tested and approved in Christ."

What if we could live like that? What if we could live like Apelles? And what if, long after they bury our bodies, they remember this most—that we were tested and approved in Christ?

That morning, my fingers flew across the computer keys, as I tapped words that made their way into the final pages of *Love Idol*:

"This is all Apelles will ever be known for, that he was 'approved in Christ.' And in the end, it may be all that really matters.

He was not Apelles the Great. He was not Apelles the Hero. No mention of Apelles the Popular, Apelles the Witty, Apelles the Man of the Year, Apelles the Valedictorian.

He was Apelles the Approved.

I wonder often about Apelles's earthly life.

He may have been the nobody in the back row. Or he might have been a big somebody who preached about Jesus among crowds in Rome. Apelles may have fought the same



battle we've been fighting. He may have, at times, been jealous or envious, or wished for a greater mention by key Christian leaders like Paul. Maybe he felt unloved by his parents. He may have fought approval until his last breath. ...

I won't know on this side of life. But on the other side of forever, when I come into glory, I want a lunch date with Apelles.

Maybe he will tell me that he lived out his days satisfied that Christ's love and approval were enough. I am sure that Apelles will tell me that, in the end, he had the only stamp of approval that really mattered."

What if we became the Apelles Generation?

What if we became the generation that forewent the lists and tiresome rankings? What if we would patiently acquire virtue, not seeking human accolades but waiting in anticipation of what C.S. Lewis called "the divine accolade?"

What if we remembered that the only approval that really matters? Is God's.

What if our own epitaphs read like that of Apelles: "[insert your name here], tested and approved in Christ."

Not the approval of our peers or the ones at the cool kids' tables. *But the approval of Christ.*



We could break from the patterns of the world. We could stop making a religion out of rankings. We could refuse to put our worth in the bank of our accomplishments. We could live like Apelles, invested wholly in Christ.

Apelles, in Greek, means “excluded and separated.”

Could we willingly be excluded? Could we, as mothers and fathers and preachers and teachers and ordinary, everyday pilgrims—could we willingly lay down our lives for a life separated with Christ?

There, we would find the only approval that matters.

And we would know it with certainty:

that it's the approval we always had.

The Prayer of the Apelles Generation

Lord, we ask you: Make us the Apelles Generation.

Make us about the cause of Christ.

Break any resume, platform, microphone, report card, accomplishment or act of service, if it does not bring You alone glory.



Strip us of any desire in our crowded hearts to be applauded. Don't let us get paralyzed by popularity. Make each of us a modern-day Apelles, content with being approved in Christ alone.

Make us servants. Make us holy.

Don't allow us to overlook the overlooked. Give us aprons and basins.

Because we don't want to get to heaven and find out that for everything we ever said or wrote or preached, that we missed out on the chance of serving You. Of kneeling beside. Of washing the feet of a King.

Of being known foremost as a window to Christ — *tested and approved in You.*

Amen.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: How does it make you feel when you're overlooked or when you're overshadowed by others? Why do we so often desire the approval of people over the approval of God? What can we learn from Apelles today?

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DAY FIVE

WHEN SOMEONE'S WORDS STING YOU





"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." ~ Matthew 5:11

I was already in my nightgown when the phone rang.

I recognized the name on the Caller ID, but I couldn't imagine why that person would be calling so late.

My own "hello" had barely coasted out of me, when the sulfuric sound of anger from the other end swallowed me.

"I've never seen such poor ministry leadership in all my life, as I have with you and your husband," said the voice, frothy and shaking.

I held my breath during a torrent of accusations.

The call came several years ago, and I've tried to un-remember what the person said. But I can't. The words split me open. These are the words that sliced deepest: "And you two call yourselves Christians?"

***Only God vindicates. You
do not need to defend
yourself.***



I fell to my knees, unsteadied by the shock of this phone call. The voice continued, and it felt like five minutes of forever.

I didn't know what to say. My voice box locked itself up and all I could manage was: "I'm sorry you feel that way. We clearly see things differently. That wasn't our intention."



But mostly, I sat quietly, remembering what a wise friend told me once: “Only God vindicates. You do not need to defend yourself.”

But I wanted to defend. I wanted to tell the voice about the countless hours that my husband and I had spent in prayer over that ministry. I wanted to tell the voice about the innumerable details that would have justified our actions. I wanted to argue. I wanted to slam the phone down.

But I didn’t. I just listened, and when I hung up the phone, I couldn’t stop crying.

I had been treated like half a person, ripped up on the inside.

Our leadership position suddenly felt like a burden rather than a blessing. I wanted to quit. I wanted to tell the person that the job was all theirs. I wanted to defend myself to all of our mutual friends.

But none of that felt right.

What does a person do when she’s been sliced open by the words of another?

Maybe you know what it feels like, to be dropped to your knees by criticism or false accusations. Maybe you know how deeply the wound hurts when your worst critic is someone who was on the same team, as a fellow worker in the Kingdom.



One of the most painful parts of ministry can be saying “yes” to roles where you *know* you are going to be misunderstood or judged, **even when you feel you’ve done what God has called you to do.**

What does a person do when that happens?

I know what I *wanted* to do. I wanted to quit, run, defend, argue.

But I also know what Jesus says.

His Word calls the insulted ones “blessed.”

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” (Matthew 5:11)

In the Greek, that word—blessed—can also be translated as happy.

It seems absurd, that I could feel “happy” or “blessed” after a phone call like that.

But when I remember what Jesus said, I start to get turned around on the inside.

Here’s why: The words of Christ will always matter more than the words of our critics.



Every day, we face the potential for being evaluated or unapproved. Every day, we face the possibility of being misunderstood by someone in the carpool lane, on the committee, in the church sanctuary.

And every day, we get to choose:

Will we respond with more hurt, or will we respond with more Jesus? Do we want to live “unapproved” or PreApproved?

That night, I gave myself permission to cry. I didn't wall off the pain. But my husband and I chose not to respond by lashing out, or defending our decisions, or bad-mouthing the caller to our mutual friends. We also knew that the phone call was an opportunity to look back on our decision, to see whether we had been mistaken.

We still feel like we made the best decision, and we came to realize that the caller was responding out of a place of hurt.

I still don't know if I'd be able to consider myself “happy” if a call like that happened this week. **But I do know this:**

- 1 - God continues to call each of us into roles where we may face scrutiny and possible criticism.
- 2 - God left His Church in the hands of sinners, so conflict is bound to happen.
- 3 - We will inadvertently hurt one another.



But that doesn't give us an excuse to quit. We are each called to follow Jesus wherever He leads. **Wherever.** And wherever that place is for me, I want to go there with Jesus. I want to follow Him close enough that He can feel my breath on His back. I want to walk close enough so I can hear His heartbeat—the blessed, happy sound of Christ, the only sound that can drown out the voice of man.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Think of a time when you've felt under attack and utterly "unapproved?" How did you respond? Would you do anything differently? How can today's verse help you respond in the future?



BLESSED ARE YOU

when people insult you.

Matthew 5:11

DAY SIX

WHEN PUSH COMES
TO SHOVE





"For they loved praise from men more than praise from God." ~ John 12:43

"When push came to shove, they cared more for human approval than God's glory." ~ John 12:43 (The Message paraphrase)

I almost didn't write *Love Idol*.

You know why? **Because of my love idols!**

I was afraid of what people would think. The fear of failure haunted me. I was equally afraid of success.

I was a small blogger, relatively unknown outside of my tiny circle of readers. Everything that I'd read about book publishing made me believe that I had little or no chance of ever seeing my book published.

Furthermore, if it did publish, *what if people hated it?*

Amazon.com terrified me. My little yellow book about approval would be open for review on a five-star approval system. Irony of ironies.

I remember distinctly a conversation that I had with my husband while writing the book. "You've married a woman of paradox," I whined to him one morning. On the verge of tears, I explained that I was jumping into a pit of my worst fears.

Here's what he said:



“Maybe that’s the point! Maybe jumping into your fear is the point. That’s why they call it courage.”

My own love idol of approval had a firm grip on me, and it nearly killed the book that now bears its name.

The Apostle John once wrote about some religious leaders who believed in Jesus, but because of the Pharisees, they wouldn’t confess their faith “out of fear.”

“When push came to shove, they cared more for human approval than God’s glory.” (John 12:43, The Message)

I’m not proud to admit that I acted like those religious leaders. God was calling me to write a book, but “out of fear” I balked. I fretted more about human approval, than what God wanted to do in and through me.

Push came to shove. I had to make a choice.

If we let fear have unrestricted access to our heart, our dreams will die with us.

I know I’m not alone. Friends tell me they’re scared, too. Scared to apply for a promotion, start a business, speak in public, write a book, enroll in a class. Our love idols convince us that we’re too stumbling and bumbling, too broken and clueless, too ridiculous or sinful to be effective. We think we’re unremarkable. So when push comes to shove, we duck from the challenges placed before us.



The desire for approval strangles dreams. It suffocates bravery. In its grip, we begin to trust exterior evaluation, more than interior revelation. Have we forgotten that we are indwelt with the



Holy Spirit? With God? He's not a miserly, absentee landlord of your life. He's the Tenant of your soul.

If we let fear have unrestricted access to our heart, our dreams will die with us.

In his book *Die Empty*, Todd Henry wrote: "The most valuable land in the world is the graveyard. ... In the graveyard are buried all of the unwritten novels, never-launched businesses, unreconciled relationships, and all of the other things that people thought, 'I'll get around to that tomorrow.' One day, however, their tomorrows ran out."

Maybe today's the day to take the next step. ***Push has officially come to shove.*** And maybe today's the day you spread your arms open wide and jump—right into your fear—to find God catching you.

Say "yes" to the crazy risk, the wild wonder of the unknown. When you say yes, you're saying you trust the Spirit of God who gave you the idea in the first place.

And when you say yes, you're making the rest of us brave. Because we can see how God, working in you, is bigger than the fears that *surround* you.

I remember just now on a winter night when I was sitting at these computer keys. It seemed like God was whispering into my "knower:"

"Amazon is a pretty big place," God seemed to say to me. "That's why it's called Amazon. But guess what? I'm bigger than Amazon."



