

If you are not focused on good, Godly things, Satan isn't focused on you.

Dear Satan,

I've only recently become aware of you. Until now you have been bright red with a pointed tail and pitchfork. I used to color pictures of you in Sunday School, but you seemed more like a cartoon than anything of significance. Some pictures have horns, others have variations of sharp teeth. Quite often you are on fire. Years later, I realize the more ridiculous people conceive you to be, the more free you are to work your best against them.

I've always been told to stay away from you. "Run!" was often accompanied with phrasing like we would use to identify strangers with candy. I'm not sure how that would work anyway, you seem to be everywhere God can go... at least for now. I think that was you in church this morning. I would never have thought to see you there. Am I supposed to run from church? That seems counterintuitive. That pretty girl... she kept looking around, playing with her hair, and those times she got up... I think every teenager in the building stopped breathing until the back auditorium door closed behind her.

How does that work? Are you her? Are you in her? Are you in the boys? Are you in all of them? Do you control them, or do they have the same free will God provides? It's so simple. Just a quick partial smile from a freckled redhead and a few dozen pimpled pre-men are instantly at various stages of sin... some of them for moments, many of them for hours after.

Did you plan that before the day began? Are you like God where you know years in advance what sins each person will be susceptible to? Or do you play the field, calling audibles and working with what you've got? I was distracted too. Seeing the commotion of so much distraction was hard to ignore. The sermon seemed good, was that what you wanted us to miss? Or are there larger goals that will build from those seemingly innocent gawks and stares?

What I really don't understand is, where have you been? I don't recall seeing you through most of my childhood. I was always best

friends with whomever the teacher sat me by. You weren't there. I loved to entertain myself for hours with toys and imagination. I never once saw you in the Legos. But last week you showed up. It was my birthday. What a horrible day that almost was. It was so different from all of life before it.

It started with the animatronic band at Showbiz pizza (yesterday's Chuck E. Cheese). They called out for the "Birthday Boy" and I didn't want to go. All of a sudden social situations went from normal routine to awkward and confusing. I just wanted to sit and eat pizza. The minimum wage employee didn't know what to do with a frightened child so he kept calling. Did he think I didn't hear him? I was afraid... and crankiness was setting in too. Finally a child went down and proclaimed themselves the birthday hero. He was my hero. Now we can get on with the day. But that ignorant worker controlling the bear from the back wouldn't allow an injustice on my birthday. Not only was my new arch nemesis, the bear, calling me down, but everyone at my table continued to overtly gesture me toward the stage. The more it became a scene, the more traumatic going to the front had become. Only now other people in the crowd were becoming less and less amused by the shy kid in the back. Now I was interrupting their entertainment. Gruff cries carried through the room, "come on kid, let's get on with it!". "Get to the stage!". "Which one is he, I'll take him!". Some were demands, while others were careless complaints that I had somehow interfered with their day.

I made my way to the stage and endured looks from annoyed tables full of spoiled kids. Parents were shaking heads at my insubordination while their ilk were simply staring with open jaws pondering why I received any attention at all. The bear briefly lectured on why I should have come down earlier and then lead an odd rendition of 'Happy Birthday'. I was then promptly seated and the show continued. Some of our party arrived late and while I was very hungry, I just wanted to follow the bright lights, loud noises, and sticky fingers into the game room. As soon as the show ended the room emptied out save my family still waiting on pizza and a planned gift opening ceremony.

Sigh! More unwanted attention and social awkwardness. Like many of my peers at this fine children's establishment, I too was spoiled. Gift after gift I was more and more underwhelmed. Clothes, books, and of course the one that everyone laughed at,

every year, was the bag of socks. A comb, a flashlight. I still had some play in me... where were the Legos? Where was the Nintendo? Where were the grownup yet still kid's toys? "Junk". I said under my breath. A big pile of junk. Feeling sorry for myself I tried to choke back any emotion and just wanted to get to my room for the night. Which, of course, meant traversing an entire birthday celebration and ride home before that could happen.

I finally made my way to ski-ball. Most of my money was inexperienced-ly wasted on video games with no ticket payouts. But now, I had finally learned where the heart of this place truly lie. It was at the prize exchange booth. Bring them tickets and they give you stuff. So I started chucking balls up the ramp of the mighty ski-ball platform. The kid next to me... it was his birthday too. Decades later I remember the look of his dad, the sound of the words, and the feeling. As his tickets poured out the dad would remove them and pile them in a stack. Wanting more for his child he looked my way and saw my tickets. He didn't even think twice. He reached down, ripped them from the machine and dropped them on his son's pile. "Here are some more", his lips dripped out the words in between chuckles.

That was my last straw. I couldn't handle it any more. I didn't even have enough tickets for a plastic frog whose true value was worth less than a fraction of what our money could measure. 10 tickets that stupid frog cost. So what, you pushed it's rear down and it slightly hopped?!?! Cheap plastic, even cheaper thrills, but I had never desired one more than I did that day. I wanted something, anything to walk away with. But my hard earned tickets lay in another child's stack. I cried. I stood at the bottom of my ski-ball ramp and I cried. The dad next to me looked down, saw my tears and held back another chuckle. Then, with all manner of callous and evil intent, looked over at my ticket slot to see if there was anything left to pilfer.

I ran through the maze of arcade and skill based games to find my parents. No matter how hard I tried to tell them about the adult who had stolen a child's dreams from them, they wouldn't hear of it. "Hush" they kept saying, along with the much more mocking version, "It's past someone's bedtime!". As I was drug past the prize exchange booth, conveniently placed at the exit, I studied extravagant toys from far off lands, some of them costing thousands

upon thousands of tickets. And I knew, the kid next to me earlier, would have them all by night's end.

I climbed in the back of the station wagon. I called it the way-way back because it was behind the back seat. I laid down finally. In darkness, finally. In seclusion, at last. Seemingly alone and separated and in quiet I was free to sob without correction. I knew I was too old to cry over such things... but perhaps I was also just young enough?

My special day seemed more about everyone else than me. As a spoiled child I lay crying over selfish issues that probably shouldn't have mattered. And I could not get that dad who stole my tickets out of my head. Where were the police? Where was the social media outrage? Where was the investigative reporting followed by the talk shows? This injustice was mine alone to bear. It was a crime the world never saw nor cared about. That man, empowered with free tickets, continued to chuckle and do **God** knows what to countless children after me.

God. That just sounded like a good idea. God... are you there? Today sucked! I started to talk inside my head. But I just knew He was listening. I prayed for that man. The ticket bandit. I prayed for him. If He needed my tickets so badly, what else is wrong in his life? I prayed for his son. I prayed that he learn to earn for himself and that his dad didn't teach him bad things, whether on accident or not. I prayed. My first prayer. It lasted 45 minutes as street lights passed shadows over the way-way back of that car all the way home. A little boy lay back there broken hearted, confused, trampled by the world, and yet couldn't stop chatting with his new friend.

I had used the phrase, "i've never been happier", before. But that night, when the street lights stopped passing over the car as it pulled into home's dark driveway... that night was by far the best up to that point. My life had meaning. My future had hope. And I now knew that life wasn't meant to be lived alone. We didn't just play and do homework and then start over the next day. Life wasn't just a string of good and bad moments. It was meant to be lived with someone. With God. I used to say that I found Him, but now I know better. He most certainly found me and He did a whole lot to make that possible. But finding Him back, was amazing. And I

knew then, that very night, that I would spend everyday talking, sharing, and listening to my new friend and savior, Jesus Christ.

... and that is exactly when you showed up, Satan. Why then?

Submerged under God's love and grace through baptism, Satan only found it easier to drown me.

Dear Satan,

I decided to get baptized. At my church there is an "appropriate age" where you are deemed able to understand what baptism means. Until then, you must wait. Was this your doing? It makes no sense to me. Jesus took death to get to us and our response is to age appropriately? I get some of the concerns, but at the risk of sounding like hate mail... it sounds like the kind of stuff you would come up with. I guess I'm lucky in that I'm close enough to the correct age that I can get away with it.

My mind was made up already. I told my parents and a close friend and we went to church that Sunday to get me baptized. It ended up being a guest speaker that performed the normal Sunday service. That wasn't an issue, but I couldn't help notice how boring he was. He was a missional accountant and if that sounds dry... it's worse than you thought. Dry doesn't cut it. Dry is too kind. Dry a wet water slide compared to how abysmally boring this presentation was. He has maps and charts and slides. He said, "watch this video presentation..." and I nearly leapt for joy. But even the video was boring. Monotonous voices grated on about inhabitants and dwellings. There were numbers.... Oh, so many numbers! Years, dates, ages, dollar amounts. They had to show us why they needed our support and in order to do that, they had to verbally turn us into skeletons and catch our money as it ran out the door in fear it was next.

To myself, I tried to focus on my baptism. This was also the kind of church that ALWAYS extended an invitation to be saved. Wishing someone had saved us from the "sermon", I walked forward proudly answering the call. This was no surprise. I was the right age, whispers had already started about my intentions, and not a single person alive in the entire world would have thought that I was moved by something this man said. As I stood at the front of the church, a half dozen people also stood at the ready. Waiting for that slight nod from an elder. As the church jubilantly sang the most rambunctious version possible of the invitation song, everyone knew the internal dialogue was simply, 'praise God this hour is over!!!!'.

An elder approached and placed his hand on my shoulder. Fighting back a yawn, he asked what I needed from the church. I knew the answer. I had heard it dozens of times. But I still messed it up. I was supposed to say the most simple verbiage possible. The truth. Describe the event. That is it. "I want to be baptized". That is it. Say it!!!! I screamed in my head. Finally words started coming out. But I was skipping a step. "I want to confess that Jesus is the son of God..." He interrupted me, aware of my folly and gave the nod many were waiting for. He pushed me into the arms of an eager passerby who whisked me to the back of the pulpit and into a mysterious doorway. One person went to get robes, another lights, still another towels.

