



“How can Christians live faithfully without becoming either too obsessive or too complacent? Is there a middle ground that isn’t lukewarm but rather is alive with a radically normal devotion to Christ? In this provocative and timely book, pastor Josh Kelley suggests that the most radical pursuit of Christ has more to do with joyfully leaning into grace than it does with being a self-sufficient Super Christian. It’s fashionable today to be radical, to subvert the safe patterns of middle-class Christianity. But truly radical Christianity may not be what you think it is. Embracing God’s call wherever God has placed us is the most radical thing we can do.”

**Brett McCracken**

author of *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*  
and *Gray Matters: Navigating the Space Between Legalism and Liberty*

“Through his biblical insight, humor, and humility, Josh Kelley assures us that we can be committed Christ followers without being kooky or uptight. *Radically Normal* is an enjoyable and refreshing read for every new believer, seasoned Christian, or burned-out ministry worker who needs to be reminded that our everyday lives can be exciting and meaningful when we follow Jesus wholeheartedly.”

**Cindi McMenamin**

national speaker and author of *When Women Walk Alone*

“If you’d like help on living for Jesus in a way that’s so surprisingly different from either legalism or complacency that it has to be called radical, then Josh Kelley’s *Radically Normal* should be in your hands right now.”

**Robert H. Mounce**

Biblical scholar and translator  
president emeritus, Whitworth University

“Greatness is all about being great in the eyes of God. But understanding God’s mission, regardless of who you are, can be a challenge. In a very entertaining way, Josh Kelley’s book helped me to better understand what kind of Christian God has called me to be.”

**Jake Byrne**

tight end for the NFL’s San Diego Chargers

“In this delightful book, Josh Kelley clearly identifies two extremes we see every day in the church—obsessive Christianity and complacent Christianity. He offers insightful and sometimes humorous illustrations and stories to show what these extremes look like, and he offers solid, biblical advice on how to reach a radically normal balance. This book will help you find that balance in your life.”

**Rick Walston**

president, Columbia Evangelical Seminary

“If you’ve ever felt lost in the Christian chatter about living too radically or too complacently, then *Radically Normal* is for you. Josh Kelley’s skillfully written book will help you move past your guilt—or your obsessive tendencies—and discover a joy-driven, obedient life that gets kingdom work done.”

**Caleb Breakey**

author of *Called to Stay* and *Dating Like Airplanes*

“I have always wanted to be radically normal—I just didn’t have the right name or a well-considered definition. Now I have both. Read, learn, and inwardly digest...and be ready to pass it on!”

**Graham Kerr**

international television personality  
award-winning author of 29 books

“In *Radically Normal*, my friend Josh Kelley cleverly dismantles the either/or thinking that causes us to live half-lives halfheartedly. Having spent the seminal years of my own life struggling to be as ‘spiritual’ Monday through Saturday as I was on Sunday, I’m thankful that God helped me see the exciting, enjoyable, everyday possibilities of normal Christianity. To experience God in everything is to enjoy a much greater view of spirituality, and my hat is off to Josh for handing out God-colored glasses to everyone!”

**Dave Browning**

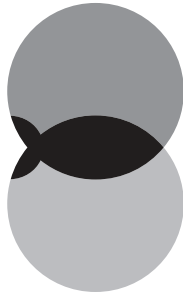
lead pastor, Christ the King Community Church  
author of *Deliberate Simplicity*

“*Radically Normal* completely resonated with me, a Christian who has run the church gamut, encountering hand-clapping Charismatics, head-bowing solemn worshippers, and zealous missionaries. Comparing myself to all types of Christians, I’ve questioned my faith, often doubting I was radical enough. Josh’s engaging style makes *Radically Normal* a fun, enlightening read that affirmed my place in the kingdom of God as a radically normal Christian.”