And then? I wrote a book.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: What is God calling you to? What do you need God to be “bigger than?” What is your Amazon? How has man’s approval/disapproval kept you from taking that next step? I’m praying for you, friend.

God

is bigger than



DAY SEVEN

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST MUSIC WITH YOUR LIFE





"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." ~ Galatians 1:10

I could have said no.

But I have trouble refusing church ladies like Trish. They're the kind whose persuasive acts make you wonder if arm-twisting is a spiritual gift. They could talk you into delivering Sunday's sermon in a pinch.

Trish had called, looking for musicians. And before I could eek out a simple word—*no*—I gushed: "Yes! Of course!"

A few days later, she brought a French horn to our house, along with a trumpet. I had ... um ... volunteered my husband, too. I agreed that both of us could play in a brass quintet at our country church's Christmas Eve service.

Never mind that neither my husband nor I have played brass in 20 years. I would need to Google-search "French horn fingerings" to refresh my memory.

Like I said, I could have said no.

But Trish was convincing. She helped me believe we might be part of a magical moment.

Plus, I really wanted to say yes. As I grow older, my inner adventurer tells me to live life more fully, more courageously. Besides, my husband and I wanted to "practice what we preach" to our



daughters. We regularly encourage our girls to try new things—like piano or cartwheels or sushi. This world—a gift to mortals—is fertile ground for playful, daring hearts.

If I scroll back through my life, I see places where perfectionism has stonewalled my spirit of adventure. I've wanted the approval of man more than I care to admit. I haven't always wanted to try new things. Maybe it's because I've felt the sting of disapproval and self-doubt too many times.

But if we're not careful, we could stop trying anything that seems scary or dangerous—like having babies. Or knitting. :)

Our drive for performance? It can drive us into a bland malaise. We miss out on adventure because we're enslaved by our approval ratings.

Here's what I know—

We'll make the best music with our lives, if we are willing to play a few wrong notes.

And we can make the best music of all when we clear all the people off of life's bleachers and play for an Audience of One.

Our little brass ensemble risked wrong notes that Christmas because we didn't want to miss out on the adventure of the song. Sure, we rehearsed, right here in our living room.

In a burst of musical bravado, my husband and I practiced while our two daughters sat cross-legged on the floor.



My mind danced with daydreams of a future with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, or at least a spot in the high school concert band. We finished the song. I lowered my horn, looking to our miniature music critics for assurance.

One daughter scrunched her nose. The other asked: "Are you sure that's the way it was supposed to sound?"

True, we sounded more like sick elephants than a brass duet.

The night of our performance came a week later. The pastor had instructed us to play our song two times through. With forty-two sets of eyes on us, we lifted borrowed horns to our lips at Trish's cue. The first strains of "The First Noel" filled the sanctuary.

And behold, we sounded like a real band. Yes, I did hit at least one wrong note, and I lost my breath midway. After one verse, we lowered our horns. Between bursts of laughter, we decided one verse was plenty.

***We'll make the best music with
our lives, if we are willing to
play a few wrong notes.***



Maybe it was the spirit of the season, but our audience broke into applause. I think I even heard a few cheers.

Afterward, Trish said we ought to play on Easter morning. I might just say yes. Unless, of course, the Royal Philharmonic calls first. ;)

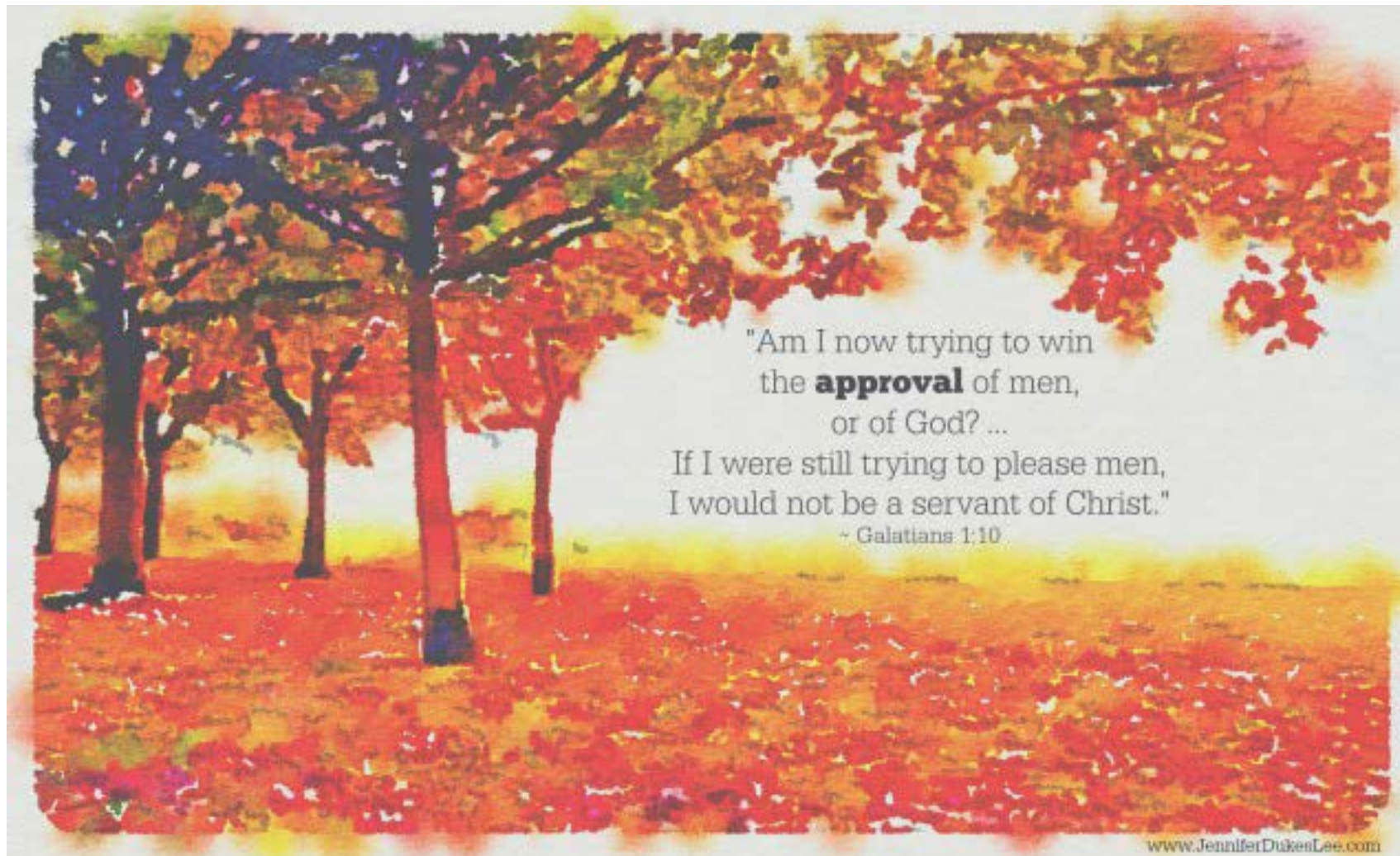
Living PreApproved,

Jennifer



Questions for you: How can you let loose your inner adventurer today? What could you try, just for the sheer fun of it, despite how you might perform? Send me an email at Jennifer@JenniferDukesLee.com and let me know how it felt! And then, post a picture of your new adventure on Facebook or Instagram. Be sure to tag me ([@dukeslee on Instagram](#), or [Jennifer Dukes Lee on Facebook](#)), and use the hashtag #preapproved.

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"Am I now trying to win
the **approval** of men,
or of God? ...

If I were still trying to please men,
I would not be a servant of Christ."

~ Galatians 1:10

DAY EIGHT

THE SECRET OF BEING CONTENT





*"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."
~ Philippians 4:12-14*

*"Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am."
~ Philippians 4:13, The Message paraphrase*

We were standing there, among the bare feet, the jutting ribcage, the tin shanties. *Haiti.*

I smiled at a child and then studied the architecture of her small face, angled and hollow with hungry eyes. She smiled back and scooted next to me, all bone and skin and sagging shirt.

We walked, a slow scuffle of feet on dirt, because no one was in a hurry there. When we turned the corner, I saw them:

"What's that?" I asked our interpreter, motioning to hundreds of bowl-shaped discs baking under the bluest sky. Sunlight pooled in the little bowls. The child made a grab for my hand. I held it, and our fingers laced.

We walked closer to the bowls, and her small legs brushed up against mine.

"Those?" the interpreter asked. "Those aren't bowls. They're mud pies."

He told us that a woman in the village—maybe the girl's mother—had mixed dirt with oil, and then pressed each of them into a uniform shape. She had lined them up on mats, to dry in the sun. Later, she would take them to market, to sell. As food.



These mud pies would be eaten. By people. This was not some bizarre Haitian delicacy. People in Haiti eat dirt because it gives their starving bodies a false sense of satisfaction.

I gripped tighter to the hand of a girl who knew the taste of dirt.

Mud pies don't fill. They merely mask real hunger. The mamas know that. But they feed them to their children, so tiny tummies will stop growling.

I snapped a photo of those mud pies, and of course, I saw the mud pies as a depressing truth about abject hunger in our world.

And then we turned to leave. I left the child, and her mama's mud pies, but the image never left me. I pray that the image will forever inform my priorities.

The mud pies paint a very real picture of a very real crisis, but the picture also came to represent something else.





The mud pies serve as a metaphor for the life of any of us who have ever looked to something or someone other than God for fulfillment.

We can go whole lifetimes eating metaphorical mud pies. We can feast on the dirt of our disordered desires, thinking they will satisfy the hunger within us—as if mud can bring joy or contentment. That momentary feast of desire may quiet our inner grumbles for a time, but in truth, the feast is a false feast. It serves to mask real hunger that can only be fed by one Source.

