

Beloved Mess

GOD'S
PERFECT
LOVE
FOR YOUR
IMPERFECT
LIFE

KIMM CRANDALL



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To my husband, Justin:
my best friend, fellow grace moocher,
and dance floor virtuoso.

Thank you for loving me as I am.

Contents

Foreword by Elyse Fitzpatrick 9

Introduction 13

1. I'm a Mess 19

2. The League of the Guilty 31

3. The Imposter, Myself, and I 43

4. An Exposure That Leads to Freedom 59

5. Romans 8:1 on Repeat 71

6. Stubborn Grace 83

7. Doubt Is Not a Dirty Word 99

8. Living in Our Belovedness 115

9. Kissed by Grace 129

Appendix: Gospel Truths for the Beloved 143

Acknowledgments 151

Notes 153

Foreword

Kimm Crandall is a friend of mine. But it's not always been that way. There was a time when Kimm didn't really like me and because, like her, I thrive on acceptance and sensed her displeasure, I'm not sure I liked her either. But thankfully all of that has changed.

There was a time when I thought and spoke almost exclusively about how to be good. I even wrote about how to get better at being good. But then grace came crashing into my life. Not because I had some great fall into unspeakable immorality and knew that I couldn't get better—no, actually I thought I was getting better. I thought I was excelling, doing my best, being faithful and obedient, and I knew how to tell other people how to be like me. Unlike others who talk about grace, I didn't go through one of those darkened-room, curled-up-in-the-fetal-position experiences. No, what I went through was something less dramatic, more gradual, but utterly Copernican in its transformation. It was a slow stripping away of my self-righteousness and self-confidence, a reorienting of my life away from my own perceived goodness and toward Jesus's perfection.

Here's how it went: In the church I was attending, I had friends (one in particular) who kept harping on me and telling me that I was already pleasing to God, that I really wasn't living in light of the gospel by focusing on how to be good. But I didn't immediately embrace the wonder of grace like someone who had found lost treasure. No, I resisted it. I went kicking and screaming down that road. *Grace? Freedom? Rest? Love? No way! Not me! I am a serious Christian, a serious theologian. I have a Master's degree in biblical counseling for crying out loud!* I can't tell you how angry these "gospel" people made me. *You think I don't understand the gospel? You think I don't live in the light of grace? How dare you!* These were thoughts that, like little pieces of sand, stuck in my heart and maddened and irritated me until Jesus finally formed a gospel pearl. His message of love began to wear down my resistance to it, to him, until I began to see beauty and love and yes, grace.

Eventually I found myself hungry to seriously investigate what these "gospel" people were talking about, and I wrote *Because He Loves Me*, and that, as they say, was pretty much the end of the story. I became aware of how self-righteous, angry, critical, and demanding I was. I knew that I didn't really love people and that the gifts of insight and wisdom Jesus had given me had been used by me for self-promotion and harshness. The light began to dawn. I was in great need of grace, and all the more so because I didn't think I was.

Then Kimm and I became friends. She attended a conference where I spoke on grace, and she glared at me through most of it. I understand why she glared. There was a big part of me that still wanted to glare at grace.

In the Lord's kind providence, we started to attend the same church and ended up in the same home group. Our friendship was inevitable because it was all too apparent that we were both in the same boat. I was (in using that past-tense verb, I flatter myself) both proud and self-righteous but also desperate for grace, and I

wanted to learn to love the weak. I was finally starting to be able to admit the truth about myself and not be terrified when others pointed it out. Kimm was desperate like me. Her life was in shambles and she was coming to see that because she'd built it on her ability to excel, to be the best, to be anything but second, she was destined for misery. Her first-place-ness idol was destroying her. She needed grace. She needed to hear grace and taste grace and listen to grace over and over and over again. I needed to give it. She needed to hear it. We became good friends.

Through the years our friendship has deepened and grown. We've both grown in our understanding and confidence of God's love for us in Christ, and we've come to identify ourselves as desperate sinners, loved by a great and kind Savior. We've laughed together and cried together and been seriously angry together. But through it all she continually reminds me about God's love for me and encourages me nonstop to bring freedom (or "drop keys," as she says) for desperate prisoners wherever I go. I'm deeply grateful for her prayer and encouragement.

