



LOVE

THEM

ANYWAY

FINDING HOPE in a
Divided World Gone Crazy

CHOCO DE JESÚS, EdD

Every page in this book is a testament to the most powerful weapon we have as believers in a dark and hostile world—love. While many have written about life in the inner city where violence and crime are everyday occurrences, Pastor Choco has lived this and come out on the other side, more determined than ever to combat every enemy of peace with love, hope, and the profound message of grace, mercy, and salvation.

—JENTEZEN FRANKLIN
SENIOR PASTOR, FREE CHAPEL
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

My covenant brother for close to thirty years, Pastor Choco's love for the marginalized serves as a modern-day unbridled application of the Good Samaritan parable. His leadership transformed Chicago, and now his message stands poised to change the world. Beyond a must read, this is a must do!

—PASTOR SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL HISPANIC CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Jesus told us that the world will know we are His followers because of our love. Yet how many of us are living lives that demonstrate His love in such a way that people we encounter are drawn to Him? This is the challenge Pastor Choco presents to us in *Love Them Anyway*, a challenge that, if met, can truly change the world one person at a time. Read this book and use it as a catalyst for change in your own heart and mind, transforming you into a living, breathing extension of God's love to others.

—MARK BATTERSON
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR, *THE CIRCLE MAKER*
LEAD PASTOR, NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

Few men model a life of love, humility, and service like Pastor Choco De Jesús. Upon the foundation of these virtues, he built and led one of the largest and fastest-growing churches in America. Many people want to know the secret to his success. I believe his new book, *Love Them Anyway*, provides the answer. It is a must read for every Christian who wants to learn to love like Jesus. It contains the remedy for the climate of division that plagues the church today. It's a powerful and timely word. I highly recommend *Love Them Anyway* and the ministry of Wilfredo "Choco" De Jesús.

—EVANGELIST DANIEL KOLENDA
PRESIDENT AND CEO, CHRIST FOR ALL NATIONS

Our world has never been in more desperate need of unity and respect for people of all walks of life. Jesus modeled this kind of love for us, and we must take up the mantle and share His pure, unadulterated love with everyone we meet. Only then will we see divisions healed and lives transformed. I commend Pastor Choco for not only writing this book but living its message every day as a powerful witness of the difference one person's life can make when we choose to *love them anyway*.

—JOHN HANNAH
FOUNDER AND LEAD PASTOR, NEW LIFE COVENANT
CHURCH SOUTHEAST
AUTHOR, *DESPERATE FOR JESUS*

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LOVE THEM ANYWAY by Wilfredo “Choco” De Jesús

Published by Charisma House

Charisma Media/Charisma House Book Group

600 Rinehart Road, Lake Mary, Florida 32746

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

An application to register this book for cataloging has been submitted to the Library of Congress.

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-62999-715-5

E-book ISBN: 978-1-62999-716-2

Some of the stories in this book have appeared in different form in *Amazing Faith*, ISBN 978-1-93669-995-7, copyright © 2012;

In the Gap, ISBN 978-1-93830-989-2, copyright © 2014; and
Stay the Course, ISBN 978-0-99733-722-8, copyright © 2016.

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21 22 23 24 25 — 987654321

Printed in the United States of America

I dedicate this book to everyone who has felt overlooked, rejected, or betrayed by the church. If I'm the offender—if I didn't take the time to listen to you, engage with you, and show you the love of Jesus—please forgive me. I'm still growing and learning. I look forward to meaningful, respectful conversations with people who have beliefs that are different from mine.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I WANT TO SAY thank you to my Lord and Savior for the greatest example in displaying love. Thank you to the disciples for carrying that mantle, to all those who have been imprisoned and martyred for this love. To Christians who are asking the prevailing question, “What do we do now?” I say, “Love them!”

I want to thank Charisma House for believing in me, especially Steve Strang and Marcos Perez for believing in this message and in my ability to communicate it and for pushing this book forward. I also want to thank Pat Springle for capturing my thoughts and my heart. I want to thank Susan and Steve Blount for being a bridge and facilitating the networking process. Thank you, New Life Covenant, for allowing me to grow in this love and helping me display it in crazy ways in Chicago. To the Assemblies of God, I want to express my gratitude for the confidence you have placed in me. My heart is to serve and to be of encouragement to our fellowship.