The worship leader had to add another song to keep people entertained as they waited my preparation in the back of the front of the church. They gave me privacy, but I had questions. Does the robe go over the clothes? Do I go under the robe, meaning me and just me, just the way God made me? What if pick the wrong thing? How devastating to find out before the entire church that I chose wrongly? Where I had stammered before, God provided logic. I've seen people come out of here dry before. I can't be dry if I wear my clothes. What do I with them? What if someone sees them? Am I too old to be embarrassed by this kind of stuff? Questions came and went as they reached the 4th stanza of a song that had never been sung past the second.

I believe God gave me some clarity and I rushed myself to the stage. Of course it had to be the wrong side. Only the preacher saw as he gently shoved me back out and indicated I had to go around to the other side. I knew God was there... because you were too. So much uncertainty and doubt for such trivial things. Who cares about clothes and ritualistic details that aren't the heart of the ceremony? But you found ways to make each moment sting. At this point, I questioned if I should even be doing this at all. I thought of Jesus being baptized and doves flew and God spoke. What would happen at mine... at such a sinful and unworthy boy's baptismal?

You certainly filled my mind with things. I thought at first the water might boil.... Or at least steam up when my evil skin touched the holy water. Would a demon fly out? Of course it was just water and no such thing happened. I thought of slipping and falling, drowning,

injuring the preacher, and all manner of mishaps. But I never again thought about the words. The ones being read off right now as I pondered disaster after disaster. The preacher looked at me and awaited my reply. I don't know if it was as bad as I remember, but he did have to repeat himself many times and these were the words I knew so well. The ones I spoke prematurely moments before. The words I've been wanting to blurt out for a while now. I believe that Jesus is the son of God!

Leaving church that day, I was excited. I had a story to tell the world. I wanted to shout to all about how I had received Jesus. I wanted to share my friend with everyone. The visiting preacher that aided in our sleep just a few moments back jerked my hand from my side and started to shake it. He started to speak to me, but he kept turning his head from side to side so the people all around and behind him could hear. "Congratulations on your baptism!". He raised the volume of each word independently. "You never know when you are gonna make such an impact on a little man's life in my line of work!". The words hissed through his teeth while his eyes scanned for back pats and accolades from onlookers. As soon as the first person approached that looked like they may have a compliment for him, he released my hand and turned to receive their oddly placed praise for him.

We went to eat at a nice restaurant to celebrate and I was gleaming from ear to ear, head to toe. Happy, excited, redeemed, and if my demeanor didn't give it all away, I still had wet hair from the dunking. I was ready. My new life begins today. Let me at this world! One server handed me a tray. The next gave me a plate. Another asked what meat I wanted... still another asked about veggies, bread, and dessert. I could feel my countenance fade. Why weren't they asking about my new found Saviour? Why not ask about my hair at least? During lunch my hair dried and I felt just like I did yesterday and the day before. I got wet, but I dried back the same person. Where was the newness, the rebirth, the death to the old? How could I keep the news bottled up inside?

I'm not even going to ask. I know you were there. I still have some of the same problems today. You keep finding new ways to tell me that people will ask about Jesus... and THEN I will get to tell my story. I've heard it all from you. Not yet. Not this one. They aren't ready. I'm not ready. It's not safe. Tomorrow. You need to learn

more. They will come to you. I'll just minister to the Christians. They probably already know Jesus.

I've seen people get saved and slowly lose momentum. But at least they had some moments. Some victories. At least they faced the darkness and let the one true light shine from them. They shared the name of Jesus and savored in those moments. At least they had some victories to savor while they were slowly drifting back to you. I couldn't even have that. Not one. Not one great story. Not one conversion. Not even one person that I could muster up the courage to talk to. I gnawed on my dinner roll and contemplated doing it all again. Baptism next Sunday, this one didn't take. But I didn't do that. I couldn't do that. You were there. And I listened too many times to what you had to say about all of that.

I thought getting baptized would be a major blow to you. I imagined hearing demons boo, and satanists protesting outside of the church. I thought it would be a grand affair and a mighty defeat. You cared about my baptism as much as you cared about me.... None. you knew the truth. Without Jesus, baptisms are just getting wet. Water dries. And weakness, whether wet or dry, will give you more foothold than you could possibly use. I wish you had let me have one good moment before the water dried. Just one good thing to hang onto. But you aren't one to grant wishes are you? We don't have that kind of relationship. As long as I'm under your thumb, I can't possibly be at His feet. And that is the relationship you desire. If you can squash all of my hope, I will just bob up and down in your swamp of lies until Jesus returns and I've wasted my whole life waiting for something awesome to happen.

Satan will always provide an audience when you think that no one is looking.

Dear Satan,

I made the football team. And I've seen you around. As good as you are, God is better. Still, I can't figure out what you are up to. Are you keeping me from something that would help me... or God? Or... are you steering me towards something? I've learned that I can hardly tell if your efforts are for the battle or the war.

You sent some nasty things my way. The bully, the move during school, the social issues. Did you know God would win in each of those? If it weren't for the bully, I'd never have learned to stand up for myself. That day I finally had enough and grabbed him by the facemask slinging him to the ground is in my personal hall of fame. I remember putting my knee on his chest as he lay on the ground and leaning into his face to tell him to leave me alone.... Forever! Just as I started to take my weight off to let him up, he yelled in that cowardly voice of his, "I'm gonna kill you when I get up!". So I rocked my weight back on him and smiled while replying, "well I guess I can't let you back up then". The coach made me run laps because he was fair. But I saw his smile. I didn't realize he had seen any of the confrontations between myself and the now ex-bully. .

This wasn't political. Coach knew who the culprit was. I leaned over him with fire in my eyes and 8 months of abuse built up to the breaking point. The tiny bully with a short man's complex lay beneath me. Just a little bigger than half my size. I could have snapped him in two. All I wanted him to do was leave me alone. Once I stopped being afraid of him, the fear shifted. His voice quivered, his eyes showed insecurity. The coach had to correct me because I deserved it. But I could see the pride welling up in him. The boy under my knee had to run twice as many laps. I really liked that coach. He wasn't about winning as much as he was about teaching. We were high school kids and he wanted a good life for us. Do I remember how to read the defense and pull between the guards? Not really. But I learned that it was ok to defend myself. And I learned how to respect my opponents in life.

He was a great coach. He could hang out with the players without losing his authoritative presence. He could tease us without

crossing that line that may cause us to question ourselves. And he allowed himself to be an equal target as long as the ribbing was in good nature and helped build us all up together in the end. I grew a lot in those 2 years. For the first time that I can remember, I had pride. Fridays were jersey days. I could not wait to put my jersey on over my clothes and head to school. I was a part of something special. Something unique and tangible. I was number 64 and I wanted everyone to know I was a member of this team.

It never dawned on me that I was living two completely different lives. I never even saw a hint of it. It just made sense. There was home behavior and school behavior. And the two never really connected. Like turning on a light switch I would transfer into my school self and back into my home self automatically. The first clue was the most painful. You just had to use the coach. My silent mentor. My role model and teacher. When he walked onto the field for practice that day and called my name while I was in the middle of making an utter fool of myself... all of life stopped for a moment. The walls closed in. Bleachers appeared and TV cameras came from nowhere. A spotlight shown down and the entire world sat in wait to see the following discourse. (or so it seemed to a confused teenager).

I don't even fully remember what I was doing, but it was wrong and it showed a lack of character. It was something I would have never done at home or church... but I wasn't there. I had forgotten that my coach was someone I wanted to impress. He was someone that mattered to me and his opinion was royalty in my life. I waited for words to follow. He had just called my name. I stood frozen in time and space. He had my attention. He had the entire team's attention. There were even some onlookers and misc. Folks around the field and stands. We all watched and waited. The sentencing. The punishment. How many laps? Would pushups be added in? This was a public school and spanking wasn't quite the issue back in the day. Perhaps a paddling? They had a massive wooden paddle and it intimidated the most athletic specimens.

It felt like a very long time before the next words came out of his mouth. He walked from the field house on the other side of the track to the middle of the field before he finally walked right past me. I still hadn't budged. Right on the 50 yard line... how convenient for someone like you who enjoys torture and humiliation. But he did walk past me. He is still going. Wait! Something else has to be

said... I must endure the consequences for my actions. And endure I did. Finally, his neck spun halfway around so the side of his mouth was addressing me directly.

He said my name again. Followed by, "of all the guys on this field right now, you are the last one I would have expected to find doing that... I'm very disappointed in you". He stopped walking, turned fully around with whistle in mouth and blew a single long blast followed by, "Line up!" Practice had officially begun and the entire team had marked me as public enemy number one to blame for the coaches less than forgiving mood.

But in the end of it all, I was never punished. Even so, the verbal price for my crime was more than I could bear. "Disappointed". To my knowledge I had never disappointed anyone before. But now the man who was teaching me real life, worldly, practical and useful knowledge had lesser feelings of me. I wanted to make it up to him. To prove that I was better than that. I wanted him to know he had placed good faith in me before... but we moved out of state and I finished High School somewhere else. And that is when I truly learned, in hindsight, how wonderful of a coach and team I had just left. Moving to a school that had lost 25 consecutive games, where fights broke out in the locker room, and where coaches hated teenagers... My football career ended after 3 years.

I was never any good anyway... but I had my moments. Small victories that have stayed with me, even decades later. The day I finally turned over the tackling dummy. The day I ran out of my shoes to stop a should be touchdown because I took the correct angle. The time we played softball for practice and I hit the ball so hard people talked about the "wicked" sound the bat made for weeks after. The little things seemed to keep me afloat. Stuff I could grab onto while I was otherwise treading water in a vast sea of danger. Not souls. Not prayers. Not spiritual sacrifices and wins. But trivial things that mattered only to me. I found my comfort in any accomplishment I made that didn't make me look like an idiot to anyone else. I didn't know I was alone. I didn't know I had chosen to abandon God. I didn't know I had picked a path. I just went where life took me and before I knew it... I needed something, someone, anything. My coach was disappointed and gone. Out of the state and out of the present he was another past memory haunting my nightmares. "Disappointed" echoed in my head. "Of all the players..." followed me for years.