Kimm is eminently qualified to talk to you about being a beloved mess. That's because, like me, she is one. But please note that she isn't just a "mess." She's a *beloved* mess; she is one of her Lord's dear sweeties and she knows how to talk about that simply because she's had to tell it to herself over and over again.

So, I give to you *Beloved Mess* and my friend Kimm. I hope you enjoy her and her message of grace as much as I do. I'm learning that the more I think I understand my Father's love for me in Christ, the farther I am from understanding it at all. This book will help. I'm so grateful for it and for Kimm. She's my friend. She's yours too.

Elyse Fitzpatrick, author of *Because He Loves Me:
How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life*

Introduction

A little bit messy. A little bit ruined. A beautiful disaster.
Just like me.

Michelle Hodkin

Real life is only ever just real life. Messy. What it means
depends on how you look at it. The only thing you've got
to do is find a way to live there.

Patrick Ness

Nobody's perfect. Well, there was this one guy, but we killed
him.

Christopher Moore

There is an area of our property that I often visit when I am hid-
ing from my kids. Maybe I have an important phone call that I
don't want them to overhear, or maybe I have just blown up at the
entire household and need a place to escape to so that I will not
do any more damage. Sometimes I just need to be alone so I can

eat chocolate or shed a few tears. Whatever the case may be, it is my refuge. It's a part of our three acres that makes me happy.

In this little corner of our property resides a giant oak tree, an old garden that once flourished as the place for a wedding of the previous owners, and an aviary that was the home of what I imagine were some beautiful and well-loved birds.

I often find myself thinking about what this area once looked like. I saw glimpses of it when the house was on the market, as it had been maintained far above the standard that we have kept for it. And I briefly saw a picture of the wedding that was held there before we took ownership. But when I look around at the neglected landscape in its current state, I can't imagine that it was ever fit for such a celebration. It's a mess.

The majestic oak tree houses a broken swing, and its branches overarch a litter of lawn chairs that my kids have dragged underneath and left overturned. The landscape gravel that had been laboriously shoveled and spread about is now covered in a thick layer of leaves with random weeds popping through. The planters that were once carefully arranged with perennials are now overgrown with stalky plants. The aviary has been taken over by my kids and is now used as a clubhouse, with books, blankets, and Christmas lights strewn about in the fashion of novice decorators. It is imperfect to say the least.

As I look around my garden area, I see chaos. I see a jumble of what was once a place beautiful and perfect enough to have the honor of being a wedding venue. But I can also see fragments of what it once was: the arbor that the happy couple exchanged vows beneath, the rocks that neatly line the beds that were once filled with colorful flowers. I imagine the birds singing in their aviary, happy for the California sunshine. I see glimpses of what once was, and this frustrates me because I know that as busy as my life is with four kids, I will never be able to restore the beauty of it all.

I venture to guess that most of you have picked up this book because you are tired of being a mess. You are tired of not being okay. You are frustrated knowing that, like my garden, your perfection will not be fully realized this side of heaven. Maybe you even fear that God is disappointed in you because you can't seem to clean yourself up.

Perhaps you have worked feverishly to try to make yourself okay. After all, the Christian culture tells us that if we would just read more, pray more, and cuss less we will experience transformation and finally live the victorious Christian life that we were meant to live. But for you, nothing seems to be changing. The weeds just keep popping back up. Nothing seems to make the untidiness go away. You are told that if you just cling tighter to the cross, you will experience peace and joy, but at this point you don't even have the strength to lift your arms.

You love Jesus. You want to do what he commands, but every step you take feels like failure. To you, the Christian life seems more like a miserable version of the children's board game Chutes and Ladders. With every success you climb the ladder toward God, and with every failure you slide down the dreaded chute farther away from him. You are ready to flip the game board over, sending all of the other players' pieces into the air, fitfully declaring, "I quit!"

You are not alone.