**Holly Michael**

author and journalist

RADICALLY



NORMAL

Josh Kelley



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*There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.*

C.S. LEWIS, *Mere Christianity*

## Obsessive and Complacent Christianity

Starbucks is a big part of my life. I hold most of my meetings at Starbucks and write my sermons there. I have my monthly father-daughter dates at Starbucks. I'm at Starbucks as I write this. But in the spring of 2011, I had no idea the role Starbucks would play in my story.

I had been an assistant pastor at one of the biggest churches in Skagit Valley (about an hour north of Seattle). When I became the lead pastor of one of the smallest churches in the area, I was filled with dreams of all I'd do. In the first three and a half years, I grew the Gathering from about 100 people to about 75—not the sort of thing that one brags about at pastors' conventions.

This is the story of the lessons God taught me through Starbucks over the next 18 months. It's also the book I wish I had when I was growing up. All the books I read back then seemed to imply that following God with my whole heart meant enjoying this life less and less.

This book tells how I discovered that the opposite is true.

### Going to Extremes

One day when I was about ten years old, my family arrived early at our pastor's house for a Bible study, and I saw Pastor Arnie sitting in

front of the TV watching a football game. Apparently, his team wasn't doing well, because he was kind of grumpy and was shouting quietly at the TV. "What? Come on! Are you blind?"

Seeing my pastor watch football was unsettling, but I wasn't sure why. I didn't think TV was wrong (I watched *Star Blazers* every morning before school), and I didn't have a problem with football (my mom loves football). But it seemed so unspiritual. In my ten-year-old logic, I assumed my pastor must do only spiritual stuff.

**We're haunted by the feeling that God must be happier when we read our Bibles than when we watch football.**

So many of us have a deep-seated fear that we have to choose—do we want to be obsessive Christians who don't enjoy this life, or do we want to be complacent Christians who have a lot of fun here? We feel as if those are our only two options. Should we give up football, sell all of our possessions, and become missionaries to India? Or should we have nice houses, be well liked, and climb the corporate ladder? We know those aren't really the only options, but we're still haunted by the feeling that God must be happier when we read our Bibles than when we watch football. I wonder how many Christians remain lukewarm primarily because they think that being on fire would be miserable.

As we journey along the path of our Christian life, we hear sermons and read books that warn us about a dangerous cliff called complacency. And for good reason—the distractions of this life are constantly pulling us away from God. But I'm becoming more and more aware of another cliff on the other side of the path. That cliff is called obsession, and it's just as dangerous as complacency. Obsession isn't about loving Jesus, but trying to look like a really good Christian.

In our human sinfulness, we tend to be proud of our obsessiveness or to excuse our complacency. But the life that God desires isn't found at either extreme. Wholehearted devotion to God consists of radical obedience lived out in surprisingly normal, joy-filled ways. This is what I mean by being radically normal. It's the biblical art of fully engaging this life while focusing on the next.



## The Problem with Complacency

My wife, Marilyn, grew up in a blurry world. She was so nearsighted she couldn't read the blackboard at school, causing her schoolwork to suffer. She didn't know she was nearsighted—she thought that was what the world was supposed to look like. When Marilyn was seven, she got her first pair of glasses. It was like heaven opened up and shone its light on the earth. Until that moment, she didn't know that trees were covered with individual leaves or that the teacher had been writing actual words on the blackboard.

I think most Christians are spiritually nearsighted. We see the things right in front of us—food and drink, relationships, clothes, books, work, vacations—with crystal clarity. But prayer, worship, sacrifice, righteousness, heaven, and even God himself are often out of focus and hazy. This isn't necessarily our fault, just as Marilyn's nearsightedness wasn't her fault. It's part of our common condition as creatures of flesh and blood. But how will we respond to our nearsightedness? Complacent Christians are happy to stay nearsighted. They're content focusing on the things right in front of their noses and keeping unseen realities at arm's length, in the blurry zone.

The problem with complacent Christianity is its mediocrity. In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, Will is an Einstein-level genius who seems to be content working blue-collar jobs. As Will deals with his past, he must choose to embrace his potential. In one scene, Will tells his best friend, Chuckie, that he's looking forward to working in construction and watching Patriots games for the rest of his life. Here's Chuckie's response.