This morning, I listened to a podcast from Pastor Matt Chandler, who talked about the disordered desires that we use to fill us up. Some of those desires, he said, aren't actually bad. In fact, they're quite good—like the desire to make a good living or to get a better job. But if our "good desires" become our "ultimate desires," we are being ruled by them.

"What is ultimate to you, will control you," Pastor Chandler said.

The Apostle Paul knew the secret to contentment.

He knew what it was to feast on metaphorical dirt, and he knew what it was to lose everything in order to gain the one Ultimate—the Person of Jesus Christ.

***What is ultimate to you,
will control you.***



Paul had feasted on a buffet of disordered desires—status and prestige, to name a few. Then, he leveraged his position as way to hunt down Christians. He terrorized Christians, *then he became one*. Finally, he had discovered the secret to contentment. He spilled that great secret in his letter to the Philippians.



In essence, his message is this:

Our hunger for contentment will never be satisfied with our perfection, our performance, or our prestige. We won't find contentment in a bigger 401K, a smaller dress size, a fancier car, or a weeklong vacation in Cancun. Those are good things, but they aren't the ultimate things.

The secret to ultimate contentment? Paul revealed it in the letter.

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation," Paul wrote, and it's this:

"I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

The secret isn't in the mud. It's in the Bread—the body of Christ, alive in you.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: What metaphorical mud pies have you feasted on? Reread Paul's words about true contentment. How have you experienced contentment, apart from circumstances, in your own life?

DAY NINE

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE
THE SMALL THINGS





"... Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." ~ Matthew 17:20

You think you're too small and powerless, eh?

Your faith? Your clout? Your intellect? Your influence? Your quiet prayers?

Think again. Look to the seeds.

There's a seed so small that it falls under the category of "Blink And You'll Miss It." The seed is dwarfed by a pencil eraser. It's the kind of seed that would get stuck in your teeth. Think: Dots-on-the-dice small.

But if you stick this seed in the ground, cover it with dirt, and add water, it will push against the earth with Herculean strength.

But God says, "Hey, kid. Give me that, would you? I can do something with it! I promise!"

The odds are stacked against that tiny seed, but it doesn't matter. The seed defies all odds to muscle forth in bloom.



That's the power of the mustard seed. Scratch that... **That's the power of God in the seed. And that's the power of God in you.**

Your faith might feel small today -- mustard-seed small, hangnail small, hole-in-the-button small. But God says it's worth something. He says it can move mountains.



Why?

Because it's not about the size of our faith. It's about the size of our God.

Maybe you feel like you're fumbling around in the dark today. Maybe you feel like your prayers are weak, your "quiet time" is lame, and your piety is just a bit off-kilter. Maybe you look at your faith walk and think that it looks more like a stumble. You too? I knew we could be friends. On this walk of faith, we're the ones with toilet paper stuck to our shoes.

But God says He can do something with our faith anyhow. Sure, it may look like a tiny shred, a crumb, a mustard seed.

But God says, "Hey, kid. Give me that, would you? I can do something with it! I promise!"

And then stand back and watch what He does.

And listen ... Listen up. Do you hear it?

That's the sound of a moving mountain.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Where do you feel "small" today? What seems too big for you? Whatever it is, it's not too big for God, Who is famous for doing the impossible through ordinary people.



DAY TEN

HOW TO FIND A LIFE OF REAL WORTH





"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."
~ Philippians 3:7-10

"Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung." ~ Philippians 3:8, The Message paraphrase

Saul had it all.

Status. Education. Some impressive DNA. A rock-star resume. Ambition. Clout. And this incredible ability to follow all the rules, like a soldier. "Faultless," he once called himself.

But then, he got knocked to the ground. And he couldn't see for a few days after.

Sometimes, a face-plant into the dirt is the best way to humble the hurried and the harried.

Saul met Jesus. Down there in the dirt. That changed everything.

Suddenly? His resume and degrees could have been turned into birdcage liners, for all he cared. "I consider them garbage," he said.

His credentials? Dog dung.



His prestige? Garbage.

"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord," Mr. Face-Plant wrote.

He traded clout for Christ. He traded personal safety, for a personal Savior. He traded legalism, for the unfailing love of the Lord. He even traded his name: Saul became Paul.

What about us?

What could we trade for Christ? Maybe we all need a little face-plant, a few days of blindness, to begin to really see straight.

What is God telling you, while you're there in the dirt?

Look how God's not stingy in the trade. Look how He takes our dog dung and gives us Heaven. See how He takes our garbage and gives us grace.

He doesn't ask for our faultless legalism, our good name, our polished performances, our overcommitted schedules, or our half-baked intentions.

He asks for our hearts.

***Saul met Jesus. Down there
in the dirt. That changed
everything.***





And in exchange?

He gives us His.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Have you ever found yourself face-planted in the proverbial dirt? What did you learn from the experience? If God gave you a new name, like He gave Paul, what would He call you?

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I consider
EVERYTHING
A LOSS COMPARED
TO KNOWING
CHRIST.

— *The Apostle Paul* —

DAY ELEVEN

PERMISSION TO BOAST





"Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." ~ 2 Corinthians 10:17-18

"It's what God says about you that makes the difference." ~ 2 Corinthians 10:18, The Message paraphrase

A friend and I were talking on the phone the other day about the book she recently wrote. She was so excited about the message God had given her. But she dreaded the marketing and publicity. Sure, she wanted people to *know* about the book. But she didn't want to have to *tell* anybody.

"It just feels ... gross. I feel like I'm making it all about me," she said. "When I mean for it to be all about God."

I nodded my head. Because for most writers I know, the word "marketing" strikes panic in our hearts. It sends us running for the nearest corner, where we draw our knees to our chest, and rock back and forth for days, maniacally wide-eyed—preferably with a few boxes of Thin Mints within reach.

Not only do we dread marketing, but also we get tongue-tied when someone thanks us.

You, too? Is it hard for you to know what to say when you're complimented? Is it hard for you to share what God is doing through you?

True humility doesn't mean we wave off affirmation, or run for the corner with Girl Scout cookies clutched in our sweaty little fists.





Some of us have got to thinking that it's plain wrong to say "thank you" when someone tells us that we wrote a good book, made a perfect pie crust, smiled the sweetest smile, penned the loveliest little poem.

We get to worrying that we're stealing some of God's praise. And we balk at sharing what God is doing through our lives, because we're afraid we're stealing God's spotlight.

We're afraid we're boasting.

But God never said you couldn't boast. In fact, He wants to show you how.

"Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." (2 Corinthians 10:17)

God didn't crack down on boasting. He is teaching us how to do it right—by boasting in the Lord. He's saying to you: "I'm doing something remarkable in you and through you. And that's worth telling."

There are ways to accept praise, share achievements, and even "market" without offending God or mankind.

True humility doesn't mean we wave off affirmation or run for the corner with Girl Scout cookies clutched in our sweaty little fists. It doesn't mean we apologize for who we are. Gospel humility doesn't mean that we unleash a litany of our shortcomings in response to praise. True humility is genuine "thanks," delivered with grace.

We are free to shine for Jesus. Because of Jesus.



We can stop ducking from the kind words of people who see God's work in us. We can stop minimizing our strengths with words like, "Oh, it was nothing."

What God put inside your spirit isn't "nothing." It's a special something, intended to change the world. It's the life of God, in you. When we deflect kind words, we diminish the beauty set aflame by God in us.

Our lives exist inside Christ, and Christ exists inside us. What comes out in His name is a product of what He designed us to do. We will come more alive to our Creator and our callings when we recognize that we bring value to our world.

So go ahead, do as the Lord taught. Boast. But in Him alone.

(But could you still pass the Thin Mints?)

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: How do you react when someone pays you a compliment? Do you have trouble accepting praise? Do you think it's possible to accept praise and maintain humility? How might you encourage a friend today with a kind word about how you see God at work in her?

We will come more

alive

to our Creator

and our callings

when we recognize

that we bring

value

to our world.

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DAY TWELVE

WHEN YOU WONDER
IF YOU'RE LOVEABLE





No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.
~ Romans 2:29

Dear God,

I come to You with a prayer, a confession:

I'm such a two-faced spiritual klutz. I'm saved, but I stumble. You made me a saint, but I'm ever the sinner. I am, indeed, the wretch the song refers to.

But You, God? You keep loving me anyway.

Even back when.

Back then.

Back before it all.

Back before I ever thought to love you back, You loved me.

And You still do. Not because of some law, some written code, some strict adherence on my part.

I seriously had NOTHING to do with this.



You love me, simply because You love me. You made my heart. And you decided in advance to love this heart. *PreApproved...*

The mirrors of the world make us forget about the miracle of what you've done with our hearts. So You've told us that mirrors are poor judges. A person can look in the mirror or the inbox or the bank account or the offering plate, and if things look good, life is good. And if things look bleak, well . . . life seems bleak. I heard You say it loud to my knower: Stop. Looking. In. The. Mirrors. They are horrible indicators of reality.

Yeah, mirrors reflect a false truth sometimes.

I do want to reflect You.

I've lived otherwise. I've paid too much attention to mirrors—and to glitter. There's a lot of glitter in the world.

And there are a thousand ways to count shiny things: followers, Facebook friends, @mentions, and invitations. There's only One Way that ever really mattered.

***You take our chins in Your
nail-scarred hands, and You
lift our eyes to You.***



Lord, help me follow that Way.

There are also a thousand ways to measure if a lowly mortal is insignificant: especially if she's been overlooked, overmatched, overburdened, overtopped. **I want to be so over that.**

There's always someone out there telling us we've got to have a bigger voice and a better house, more influence and less mess.



You know it already, Lord, but let me say it out loud here: The world tells me to be all the things that **end in Y**: funny, pretty, skinny, witty. I'll turn it all upside-down, and chase after the One whose name *begins* with Y. **You, Yahweh.**

You know what, Lord? I've been mesmerized by all my shortcomings. I confess that to You. But . . . here's the thing about You, Yahweh. Here's the amazing thing about Your still-amazing grace. You take our chins in Your nail-scarred hands, and You lift our eyes to You.

I see You.

And it's so good to be seen *by* You.