I saw you. How did you pull this off when I saw you? You used to run when you were caught in your schemes. Was that part of the trick? Openness? The misdirect was the real thing? How do I get out of a trap I barely realize I'm stuck in? Where is your pitchfork? Where is your tail? How can I know what to run from and what to embrace? The cherry on top is the toxic new youth group I settled into after the move. You have been busy here. Ego driven, bored, rich teenagers that immediately accepted me into the group. I've never been popular and I've certainly never hit it off so well so fast.

Ah, now this is the devil I know. Straight up standard temptation. This is what I had been missing. The classic battle of right and wrong. What should I do? Sin or not sin? Finally, some straightforward battling where I can regain some ground and some confidence. Only I didn't. I guess you had worn me down. You knew just when to strike. It was slick and secretive at first, but after after a while, even though I saw the hook in the bait, I just had to have another taste. You didn't even need both hands to reel me in. I knew God was out there, and that was a thought you freely let me keep. Out there. Not here. Not within me. Not able to help NOW. Not powerful enough to break my bondage to you. He was in the cosmos somewhere. Or maybe He was hovering over a church building in another state. Did you put that thought in my mind... or did you simply encourage me to remain ignorant of the relationship I was forfeiting to keep taking the path of least resistance?

I think it's inaccurate, even after all we have been through, to say that you are getting stronger... but you sure are becoming more clever and your ability to use me against myself is overwhelmingly scary.

God can give to you the deepest wishes of your heart... so can Satan. Be careful what you ask for.

Dear Satan,

I'm trying to get things back to the way they used to be. You probably don't like your place in all of this, but to be fair, you did choose it. I almost understand you. I am tempted (not by you, I don't think), to feel sorry for you. Fighting a war you have already lost to try and drag down a few lost souls with you. It's sad. Except you tip the scales when I realize i'm more of a prize than a trophy to you. If you don't know my meaning, a trophy is an accomplishment. An earning. Something you cherish after obtaining. A prize is just a statement of winning and nothing more. A prize might be, "1st place" or "Suzie's soul". But once won, it's just a title to you. You don't care anymore. My sympathy, empathy, and any other thy runs out when I ponder your actions. Jesus would die to save me... you would kill to see that I stay lost. The short of it all... you don't have any skin in the game. Not any that hasn't already been wagered and lost anyway.

I love your head on assaults. Drink this! Ha! I hate the taste of alcohol. It cracks me up to see you try. Is that why people are so cool when I say no? Is it because you know there isn't any room for sin where my taste buds are disgusted? Or is it that you have all the teenagers convinced of another lie... that we don't accept anyone that doesn't give in to the things that rot our bodies the fastest? I've said no to drugs, alcohol, and all kinds of silly things people are doing to themselves. I've never been called out for it. In fact I've been complimented on several occasions. It almost seems like the fastest track to cool-town is to say 'no'. You've done some significant work here whether it's in me or them. Kudos on that. I can't deny you know your way around a teen's social structure.

You say 'drugs', I say 'no', God says, "well done" and it just feels like we all have a big laugh. It's the way of things. I miss that. I knew my place. Right by my God. Sitting at His feet is a pleasure I can't even begin to describe in words, let alone on paper. And when I'm shooting you down left and right, there is a good chance that is where I'm at. I want to get back there. I don't even recall getting up to leave. In fact, I was working on my prayer life the last time I was there. I had decided it was time to go deeper.

I was weary of some of the whisperings I had bothered with that came from you and aiming to stay in God's camp I wanted to be sure His voice was the only one I treated with. That prayer was scary. I prayed for God to intervene in my earthly life. I actually asked Him to talk to me. For years I had been talking to Him. With the best intentions I could muster I boldly asked God to talk back. I figured if people could speak in tongues, or prophesy, or heal... all with God's power... why couldn't I simply hear God speak to me?

And my motives couldn't be more pure. I simply wanted a way to discern between my own thoughts, God's, and yours. I asked for a filter. For a sure fire, 100%, guaranteed way to know who was speaking.

Confident in my purity, I threw on, what I thought was certainly the clincher. "And I'll be obedient". How could God resist? A way to make sure I never listen to you again, promises that I would do whatever He said, and the closest relationship we could ever have by true bi-party communication. I prayed for hours that first night. I remember getting scared the first time just thinking... what would God sound like? And, of course, I never stopped talking. The whole time I narrated directly to God. "You don't have to be scary... you can whisper... you can wait until the morning when it's daylight".

I had never considered what God might sound like. Would He come in a vision as well? Would the words hurt? Would it be a man's voice?

I pace when I pray, and I'm convinced I wore a path in the shag.

Covering all of my bases, I kept trying to encourage God. In hindsight, I treated Him like a frightened mouse. "You don't have to talk today. I will be patient. All in your timing. I trust you will speak when you are ready. This isn't a test, I believe in you even if you choose not to speak. Oh, this would be a good time to talk, what should I do in this situation?" Night after night, day after day, I prayed. I wasn't very good at listening, but I tried. Radio off in the car. Locked in the closet. Trying to fall asleep at night I would listen past the silence in the house. I would identify all of the quiet noisemakers... the fan, the refrigerator hum, my own breathing, crickets, etc. And I would zero in on the abyss where sound was currently lacking. Praying, begging, pleading that God would give birth to words that I could plainly hear.

In my ears, in my head, in my heart, I didn't know what to expect. Would my cat talk to me, would an item, would the house shake,

would I fall to my knees? I would cross back and forth from fear to anxiously awaiting those confirming words that I wanted so desperately to hear. This would end it all. You, my evil schemer, could never sway me again. I would obey only God's words. Obedience is what I sold over and over. I promise to obey. I saw it in my mind. God would tell me to be nice to a co-worker and I would. He would tell me to go into work if I felt a little ill and I would. He would tell me to ignore certain people, share a prayer, and speak up in church with messages that were no longer questionable as to their origin.

As I was walking one day of little note. I began the prayer again. I will be obedient. And while God wasn't ready to talk, you sure were. You pointed out that group of men standing by the side of the road. You told me something I never once expected to hear from you. "Go share Jesus with these men". The words were so shocking it hurt inside and out. I had recognized them before. It was the constant inner dialogue that I wrestled with so many times before and essentially what lead me to pray for God to speak in the first place. How can I go to them? I don't know them? What if they don't speak my language? What if my religion is offensive? What if I'm interrupting something important? What will I say?

And then you stood right behind them, waving me over. "Come on... be obedient". Before I could even muster an insult at your audacity to tempt me to do good things, you landed another blow. "Move out of the country. Sell all you have and be a missionary. Leave your family and live in the wilderness..." blow after blow I considered how I could make them work. I didn't even know for sure how I landed the job I had, if I left now, how would I get another one? I'm not handy, I'm not street smart, I'm not a survivalist... how would I manage? Excuses poured out faster than I could field your mockery. "Be obedient!" you hissed. And we both knew I couldn't. The fear was crippling. It had never crossed my mind. What if God asked me to do something I couldn't, wouldn't, or shouldn't do? It's happened before. An obedient Abraham tied his son up in the forest and I am pretty certain I could not do that. I couldn't do a whole lot of things that I never imagined when I prayed for God to provide direction to me. I'm not only scared at what might happen, I don't want to pray that prayer anymore. I love singing the song, "where you go, I'll go, I will follow you!". And I sincerely mean every word... as long as you lead me to places of comfort.

And speaking of comfort... I am nowhere near the feet of God now. And I'm starting to see why. You taught me some things tonight. It's not below you to use God, the Bible, and what we are called to be against us. As mentioned before... you've got nothing to lose, right? Just know that it sounds like poison to hear you calling me to be a better Christian. In fact, poison is exactly what it was. I've learned some things about you. But I've learned them about myself too. I didn't mean it when I asked God to lead my life. I forgot what kind of life it was to follow in His footsteps. Jesus didn't have a home. He had few friends. Ultimately He gave everything including His life to set the example for us. Mock me know. But I've learned a lot more about how I want to serve God. I've learned what I need to overcome. I've learned what I have to give up.

It is the way with you isn't it? You throw a perfect spiral for a touchdown, obliterating my hopes and dreams... only for God to find another way into my heart and calling your play back on a penalty. Whatever I'm not willing to give up for God is a weakness that you will continue to exploit. I've learned a lot. I fear I have much more knowledge to obtain. One day, I will learn how to share Jesus. I will break the chains of your fear mongering. I will have no ties to this world or to my possessions. In short, you are running out of strings to pull. Would it be like you if were to gloat? If I were to thank you for showing me where my sinful heart truly lay so that I can work on fixing that? I don't want to be like you, so I'll just say that I look forward to another letter where I can share my triumphs. Your disdain for God hurts me... but from that pain, I am healed and made more complete.

Don't bring a squirt gun to a holy war.

Dear Satan,

I just finished watching an episode of Lost, the one where Sawyer pulled a long con, both on the island, and in a flashback. That must be how you did it. What a ride you have taken me on. And my God is nowhere to be found in my life. You gently set me in an innertube and let me float down the river of life. It's been slow, breezy, warm, and completely tranquil. I'm so far down the river that I just happened to realize I'm headed straight for the gigantic waterfall, but the rapids picked up so gradually, I never even noticed. Now, I have nowhere to turn. It's water on all sides with jagged rocks and deep currents.

My life has become a hum. I'm the side effect to something else happening. I'm screaming at the top of my lungs around everyone I know and they simply hear white noise in the background. The help I need... it's too late, isn't it? Someone could toss me a rope but that would require someone in my life. Someone around at least. Someone that could hear me now. Before someone could help me... they would have to know I needed help. How is that going to happen? I'm moments from the edge of the cliff, drowning in rapids, and they don't even have the emergency helicopters fueled. It's simple math... my ONLY option is to hold onto this inner tube and wait for the ledge.

How do you do that? My "only" option. I've called on God plenty of times. That is an option, isn't it? Would it work? Why am I questioning and not calling out? I guess I remember the warm quiet water. It's not all been bad. Part of me is scared He might answer and rip me straight out of the river. Am I ready for a life without a little splash now and then? Is this my punishment for some fun and a bit of disobedience... and perhaps a double life and some real sin in the mix? I do good things! This shouldn't be my last resort. Most Christians will tell you I'm a great person! I see they are also floating down the river behind me... I guess that means they aren't the best character witnesses?