This book was written for people who are ready to quit because they can't handle the mess. People like my friend Charles who struggles with addiction and depression. He loves God and desires to do what is right, but he finds it hard to believe that he is loved by God, partly because the church and his own family have cast him aside. His brokenness consumes him. He knows what God's law says about his struggles and he lives under its crushing weight, but he has never had anyone show him how the gospel speaks into his mess. He needs to know that he isn't alone in his struggles and that the grace of God sets him free to be loved as he is.

And it was written for people like Katie, a homeschooling mom of six. From the outside she appears to have it all together. Her children are well behaved, and she is often praised for her performance as a godly mother and wife. But the secret that nobody knows is that Katie is dying on the inside. She constantly feels like a failure as a wife, mother, and Christian woman. Although she loves the praise she receives from those around her, she wishes her real life could somehow be exposed. She is exhausted from keeping up appearances, but she is also afraid to share her pain with anyone. She tries harder to please God with her good works, hoping that somehow he too cannot see through the glittering image that she has created for herself. Katie needs to know that the gospel sets her free to expose her mess to others. She needs to know that she is not alone and that she can rest in Christ's love for her.

Beloved Mess is for doubters like Charles, for those who have lost hope that they could ever be good enough, for those who need to know that the strength of their faith is not the object of their faith. It's for those who are just barely hanging on. It's for those who have been asked the crushing question, "What are you doing for God today?" and have no answer.

It's for others as well. It's for the "good girls and boys" who have thought that their performance impresses God. It's for the merit mongers, performance addicts, and approval junkies. It's for those who always have an answer to what they have done for God today and are happy to provide you with their list. It's for those, like Katie, who have buried their mess so deep that they have made an imposter of their outer selves, fearful that one day their authentic selves might be exposed.

Beloved Mess is about the hard work of believing that we are his Beloved. It's about living in our belovedness, resting in our sweet security with Christ, and truly believing that because of Christ we really are loved just as we are. It's about the good news of the gospel sidelining the bad news of our humanity.

I will begin this book by showing you that I am just as much of a mess as you are. We'll explore the purpose of the law in the life of the believer. I will introduce you to my imposter, who I am sure is friends with yours. I'll seek to answer the question, why? Why is it okay to not be okay? How can we be loved just as we are if we were made to be image bearers of the God who said, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48)? But don't worry, I won't leave you crushed by the law, feeling like a failure. Eventually, I will let loose a cannon of good news that will bring you hope. And in case you haven't had enough Jesus, I will help you to see what it means to live the life of the Beloved and finally leave you kissed by grace.

At the end of each chapter I have included reflection questions to help you as you travel through this book. Journey through it on your own, grab a friend, or grab a gaggle of friends. Discuss it. Struggle through it. Ask God to speak his love over you in ways that prove that you indeed are his Beloved.

My hope is that throughout this book you will see that it's okay that you aren't okay. In fact, it is my hope that you will begin to see how much you are loved in the midst of your mess and how it cannot separate you from God.



I'm a Mess

The Good News of the gospel of grace cries out: We are all, equally, privileged but unentitled beggars at the door of God's mercy.

Brennan Manning

Real life is messy, inconsistent, and it's seldom when anything ever really gets resolved. It's taken me a long time to realize that.

Alan Moore

“Have no fear of this mess,” said the Cat in the Hat.

Dr. Seuss

I'm a mess. I really am. I'm not talking about my physical environment—the crumbs you will find in my butter or the laundry piles that spill out of every closet in my house. I'm speaking of my

heart; a heart that struggles with the reality of living between the already and the not yet; a heart that lives with the tension of being here on earth, struggling against my selfish desires, yet longing to be in heaven, the place that holds my true citizenship.

As I grow and mature spiritually, I don't see myself as less of a mess but more of one. The older I get, the more I need approval. (I am an approval addict.) The wiser I become, the more I long for people to tell me how wise I am. The more opportunity I have, the less sure I am of myself. I rely heavily on my performance to justify myself and find worth. I am a performance junkie. I often find myself trying to earn God's favor by showing him how good I can be (as if he didn't already know my motives). I am a merit monger.¹ I am obsessive. I mean *really* obsessive. Just ask my friends. One friend told me that I am not happy unless I am freaking out over something. She's right.

I have overactive guilt glands. Everything in my life seems to be filtered through shame and false guilt, often leaving me guessing as to whether I should be repenting and apologizing or checking myself into the local psych ward.