You are the God Who Sees, my El Roi. And we all want to be seen, I suppose? To know that we matter? You made it that way, but our impulse is to seek affirmation outside of You.

Change my impulses.

Let me hear You whisper again to me:

"You. Matter."

And let me believe it's true.

Amen.



Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Your turn: Write a prayer today, thanking God for the ways that He already loves you.

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**God made my heart,
and decided
in advance
to LOVE it.**

DAY THIRTEEN

TRADING HEARTACHE FOR HEARTBURN





"And they said one to another, 'Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?'" ~ Luke 24:32

I had this huge smile on my face, big enough to hide an avalanche of pain underneath.

The smile was legit. I swear it. I still remember how happy I was to be making my inaugural journey to the Laity Lodge retreat center in Texas. I had forged friendships online with writers all over the country, and now we'd be together for the first time ever. It was the fall of 2010.

Here's a picture of me, snapped a few moments before I arrived.

When that picture was taken, we were driving in the river. Yes, **in it**. That's the only way in to Laity Lodge—through the river.

And it was ridiculously fun.

So, yeah, my smile stretched wide and real.

But the smile didn't tell the whole story.





Underneath, there were layers of heartache, loss, and stress. My smile cloaked grief, dangling from the architecture of my heart. The smile also didn't reveal how a treasured friend had begun to drift, or how a conflict in ministry was causing us great heartache.

So I took both my heartache and my smile to Laity Lodge that year, but I took great care in which part I'd reveal.

But that first night, Ashley Cleveland started singing.

She sang hymns, smoky and soulful. This was the voice of a woman who'd felt pain and gone hunting for peace, to find it.

Her voice came at me like a freight train, or a freedom train—I didn't know which yet. I sank deeper into the couch, while her songs opened me up. I felt raw, excavated, and vulnerable. I also felt a nearness to Jesus. In some way, I could see the hem of His garment, as He picked up the gazillion shattered pieces of my heart, like so many breadcrumbs.

My reluctant heart went fluid, straight out my eyes. I came unhinged. It was messy, except for the fact that Jesus was in the room, so that made it beautiful. I could feel Him close, like a fire inside of me. Like I'd been busted open by the Gospel.

Ashley sat down next to me on the couch after her last song. And she didn't act like she knew what a happy wreck I was. Not at first. So I thought I'd gotten away with something. But then she turned toward me. Her eyes studied mine.

I was never happier to be found out, to be affirmed in my vulnerability.





"Sorry," I sniffled. "Can't stop crying."

"The Holy Spirit," she said, unblinking and matter-of-fact, like she was a doctor delivering the best possible diagnosis.

I must have looked surprised.

"That's what's going on in you," Ashley said. "It's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is thick in this place."

I was never happier to be found out, to be affirmed in my vulnerability, and to hear confirming words that God was at work, even in me. *I was a mess, but I was a holy mess.*

Later, we took a picture together, and when I look back, I see two things in my face:

- 1) A genuine smile.
- 2) Eyes that had been crying.

In that retreat center, I had experienced a "Holy Heartburn moment."





My heart had burned. I had let myself be true. I felt held. I felt attended to by Jesus.

Maybe it's the way those travelers felt on their way to Emmaus. They were dejected and downtrodden, but then another traveler joined them. They didn't know it yet, but that traveler was Jesus.

I had come to Jesus by way of a river. They had come to Jesus by way of a dusty road.

We both found the Holy Spirit when we got to where we were headed.

Look, we're all busted up. We're all dealing with something. But He's got a table, and a loaf, and a seat for you.

Put your hand against your chest, and feel it—your heart, beating.

We all have heartache. And Jesus wants to trade it for His heartburn.

He wants to walk with you, drive through the river, and break bread at the end of the road. You'll look back on how far you've come, and then maybe you'll turn to a friend to say it:

"Did not our heart burn within us while he talked with us by the way ..."

That's the kind of heartburn I want. Chronic, Holy Heartburn. I want a heart that beats like this:

Jesus ... Jesus ... Jesus.



Some of us have been walking a dusty road, and life has been plain hard.

Keep walking. Lift your eyes from the dusty path, to see Him walking with you. And on the inside, may you feel that burn. Your own Emmaus heartburn with Jesus...

Chronic. Fiery. Holy.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: When was a time when you felt like one of the dejected travelers heading to Emmaus? Can you identify how Jesus became present for you in that moment, perhaps through a friend, a pastor, a song, a verse, a dream? How did Jesus' presence comfort you?

DAY FOURTEEN

A VALIDATED LIFE





*"Open up before God, keep nothing back;
he'll do whatever needs to be done:
He'll validate your life in the clear light of day
and stamp you with approval at high noon."
~ Psalm 37:6 (The Message)*

Just a few words today, a whisper to your soul:

Did you know that you shine, even on your darkest days?

Did you know how God approves of you,

*And how that is **approval enough?***

Your "shine" is the mark of His approval of your very existence.

Your shine is who you ARE, not what you DO.

And your shine isn't about your circumstances; it's about your Savior. **I dare us to believe it.**

God's got this, friend.

He's got your reputation, your honor, your righteousness.

He's standing with you in the dark, giving you more of His Light.



You are never alone even if you feel hidden because your life is ***hidden in Christ with God.***

You might face censure or rebuke or the steady drumbeat of disapproval and maybe your inner critic is the one shouting loudest.

Step out of the dark, and into the light brave soul.

Turn your face to the noonday sun and let it warm you through.

God's got this and God's got you.


Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

***And your shine isn't about
your circumstances; it's about
your Savior.***



Questions for you: Is it hard for you to believe that you shine? Do you find yourself giving into the temptation of believing that you are defined by what you do instead of who you are?



He'll validate your life in the clear light of day
and stamp you with **approval** at high noon.

DAY FIFTEEN

HOW TO LIVE OUT YOUR CALLING BOLDLY





"He must become greater; I must become less." ~ John 3:30

I met her at a retreat in Arkansas.

She'd come from Canada. I'd come from Iowa.

She was 20. I was old enough to be her mother.

She's a Starbucks barista. I'm a farmer's wife on a family farm, where my husband and I are raising crops, pigs and two humans.

But we hit it off immediately, and we walked with our arms linked down the streets of Bentonville, Arkansas. Her eyes were pathways to an old soul, shimmering with a deep wisdom. She had an unusual confidence in who she was—not an arrogant "I'm a real somebody," but a God-fidence that made her more courageous than I was at that age, maybe even than I am *now*. It was so beautiful to see her *whole self* agreeing with God—that she was made in His image. She wasn't afraid to unleash her gifts in the world, and I believe that's how God intended it.

She was walking gospel. Her name is Aliza.

In the months that have passed, Aliza and I have stayed in touch. She's half my age, yet manages to mentor me with her life.

A couple weeks ago, Aliza posted some words on Instagram that have stuck with me:



"I am imagining a world where we live out our callings to their fullest potential, where success doesn't look like huge numbers or giant followings but a life lived out in humility, patience and love. I think Jesus measures success differently than we do. I want to live out my calling in the biggest way I can, but in the smallest way possible - ***the kind of small where I always find myself in front of Jesus***. The soundtrack playing in my head this morning: patience, humility, love. I hope we live our callings big but always go back to being small."

Her words bubbled to the surface again this morning, when I spent time in John 3:30: "He must become greater; I must become less." John the Baptist was saying, in essence: "I was the opening act, but I'm going to give up the spotlight now, because the Main Attraction is now in the building."

I love John's words. They model great humility for all of us.

***I want to live out my calling
in the biggest way I can, but in
the smallest way possible.***

But those very words are dangerous, if they are interpreted in a way that encourages us to be so small as to disappear.



It can be easy to shrink into timid ways. It can be easy to misinterpret humility. I've gone through times where I've hidden my light under a bushel, afraid to shine.

But the gospel doesn't call you to run into hiding. You are light, the Bible says, like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden.

We ought to be small in the right ways—humble, but not by hiding our light. John 3:30 is not an excuse for timidity.



So how do we live our lives more boldly?

- 1 - By using our gifts without timidity or apology.
- 2 - By never robbing the spotlight from the Main Attraction.
- 3 - By giving God all the glory.
- 4 - By remembering that while a person can climb too high, she can never bow too low.

I think Aliza nailed it:

"I want to live out my calling in the biggest way I can, but in the smallest way possible—the kind of small where I always find myself in front of Jesus."

I want to be found facing Jesus, looking to Him, and no one else.

Dear God, Grant us the courage to be big in You alone. May all we do bring You glory. And may You make Yourself the Main Attraction, so that when people look at us, they ultimately see You. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: How can you live your life more boldly, without timidity? Be bold and thank God for the spiritual gifts that He has given you. Name them!

He MUST
BECOME
greater;
I MUST
BECOME
less.



DAY SIXTEEN

A FIX FOR WHAT'S BEEN RUINED





"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. They will say, 'This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.' Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it."
~ Ezekiel 36:33-36

"The wasteland will be plowed and sown—a vast change from the emptiness those passing by are used to seeing." ~ Ezekiel 36:34, The Voice

Each spring, I watch from the kitchen window as our local farmers turn over the earth. They are preparing for planting, making the soil ready for seeds. It's a season of hope for farmers everywhere, a timeless act of believing that something good will grow again.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote of this practice nearly six hundred years before Christ was born. He spoke of land being "cultivated instead of lying desolate." His words held hope and promise.

Centuries later, behold: Christ cultivated new life on the cross at Calvary with the most marvelous, scandalous act of sacrifice known to mankind.

And the Savior still "cultivates." Even today, He is "working the ground" of our souls, to make us like springtime fields, ready for planting. He tends to the fallow ground of human hearts, turning the soil over and over again so seeds can be planted.



What do you see in your fields today? Do they look desolate? Empty? Hopeless? Unproductive?

God is the farmer of your field. He has plans for what is lying in ruins. He has a fix for what's been destroyed.

He didn't say He *might* fix things. He didn't say He'd *think* about it. He said, "I the Lord have spoken, and ***I will do it.***"

Look to the cross, to see how He already did.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Examine your fields. Do they look desolate, empty, and unproductive? Or do you see signs of new growth? How do you sense God "working the ground" of your soul, especially with regard to issues of identity?