To my tireless wife, Elizabeth, who has been with me and always believes in me, thank you for helping me put my words down in ways that people can read them and be inspired. To my children, whom I love so much, keep the love alive in your lives and ministry. Papi is so proud of you, Alex and Anthony, Yesenia and Anders, Pito and Eden. To my two granddaughters, Charlie Grace and Reagan Liv, I

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love you girls. You have given me and your mama a brand-new love. To my grandsons, James Anthony and Donovan Ray, I love you boys and look forward to teaching you about this love of Jesus. To Sky, can't wait to see your face. Papa will love you the same.

FOREWORD

LOVE THE CHURCH. I was born into a pastor's home. My teeth were cut on the back of church pews. When my father passed away unexpectedly when I was only nine years old, it would have been easy to feel abandoned, lonely, or somehow cheated. I didn't.

The reason I didn't feel abandoned is because I was part of a vibrant church community that knew how to show love—real love—to those inside and outside of their circle of influence. Men from our church would take me to Detroit Tigers games. They would come and see my ball games. They would take me on campouts. They rallied around me and, in a spiritual sense, became like fathers to me.

It should be no surprise that a healthy, Spirit-empowered church would be outgoing in its demonstration of love. After all, the apostle Paul described love as a fruit (or evidence) of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Two researchers at the University of California—Berkeley set out to see how Christians engage in compassionate relief in a global context. They quickly saw the outsized impact of the Pentecostal and Charismatic community. Their published research in *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* showed that as much as 87 percent of religious-based international social relief is from the Pentecostal-Charismatic community.

As general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, I

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have a unique perspective. I have the privileged opportunity to see churches across the US and throughout the world from a bird's-eye view. I see churches tearing down walls of racial division. I see churches distributing food to the hungry. I see churches rescuing girls from human traffickers. Above all of that I see churches sharing the life-changing hope of Jesus Christ with those who are lost and without hope.

I know that Choco's passion is to show Christ to the world through words and deeds. Although this book was written while he served as lead pastor of New Life Covenant Church in Chicago, I've gotten to know Choco closely through his current assignment as general treasurer of the Assemblies of God. He continues to be a soul winner, wanting to reach as many people as possible with the good news of Jesus.

May the Lord use *Love Them Anyway* to help you fall in love with the people at the place you are called to serve.

—DOUG CLAY

GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT, ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I BEGAN to write the manuscript for this book, our country was suffering from racial division and political polarization. That was before the calendar turned to 2020. I had no idea a pandemic was right around the corner, no one could foresee the widespread protests over police shootings of black people, and I certainly didn't anticipate the rage over our presidential election!

Initially I wrote this book to address the emotional barriers and bitterness that had poisoned our discourse—inside and outside our church walls. And now the barriers are higher and the bitterness is deeper than I ever imagined.

People expect me, as a spiritual leader, to take sides on every issue in the news. Those who know me are well aware that I have very strong views on many different issues, but let me assure you from the outset that I'm not taking a hard-right or far-left stance on this problem or that one. I'm proposing a third way, the way of Jesus, one that values God's justice, kindness, and righteousness above every other point of view—it's the perspective and the lifestyle of the kingdom of God. His kingdom is upside down from the way the world operates. When Jesus' love and forgiveness fill our hearts and guide our steps, we'll listen more and we'll try to understand those who disagree with us without hedging our values. We'll be salt instead of sandpaper, and we'll be a

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source of light instead of letting our prejudices and political views become a dark cloud of resentment.

You may already be shaking your head and mumbling, “I knew it. He’s a _____!” But I beg you, please don’t write me off so quickly. Honor me by reading this book, and ask God to give you His wisdom as you read. Challenge me all you want, but please be open to the Spirit of God speaking grace and truth to your heart. And then obey Him by living in a way that reflects the gentleness and power of Jesus.

Today we’re even more polarized than we were when I began writing this book. More than ever we need to experience God’s kindness as we try to live according to His truth. That’s the only way we’ll have the motivation and the power to *love them anyway*.

CHAPTER 1

FENCES AND GATES

BEFORE MAY 25, 2020, black leaders could list dozens of incidents when the police killed black men—but this one was different. It must have been the fact that it was so visible and agonizingly slow and the response seemed so callous. The nation and the world watched as a Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee into George Floyd’s neck for more than eight minutes. Protests started the next day, and they lasted for weeks, turning violent in some cities. I know something about the cause and the devastation of riots because I’ve experienced one.