Most sin is just an accident anyway. Who sits down and plans to sin? Aren't those the people that really belong to you? The falls are getting loud. I hear rocks breaking off the peak beneath the

strength of the water and crushing against their brethren boulders at the bottom. The mist hits me in the face and I can't see anything.

Just water and noise. Along with my own desperate screams, knowing full well, no one is here to help, I hear echoes of my own past. I guess these were screams I should have heard myself and either didn't hear or opted to ignore.

"Are you going to go to church with us?" "we are headed to the movies after". "Want to hang out?" "we are going on a mission trip...". Every "no" audibly comes from a different place. They begin to repeat and new questions have more "no's" stacked upon them. In front of me, behind. From the bottom of the falls. From the shores in all directions. The answers never change and the sound of my own constant refusal is overspeaking the water. With every 'no' I set forth this journey. Every friend pushed away. Every opportunity pushed under the water. I'm riding on top of my opportunities. They were drowned from my life and now carry me off to whatever doom you have prepared for me. I can't tell where your tempting ended and I began to automate my life without your help. The 'no's' came so easily. No time for family, no time for the Bible, no time for friends, no time for strangers, not time for exercise, no time to... anything. Nothing. Everything. It's all now floating below. And I can honestly only blame you for a portion of it.

That is how you did it... isn't it? You long conned me. You let me pack for my own trip. Each bag in the boat, each pair of socks neatly folded and placed in a suitcase. Not too fast. Slowly.

Methodically. Like lego blocks, I was building my own eternal doom. One piece at a time. I never turned the package over and saw your face on it. It wasn't a sudden change or major life event.

It was just life. One day at a time. One decision at a time. Slowly lulling myself out of happiness, activity, camaraderie, and eventually, life itself. There is no motor on this boat. No paddles.

The current has carried me at a daily pace for years now. All you required was my acceptance. I didn't even have to say yes... I just had to keep saying, 'no'... and that was all you needed to set my raft adrift down towards the bowels of your home.

My cries to God go unanswered. Is it too late? I've often joked with others about the saving grace of God. What if lightning struck when you had only one foot in the baptismal? Would you be saved?

Would just your foot be saved? Would he slam the door to Heaven

in your face because you were moments too late? It was a joke... but here I am with my entire body needing the saving powers of Jesus, the lightning storm is swirling overhead, and it appears I have only seconds left. Am I not saying it right? Is my heart not right? I'm ready to wake up and live differently. This is unlike the times before where I promised to change and didn't really do anything afterwards.. I am ready to live right.

Can He hear me? Am I already on the other side? Is it too late because I've already died? Is this already Hell I'm in? There are so many reasons to stop crying out for God. And now I have to wonder... are these reasons yours? Did you give them to me? I'm ashamed to acknowledge God, it's been so long since I've lived in His embrace. I'm scared. What if He says 'no' back at me... wouldn't that be fitting? He let me get this far. Is He done with me? Why would He want me back anyway? I've past the point of no return already. I'm tired of sulking back to Him a sinner.... AGAIN! 'Hi God, it's me... your mistake. Failure is here. Just call me, 'can't get anything right even after a few hundred chances' or... CGAREAAFHC for short. That name makes as much sense as I do.

And so the real struggle begins. Whom do I listen too? Who is telling me what? The voices raise in volume. Don't involve God! I'm meaningless! It's too late now! I've gone too far, I'm in too deep, I can't turn back, He isn't listening to you anyway! Just hold on a little while longer!!!

And that's when you tipped your hand. It's how you got me to the point I was at. You whispered, "just a little while longer" so many times I forgot the lies came from you to begin with. It's always been a little. A little longer, A little more, A little... Too much and I would have recognized what was happening. Too sudden and your long con would have been revealed too soon. But you forgot your own advice. A little. You started pouring it on thick. I saw the repetition. I felt your fear while you tried to comfort me into more submission. Finally wisdom broke through all the voices. They shattered into pieces and muted into mere mumblings. I saw Jesus. It wasn't 'my' Jesus, it was Simon's. Standing in the water with a hand out beckoning for him to leave the boat. Jesus didn't come onto the boat and carry Simon out, he let Simon choose. Simon's faith had to come from within. He had to believe before he touched cold water. When Simon obeyed the water firmly held him at the

command of Jesus. It was Jesus. Jesus was there. Simon had to get off the boat. I didn't know why, but somehow it was a revelation.

Get off the boat. How does this help me? The boat held him back. It provided safety. It fit inside Simon's mind and perspective. It made sense. People don't walk on water.... Boats do! It was his safe place. Jesus called him to come out of his safe place. Jesus protects us when we are with Him... Jesus can't protect us if we won't run to Him. We have to throw off our trappings in order to run to Him. Thoughts rushed in like the water over the cliff. And just now, my time was up. I wanted Simon's Jesus. I knew that for sure. My inner tube was all I had to hold on to. But lies, lies, lies, it was not my only prayer... it was not my only hope.

I knew that getting out of the inner tube was not enough. I didn't want it anywhere near me. In one breath and in one motion I slung the device as far away as possible... "For you, God!" When I woke up that morning in my dry bed I knew something significant had occurred. I realized this wasn't spiritual tickle fighting.. This was war. I've not yet prepared for war... but if I want to end up on the right side of eternity after the dust settles, I think it's time to take this much more seriously. You keep telling me that Jesus doesn't want me. I have to ask... if that were true, why are you working so hard to keep us apart? If He didn't want me... with all of His power... don't you think I'd never have a shot at being near Him? Wouldn't you have the easiest job in the world? Forget about Him creating me, and forget for just a minute that He let His Son die so we could get to Him... couldn't He just stop us altogether if that was His true desire?

I've never been good at discerning your lies from His truth... but even you have to admit... that is kind of weak, right?

Until you have another plan, I am:

Living in grace,

Barry.

When you have amassed wealth beyond your wildest dreams... that is usually where you will find it.

Dear Satan,

I have found my calling in life. To be a PC Gamer! I've always loved games, but I agreed they were seemingly anti-social and nerdy. This isn't just a game... it's an MMORPG. I connect online and interact with real people. We aren't typing or hiding behind monitors... we actually talk. We share stories about kids, work, personal struggles. It's nothing like they make it out like in the movies... I'm not sitting in the basement with maps of Mordor and character sheets of elves and orcs strewn about. I'm in my home office with the lights on talking to Nick about how his college classes are going. Sure we might sidetrack to discuss which helmet is better for raiding and where to find the materials to craft it... but then it's back to normal-folk talk soon after.

I was never a fan of competitive gaming... like raiding. But this game boasted a solo experience as well. My goal was to play alone and enjoy what the solo experience had to offer. But then it happened. I just HAD to have that piece of armor. "Where did you get it?" I boldly asked in a private message to a stranger. (something I would never dare do in the streets of real life). But here, behind the safety of my router, I had courage I never knew possible. I had to join a group of fellow humans, scattered across the globe, with one common agenda... to get that helmet. I didn't want to. It felt weird. Social situations stress me out and this is starting to feel like real life and less like a game. Before I knew it I accepted an invitation and we were off to storm the cave of a long forgotten evil.

But this wasn't like real social situations at all. I was good at gaming. I was the healer class and I kept everyone alive. "Nice heals!" were spoken often. In real life, you trip and fall, stutter over words, and make all kinds of day to day mistakes. In the computer, 1 means 1. I can't mess that up. The developers didn't program tripping hazards in the game. My character never slips and fall or burps (unless I tell him to). This is pure fantasy... a place where I'm important, liked, and even sought after.

My life changed the day I got home from work and logged in to a swarm of messages asking me to come and heal instances for various groups. I was a good healer. In games, words mean nothing. People find out everything they need to know about you by playing with you for just a few minutes. This was about teamwork, strategy, following orders, sticking to your role, knowing your responsibilities. I was good. And my game account started to show that. There was housing in the game where trophies could be shown off. You could also win all kinds of cosmetic gear including horses. I lost count after my 70th sought after horse.

In my home (in game) I had trinkets from skirmishes across the entire game world. Other solo players had joined like me but feared to group up. They would ask in awe how they could get some of the items from my home. You could hear the despair in their voice after they learned those items required a team of people. Like me they were scared or some simply weren't good enough to hold a position in a group. Skills, deeds, titles, horses, armor, weapons, pets, loot... I wanted it all. I worked for it all. And when I got it all... I started over with a new character. Instead of healing, maybe I could try another roll for a while. Then it really did start all over. This character doesn't have the horse or the title I like from the other one... lets get it!

Slaughtering goblins by the thousands I rose to the elite ranks of raider on 9 different characters. My digital representation of myself on screen would shimmer in the light as he was donned with exotic gold and clad in precious metals that yielded some of the best abilities in the game. I had a horse for every occasion. I had money (in game money) to spare. I was needed, I was wanted, I was more social than I had ever been in my entire life. It was fun too. I laughed. The people were fun. We joked through the instances.

The people I played with were serious enough to respect each other and play well, but laid back enough that life could happen around us. We would pause for diaper changes, pizza deliveries and expected phone calls. Bathroom breaks and refills were a common occurrence. Every day I would come home from work and run straight to the computer. I couldn't wait for the next adventure. Would this be a kin run up to the mountain of St. Evil Darkerson the 3rd?!?!? Or would I go hunting for resources or tackle some solo quests?

The sky was the limit because every time I ran out of stuff to do, I could either start a new character or the developers would release new content. So there was ALWAYS new stuff to do. Some people left and new people came. It started to become less fun. Numbers dwindled as this was no longer the newest game and they didn't release the BEST updates. One quiet night I found myself alone with only one other person online in my group. They asked a question and I had an immediate answer. They asked a follow up and I laid that one down too. I then proceeded to give them an option b, c, and d based on their preferences. Then, they asked a question I had been asked before but never pondered. "How do you know all this stuff?"

Before I just joked it away. I would say, "It's because I'm smrt" (and purposefully misspell smart). Or I'd say my uncle was a troll. (more internet humor). I guess it was a combination of the boredom and the lack of people available. I actually thought for a minute. How do I know this stuff? Well let's answer honestly. "Trial and error, research, experience, asking questions of my own...". They asked back, "research? How do you research a computer game?" Well that was easy, "Patch notes, internet forums, chat channels, fansites, game blogs, facebook, twitter..." To which the reply was, "yeah, but how much time do you have to put into this game?"