"I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it."

Ezekiel 36:36



DAY SEVENTEEN

IT'S NOT OVER





In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ~ Philippians 1:4-6

Hey friend,

You've been working hard, haven't you?

God started something in you, but the finish line is nowhere in sight.

Maybe you want to stop at the side of the road, stick out your thumb, and hitch a ride back to town.

Don't do it.

Keep moving forward, one step at a time. But be sure to take Sabbath breaks—no matter if it's Sunday, Tuesday or Friday. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Look back for a moment and see how far you've come. Don't fret too much about what lies ahead.

Remember: you're in the middle.

It's not over yet, but it will be. And this road has a real finish line, a God-ordained ending.

This road is not for the faint of heart. The middle is always the hardest. But do not be afraid. If God started it, He will see it through to the end. That's His promise.



This day, rest in His promises. Hang in there: He who began this good work in you will carry it on to completion.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Tell me about your road. Is it foggy? Is the path littered with stones and potholes? Now, turn around and see how far you've come, along that same littered, stony, potholed path. Hang in there, friend. God promises you're going to make it!

IT'S NOT OVER.

"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."

Philippians 4:16



DAY EIGHTEEN

THE STARTLING TRUTH ABOUT GRACE & PREAPPROVAL





We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is declared right with God—something the law of Moses could never do.

~ Acts 13:38-41

Sometimes our sin can feel so heavy, our repeat offenses so burdensome, and our private thoughts so embarrassingly awful. We can't imagine how a God could love or approve of us.

That must have been how the woman felt that day, when she came to me crying. I was sitting at the lunch table, with half-a-dozen others at a women's retreat. She grabbed my elbow and pleaded.

"It's so awful, Jennifer," she said. "And I've kept it inside for so, so long."

I stood up and slipped an arm around her waist. We walked to the other side of the building, away from the others. She wanted to confess a sin that she'd been hauling around for years. She had tried to keep that sin buried, but it had burned a hole through her. It spilled out, like ash.

She hitched her thumbs in her pockets and stared at one spot in the carpet when she told me what she'd done.

Yes, it was horrible. Yes, it was big. And it had dug its claws into her heart and she couldn't figure out how to make it go away.

She said she just wasn't sure how to give it to God all by herself. And I'd been there before, too, needing a Spirit-sister to go with me.



"Would you be willing to write it down?" I asked her, and passed her a scrap of paper I'd ripped from the side of an envelope.

So she wrote the name of the thing she'd done on ragged paper, and we found a lighter by the altar. We slipped out the back door, and huddled on the back step of a patio.

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us," I said. "Do you believe that?"

Yes, she nodded, yes, I do.

She held the paper, and I clicked the lighter. The paper sizzled, curling under a flame. She dropped the burning sin to the pavement, and it left a streak of ash.

She wept. So did I.

It was gone.

* * *

Quite often, it will happen like that—a woman will pull me to a corner at a conference. Or she'll quietly slip a note into my inbox after reading *Love Idol*.

"What about *God's* approval? How do I know I have *that*?" the woman will ask. "I feel like there's no way I can have His love and approval, after all that I have done."



Every time I get a letter like that, I remember that moment with the burning paper. I remember the words, "It is finished."

And I remember the words in the Book of Acts. Look there for some startling truth about God's grace toward us and His forgiveness for us.

"Everyone who believes in him is declared right with God," the Scripture says, and that's something that the law could never do. The law could never produce perfect obedience in people. Only Jesus could do what the law could not.

***She dropped the burning sin
to the pavement, and it left a
streak of ash.***

It's scandalous, wonderful, tragic, and mysterious. *And it's real. Let it sink in.*



When is the last time we took a good long look at Jesus, carrying the sin of mankind on His back? What an astounding burden, an illogical grace.

If we then looked at our own sin, and found it too big for Jesus, might we cheapen the work of the cross? Might we be saying, "Jesus, thank You for doing what you did. But it wasn't enough to cover the mistakes I've made."

That's not what the Bible says. There's no fine print. No escape clause. There are no sins too big or too small.

He handled it all. He carried it all, no matter how vile or ugly.



If ever there was a time when God declared us “PreApproved,” it was on a Friday—Good Friday.

His Son went to the cross for us, *before* we even existed. We were PreApproved *before* we were born. We were already approved—bought and paid for—when Jesus took our yet-to-be-committed sins with Him to the cross, spread His arms wide, as if to say, “PreApproved, PreApproved, PreApproved! I’m dying for you now, and you don’t even know Me yet. You’re PreApproved, not by your law-keeping, but by My sacrifice.”

Maybe you’ve been wondering it, too: Am I really loved and approved? Can God PreApprove a wretch like me? The Scriptures say yes.

So maybe today’s the day to release your pent-up baggage. Take your sins to a friend, and burn them if you must. Cry. And believe. Believe that He loves you, and He likes you, and He sent His Son to die for you in the biggest act of validation known in the history of mankind. Let yourself believe that it’s true. Because it is.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Do you ever have trouble believing that God approves of you? Have you ever struggled with the belief that you have to “earn” God’s love? Re-read those verses from Acts, and apply them to your beautiful, PreApproved self.

If ever there
was a time
when God
declared us
PreApproved,
it was on a Friday.

Jennifer Dukes Lee | Love Idol



DAY NINETEEN

YOUR NAME
IS IN THE WILL





Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ~ Romans 8:17

We are co-heirs with Christ.

Read that sentence again, because we don't want to miss this. ***We are co-heirs with Christ!***

You know what that means?

We're not long-lost cousins getting a smidgen of the inheritance. We are co-heirs and co-beneficiaries. We share the same will as the Son of God. *Um, hello.*

And even more stunning? ***We didn't do a thing to earn it.***

Who did all the work? Christ, of course. He bought our way onto the will. That's how our names are on the papers. And the cost was terribly high.

You'd think that as a reward for all of His suffering, Jesus would get at least 98 percent of the inheritance.

But that's not what it says in Romans 8:17. Paul is telling us that we're co-heirs, getting the full benefits of the firstborn. ***We inherit what Jesus inherits.***

In one startlingly beautiful example of PreApproval, God always knew that you would be His. He always knew that He wanted you in the will, and He couldn't wait for your "yes."



We've been reading Scriptures about our identity in Christ, and this right here is the goods. If you're ever wondering about who you really are, go back and re-read Romans 8:17.

I love how Max Lucado says it:

"Before you knew you needed adopting, he'd already filed the papers and selected the wallpaper for your room."

That's some kind of amazing PreApproval.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer, a co-heir

Questions for you: Does it seem fair that we get the same inheritance as Jesus? How does that change your perspective about how much God treasures you?

DAY TWENTY

WHEN YOU AREN'T SURE IF GOD
(OR ANYONE ELSE!) LIKES YOU





See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ~ 1 John 3:1

I'm driving down the highway to a friend's house. I'm due at her house at 3:30. We have a late-afternoon shopping trip planned, and I've been looking forward to this all day. I'm not a woman who's into the "retail therapy" thing, but what I am into is this: quality time spent with my people. I needed girlfriend time.

The whole day up to that point had been an ugly one. It was one of those terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. I had no bread for the school lunches. We had arrived late—again—for the bus. I had shrunk two of my daughter's favorite shirts. My hormones were doing crazy things, like they do every 28 days or so. And I was feeling this deep sense of aloneness that creeps up on me every so often, especially when the days get shorter and the nights get colder.

So I drive to find a friend.

I need friend therapy, I say to myself. I turn into her driveway, hopeful for a remedy. But when I get there, she says there's been a change of plans. Here's what I'm thinking on the inside: *She can't fix me. I wanted her to fix me, and now she can't.*

I stand on her back step, wanting to cry. I'm embarrassed at how my insides are reacting, and my adult self can't keep the little kid inside of me in line.

I hear my voice say to her, "It's okay, really." But my tone sounds sharp; my words taste bitter. I feel wildly disappointed, achy, and alone. And there's no doubt she knows it. She can read the signs, the body language.



I turn to leave, before she sees that I'm ridiculously close to tears. I fake a cheery, "We'll make it work another time!"

But I hear the pain etched inside of her goodbye. I've made her feel bad.

Now there are two of us feeling awful.

Driving home, I remember the saying, "Hurt people hurt people."

I am the hurting. ***And I am the hurter.*** I hurt her, my friend whom I love.

All the way home, my sadness widens. Grief opens a wide chasm underneath me. Guilt rushes in with a ferocious voice—

"What kind of sophomoric friend are you?"

"When will you ever stop messing it up?"

"When will you get to the point where you really know who you are in Christ?"

These are the days when I don't like myself. These are the days when I hurt myself with accusations, and then I hurt someone I love in the process. Usually, it happens all in the same day—a perfect, furious storm of disappointment.

Sometimes the most impossible person to love is your own self.



I drive home, into the fuzzy gray air, feeling terribly sorry for myself. And I reach a hand to the radio knob, to turn up the music.

A recital of truth streams out of the speakers.

“Tell me once again who I am to You, who I am to You,” the singer sings. “Tell me lest I forget who I am to You. I belong to You.”

That’s when the tears fall. The lyrics swell up inside of my heart, and suddenly I re-remember what I re-forgot. (I know, those are not real words, but they’re the most legit ones when you find yourself re-treading old ground. Again.)

I sing along with the song—each lyric an exhale of released hurt: “Tell me once again who I am to You.”

And my knower, which had re-forgotten, begins to re-remember. *And my knower, which had re-forgotten, begins to re-remember.*

In moments like those, it seems that God is whispering these words: “I named you My Beloved. *Believe* that you are beloved.”



This whisper sinks me deeper into the heart of God—this all-knowing God who loves the unlovable. He knows me better than I know me.

God knows what’s behind the sulfur in our words and what’s under the pain in our loneliness. He causes us to peel back the top layers, to go farther in to the places where the hurt really started.