Back in the early 1970s, when I was growing up in Humboldt Park, a Puerto Rican community in Chicago, fear and hate hung in the air. My neighborhood was labeled the worst in the nation, and deservedly so. Different gangs claimed each corner of the park and the streets beyond. One of my brothers led one of the gangs, so our family was deeply immersed in the atmosphere of crime, violence, fear, and hatred.

I was eight years old when my father abandoned our family

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in 1972. My mom then had to look after her five sons and a daughter, including me, the youngest of the six. I struggled in school; I failed third grade because I couldn't read. With no father, no Jesus, and no future, it seemed that things couldn't get worse, but they did.

Five years later, just after the Puerto Rican Day Parade in Humboldt Park on June 4, 1977, gang warfare erupted between the Latin Kings and the Spanish Cobras. When the police arrived, they opened fire. At the time, the department was almost entirely white. A police sergeant killed two Latino men, and rumors circulated that they were shot in the back. Tension escalated. When police tried to close the park, they "were met with a barrage of bricks, bottles, stones, sticks and chairs. But Hispanic witnesses charged that policemen stormed the park with nightsticks and attacked many picnickers, including families with children,"¹ according to a local news report.

Immediately, violence broke out. The gangs—often at each other's throats—found a common enemy in the police, and resistance united them. Rioters threw Molotov cocktails, bottles, rocks, and anything else they could find. The hatred wasn't one-sided: some observed a Chicago cop lighting a Puerto Rican flag on fire, then waving it high in the air before dropping the flaming flag and stomping on it. Of the three thousand people involved in the riot, 116 were injured and 119 were arrested. In addition, thirty-eight police officers were hurt.²

The riots lasted a day and a half. Police cars were torched, and paddy wagons were overturned. When the police pushed people out of one part of the park, they gathered in another place with even more anger.

I was right in the middle of it all. This was our neighborhood, and these were our people. I was just a boy, thirteen at the time. Friends gave me the nickname “Choco”—because I loved chocolate so much—that has stuck to this day. But back then, I roamed the streets with everyone else. I remember wandering through the streets in disbelief as I watched the bloodshed and saw the rage in people’s eyes. My big brothers were nearby, so I wasn’t afraid. I knew they’d protect me.

During the riot, the streets were in chaos. Store owners locked their doors, but looters broke windows, climbed through the broken glass, and seized anything and everything they could. I watched people stream in and out of a small grocery store at the corner of Division and California Streets. They stole cases and armloads of things. What they were doing looked so normal that I stepped through the broken glass of the front door and walked over to the display cooler. I opened the refrigerator and took a bottle of soda—just one bottle—and closed the glass door. (I may have been a thief, but at least I closed the door just like my mom taught me.)

I had walked only a few steps down Division Street when I sensed a voice saying, “Put it back.” At the time, I had no grasp of anything spiritual in my life, but later I understood that it was the Holy Spirit speaking to me.

I stood still on the sidewalk wondering what to do. Looters were chaotically running all around me with boxes of food and cases of drinks, but something propelled me to turn on my heels, walk back through the shattered front door of the store, dodge more people running in and out, and put the bottle of soda on the shelf, right where I found it. (And of course, I closed the refrigerator door before I walked out.)

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At that moment, I wondered what was wrong with me. How could all these rioters feel happy and excited about stealing lots of stuff but I didn't feel good about taking one bottle of soda?

Back on Division Street the noise was deafening: sirens screamed, people yelled, and cars screeched their tires in a mad rush to get somewhere fast. But where could I go? I had no idea. I felt confused. This was my community. These were my people. We were all outraged at the injustice of the police action, but I couldn't make it all fit together.

On the third day, the police finally got control of the situation, and the riot subsided. When things had calmed down, I walked through the neighborhood. Smoke from burning cars and houses filled the air. I felt tremendous sadness and anger. None of this needed to happen. The scars from the fires and destruction took time to heal, but the resentment against the police lasted much longer.

One year later, the mayor offered to hire thousands of young people during the summer break to clean the streets of Chicago. The three-month program was the city's only specific response to the Humboldt Park riots and viewed as a way to give us something to do while we were out of school and make the city look nicer.

The mayor and a commission, who'd listened to the demands of the Puerto Rican community for summer employment, allocated \$471,000 to fund these community service jobs.³ The rules were that each person had to be at least fifteen years old. I was only fourteen at the time, but I applied anyway because I needed the money.

When I got my assignment, I was directed to meet with a supervisor and other kids at an Assembly of God church in

our community. I thought I was going to be cleaning streets or a playground, but instead I was hired to help with their Vacation Bible School. (Believe me, I didn't know what I was getting into. I had no idea what VBS was!)