Speaking of that, there is the depression. Oh, the depression. It hits me like a knife in the back, leaving me on my knees gasping for air. I feel as though I am constantly running from the darkness. Every so often I trip, and it covers me like a wet woolen blanket, so dank and dark that I don't have the strength to wiggle my way out from under it. There have been times of darkness in my life when I thought that the world would be a better place without me. I stashed away pills, waiting for the right time to slip quietly off without having to worry about waking up and facing the harshness of the cruel world.

I have withheld food from myself in an attempt to seek control, and I have binged and purged to try to cope with what I could not. I have cut and burned my body as a way to deal with the pain, hiding my scars from others, wondering what they would think

of me if they only knew the truth, all while trying to be the model mother to my four children.

And as if my inner mess is not enough, there is the way I have treated my family. I have lashed out at them for stupid things; I have joined in on the petty fights and I can throw an attitude with the best of teenage daughters. I have been unkind, selfish, rude, and downright ugly. I have put myself before them and have not loved them the way that God intended for a mother to love. I have failed to show compassion when it was most needed, and you do *not* want to hear the things that have come out of my mouth upon being woken up from a nap. I have lived for the approval of my kids; I have used them to make myself look good and I have chastised them for making me look bad. I have shared my disappointment in them when they did not fulfill my expectations and have put ridiculous amounts of pressure on them to perform. I have twisted Scripture to get them to obey. I have manipulated them with my words. I have been angry, oh so angry. I have yelled and have unfairly disciplined. I have treated them with harshness. I have failed them more times than I want to admit, and yet they still love me.

That is grace.

Your pain may be different from mine. You may not struggle with the terrifying darkness of depression or the overwhelming fear of anxiety. You may not punish yourself the way that I do when things get too much for you to handle. Maybe you are more prone to numb yourself in front of the television and polish off an entire box of cookies in one sitting, or work out obsessively to push away the pain of life, or hide your fears behind long work hours and career advancement. In any case we all have our own burdens of dysfunction. Some of it is caused by our own sin. Yet some is a result of our woundedness—a result of the sin of others against us. But in the end, whether it's our sin or our circumstances, we are all in need of the same thing: to be known and loved as we are, right *where* we are.

If you are wondering why I seem to have such poor self-esteem and are worried about my negativity, don't be. Let me assure you that I could go on for just as long with a list of my accomplishments and the ways that I am a great mom and a valuable asset to the world. (Yes, I really do think about myself this much.)

And if you are worried that I am bragging about or condoning sin when I speak of the ways that I have failed, you can relax. Every one of these failures has brought great grief over my disobedience and a longing to see Jesus through the thickness of what threatens to suffocate me with condemnation. In every one of these moments the law exposes my need to be rescued. In every one of these moments grace floods in, an outrageous act of love for this undeserving sinner. I have a great Savior whose grace long outlasts my failings. A Savior who has taken each item of my mess, each thing on my list (and yours as well), and has splattered his blood upon them, making atonement for us, pleading our destitute case in the heavenly throne room of grace.

You may be wondering why I would start a book with a long list of my personal failures and weaknesses. Maybe you think I'm crazy to put myself out there like this, to be so brutally honest. This has come from a promise to myself a few years back. I decided that I would not speak or write to an audience without first proving to them that I was a sinner.² You see, it's not enough for me to hear that someone else is "not perfect" or is "a sinner just like me." I need proof! I need to know that the person speaking to me has been in my shoes. I need to know that he or she understands what it is to be a sinner and stand in desperate need of grace like I do. I need to know that other Christians are not the shiny, happy people that my mind wants to trick me into believing they are.

So, I'm going to assume that you feel the same as I do. Does it not bring you a sigh of relief when someone who you may think has it all together suddenly proves that she does not? Admit it, when you see a highly acclaimed actor trip on his way to the stage to receive a

prestigious award, you and I both have a sudden burst of freedom that reassures us that he is just like us. Or what about when you glimpse those seemingly perfect parents at the park lose their temper as they load their crying children into their minivans. You can almost hear the sound of your cage door unlocking, and you want to go and thank them for falling apart (although they might think you are crazy).