The only way this can be done is through God. The only way OUT, is *through* Him. He moves our hearts to a place where we can hear His questions. The questions come easy, slow, unaccusing:

"Do you know that I love you?"

"Do you know that I like you?"

"Do you remember that living PreApproved requires a daily starting over?"

"Do you know that your friends can't fix this, your husband can't fix this, your good works can't fix this? *Do you know that only I can fix this?*"

I arrive at my driveway, emptied out, ready for a new refilling. My soul becomes a cup. I marvel at the fact that He chooses to fill it. He chooses to make me sacred, a vessel. The chasm below me closes up. My words don't taste so bitter.

I breathe.

I re-remember what I re-forget.

And I walk into the house, the door falling shut behind me. I dial her number. She answers. I say, "I'm sorry."

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer



Questions for you: Think of a time you've experienced this quote in your own life: "Hurt people hurt people." Knowing that we are truly loved by God, we can live like this instead: "Loved people love people."



DAY TWENTY-ONE

FOR ALL THE BROKEN, TANGLED-UP, MESSED-UP,
SWEATY-PALMED, & CLUMSY PEOPLE





Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. ~ Ephesians 1:4

This one's for the doubters, and the fraidy-cats, and the mess-makers like me. Maybe like you?

This one's for anyone who wants to believe that what the Bible says is true—

God has a plan and a purpose for you on this earth. No matter how broken, tangled-up, messed-up, sweaty-palmed, or clumsy you feel.

Believe this: God picked you, and He dreamed you up before He molded the earth into this whirling ball of stone. (True story ... Read Ephesians 1:4 for proof.)

When you get to Heaven, He doesn't want to shake your hand and congratulate you for being a great Mindy. (Unless you ARE Mindy!) He doesn't want to tell you that you were a pretty convincing Mabel. (Unless you ARE Mabel!) He wants to tell you that He's so happy that you were the YOU He created you to be. Amen? (I've been traveling a long road toward believing that one for myself.)

God didn't wait for you to get your act together before He decided to love you with an incomparable love. He didn't wait for you to get the grade, the corner office, the plaque on the wall, the Pinterested house, or the prettied-up life. He's not waiting for you to figure out how to influence people and make friends.

God knows you can't live a life of perfection. But He's counting on you to live a life of purpose.



His love for you isn't performance-based.

He loves you because
He loves you because
He loves you.

That love was conceived *before* you stepped one toe on earth.
That's the essence of being PREapproved.
That's the essence of *you*.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Do you ever think you're too messed up or broken to be used by God for His purposes? Take a moment to reflect on the fact that "even before He made the world" He had decided to love you, and He knew exactly who you'd become.

Dear friend,

God didn't wait for you to get your act together before He decided to love you with an **incomparable love**.

He didn't wait for you to get the grade, the corner office, the plaque on the wall, the Pinterested house, or the prettied-up life. He's not waiting on you to figure out how to influence people and make friends. He loved you because He loved you because He loved you-**BEFORE** you stepped one toe on earth. That's the essence of being **PreApproved**.

That's the **essence of you**.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

A CALL TO LOVE





"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other." ~John 15:15-17

A few words, to sink deep into your soul today:

You are God's favorite. *Every one of you.*

It's, like, a tie for first place. :)

He loves you best, because you are His friend.

Greater love has no man than this, that he would lay down his life for a friend.

And Jesus did just that. For you. Your name coursed through the beating heart of a dying Savior who now lives and reigns in heaven.

He calls you friend. *And now, He calls you to love.*

His fathomless love changes how you and I will live in our moments, how we'll love in our neighborhoods, and what we'll be known for in eternity.



Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: What one action could you take today to love someone in a creative way? Who in your neighborhood could use some extra love? Email me at Jennifer@JenniferDukesLee.com so I can hear how God moved you to love creatively today! It would be a joy to hear from you.

This is my command:
Love each other.

John 15:17



JenniferDukesLee.com

DAY TWENTY-THREE

HOW TO FEEL COMFORTABLE IN YOUR OWN SKIN





"The King is enthralled by you beauty." ~ Psalm 45:11

When was the last time you looked in the mirror and smiled at the person you saw? When was the last time you were comfortable in your own skin?

I can honestly say, "Today."

But ask me again tomorrow.

Because it can be hard to feel comfortable in our own skin, especially when the message of the world screams: "You're falling short, and let us show you just how much."

The world is trending with photos of the latest star to "reveal all." In the Target checkout lane, your eyes are assaulted by the photo-shopped unreality of a woman's body. The ads between your favorite shows are designed to make you think you're doing it all wrong, and for \$49.99 a month, they'll fix you.

Mirrors are false indicators of reality. So are magazine covers, bathroom scales, and Kim Kardashian's backside in your Facebook feed.

Do you remember when I told you about how Anna and I gave up our reflections for Lent? For forty days last spring, we covered every mirror in our house. We covered the mirrors with words like PreApproved, Beloved, Cherished, Enough. I was tired of the self-degradation that we engage in as women. We tell ourselves that we're not enough—or we let our bathroom scales tell us that we're too much. We often see ourselves as a series of parts and "thigh gaps," or lack thereof.



Now—perhaps more than ever in human history—we are bombarded with opportunities for literal self-reflection in places like Instagram and Facebook. We feel less comfortable in our skin than ever before. Plastic surgeons now report that selfies are encouraging more people to go under the knife. Get this: One in three facial plastic surgeons saw an “increase in requests for surgery due to patients being more self-aware of looks in social media.”

If you don't want to go under the knife, but want to be “InstaFamous” (that's a thing now), you might be tempted to make use of an actual app that will skinni-fy you.

Or ... you could try a better way toward feeling comfortable in your own skin: ***You could show yourself some overdue self-compassion.***

In Christ, we're all the right kinds of beautiful, and if you don't trust your mirror, trust your Bible.

Right before I covered my mirrors last spring, I really took my reflection in—the whole of myself, not the parts. And that time, I didn't feel sorry for the woman in the mirror. Not at all.



I didn't frown at her. I didn't chide or criticize her, and I resisted the urge to fret over the fact that she had a rather large pimple on her nose—at age 42. I found what I liked. I saw lines around my eyes—the crinkles of a woman who loves to laugh. I saw my soft belly as the place where two humans miraculously grew. I saw my legs, strong enough to carry me far, far, far down this road of life. I looked at my reflection, and felt more tenderly toward her than I usually do. I thought to myself, *I need to love that woman better.*

And maybe you do, too. Maybe you need to love your mirror-woman better.



In Christ, we're all the right kinds of beautiful, and if you don't trust your mirror, trust your Bible. Read Psalm 45:11 again, and let it sink in.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Would you consider showing yourself some overdue self-compassion? Name what makes you beautiful. How can you rethink, for instance, your stretch marks? (i.e. – they are proof that I am a mother.)

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

WHAT GOD CAN DO
WITH A PEANUT-BUTTER SANDWICH





But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ~ Romans 5:8

This is the story of a man who traveled a long, long way to discover this truth: There's no place you can go where the grace of God can't find you.

Grace found Ed Hughes on the shore of an island, and handed him a peanut-butter sandwich.

Before he was on that island, Ed Hughes was in Hamilton, Canada. He was a flamboyant entrepreneur who ran one of the largest social "swingers" club in all of North America. The police raided that club in the early 1980s and shut his business down. A few years later, Ed left Canada aboard a self-built yacht called "The Tytoo."

He dropped anchor off the coast of Haiti, across the bay from Port-au-Prince. And he started building a nightclub. He had dreams of a world-class swingers club called "Tytoo Gardens."

But before the tourists came, the children showed up.

They hid in the bushes. They were hungry but oddly, happy. That's how Ed remembered them.

"That's when I started to bring them peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches."

He passed out about a dozen the first day. The next day, he passed out 24. The day after that, he made 48 sandwiches.



And then the miraculous happened. The “retired scoundrel”—as he called himself—traded his past for a new kind of future.

“I simply lost interest in another party place. What became important was whether I was going to have enough peanut butter,” Ed said.

Ed Hughes turned his nightclub into an orphanage.

And every year our family of four heads to that orphanage.

We always bring Band-Aids, and pencils, and backpacks, and books, and toys ... and peanut butter, of course.

We bring our hands and hearts and our listening ears.

We bring our own “scoundrel” selves to the gate of Tytoo—all of us hungry for more of what God would show us in this new life we’ve been given.

This morning, I’m looking at those verses in Romans 5:8. I’m blown





away by the absurdity of God's grace. God takes us as we are but promises never to leave us that way. Maybe we're all "retired scoundrels," who've left our past in the past, in exchange for something better.

There is nothing that God can't repair, restore, or redeem.

There is room at the cross for each of us, and grace enough for all of us, and not one of us stands beyond His reach.

Ed said he was 60 years old before he came to know the Lord. Someone once asked him, "What's in it for you, Ed?"

***There's no place you can go
where the grace of God cannot
find you.***

This was his answer: "It's not money. Not prestige. I don't need a new set of clothes or a new car. I don't need any of that. I just need to be in service."



It seems to me that God is saying to each one of us, just as He said to Ed, "Do not underestimate what I can do with your hands, your service, your prayers, and your peanut butter."

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Your turn: Reflect for a moment on Romans 5:8. Take a moment to thank God again for the greatest gift of PreApproval in the history of mankind. He demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

LOVE COMES RUNNING





"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." ~ Luke 15:20

I was quite a long way off when the Father first loved me. I was shuffling back toward him, tail behind my legs, and He was already there waiting.

I was PreApproved, and I didn't even know it.

God had planned the PreApproval Party before I took my first step toward His front step. He'd picked out the balloons, bought the flowers, arranged for the cake, and hung a welcome banner.

All of this. It could positively change a person's life.

I didn't earn this gift. But I can turn toward home and receive it—the most expensive, outrageous gift of all time. It's always ours for the taking.

Like the lost son, we can wear the ring on our finger and put on "the finest robe," without worrying any more whether it makes us look fat. Because: PreApproved!

This Father of ours doesn't stop loving us, even if we run away from home. Even if we demanded our inheritance, then squandered it all (Luke 15:13).