How much time? I had no idea. I started to think about my current schedule. Get up in the morning and go to work. Come home from work and immediately log in. Eat dinner while playing. Stop playing around bedtime. That gets me about 6 hours a night if I stay up late. But those are just weeknights. On the weekends, I'm usually up from 8 am till around 11 p.m. so that is what... 15 hours? But I take breaks. 15 minute ones at least a couple of times during those long days. Oh, same thing for sick days. And vacation days. And holidays. I started to feel weird about my own thought process.

When do I not play? Even though I still work and sleep, if I ever can't sleep, I play. If I ever can't work, I play. Wow, I have no life! I have all this stuff, but I have no life. And then the question came from mind, and I honestly don't think it was you who asked it. "What stuff?". That isn't your question is it? You were the one telling me I had things all along. No, this voice was showing me I didn't.

Have.... Anything! I said good night and logged out and received a quick 'thanks' for my time. But I sat and watched the computer screen change from a bright blue to various shades of grey before finally resting on the absent black of losing all power.

I started doing the math. Fingers were moving slightly while lips were mouthing numbers calculated by my very tired brain. The 5 minutes I sat in that chair with the monitor off was the longest amount of time I had spent outside of the game (when I was able to play) in 8 years. And that is finally the number that came out of my mouth... "8 years!". The number 8 came out solid. But the word years started to trail off in desperate fear and panic. Emotions started churning inside... 8 years!!!! I needed to cry and scream at the same time. Was this right? In my messed up mind I thought I knew exactly what prisoners felt after their sentence. Zero connection to the world and then they are finally released. But that analogy falls flat quickly. How many prisoners happily lock themselves up every day?

8 years! I couldn't stop hyperventilating. This was news delivered to a weak and completely unaware bystander. A literal bystander who sat by and watched his life erode away, one pixel at a time. 8 years. The number wouldn't stop. What's happened the the last 8 years. I'd lost family members... loved ones. I went to the funeral's but my brain was checked out and completely focused on winning the next horse. I'd played through promotion opportunities, turned down training, said goodbye to every single real life friend I had. But I didn't know. I was being social. I had new friends. I had amassed a wealth of treasure rarely seen or heard of anywhere in.... In the game world. And every time my monitor was turned off my actual treasure in the real world was zero.

I can't take it with me. I can't turn the last 8 years into ANYTHING of value. Those pixels on the screen will never leave that screen. In fact, one day, the creators of that game will decide to turn the servers off, and even if I wanted to play, I couldn't. Was this my life now. Will I be in the news as the man who dies simultaneously as they shut down a game server? I have nothing. NOTHING to show for the last 8 years. And while I gained nothing... I lost everything. I freely and willfully traded it all away for some pixels on a screen.

And that is when your voice became ever so clear. "You can't quit now. Look at what all you have accomplished. You will lose it all. You are so close to getting more. Think of the ministry, you can help people through the game. You can share your resources and help them on quests and then help them in real life by listening and sharing God stories with them". Your voice. Where has it been the

past 8 years? I hear it now? Now that I'm done? You wait until I open my eyes and try to stand on my own legs and THEN you come running back to me?

I thought you wanted me? I mean, all my life I envisioned this epic struggle between you and God. Fighting tirelessly over each soul before the final moment of the world. And here you aren't. For 8 years you left me on auto-pilot. So evil, so deceptive, and yet so seemingly lazy. You don't want me! You just don't want Him to have me! I don't understand. Jesus faces the cross and you give me video games. That is what my soul is worth to you? Don't get me wrong, this was never a mutual relationship. I don't WANT to be with you, it's just offensive to find out after all your efforts you never wanted me either. All of your lies telling me that Jesus couldn't love and how He couldn't forgive... You were merely describing yourself.

I walk past 8 tombstones in my hallway. 8 years that I was dead and simply waiting for the day of judgement. 8 graves full of opportunity lost, but more importantly, life forfeited. If you can do this to me now. Here. On earth where I live and you have limited authority. What could you do in Hell with no rules and no Savior?

I wish I could say I immediately uninstalled that game and never played again. It took me a few months to get my head in the right place to get out of those habits safely. I went back once, but it just wasn't the same. Your watermark poisoned every pixel on the screen. I only wish it had lasted longer. The uninstallation of that game. It took an hour to install. It took 8 years of my life. And it uninstalled in 10 seconds. I wanted a ceremony. I wanted to say things and honor moments. I wanted to vow to change and never return to a life ruled by your greed. You wouldn't let me have the pleasure.

I had a party later. I deleted installers, beta programs, screenshots, homemade movies, walkthroughs, fan art. Gigabytes upon Gigabytes of accumulated documents and files. I actually went back looking for a picture to include with this letter. I deleted it all.

It's been a few years since I've played and when I went to look and see if any of my pictures were still online I actually found a trace of my old self in that game. A word here... a walkthrough there.

Some saved posts that survived forum overhauls. Just enough to know I existed during my death. Just not here. Not where it mattered. I was with you, it seems. That picture is gone. In years

to come so will the final remnants of my time there. Soon, all you will have is this letter. You had me. But you didn't want me. And now I've chosen God. Let's be clear. I've never chosen you.... But you have a way of getting my attention more than I'd like. I'll leave it at that.

Regretting nearly a decade of my life,

Barry.

"This way to safety" only works when you can trust the sign maker.

Dear Satan,

All of my life feels like a constant crawling from one patch of fog to the next. I know that when my head's on straight that it's the other way around. The fog is the path and the breaks in the fog are the moments we are to truly live in. That is if we remember to live in those moments. What I have learned from you is that you deter me from the open spaces. You lead me away from the clearings and keep me in the fog as much as possible. While others are dancing, singing, laughing, and living life to its full enjoyment, I'm screaming into the echoes of my own broken path. My arms hang limp from their sockets... drained of all energy, not to mention sinew necessary to wave through the mist once more.

It's the long path you lead me on. The one around the bubbles I'm meant to live in. Instead of a clearing I get the ramp that goes up and over. Sometimes it's down and under. But you always allow a subtle glimpse. Just when I've made it around the great moments in life, you flash a glimpse of what I've just bypassed completely. You have labeled me so cleverly. Shy, introvert, socially awkward, scared, un-skilled, and on and on. At times, I choose the dark path on my own, terrified of embarrassing myself. But anytime I decide I'm missing life and want to make things better... that is when you appear to lead me around the path of least resistance.

I miss my mom. I never had the kind of relationship I wished I could have, but I miss her for both what I knew and never learned about her. She came to me in the fog. I thought I did my best. In the tiring, blinding, misguiding mist of your deceit I thought I had done well to give her a room and leave her in peace and privacy as she wanted.

I checked for food, comfort, warmth, and any other sterile offering a perfect stranger would offer in a facility void of personality. Finally an opportunity to fellowship with walls down and hearts open. But when she finally came to stay with me, in her final moments of life, my eyes were glazed over with defeat. "Are you ok?" I would ask 2 or 3 times a day depending on whether or not I worked that day. I'd check every single item she wanted off the grocery list. The one thing I could do is what we almost all do when things get too tough

to actually work through. So I wrote checks to Kroger for grape popsicles, pot pies and home deliveries.

When I reach deep in and try to pull out some form of love, all I feel are the fingerprints of my last effort to find something there. So I make sure the burritos are stocked, the blankets are thick, and the tv works for her. I missed it all. Bedside conversations never happened. Small walks around the house, prayers, life lessons, hugs, political debates, favorite scriptures... she took them all with her because I was too tired and too lost to be there. While 'there' was 15 feet away behind an open door, I was miles behind thick walls placed around me by you.

And this is where I get really confused. Who is to blame? Of course you! Absolutely you! But that doesn't sooth my regret. Didn't I have a choice? Couldn't I have broken through and been the son I should have been. It was good logic to let the hospice worker handle all of the tough stuff. I wasn't qualified. Some of it was awkward. In some ways she prefered that. It made her happy to feel like she wasn't inconveniencing me. I act like the fog contained me. I blame you for putting the fog there. It was tricky. It was confusing. It was so weary and tiresome. Even now, I can drop my arms past the sides of my chair, slouch down with chin in chest and desperately sigh that same old feeling of pure exhaustion.

But I could have walked out of the fog. I'm mad at you for putting those obstacles there and for robbing me of so much. So much you have taken, stolen, pillaged, ripped away. You thief! But I had the power to do something. I had a will, a hope, a love and a God. I could have beaten you. I could have... I could have told her I loved her. I could have prayed. Oh, my God... I could have prayed with my mom. I've even been angry at Him, my Savior. Why didn't He deliver me in time to share those moments?

This lesson has been the most painful to learn in all of my life. There was deliverance. There was an out. There was healing. There was comfort. There was a relationship available. There was time to be had. There was love to be shared. There was everything I could have ever wanted. All I had to do was take it. One step. One reach. One time of turning back around and walking back into her room explaining that I did have more to say. The door was

always open. God didn't stop me no more than you lead me. And now I know.

You only have the power to deceive. You can't force me to do anything. You can't stop me, you can't make me. You don't control others. You deal strictly with props, shadows, and slight of hand. Your world is based on theatrics. You have to convince me to do your will. I never have to do it. On the contrary, God always has a way. A path. An outreached hand. I could have grasped Him at any time. It was a choice. Your lie felt better. The somber, sluggish, dull pain of barely living felt easier. I learned a lot about myself.

I learned how I gave up. I was scared. I lived for far too long this way. I kept waiting for the fog to lift, but you had a willing contestant who had lost at this game many times before. I learned it's not your fault anymore. It's who you are. I know better. And this points the finger solely at me. Circumstances, especially chronic ones that are concocted from you, won't just go away. I ignored anyone and everyone, especially those trying to help. You made the fog feel safe. It was my quiet, ambient place, where my life was delicately wrecked piece by peaceful piece.

I've always had a soft spot in my heart for prodigal children. I only found out too late that I could have given an amazing gift by tearing out the fog and stepping over the lies into a relationship with her.