We want the comfort of knowing that everyone else is just like us. We want to know that we are not alone.

Met in Our Mess

“We just want you to know what you will be getting if we join your church. We are both a bit of a mess.” My husband voiced these words from a place of courage as we sat across from two pastors in the corner booth of our local diner. We had moved to our small town several months prior and believed that it was finally time to make the switch to a church in our own community. But with both of us in counseling for severe depression and marital problems, we were afraid our mess would be too much to bring to a new congregation. Pride and fear had left us undecided about making the change for months.

As I sat staring into my coffee and rearranging the eggs on my plate, I was glad for what he said, but the shame had paralyzed me once again. I couldn't look into those men's eyes for fear of their judgment. I sat anticipating the stab of rejection.

To my amazement, judgment and rejection were the furthest words from their lips. We were met with nothing but love and acceptance. The pastors had already been aware of our struggles. They had already inquired about us with our previous pastor and knew far more than we had planned on exposing, yet there was only room for grace on their lips. We were already known, yet loved and accepted when we feared that being known would mean

judgment and rejection. The words “We know about your mess. We love you. You are welcome here” were the most curative words that two hearts crushed by the law could hear at that moment. No longer did we simply feel tolerated; we now felt desired.

This conversation was only the beginning of our journey into learning that life is messy, each one of us is broken, and to live in a messy and broken world means we all need grace. It was a beautiful example of how God’s one-way love comes down through Christ and meets us in our mess. It is only through Christ that we can be both fully known and fully loved. The law threatens judgment and rejection while the gospel tells us the beautiful story of a loving God who came to free us from shame; a God who saw that we were a mess, and through one act of outrageous grace met us in our mess with love and acceptance. And every day since that marvelous, tragic, sacrificial, life-giving act he has pursued us all for the sake of love.

Through all of my mess, past and present, God has shown me that the Christian life is not about the good things I do. It’s not about my performance, my perfection, or giving up my life for Christ. It is about Christ’s performance, perfection, and giving of himself *for me* because I just can’t get it right. It’s all about Christ *for me*.

Unfortunately, when we spill our junk out onto the greasy diner tables of life, much of the time we are not met with this kind of love and acceptance.

The only way I can be so vulnerable with you is because of the gospel. If the gospel really is rescue for sinners (which it is), we should be able to freely admit our messiness. That’s what sinners are—messes.³

How This Book Is Different

What makes this book different from other material that you will read on the Christian life is this: I am not going to focus on telling

you how to be a better you, how to find the beauty in parenting, how to embrace your calling as a spouse, or how I have fixed all of my mess by social-media fasting and thirty-day challenges. I'm not going to pretend to have it all together and give you a list of ways to be like me (and after what you have just read, I'm sure you are thankful for that). It would be easy for me to write a book that simply states that it's okay to not be perfect. But our hope is not in the fact that we are imperfect, it's in the fact that *Christ* is perfect in our stead. That is why the words "nobody's perfect" are only freeing in the moment. Because we know, deep down, that we were made in the image of perfection. God's law calls us to be holy as he is holy. And so there is no rest until we find that perfection.

What you need to hear from me is that I am a mess, you are a mess, *and* that there is hope outside of ourselves; a hope in the one who came and lived perfectly on our behalf because he knew that we would make a huge mess out of what we have been given. He knew that it would be impossible for us to consistently love others, so he came and he loved. He loved deeper than you can imagine, without even an unloving thought for anyone around him, no matter how they treated him.

He knew that you would be irritated with all the bad drivers in your way, the cattiness of your co-workers, and the drama of your family. So he came. He came and he patiently endured those around him. Those who constantly dropped the ball, upset the

What you need to hear from me is that I am a mess, you are a mess, **and** that there is hope outside of ourselves; a hope in the one who came and lived perfectly on our behalf because he knew that we would make a huge mess out of what we have been given.

basket, and pushed their way to the front of the line. He came for messes like you and me.