Look, you're my best friend, so don't take this the wrong way. In twenty years, if you're still livin' here, comin' over to my house to watch the Patriots' games, still workin' construction, I'll [blanking] kill you. That's not a threat, now. That's a fact. I'll [blanking] kill you.

Chuckie knows that Will is settling for far too little. Each day that Will spends in construction is a day he's wasting. That is exactly how I feel about complacent Christianity (without the swearing)—not that

complacency is too sinful or too worldly but that it's too dull, too meaningless, too little. It's far below what we were meant for. My favorite author, C.S. Lewis, described it this way.

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>1</sup>

I've seen my share of lukewarm, half-committed, self-serving, near-sighted Christians. They spend their money on immediate thrills, work harder for praise from man than praise from God, leave their spouses when marriage gets too hard, and give little thought to life outside of their own little bubble. When I observe complacent Christians, I don't feel indignation; I feel pity. They are far too easily pleased.

## The Problem with Obsession

Many pastors and Christian authors try to correct complacent Christianity by promoting obsessive Christianity. In effect, they say, "Stop focusing so much on the things of this life!" Their antidote to nearsightedness is farsightedness. Obsessive Christians don't say earthly stuff is evil, but they hint that the more you focus on God, the blurrier this life should become.

These folks remind me of a Christian teacher I once knew. She had really bad eyesight but believed that God told her not to wear glasses. I think the idea was that leaving her glasses at home made her depend more on him. I can't comment on whether she heard God correctly—that's none of my business. But I do know she complained of frequent headaches and looked odd. The perpetual squinting gave her a mole-like appearance.

Obsessive Christians might say the rest of us are nearsighted and unable to see God clearly because we're not squinting enough. We're not giving enough, serving enough, praying enough, sacrificing enough. They might tell us to spurn the pleasures of life, hate the world,

and stop getting caught up in earthly things. Do all that, and *then* you'll gain spiritual focus. *Then* you'll start enjoying a four-hour worship service more than a trip to Disneyland. You'll be perfectly happy to sell your possessions and move to India.

Many of us who hear their advice feel guilty for not doing enough to focus on God. We wonder if something is wrong with us. But trying to follow their advice isn't the answer—it leaves us looking as odd and unapproachable as that squinting mole-teacher looked to me.

Too many Christians struggle under the weight of trying to do enough. They're so busy trying to be spiritual enough that they miss God's blessings in everyday life. They're like frightened children who refuse to go to the beach because they think their father would be more pleased if they did extra chores.

Worse yet, I've watched some Christians break under the strain of spiritual farsightedness and walk away from God completely. As we'll later see, the Bible teaches that God created us for joy—not just in heaven someday, but here and now. Here's the thing. If you believe you can't find joy with God, you'll try to find it without him. Or you'll try to squelch your longing for joy, and your soul will shrivel. That's one reason why we see so many withered, sour Christians in the world.

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joy with God,  
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it without him.**

I wonder how many atheists were once obsessive Christians who hoped their joyless faith wasn't true. That is basically C.S. Lewis's story. As a young man, he wanted to be free of the drudgery of his childhood faith long before he rejected God for rational reasons. Ultimately it was joy that brought him back to God.<sup>2</sup> Do you know anyone who walked away from God because he or she couldn't find happiness in the church? Could you be heading in that direction?

## Another Option

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), the prodigal son starts out looking a lot like complacent, nearsighted Christians. He

wanted his inheritance so he could leave his father and blow it all in wild living. Complacent Christians want God's blessings—life, money, food, possession, sex—but want him to stay safely out of focus so they can use those things however they want. When they use God's good gifts in sinful, destructive ways, they end up suffering the consequences.

The prodigal's older brother reminds me of obsessive, farsighted Christians. His father has to remind him, "Everything I have is yours." Obsessive Christians are squinting so hard that they can't enjoy the

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Father's gifts right under their noses. Is it any surprise they doubt his goodness? The parable showcases God's forgiveness and acceptance of the lost, but it also teaches us how easily we can be separated from God without even leaving home.