But in your greed you overreached. Once again, too desperate for souls that don't belong to you. I've spent too much time in that fog. It's not pleasing anymore. It's not safe. I smell its very approach. Like a 'B' horror movie I can see the bad makeup job on the monsters and the set hand in full view, eating a donut, during the take.

Most of all, I've learned there is nothing to run to. No matter how bad life gets, I know it's worse with you. No amount of fear, peril, danger, loss, depression, or pure despair will drive me into that fog again. Running is an escape. You attempt to drive us away from where we belong. I've learned to be content and hence I have no reason to run. I want to run to home. Warmth. Forgiveness. Love. My Savior. If I'm away from you, I'm already there. When I stand firm in my faith, I will never run. I will always be protected. I will remember that running means to flee. To depart. It's built in cowardice. The only reason to run is to not have faith that my God will protect me. Running is the absence of faith.

He will protect. Running is how we get lost. Running is how we get weary. Running is how we get desperate. Running is how we find you. I will never run again. My worst fears are already where running will take me. I'll lose nothing by standing firm. Thank you for this lesson. But I will not forget its price. It was far too high.

There is a thin line between patience and laziness. Both can accomplish the same goal, but at completely different costs.

Dear Satan,

I've heard it said that when you pray for rain, that you should carry an umbrella. I've lived quite the opposite of that cliché. I pray for it not to rain and leave the umbrella at home. Is that not also faith? I stand dripping and amazed at how many times I've been caught without an umbrella. I'm guessing it's a different level of faith to pray for rain than to pray for dry?

It hasn't really shaken my faith, but I do presume that God has a sense of humor. Or, perhaps, since I write to you now, perhaps He has a lesson or two for me still? Maybe it's a reminder that my prayer life needs work? It's also within the realm of reason that it's just nature watering the earth and prayer had no influence pro or con. But you like the head games.

How many times have the most insignificant issues been blamed against God simply because they align against a follower having a bad day? Missed a flight? God must be mad at me. Sick again? I thought God was compassionate. Lost job? The wrath of God consumes us all. But it never ends... dirty fork served with lunch, missed the green light and have to wait, elevator was full, tripped up the stairs, no matching socks... you can turn it all into God-blame with us.

I'm pretty sure the answer to all of life's issues like these is simply prayer. And I've tried that. But prayer can be tricky. You have God's timing, God's will, our faith, our actions, and our devotion.

Some of the greatest stories of answered prayer span years while those elements all align. That's where you came in. "It's not worth your time", you said. "God doesn't listen", you whispered.

"Remember the rain, remember your relationships, remember how He ignored you", you lied. That may have worked on others, but I'm pretty sure God listens. You have to work harder than that to convince me not to pray.

And so you offered the golden apple. The white whale. You went for the home run, or more literally, the jugular. "Just do it tomorrow" you even chuckled a bit while you offered the solution, as though you couldn't imagine something so trite and ridiculous would be a

viable alternative. But I didn't care. It was what I needed. The answer to all of life's problems. Tomorrow will handle it. Let it rain confetti, I'm now free from today. It has no hold over me. I can do whatever I want, however I want.... For tomorrow is when problems will be handled.

What I didn't understand at the time, the lie you hid beneath the smirk, was that it's always the day before tomorrow. And that is where I live. When I'm not lost in the fog of confusion, I'm content to put off until tomorrow all of life's moments. Especially the defining ones. Friends in need, opportunity to serve, relationships to build, example to set... tomorrow. It will all be there tomorrow. But I can't stop there. Education, Bible study, prayer, hospital visits, career advancement.... That can all wait too, right? Nothing is going to leave, it will just sit there, waiting, for me to deal with it. But it did leave. I'm not sure exactly when, but after a few hundred 'tomorrows' I finally decided it was time to deal with some long overdue situations. But where was it all? It wasn't there. The relationships that needed mending had moved on. The love that needed to be shared was somewhere else now. The documents had expired, the leases were up, the clocks had ran out... all of them. I started to pray but getting started was simply embarrassing. "Hi God... um... it's me" I trembled. And then I did something that felt oh so natural. I told myself this wasn't right... it had been too long. I would gather my thoughts and try again.... Tomorrow.

Even in it's purest, most meaningful forms, the concept of tomorrow is corrupted. Tomorrow takes all power away from God's timing. It removes God completely from the equation when we start dictating the game plan. He does not intervene when we have things "under control". Saying "I'll do this later", completely obliterates the phrase, "Thy will be done". We can't possibly say both. We only ever have one blessing in this world and it is the moment. Read that as "THE" moment. Now. Right now. That is all we have.

And we control it to some degree. When we say, 'later', we spit on the gift of God. We wave off the gift bringers and refuse to sign. Instead of asking God to take control we mutter out, "I've got this" and then we toss into the never ending black hole of tomorrow. I've learned one thing for sure. God is today and Satan is tomorrow. God doesn't work in tomorrow. He works in the moment. He answers prayers, He honors devotion, He loves those in a relationship with Him. Relationships aren't born from

procrastination, laziness, and fear. Those are the building blocks of tomorrow.

I promised to ask her out tomorrow. Tomorrow she found another date. I decided to prepare food for the homeless man tomorrow. He didn't have another tomorrow in him. I'll pay the bank tomorrow, they sent the foreclosure today. I'll pray tomorrow, God doesn't work on my schedule. I've said tomorrow hundreds of times. Possibly thousands as anything difficult or painful or even slightly awkward has been dismissed into the waning lies of the not now.

You operate in tomorrow. It was so easy. When everything is postponed there is little life to actually live. Games, sleep, TV, whatever the flesh desires, I'm all freed up to do so as all of my life is dwindling ahead of me with you at the helm.

I do not understand why God gives so many chances. But I'm thankful He does. When I shook free the desires to procrastinate life, another lesson was firmly etched onto my soul. Another tell I learned from playing far too long at your table. If it can't be done now, it's probably not from God. God is a God of the moment. He creates them, guides us to them, prepares them for us, and gives us the strength to move within them and give Him glory throughout the process.

When I hear 'not yet', I know that verbiage tends to come from you. I'm more of a yes man now. It's not that I don't have my own opinions or feelings, it's that I'm done passing on the grace and gifts of God. We don't get to experience them by saying 'no'. That word is your word. You taught me to wield it with precision craftsmanship and I'm ejecting it from my vocabulary. And the best part is... I'm not going to wait to do it. It stops now. Right now. I don't fear the moment, because I'm no longer alone in it. When I called out to God He answered back. While you try to lose us forever in the traps of your deceit, God never stops listening for our return. I left my jersey for you... I'm forever on team, 'now'. Moments are exceedingly valuable. It's what our lives are made of. Passing on a single one is an absolute travesty. You never know which moment will be the one that brings a miracle, saves a life, brings joy, or connects a soul to eternity.

It's an adventure to flip each second of the day over and see what is in store. Not so with tomorrow. Tomorrow is guaranteed to contain

absolutely nothing. Wasted time and destroyed dreams are promised for tomorrow. No thanks. I've got today... I'll live there. I'll chase my dreams, I'll help others with theirs, I'll pray and communicate with my God. I'll grab His hand as He reaches down to pull me out of the cardboard promises you encircled around me. Never again. Today is all I've got. It's the only thing I can do anything about. It's a miraculous and wonderful gift. How can I not bound through each moment soaking up the opportunities and possibilities?

The harder I try, the bumber I look.

I wasn't sure which to focus on more. The basketball goal I stood immediately under. The coach with his timer and clipboard. The students encircled around me. I couldn't do both. Toss up another missed shot or fight back the tears. On one hand, I needed to make a basket. Just one. But on the other, I had already made such a spectacle in my first several attempts, that to return with tears forming would be the last thing I remember in my short academic career. It just wasn't acceptable. Forget about the ball or the goal or the people, dignity and credibility were already long gone. At this point the one thing I could do was to return to my seat with the stature of someone who didn't care about something as silly as this physical education test.

We had 60 seconds. Each person was timed and the number of shots was recorded. We could shoot from anywhere. Most stood right under the goal for the easy points. That didn't help me. Some shots hit the rim and bounced right back into my face (adding insult to injury, quite literally). I tried the backboard but shots were too soft to make it over the rim or too hard, ejecting the ball across the room. Time ran while I chased the ball passed a class full of students who refused to stop the ball from careening outside of the circle. I don't blame them. After seeing this performance, it would appear that ball was cursed.

But I wasn't so lucky. They pretty much placed blame on the boy holding the ball. It didn't help that they wouldn't budge to let me chase down my runaway ball. The solidarity of the circle was quite strong. Bricks, airballs, rebounds, missed shots... each attempt yielded a louder gasp than the one before. As time ran out it become more and more clear I wasn't going to make a single one. Comments made it past my futile attempts to block them out. "He still hasn't made one?!?" I could feel the tension sway. What started out as comical and sad become a moment children would use as a reference point for the entire school year. The shift was universal, automatic, instant.

From, "what is this spectacle?" to, "oh, I hope he doesn't make one now". At first I had just lost. That was obvious after about 2 shots. But by the end it had become a reckoning. To make a shot from such uninspired flailing would have been a disappointment to all

who looked on. Those last seconds felt like an eternity. Only years later did I realize the coach was likely fudging the time to help me walk out with at least one shot recorded. All that accomplished was a record number of shots taken, only to yield a record low of shots made. To the glee of all those present, I never made a bucket.

People to follow received boosted confidence. "Don't worry, you can't do worse..." was spoken more than once. I don't know exactly how long it took the kids in that class to actually forget the events of that day or their meaning to a young middle school kid. But to me, the lesson learned still burns deep in the dark places of my soul. It was a lesson in humiliation. The more shots I took, the more I failed. The longer I spent trying the more people took notice that I had no business touching athletic equipment. The worse I did... the more people enjoyed my failure. The worse the wreck is, the more people slow down to take a look. And I was a catastrophe.

I wish this were the only story like this in my life. I wish I could trace it all back to basketball and simply cut that sport out of my life for good. I could easily move on with joy and full of life satisfaction.