What kind of love is this?

God's love. That's what.



I get the sense that God planned the party before we turned back toward home. And He comes at us—running straight for us. I can feel my heart thumping just now, thinking of it. How a Love that was already mine always comes running.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Reread the story of the prodigal in Luke 15. Can you identify with any of the characters in the story? Were you like the son, running? The brother? Or have you been like the Father, waiting for someone you love to come home?

While he was still a long way off,
his father saw him and was filled
with compassion for him.

Luke 15:20



DAY TWENTY-SIX

ONE “VERY LITTLE” ACTION YOU CAN TAKE TODAY
TO END YOUR NEED FOR APPROVAL





"As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. ~ 1 Corinthians 4:3

It was a happy accident when my eyes fell on those two words one morning. *"Very little."*
Paul wrote that the opinion of others was not only a little thing but a *very little* thing.

"As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point." (1 Corinthians 4:3)

A "very little" thing for Paul can become a very little thing for us, every day.

Say it out loud with me: "It matters *very little* how I might be evaluated."

That's the sound of freedom there.

If we are criticized today, what does it mean? Very little.

If someone challenges our parenting today, what does it mean? Very little.

If someone corrects us, disagrees with us, or talks poorly of us to others, what does it mean? Very little.

And this: If someone endorses us, applauds our work, affirms our parenting, or offers us praise, what does it mean? Very little.



Oh. Yes.

When we no longer rely on praise or approval, we find new freedom: We can enjoy affirmation without craving it. We are neither addicted to praise nor deflated by criticism. Because what does the opinion of humankind mean?

Yeah. Very little.

Living PreApproved,
Jennifer

Questions for you: How much does the praise of someone buoy you? How much does criticism deflate you? Can you begin, today, to merely hear the opinions of people, without being controlled by them?

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A landscape photograph featuring a vast, green field in the foreground, possibly a meadow or a field of tall grass. The field stretches towards a flat horizon. The sky above is a clear, vibrant blue, with a single, small, white cloud visible near the center. The overall lighting suggests a bright, sunny day.

WHEN WE NO LONGER RELY ON PRAISE
OR APPROVAL,
WE FIND NEW FREEDOM:
WE CAN ENJOY AFFIRMATION WITHOUT CRAVING IT.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

I WILL GIVE YOU REST





"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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." ~ Matthew 11:28-30

This is how I'm hard-wired—driven, goal-oriented, focused. Yeah, it's in my DNA. But it was also in my upbringing. Mom and Dad taught the importance of a good work ethic.

What happened later? It wasn't my parents' fault. My parents taught me about a work ethic, not a work-as-worth ethic.

Yet I grew up to be a woman who measured all the *worth* of her life ***by all the work of her life.***

Do you know someone like that? Is that someone you?

We're weary, aren't we? This life of doing, more than being, has stretched us so thin that we're about to snap.

We know better, but we fall into deep grooves carved by living one way for so many years, so fast, so driven. The crazy thing is, so much of our striving has come out of a place of *deep love* for our people. We've wanted to make our people happy. We've wanted to meet the expectations. We've wanted to check off all the boxes. And it became about how many tasks we can wring out of our over-stuffed days—until we're wrung dry, like dishrags hanging limp on the faucet.

Love can turn into hard labor.



Sure, there are always these *seasons*—where we have to work overtime, burn the candle at both ends, wake up three times a night with the crying child, and push until we can't push anymore. *And rightly so.*

But they should remain only that—seasons.

For some of us? Busy becomes more than a season; **busy becomes the wheels that move the whole life forward.**


I was a news reporter. And the lights would dim above my cubicle. The newsroom would exhale all the other people out into the streets. Yet there I remained, stacking one more paragraph on top of another. Even at church, I said yes to every committee, every potluck dinner, every mission, every class, every request from every person I wanted to make happy. I lost myself in all the doing.

But one day the wheels fell off of the life, sending me careening into the ditch. *A happy accident. A happy wreck.*

Sometimes you need to get wrecked into rest.

Stilled, you can hear Him saying it, straight into your knower: "Come to me, weary soul. I will give you rest."

Jesus isn't offering rest as a nice suggestion. Rest is His command. And it is *life*. He commands: "Come to me."



We don't have to wait for heaven to truly
rest.



And when we come, we enter into this promise: “I will give you rest.” Not: maybe I will give you rest.” Not: “if you work hard first, I’ll give you rest.” Not: “if you get your act together, I’ll give you rest.” Not: “when all of the tiny boxes are filled in, I’ll think about giving you some rest.”

But this: **I. will. give. you. rest.**

We are a tired people, a weary people, and we are being called to enter His rest, today. Right now.

***Dear God, Don’t let the wheels
of our busy lives drive us
away from You.***

Let the agenda die for a moment. Let the alarms on your iPhone go quiet. Breathe again.



Make room for you. Remember who He said you were: PreApproved. Held. His.

This—*this!* —is His desire for you: To rest, not rush. To abide, not “achieve.”

This is real life, right here, happening today—these precious moments so quickly passing by.

Dear God, Don’t let the wheels of our busy lives drive us away from You.

And where are we going with all this driving? Where are we trying to arrive?

We’ve got to know this: we have *already* arrived. We have arrived in Him, in the Person of Jesus, who dwells in us. **Our striving is over.**



I look out the window now and see frothy clouds lumbering by, moved by a hidden wind. Sitting here, I imagine Heaven, where our eternal rest awaits. *But we don't have to wait for Heaven to truly rest.*

We pray this every day: Thy Kingdom come, ***on earth as it is in Heaven.***

"Heaven come down," I say, like a prayer.

And God seems to be saying in response: "Here you go, daughter. An answer to your prayer: an easy yoke. Everything you've always wanted—happiness, contentment, approval, love, validation, security, ... ***rest***—it is all right here, waiting for you. *It is already yours, in Christ.*

Believe, walk free, and live PreApproved.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Do you have a day each week set apart for rest? A few minutes each day? Have you taken the easy yoke? Have you ever been "wrecked into rest?"

Come to me, all you who are weary
and burdened, and I will give you

REST.

Matthew 11:28



DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

APPROVAL ADDICTION (AND RECOVERY)





For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. ~ 1 Thessalonians 2:4

"... we're not after crowd approval—but God approval." ~ Message paraphrase

I feel an old anxiety rising up in me as I tap at these computer keys.

Maybe this is how a recovering alcoholic would feel if she walked into a dimly lit tavern, where ice cubes clink against glass and the bartender counts out the glug-glug-glugs from a tipped bottle.

Someone else will have to tell me if I'm right—if this is how a recovering alcoholic would feel in a bar. (And maybe it all depends on the day.)

I can't say for sure, because booze isn't my vice.

Your approval is.

Let me tell what I'm feeling as I step inside, leaning my back against a wood-paneled wall illuminated by a collage of neon signs. I can already taste it, how badly I want it: Your approval and acceptance. I know how it feels on the way down—like a familiar, comfortable burn to appease my inner addict, my inner pain.

I have a two-faced heart: I both want what I want, and yet I don't want it at all.

All the world's a tavern, it seems, and maybe we're all thirsty for something that we know won't do us any good.



Who's in this room today? And does what I have to say make me worth listening to?

I see you, and I wonder if you will swivel in your seats to see me. They call it "being known" these days.

I'm not proud to admit how often I have wanted to "be known." I've wanted to make a good impression, especially around smart folks like you.

***I don't need to numb the ache.
I need to understand the ache.***

I've been coming clean from that, and God knows it hasn't been easy. Dying daily never is. Maybe it's the way someone comes clean from alcohol dependency, one day at a time. It's both painful and exhilarating—like you're breathing air into your lungs for the first time in your life.



It's how a daily death makes you more *alive*.

My friend, Seth, and I have been talking about that—about how recovery is universal.

Recovery isn't just for the drinkers and the users.

It's for me.

Let me tell you what I've been recovering from:



Let's say my heart was a beer stein or a wine glass. I've spent a lot of my life holding the heart-cup out to people like you, hoping you'd fill it by telling me that I'm kind, that I'm smart, that I've got something important to say. *That I matter.*

I want you to say good things about me when the saloon doors swing closed behind me after I leave. (But I assume the worst.)

I have figured your good words would save me from my inner addict—the one who has feared rejection, of being “found out,” and of assuming that I don't really belong in whatever room I've been invited into. I've been a poster child of “imposter syndrome.”

After years of imposter living, a person can barely tell where the mask stops and the skin starts. And it can take a good long while to find the “real you” again.

I'm in the middle of finding me.

I'm in the middle of my do-over.

And in my do-over, I need every day to be Easter.

Easter is how I live in the tavern of this world, and still function without asking for another glass of whatever I think will numb the ache.

I don't need to numb the ache. I need to *understand* the ache. I need to feel the ache, and then ask God to help me deal with it. Every day, I ask myself hard questions, like the ones the Apostle Paul asked: “Am I now trying to win the approval of man, or of God? Or am I still trying to please man?”



I used to think that I'd wake up some day and then it would be gone. *Poof!* I wouldn't want your approval anymore.

But my recovery? It's ongoing. I have learned that I am in the constant process of coming clean. I am caught between who I once was, and who I will be.

I'm learning not to resent the process, because my recovery makes me needy for Jesus, needy for Easter.

In my childhood church, we sang this song throughout the Lenten season: "Every morning is Easter morning from now. Every day's Resurrection Day the past is over and gone."

I want to live every morning like it's Easter morning, like a fresh coming-alive. I also want to live like it's Good Friday, because I have to die to live.

The world has never known another god like this—a God who loves sinners, who says, "I'm giving you a do-over."

The same God will say the very same thing tomorrow. Isn't that something?

In my recovery, I need a God like that.

And thanks be to Jesus, I have one.



Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Do you resonate with the “recovery” metaphor here? If you’ve struggled with approval, do you find yourself needing to daily remind yourself of the Gospel?