If I had to choose one of those options, I'd rather be complacent than obsessive. Does that surprise you? Complacent Christianity will prove itself empty enough when the famine comes. Sitting in the pigpen, the prodigal son quickly realized how unfulfilling his life actually was. His misery sent him back to his father. In contrast, Jesus leaves us wondering what the older brother will decide to do. Will he embrace the father's joy and grace and join the party, or will he remain outside, sullen and angry? Obsessive Christians can keep squinting for a long time without realizing how distant from God they are.

Fortunately, those are not the only options. Between the extremes of obsessive and complacent Christianity lies what I'm calling radically normal Christianity. This isn't a novel idea I dreamed up—I'm simply putting a name to what the Bible has always taught. I want to show you just how much the Bible has to say about being radically committed to God in perfectly normal ways, about discovering a clear-sighted faith that shares God's delight in both earthly and spiritual things.

## **Our Father**

Years ago, before Marilyn and I had children, we visited Israel. Walking through the Old City of Jerusalem one afternoon, we saw

a little Jewish boy trotting behind his father, struggling to keep pace. As he fell behind, I heard him shout, “Abba! Abba!” and then the dad slowed down so his son could catch up. As I watched them walk off hand in hand, I realized I had just experienced the most profound lesson of the entire trip. I had studied the Greek New Testament and dissected complicated passages, but now I finally understood the words “And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:15) in a way that my commentaries failed to convey. Sometimes we forget that *Father* is not simply a name for God—it is a profound revelation of his relationship with us.

Now a father myself, every day that I spend with my daughters teaches me more about my heavenly Father. My little girls, Grace and Sarah, are exactly 21 months apart. Sometimes I wonder how we got through their first few years without going insane or getting divorced. But we survived, and now I absolutely love being the daddy of two little girls. It’s what I was meant for. I don’t need a son to play catch with (I don’t even like catch). I’m much happier reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to them or going on our father-daughter dates.

One of my favorite parts of being a daddy is simply watching Grace and Sarah play. They build fairy houses in the backyard and make soup for the fairies out of grass clippings and rose petals. When it rains (as it often does in Washington), they come inside and turn their beds into a fort and fill it with stuffed animals. Few things give me more joy than listening to their make-believe adventures. Today, they told me that their stuffed animals had to go to jail for stealing candy while they were sleepwalking. I have no idea where they come up with this stuff.

It’s one thing to know God loves me, but it’s another altogether to delight in my children and marvel at how much more God must delight in me. I think of how much I enjoy watching my daughters play, and I wonder how much more God must enjoy watching us play in this world he has given us.

We forget that this world is good stuff. When God finished creating it, he didn’t say, “This isn’t half bad for my first try, but I hope they don’t enjoy it too much.” He said it was very good. Then 2000 years ago, he became one of us and lived in it himself. While Jesus was here,

he prayed, worshipped, read the Bible, and fed the poor, but he also feasted, drank, slept, laughed, cried, and told jokes.

**God is happiest when he can give us both earthly and spiritual joy.**

I know that being a father isn't all play. My role includes making sure Grace and Sarah put their beds back together, empty the dishwasher, and do their homework. Disciplining and teaching are absolutely vital, but those aren't my favorite parts of being a daddy. Likewise, I know that God's highest desire for us is eternal joy, and sometimes that means we must experience discipline and suffering. Yet Scripture hints that God is happiest when he can give us both earthly and spiritual joy.

## **It's Better Than You'd Hoped**

My parents are from Southern California, but we moved to Washington State when I was three. Every couple years we'd go back to visit my grandparents. My dad hated wasting money on motels, so we'd leave as soon as he got off work and drive straight through the night. My parents laid blankets out for my brother, sister, and me in the back of our Datsun B-210, and we slept for the first part of the trip (this was before seat belt laws). For me, summer vacation officially began as I dozed off, looking at the stars out the hatchback window. But the highlight of every trip was Disneyland. Regardless of how tight money was, my parents always managed to take us to "the happiest place on earth." Not surprisingly, Disneyland has always held a special place in my heart.