When we think of our past, present, and possible future messes, we can have hope. Not the hope that we will someday be able to muster up the strength to be better people, but the hope that God is changing us and that—whatever state we are in, whether a state of grace or disgrace—we have been washed in the blood of the one who knows us and loves us as we are, the one who makes us okay. We remain his Beloved. As Simon Tugwell said,

Whatever past achievements might bring us honor, whatever past disgraces might make us blush, all have been crucified with Christ and exist no more except in the deep recesses of eternity, where “good is enhanced into glory and evil miraculously established as part of the greater good.”⁴

I want to show you just how important a role the gospel plays in your everyday life. I’ll talk about grace, grace, and more grace. Not a “God looks the other way” kind of grace (which is a common misunderstanding of grace), but rather the grace of the gospel. Grace is not about God looking the other way but rather about him looking directly at us and seeing every good work that his Son has done on our behalf. Grace sustains us in our mess; it makes it possible to be loved as we are. This is a scandalous grace. The truth is that we are all scandalously messy, just as Mike Yaconelli heralds in his incredibly freeing book, *Messy Spirituality*.

What landed Jesus on the cross was the preposterous idea that common, ordinary, broken, screwed-up people *could be godly!* What drove Jesus’s enemies crazy were his criticisms of the “perfect” religious people and his acceptance of the imperfect nonreligious people. The shocking implication of Jesus’s ministry is that *anyone* can be spiritual.

Scandalous? Maybe.

Maybe truth *is* scandalous. Maybe the scandal is that all of us are in some condition of not-togetherness, even those of us who are trying to be godly. Maybe we're all a mess, not only sinfully messy but inconsistently messy, up-and-down messy, in-and-out messy, I-understand-uh-now-I-don't-understand messy.⁵

As we walk hand in hand through these pages, through our messes, the only real and lasting encouragement that I can give to you is to remind you that Jesus has redeemed you from the mess that you have been, the mess that you are, and the messes that you will make in the future.

I refuse to give you ten steps to overcome your challenges, and I'm not going to tell you that freedom is found in the fact that “no-body's perfect.” Nor am I going to tell you that “to err is human” and that as long as you are trying you are okay with God. That's not the gospel! That's not good news! The gospel is this: *You were made to be perfect. The law requires you to be perfect, but you can't be. Christ was perfect on your behalf, thus silencing the law's voice toward you. You are free!*

You may find that my honesty is a stretch for you. Maybe you would never say you're a mess, or you don't see yourself as *that bad* of a person. Perhaps you find it easier to pursue the “try harder, do better” avenue of Christianity because it gives you a sense of hope that you will someday get it right (or at least get it a bit

Grace is not about God looking the other way but rather about him looking directly at us and seeing every good work that his Son has done on our behalf. Grace sustains us in our mess; it makes it possible to be loved as we are. This is a scandalous grace.

better than it is right now). If my honesty doesn't impress you, I understand. But please stick with me. There is so much more to be discovered here. Though you may believe that you are doing okay, I hope that you will see that you are no different than I am. The law condemns us all. We all need Jesus.

On the other hand, maybe you can relate to and embrace all I have said. Maybe you are nodding your head in agreement with this list and even adding to it. Perhaps you are relieved to hear that you don't have to be perfect and that it's okay to just be who you are.

But let's not stop there. Join me as I delve deeper into how it is possible to be loved just as we are in the midst of all of our ugliness. I think you will find hope in these pages as I prove to you the truth of the gospel—the truth that we are all his Beloved Messes.

Henri Nouwen beautifully captures the cry of each one of our messy hearts and the hope we have within the pain of our brokenness when he says:

To us, who cry out from the depth of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, an arm that can embrace us, lips that will kiss us, a word that speaks to us here and now, and a heart that is not afraid of our fears and tremblings; to us, who feel our own pain as no other human being feels it, has felt it, or ever will feel it and who are always waiting for someone who dares to come close—to us a person has come who could truly say, 'I am with you.' Jesus Christ is God-with-us. . . . Our human pain reverberates in his innermost self.⁶



FOR THE JOURNEY

1. As you read this chapter what was your initial reaction to the author's confession of sin and the sharing of her messiness? Were you shocked or comforted? Explain your response.
2. Do you find it difficult to share your mess with others? Why or why not?
3. What are you hoping that God will reveal to you as you work through this book?