But it wasn't just there. Social encounters, public speeches, wardrobe, career, relationships... I can't think of a place where I haven't re-learned, neigh, solidified that the harder I try, the bigger failure explosion the world will get to enjoy. Firmed up in concrete is the lesson that I simply cannot do anything right. And anytime I get brave enough to test the waters, a thousand sharks seem ready to put me back in my place.

Sometimes it's with laughter, other times real pain works.

Demotions, pay cuts, lost friends, broken items, injury, and I'm just getting started. Exodus teaches there is a time for everything.

Everything, that is, except my success... at anything at all. Just one thing. I just want one thing to be mine. Just one thing I'm good at. Just one thing that people will say, "you should go see that guy, He's the best I know". Just one thing, in one part of my life, in one subset of specialties.

I'd like an answer to those self defining questions in life that I can't ever answer without depressing the room. "What do you do? What are you good at? What are your hobbies? What are you handy at? Just one answer would do.

I finally learned that you can't be a Christian and hate yourself. That is what feeling worthless accomplishes. It creates hate. You feel like you have no value. And to say that I am redeemed and loved and have received salvation and to also say that I have no value to anyone, is to question the very actions of Jesus. Why would He save someone that means nothing to Him? Why would He keep around a loser? Is it salvation if I wasn't salvageable? My tear-stained Bible pages yielded a glimpse of hope.

I quit asking who am I. I quit begging for talent. I stopped the whining, the complaining, and the self loathing. And instead I compared your relationship with me and God's. I saw your goal was to keep me down, with you, as a useless loser until that thought consumed my whole eternity. Then I saw Jesus and how He offered a solution from your lies. He offered an alternative definition of success. I learned what Jesus did for me. I learned what He wants for me. I learned what it's like to say prayers in the presence of the Father of the world. And it really became quite simple after that.

When I defined God properly as my Savior, it was easy to see myself as the saved. When I gave God credit for how much He loved humanity, I became loved. I didn't do anything. I have no power in this world. But I learned how to accept gifts that you had me toss away before. You immediately flagged them as 'scary', 'spotlight', 'failure'. Childhood and adult reminders of self imposed misery filled my head and with but a whisper from you and I unquestionably cast away the most precious things in this world.

Your lessons have taught me to run. Hide. It's embarrassing to be myself. Never, ever, try. And yet God tells me that He will never stop loving me for who I am. It's time like this that I truly learn the definition of shame. It's not shameful to try and fail. Not trying to succeed or make myself better has amazingly negative connotations. Giving up. Quitter. Failure. Failure isn't being unsuccessful, failing is when you quit trying! I was so ashamed of who I wasn't I forgot to be to the world who I truly was. And the greatest shame, the defining meat of the word, is when I chose to listen to the coward and refused to live my life. The shame is knowing my Saviour saw me choose you, fear, and hiding, over Him and His love. Pride isn't sinking a basketball through a hoop in the air. Pride is the ability to walk on this earth knowing that I have

chosen to be the man that I am. And I live that out daily. There is no discrepancy between who I am in private or public. I'm the same in the morning and at night.

I'm who God made me to be. Whether that means I'm a star athlete, an expert baker, a phenomenal listener, or... maybe, for the time being, I'm just an obedient servant to the Lord, God Almighty. I don't see anything shameful in that at all. And if God chooses for me to be more one day, I'll still be me while trying to fulfill that role too.

I understand why you would benefit from convincing us that we don't matter. If we stay balled up in the corner for the rest of our lives we might just miss the love that God offers us. And no one would choose you over that amazing, selfless love. I don't fault you for rigging the game. You have to. Otherwise you would be all alone on that side of the cross. Drag them down with you... that motto fits you well.

Thanks for the reminder. The next time I start to worry what others think. When that very familiar feeling of self consciousness starts to creep in... now I know it's a must take opportunity to improve myself. It's a training moment. It's a sharing moment. Its a witness moment. It's a moment you don't want for me.... And that is more than I need to know. I'll seize everyone of them! Let them laugh. Bring the jokes. I'm not defined by others, I'm created, loved, and defined by God. It's to Him I live. It's for Him I live. I'll spend no more time huddled in the corner when I've been gifted the freedom to enjoy the whole of life.

He gave me all of his legos... now I know why.

He wasn't even that good of a friend. I don't remember treating him that well. I was fairly spoiled and I didn't play well with others for a while. I think the last thing I said to him was in a yelling tone. A couple of days later he gave me all of his legos and walked away.

At my young age I felt bad. But I was more than willing to accept such a gift. I promised he could play with them as he shuffled down the driveway. A couple of days later my parents told me he was gone. He had passed. Taken his own life. Not even a teenager yet.

Everyone tried to comfort me as his friend. I just never saw us that way. We lived in the same neighborhood, but proximity was our only true bond. I just couldn't muster up much sadness. I was too involved in my own world, all I could do was convince people I was going to be fine. They were worried about my emotional state which I would describe as clueless and selfish. But not sad. Then the parents came looking for his toys. They wanted back all that he had given away.

My parents explained that it was the right thing to do... but now I felt like I needed that help everyone was offering just moments before.

Now an injustice is occurring. I have to lose MY toys? How absurd! They were gifts! Didn't I need something to honor the memory of what's his name also! Now I was sad. It's pretty obvious you did a good job on me. I was a short tempered little brat for part of my youth. Selfish and oblivious to the world around me. But I've outgrown that.

That is an understatement. Let me try again, God has delivered me from the sins of my youth. It feels like a flu shot, when I confess and pray for forgiveness. Not only does God remove the sin and forgive me, but it's like I have an immunity to that attempt in the future. So I'm not really writing to talk about my bad attitude. As appalling as it may seem, and a great testament to your handiwork, we have already finished that round. It was won by Jesus and I don't see the point in rehashing now.

What I can't seem to get over is what that other boy must have been going through. I can't tell you his name. I can't describe him. I don't even have enough contextual memory to pick him out of a

lineup. He is, forever since, the boy who killed himself. His best friends were mere acquaintances. That is a worst fear for many. To leave this earth having made no impact, not leaving any legacy or significance. The name on the tombstone might as well read John Doe as no one carries any recollection when those titles are gathered together.

I can't imagine what he felt. What he went through. How he struggled. How much effort it took to try anyway amongst kids in the neighborhood who could have cared less. We didn't see the signs because we didn't care. His bad mood was a hindrance. His grievances were annoying. His opinions obstructed play time. And however he struggled to work out life, we didn't help.

In hindsight, I see you pulling strings. I was never overly cruel. But I was smug and entitled just enough that I never helped. One child of the neighborhood to the next. Too busy. Too tired. Too bored. Too much planned. We all shut him down collectively, but without any idea of what we were actually doing. Nor with any inclination to work together on this. You orchestrated children and their toys and their playtime to ignore a boy who was desperate for help.

What if just one of us had a relationship with God? What if just one could see the struggle? What if one hand reached out? I think you asked those same questions and made sure it never happened. You made toys shiny. Time became valuable. Popularity was addictive. And the outcast... you made them seemingly leprous.

I see a well oiled machine... firing on all cylinders... and working against the failing life of a child who simply couldn't figure out life fast enough. If it weren't so disgusting, it would be impressive how well communicated and efficient your different divisions seem to be. Like an orchestra, you are in tune, harmonic, and outstanding at a multi-faceted performance against individuals you have your grasp on.

Neighborhood full of entitled kids. Parents too busy to notice. School teachers too harsh. Siblings extra needy. It all lines up. A forgotten name. No one calls for the cul-de-sac game. A vague insult here and there. Nothing, by itself, too terrible, but all together a monstrosity collaborated by pure evil.

Now I wonder. Was he a threat? Did he have promise? Was there a spark you felt could diminish your already failing kingdom? Did he have humility? Was there a sincerity that just rubbed you the wrong way? Was he a potential leader? Or... was he just another notch in your ledger filled with nothing but meaningless numbers? Will you take anything you can get no matter who, how, when, or where?

Was he a special assignment or did you just dig your teeth in when you realized he couldn't take anymore? I'm not sure the answer matters. At least one doesn't really make you any less evil than the other. But I've always felt like you were after me because of my relationship with God. I felt like you knew my name because I call on His. I'm on your radar because I understand the commandments from Jesus. I heed the call to discipleship and am obedient to the only Master. Of course... I wonder now if that line of thinking comes from you. It can quickly lead to pride.

I could see dropping my guard thinking you see me as special. But I can also see you desperately moving from husk to husk trying to find anyone and everyone who will buy the lies you spin. It's likely your single consistency... you will help anyone and everyone equally lose their soul to you.

I can't remember his name or his face, but I remember his legacy. He was another drop in your bucket that shouldn't have been. He was an action too late. He is a regret passed by. He is a reminder to all who think on the lies of "waiting". Not yet. Tomorrow. Someone else will say something. Someone else will do something. His tragically short life stand testament to the severity and importance of God's loving will. His commands on how we treat each other and how we are to encourage and how we are to pray, love, and commune with You... It's a glaring reminder that those aren't just rules. The Bible is not just a bunch of lists and limitations. It's a treatise on how to avoid and utterly defeat you! I'm reminded how dire that truly is. Because when I stop living in the shadow of my God you are there to steal, deceive, break, and utterly destroy everything that is precious.

Much has been lost. Much more is still at stake. I will not toy with the lives of others. It's never been more important to honor God and call Him Father. Not only does He offer protection from your efforts, but He empowers us to help others. To limit the losses. To save those entangled in your misery. I'm not the Saviour. God is.

He sent His Son to do that. But I'm with Him. He is my God. He is my Master. He is Holy. He is righteous. He is almighty. He is the beginning and He is the end. He is the end of you. Your kingdom is weak and getting weaker. You are both lost and losing. I believe God will use me for His glory much more than you used me for your pain. There is work to be done. I am ready. I reach upward and the warmth of a Saving embrace grabs my hand and leads. I'm lead by love. I'm lead by trust and faith. I'm lead by a Father. I'm a child of God. I will forever reject you. I will loudly and boldly claim to all who can hear of your evil ways. Your methods, which aim only to corrupt. You are a loser. Not just because you have lost. But because your efforts to claim the world around you will also fail in the light of the one true King.