We're not after
crowd approval -- but
GOD APPROVAL.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:4

JENNIFER DUKES LEE #LoveIdol

DAY TWENTY-NINE

TEN WAYS TO OVERCOME YOUR NEED FOR APPROVAL





"Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval." ~ 2 Timothy 2:15

My mirror-free journey was more than an exercise in finding peace with my physical appearance. It served as a metaphorical reminder of the myriad ways we measure our approval ratings. Authors monitor book sales and Amazon rankings. Pastors count people in pews. Rarely do people say, "I have enough money in the bank, enough people in my church, enough followers or friends or _____."

People measure worth by the size of their 401Ks, the square-footage of their houses, and the inches in their waist size. We're either not enough . . . or too much.

We measure, to see if we matter.

We've all done it—whether we're viewed as real "somebodies" or whether we think of ourselves as the "nobodies" sitting in the back row of life. We want to be known, approved, and liked.

The craving for love isn't, in itself, sinful. In fact, our need for love is God-created. But because of our sinful nature, present in every human since the Garden of Eden, we are tempted to feed our craving with the approval of man.

But we don't have to be controlled by our approval ratings. Here are ten ways to get over the approval you crave from other people.



1. Identify where you go for your approval “fix.”

Every journey toward freedom from others’ approval starts here—in the naming. Whose approval do you seek most? Where do you look for it? To let go of something, you have to first admit you’re holding on to it. The moment you’re willing to call the problem by its actual name, you’re one step closer to canceling its power over you. This is perhaps why lives change in rooms where these words are uttered quietly into a circle of understanding faces: “Hi, my name is [insert name here]. And I am a [insert addiction here].”

2. Go on an approval fast.

After you name it, fast from it. I gave up mirrors for 40 days. And I survived. In fact, my life felt fuller—even if my hair wasn’t perfect. Mirrors aren’t, in and of themselves, evil. But they can become a source of unhealthy self-judgment. Identify an area where you seek the approval of others, such as social media. Then give it up for a day, a week, or even 40 days, and behold: you may discover that you’re thriving without your own mirrors.

We miss the beauty of our own lives if we’re holding up a mirror to someone else’s.

3. Stop lying to yourself about yourself.

Some of us have been telling ourselves the same false narratives our whole lives. The lies make us feel pressured into working harder, faster, and longer to reach some invisible standard that we think will give us the approval we need. Who are we working harder for? Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval.” Not so we can present ourselves to a spouse. Or to our coworkers. Or even to Bible study partners. But to God alone.





4. Remind yourself what God says about you.

God wants to fill our need for approval and love. All the approval we've ever wanted is actually and already ours. God says we're already beautiful (see Psalm 45:11). We're already beloved (see 1 John 3:1). We're already known (see Psalm 139:1). We were already loved, even when we were dead in our transgressions (see Ephesians 2:4-5).

5. Stop comparing.

Envy is at the root of much of our approval-seeking. We miss the beauty of our own lives if we're holding up a mirror to someone else's.

6. Celebrate others' successes.

We're actually all on the same team, and it's called the Body of Christ. Author [Lisa-Jo Baker](#) says it like this: "It's never a competition in the Kingdom. It's always a co-op." We would do well to pick up pom-poms to cheer one another on. In doing so, we can achieve what Timothy Keller calls "the freedom of self-forgetfulness."

7. Do good deeds in secret, without applause.

Go ahead. Do what Jesus said. Be a charity ninja—so secretive that your left hand doesn't have a clue what your right hand is doing. Then sit back and enjoy the freedom of your approval-free zone.



8. Risk a subpar performance.

Do something new that you've always wanted to try—running a 5K or taking a painting class, for instance—even if you believe you'll perform with mediocrity, even if you believe you'll fail. The moment we stop fussing over the opinions of others might be the moment when we start actually living.

9. Love from your approval, not for it.

When we are freed from unhealthy notions about love and approval, we are able to love others without expecting anything in return. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

10. Keep an eternal perspective.

So maybe you've wanted a few accolades this side of heaven. But don't forget that the divine accolade—as C. S. Lewis calls it—is coming. And that's the accolade you were created to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:23).

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: Which of these ten ways resonated most with you? Which have you already put into practice?



Our purpose is to **please God** not people.
1 Thessalonians 2:4



Jennifer Dukes Lee | #LoveIdol

DAY THIRTY

A DARE
TO LOVE YOUR SELFIE





*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well. ~ Psalm 139:14*

On the night I went looking for a few photographs, I knew something had to change.

I needed photos of me with my two young daughters for a video I was creating. So I sat in the blue glow of the computer screen, scrolling through files and folders, looking down deeper and deeper to find photos I was certain were there.

Where had they all gone? I wondered. *Where were all the photos of us together?*

The sad truth dropped like a weight in my gut: The photos were never taken.

Among the thousands of photographs I had snapped over the years, I found only a handful of me with my daughters.

At first, I blamed the lack of mother-daughter footage on the fact that I'm usually the one behind the camera. But that's only partially true. The bigger truth is this: I have not wanted to be photographed.

At the computer, I copied and pasted those precious few photographs into one file folder—like a little treasure box that held rare jewels. The lump in my throat tasted like regret. *I would never be able to rewind those years and snap the photos I'd missed.*



I grieved the Christmas mornings when I, with mussed hair, scooted out of the shot that my husband was framing up. I grieved the pictures-that-never-were from summer afternoons, when I believed I was too pasty-skinned and “too fat.”

Oh, I wouldn’t have dared utter those words out loud, because I have never wanted my girls to hear their mother complain about her looks or weight.

No, I hadn’t spoken my insecurities aloud. But what had they read between the lines of my not-so-subtle escapes from photo shoots? And someday, when they grew older and wanted to find photos with their mom, they’d wonder, “Where have all the photos gone?”

While waiting for some elusive better-hair-day, I missed photo after photo.



Looking back, I have always hated the way I looked in pictures. I’m not even smiling in my senior pictures, because I had braces on.

As I grew older, I always figured the photos could wait until another day, after I lost 10 pounds, toned my upper arms, had a zit-free chin. And while waiting for some elusive better-hair-day, I missed photo after photo.

Even in the best photos, I found flaws—for instance, the fact that one of my eyes is bigger than the other.

That night at the computer screen, I saw how scandalously critical I’d been about myself, and how I’d missed the opportunity to capture unrepeatable moments with my girls.



I realized that I had often seen myself as a series of ugly pieces, rather than as a whole woman, beautifully fashioned by an inventive God.

The truth rises up against those spurious self-accusations in places like Psalm 139:14. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." *Wonderfully!*

So I vowed a better way, to see myself whole. I said it like a pledge, and sometimes I have to repeat: *I am lovely and brave and crooked and banged-up and beautiful, and, yes, rounder than I used to be. I am wrinkly and stray-grayed and goofy-smiley and courageous and scarred and gutsy enough to make babies.* I am a wonder and a miracle, and my scars are part of my story.

I am not a series of bad parts; I am whole. And I am wonderfully made.

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer Lee

A dare for you: Post a selfie of beautiful you, without the filter. Hashtag it #preapproved. Tag me @dukeslee so I can find you!

DAY 31

THE ART OF FLYING





Seventy years are given to us! Some even live to eighty. But even the best years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we fly away. ~ Psalm 90:10

Our daughter Lydia turned 13 a week ago. All the things about getting older have been coming true. I have to close my eyes tight to remember how it felt to strap her into a car seat or to lift her from the crib. We've walked a long stretch of life since those early days, when I charted every feeding, every body function, every diapering on a piece of paper. I hummed a lullaby to her every night, the same song again and again, while rubbing a thousand endless rings into her back. There were the endless loads of laundry, the feverish nights, the unexplained crying, the same books read and re-read. It was all the same, day in, day out, and day in again.

It's true what they say, about the days going slow and the years going fast.

Time is a greedy thing, gobbling up minutes.

At her birthday party, Lydia stood in a ring of girls and tossed her head back. Her hair ran in brown ribbons down her back. She and her friends were all squinty with laughter, turning into each other, so full and happy and alive. I stood in the doorway and watched my daughter. She looked like a little woman.

I don't want to say, "Oh, how time flew." I want to exclaim to my people, "Look! Look how we learned to fly!"



There goes the girl.

The years disappear, the psalmist told us. And birthdays always remind us just how much.



Birthdays also remind us that we're just passing through, on our way to somewhere else, to a forever place.

My friend Diane sent a photograph to me the other day, saying she liked my smile. I first noticed the lines around my eyes, not in a resentful way, but in a matter-of-fact way. In the photo, I see a life-lined face, grooved and creased by millions of moments that made me who I am. I see that I am getting older, and I don't fear it. My only fear would be not really living the life I'd been given. The tragedy would be allowing years to disappear in a fog of disappointment or drudgery, with no way to recover the beauty—which was always present, but passed by, unnoticed.

This is me, leaning into the rest of the years I've been given.



I haven't always leaned into my life. I've abandoned myself to the urges to be something more, something other.



But you know, that was a big waste of time. We won't get into that here today. I wrote a whole book about the dangers of trying to be someone you're NOT. And I want to get on with my point here. Which is this:

I've got to spend the rest of my days living my life, or it won't get lived. Same goes for you. You are the only you there is. What truth is your life-lined face speaking about who you are?

Look, I don't mean to get morbid here, but young or old, there's one common trait uniting us: we're terminal. On the big screen of eternity's theater, our lives are microscopic blips.

I want my wee little blip on the screen to blink boldly for a King, before it flickers out. I want to pay attention, love well, lay down my own desires, and make daily decisions that match up with my beliefs. I want to reach out, lean in, look up, and bow down. I want to breathe more deeply, see more beauty, make more room at the table, learn more from the Teacher, and pass more of the good stuff onto my people.

I don't know how this all ends, but when it comes down to the last moments, I don't want to say, "Oh, how time flew." I want to exclaim to my people, "Look! Look, how we learned to fly!"

Living PreApproved,

Jennifer

Questions for you: What truth is your life-lined face speaking about who you are? If this were your last year on earth, what would you want to do with your hours and days?



Learn more at JenniferDukesLee.com.

Keep up with Jennifer's updates on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Find Love Idol [here](#).

The book includes a four-week discussion guide.