As Marilyn and I watched Grace and Sarah fall in love with fairies and princesses, we became more and more eager to share the magic of Disneyland with them. We decided the ideal age would be when Sarah was seven and Grace nine—old enough to really enjoy and remember it but young enough to experience the wonder. The problem was that the money just wasn't there, so for two or three years, we prayed that God would provide a way. Almost every night, as I watched my little princesses sleep, I'd silently pray, "Father, I know that a trip to Disneyland

isn't the most important thing in the world, but please, please make a way for us to take our little girls there."

Sometimes God's answers to the seemingly frivolous prayers mean the most. I don't know where all the money came from, but between pinching pennies, using air miles, and finding amazing deals, we were able to book the trip as part of a visit to my sister and her family, who are missionaries in Mexico. Circumstances beyond our control dictated that we'd arrive on Sarah's birthday, so they would still be seven and nine (at least until 8:23 p.m., when Sarah would turn eight).

Of course, we couldn't just tell our girls they were going to Disneyland. The telling had to be an event. We sat Grace and Sarah on the couch and gave them packages containing Minnie Mouse ears and Disneyland T-shirts. "When we go to California to visit Great-Grandpa," Marilyn said, "we're taking you to a very special place. Those presents are your clues."

We waited eagerly for the squeals of excitement as they opened the packages. Instead, they just stared at the gifts. Silence. Off in the distance, my neighbor was mowing his lawn.

"Where do you think we're going?" I finally asked.

"Well, it has to do with Disneyland," Grace said.

"Yes...it has to do with Disneyland," I said. "Where do you think we're going that has to do with Disneyland?"

"We don't know."

"Guess. It has to do with *Disneyland*."

"We don't know!"

This was not going according to plan. Trying not to feel disappointed, we tried again. "It's in California and has to do with Disneyland. Where could that be?"

"We don't know!" Grace said.

"Just tell us!" begged Sarah.

Finally I gave in. "We're going to Disneyland!"

Grace started squealing, and Sarah got very quiet, as she does when she's especially excited. We had a great time telling them all about the rides and showing them pictures of Disneyland. But all the while, I thought about their anticlimactic response to the Minnie Mouse ears.

I didn't have to wait too long to find out what was really going on. Grace told my wife they knew immediately we meant Disneyland but were afraid to say it out loud in case they were wrong. They were afraid to even hope for something that good. I lack the words to describe how that affected me. I can only say that parenthood is filled with moments of sweet heartbreak, like when they break their favorite toy or finally toss out their tattered blankie.

Their innocence and lack of presumption were beautiful. They had received a gift they didn't expect and were afraid to embrace it. But I was also heartbroken. Didn't they know we'd do anything we could for them? That they were worth a trip to Disneyland and so much more? Had we been talking too much about how tight money was?

Over the next few days, that scene kept replaying in my head. Then something dawned on me. How often has God had similar experiences with us? Are we afraid to even hope that he really wants us to enjoy all things, as if we should be happy with just spiritual-sounding activities? In my journey of discovering a radically normal faith, I've often thought, "Glorifying God couldn't possibly be this much fun." And yet the Bible says it can be.

This book is an invitation to joy—to find your eternal joy and satisfaction in God himself and then to delight in all the good gifts he gives. Do you lean toward being obsessively spiritual, undervaluing your everyday things? Or are you sometimes complacent, underestimating the importance of focusing your attention on God? Do you ever feel guilty for not being spiritual enough, or are you more likely to shove God to the corner of your life? Either way, I pray that God will use the following chapters to rescue you from the complacent and obsessive extremes.



Grace isn't just my oldest daughter's name; it's also the central thread holding this entire book together. Without a good grasp on grace, we could easily use it to excuse complacency or to find new ways to be obsessive. So let's talk about grace next.