I praise God for saving me from you. I pray for those lost. And I work to keep those losses both small in number and to make sure that even in loss, their stories will bring light to the world. Even the ones you have claimed will speak out against you in death. Just in case you have begun to buy into your own lies... you cannot win. I will not forget that. I have the legos to remind me. I have the cross to carry me. And I have the Savior to redeem me. Whatever temporary agony you can muster at me will be yet another anchor to tether me to my God and Father in Heaven. To my Savior, Jesus Christ. To the Holy Spirit.

The more you tighten your grasp, the more that slips through your fingers.

Dear Satan,

You appear to be all thumbs. With demons at your disposal, temptation tailored specifically for each Christian, and centuries of practice, people keep getting out. By the grace of God I'm out of the fog. I no longer accept your excuses. And, I'm now a firm liver of the current day. And I'm not the only one. I pray for and enjoy the relationships of many who were once like me... firmly entrenched in your grasp.

But my small circle of friends weren't the first to escape you. Do you remember the day? You were busy that day. Whispering to the commoners that Jesus was a liar. They saw Him heal and bring peace... what did you tell them? Which trick did you use to convince them they needed to condemn this innocent man?

I completely understand your work with the pharisees... that has lasted still. So many church leaders entrenched in arguments over literary meaning and hiding behind battlestations of interpretation. They fight so hard to enforce your doctrine they never see the love you showed them. Some of them mean well in their pursuits to cleanse your temples or the flocks... but others have agendas afforded by their positions. They are easy targets. Even I could muster a few favors from them bending their ears at just the right angle. To get them riled up was likely the easiest part of your plan.

Judas is a wonder. I know he loved money but the complete sell out of someone so close to the mission was impressive. Even if he was ill intended from the beginning how could he stand to hear the prayers, see the grace, witness the sacrifice, and gaze on the face of the Son of God? How could he not be swayed to defend the man that loved so many? He had fourth quarter hero written all over him. I fully expected him to throw the money back at the bribers and defend the lord that kept his company. Whatever work you performed on him stood till the very end.

You added fear to the other followers. They scattered when they could have defended or at least comforted. Three crosses was enough for them, they flat out denied even knowing Jesus. Even

writing those words puts a lump in my throat and my hands tremble. After all they had been through. After the very promise made only hours before. They truly abandoned their Master and left Him fully alone when He needed them to stay strong the most.

There was the judge who oversaw the whole affair. He had guards that assisted as well. So many puzzle pieces, so much work. And it was orchestrated so perfectly. Did you ever think, 'what if Jesus defends himself'? Did you ever wonder what you might have to do if he fought back? You know, he would have won, right? But I'm guessing you counted on that? If He resisted, if He called those often mentioned 10,000 angels... it wouldn't have been much of a sacrifice... would it? And that is where your fingers slowly tightened around your near-victory. Too much... and too soon. The torture, the mocking, the weeping, the sin... you were winning. Tighter and tighter you gripped. Condemnation decreed, nails driven in, the final moments... you couldn't stand it, could you? Did you celebrate all 3 days that Jesus remained in the tomb? Or did you know then that He wasn't quite finished yet?

You wanted Him so bad... did you know you were instrumental in His plan to save us all? Or did you find out later? I don't think you ever considered that it was just a bit too easy. That everything fell into place... perfectly. You were so greedy to get what you wanted you could see the work being done all around you. You just squeezed and squeezed until when you finally opened your hand to view the prize and found it empty.

What's worse for you, is I now have that same example afforded to me. You can squeeze all you want, but there is only so much damage you can do. The things you would take away are either not going with me, or I'll meet in Heaven anyway. So what is your threat? That you would hasten God's wonderful promise to me? Or to those I love? I've learned from Paul to count my sufferings as blessings. And thanks to you I can feel each finger of yours in my life. I can feel them tighten at each knuckle. And I praise God that His glory is about to be received in some yet to be revealed way.

We don't always see the deception in the moment. In fact, that is the hardest place to see it. Satan is a master manipulator. As I've pondered the ways in which he tricked, won over, and outright lied to me over and over again, I finally started to see some patterns to his work. More importantly, when compared to God, the creator of love, it's much, much easier to pick out the tricks and traps devised around us. We just have to know where to look.

The first area I see used most often. God does not always answer. The devil takes advantage of this frequently. I would say he answers much more often. God has His reasons in His perfect plan and I won't get into all of that here, but God definitely has reason to remain quiet when we would prefer He speak up. A scenario that I am talking about might play out like this:

"God, there is a mission trip coming up, should I go?" No booming voice speaks down from the heavens, but thoughts start to seep into your mind.

'I could use the extra time to study for school/job certifications/etc.'

'My throat is sore, I can't get everyone sick'.

'I won't be able to answer the deep questions they may ask.'

'I need to save my money for all of these legitimate needs'.

'There will be another trip and opportunity next year'.

'I don't really know anyone else going'.

'I'm not a doctor or preacher or architect, I'll just be in the way'.

Hopefully you see a pattern. Excuses. When going through scriptures, God's commands are typically in the positive. He rarely says not to do things. Most of His will is centered around action. Go to this place. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Forgive this person. Give this money. Proclaim the gospel. Pray without ceasing. Read God's word. Love all. Even when He wants people to flee danger the instructions are provided as an action to move upon.

Listen to how Satan deceives. He is an expert of inaction. The opposite of God. He would tell you through whispers of deceit to NOT do things, especially good things. It might not even sound so bad because He is so good at persuasion. It will sound like delays, waiting, thinking, He won't beg you to stop all good things immediately, he will try and convince you to simply put it off a bit. If he can just postpone you for today, he gets another chance to deter

you tomorrow. Satan is the devil of the details. Not yet. Soon.

Tomorrow. Later. Maybe. We'll see. He has golden stamps with these phrases emblazoned on them. And they can make so much sense to the confused looking for guidance.

If you are looking for God to answer you, think on what you are seeking. Should I do this good thing? Or should I not? We are so good at seeking help, we rarely ponder what permission we are looking for. I wonder if one of the reasons God doesn't answer us as often as we'd like is because He already has, and very clearly in His words that we carry, and He wants us to stop opening the floor up to the evil one so he can get an opportunity to poison so many unnecessary situations when God has already clearly spoken.

"Should I pray for this person?" Would God ever say 'no' to such a good opportunity? Would Satan ever encourage us to? "Should I give this money?" oh, now it gets tricky. Satan will be the first to remind you that you need to be a good steward. Perhaps this isn't a worthy cause? Maybe we should hold onto our money until we have more. We could do a lot more good with more money. Aside from going against scripture and hoarding possessions, this logic sounds negative. It's a stop sign to an otherwise good intention.

While it may not be always 100% black and white, it wreaks of the enemy trying to halt something good from happening. And this is what typically happens. God says go, go, go. Satan says no, no, no.

When you feel the urge to postpone, stop, wait, ignore, sit down, be quiet, or let a moment pass... ask why? Who benefits from this moment? If I do nothing, is that taking action? Does my abstinence in this event fulfill my going into the world and preaching the good news? Does my silence give God glory. And to be fair, sometimes it will. But not most. Especially when weighed against the other tests listed here and more importantly, when measured against the whole word of God. Who benefits more from you going, giving, helping, speaking, praying, glorifying... and who benefits from you checking out, passing on the moment, and doing nothing at all?

The second tell is how we feel after making our decisions. Doing right almost always feels good afterwards. I don't believe anyone has ever regretted being kind. Remorse and doubt, however, those are signs that God is not the one encouraging. If you are really struggling with an action or inaction, try to think the moment all the way through to its inevitable end. How will we feel when it's all said

and done? Should I give this man money? What might cause regret here? Well, if I don't give freely, I might miss the money. In this scenario I make the right decision for the wrong reasons. It's still sin. I didn't follow God's word on to handle my money.

What if I don't have any money. The plot gets thicker. What about giving on faith? God also commands us to feed our families and provide certain levels of comfort there. Satan knows all of these caveats and will always use them to convince us to hoard selfishly and ignore God's commands to help others. There is more common sense than we realize in these moments.

Is the person grifting? Is the elaborate story worthy of hollywood? Is your heart clear? Is your conscience clean? Is your family in order? Are you just making excuses? Who does the money belong to? You? Or God? Do you care what happens to the money after it leaves your hand?

Some of this isn't a spur of the moment decision. We have to work on our own hearts and make peace with certain scenarios before they ever approach us. I could write a whole book on different opportunities to give and why each one may or may not be a blessing or a mistake. The bottom line I would like to draw is simply who is pulling your strings? And you have to keep your relationship with God in a healthy space to constantly be prepared to take of good opportunities to bless others.

Finally, and while on the issue of money, the last thing I would caution is this. You can't take it with you. Satan says to build, amass, grind, occupy, obtain, take, take, take. God says to give freely. Share. Whether is the example above of who, when, how, and why to give money, or if its a multitude of other examples where wealth, items, possessions, time, popularity, pedigree, legacy, occupation, trophies, degrees, accolades... it does not have to be made of metal or gold to be coveted, and consequently mistreated, and ultimately placed over God like an idol. God has called us to a simple life of obedience to Him. We have to be vigilant about what tempts us. Who benefits from this decision? Me? Or God? Can we be successful? Sure. And Satan will tell you this all along the way as well.

Satan goes for the jugular. The kill shot. He is after us. He wants us. If he defeats us, he wins us. God bought us, so we have a

choice. God wouldn't pay the price (of His son) if He didn't want us, or like us, or think of us as failures. Those are all of the devil's tricks. He eats at our thoughts, poisons our minds. I'm too fat, I'm too poor, I'm not likeable, I'm not smart enough, I'm not good enough... These are not the things our Savior would say to us. He loves us so much, He gave up everything to get us. In fact, His sacrifice, cures most of our issues anyway. God is not in the low self esteem market. Those are obvious lies, but told by the master deceiver. We must learn to spot them simply by their design. Their very purpose is to dismantle us. That alone should tip us in the right direction.

Lies, lies, lies. All he does is lie. The Bible is our truth. It is the one and only truth. A relationship with God and time spent in the Bible (learning and living it's truth) is how we shine light on the lies that come from the enemy.