Day after day and week after week, when I arrived each morning, I saw young people praying and singing together. I saw a different countenance on their faces: instead of hatred, I saw love; instead of fear, I saw joy. I was fascinated. I'd never been around people like this, so I sat in the back and soaked it all in.

In August, I asked the supervisor to tell me more about what these kids were doing each morning. He smiled and said, "They're praying to Jesus."

He must have noticed that I was interested because he asked me, "Do you know Jesus?" I shrugged, so he asked another pertinent question: "Do you want to know Him?"

"Sure," I replied. I wanted what those kids had.

He called the other kids to come over. He told them I wanted to know Jesus, and he asked them to form a circle around me.

Well, that wasn't going to happen! A circle was gang language, not love language. Gangs put people in the middle of a circle as part of their initiation and then give them a beatdown. I didn't want that kind of initiation to Christ! They convinced me that no one was going to hit me, so I let them gather around me. They told me to close my eyes, but I wasn't going to do that. Then I heard them pray for me, prompting me to pray, "God, if You exist, change my life." I began attending that little church with the friends I'd met at VBS that summer.

A NEW DIRECTION

In November of that year, several of us went to a Christian convention. I'd never been to anything like that and didn't even know events like this even happened.

On the first night, the preacher told us about Jesus. When he called people to respond and come to the altar, I went forward. (Actually I went forward in every altar call during this period of my life because I wanted to make sure every door of my heart was open to Him.)

While I knelt at the front, a lady came over, laid her hands on me, prayed, and prophesied, "I've called you to be a great leader. Stay in My path. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you."

I was amazed and felt special in the eyes of God. I sensed that He had noticed me and was calling me to do something significant for Him. I felt like I had been given a new purpose and a new direction for my life. I had no idea what it might be, but this moment felt like a turning point. Up until then, my greatest hope was to play baseball in the major leagues, but now I realized God had something different for me.

As I walked back to the hotel, I thought long and hard about the prophetic word spoken over me and what it might mean. When I stepped into an elevator to go to my room, a tall Anglo man in a suit got on with me. As soon as the doors closed, he turned to me and said, "Have you not heard? I've called you to be a great leader. Stay in My path. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you."

Was I in the twilight zone? When the doors opened, I couldn't wait to get off the elevator. Walking down the hallway, I wondered what in the world this twice-spoken

message meant. Who are these people? How did they get this message? How is this going to shape my life?

I didn't understand how the spiritual world operates, but I sensed these words were somehow God's message to me. I used them as fuel to give me energy, as stripes on the road to keep me out of the ditches. When I was a sophomore at Roberto Clemente High School in Humboldt Park, I was known as "the preacher kid" because I always carried my Bible with me. The high-rise school had eight floors and over five thousand students. I started a breakfast prayer club on the fourth floor. One day after the bell rang to change classes, I rode the escalator down to my next class. I looked down and saw four Hispanic kids beating a white student. That was not unusual: the school was predominantly Hispanic with some African Americans, but there were only a handful of white students. The way things worked out, almost every floor was ruled by a different gang. This white kid was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I jumped over the side of the escalator and ran to the fight. I got in front of the white kid and told the Hispanic boys, "If you want to hit somebody, hit me!"

One of them smirked and waved me off. "This isn't your fight," he said. "Get out of the way."

I was defiant. "That's not going to happen! You're going to have to take me out if you want to get to him."

After a few tense seconds, the boys looked at each other, shrugged, and walked away. I turned around and helped the white kid stand up. He thanked me, and we both went to our next class. Turns out I never saw him again, but that wasn't the point.

The injustice I'd seen in the riots a few years earlier had

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been repeated that day on the fourth-floor landing at the high school. I witnessed an innocent person being hurt, but this time, I had the opportunity to do something about it. I couldn't just walk past the boy being beaten up. I had to get involved. I had to be a leader and defend the defenseless. I'd been reading in the Bible about Jesus stepping in to care for people in trouble, and although I didn't understand it all, I had a strong feeling that He wanted me to follow His example to love, protect, and defend people.

Even though I was aware that fear and hate were all around me, I couldn't give in to those powerful emotions. I wanted to live in the reality of Jesus' presence and purpose. Because God was working in my heart, I knew God wanted me to love those being brutalized by others. But I also saw the people who were the persecutors and perpetrators, and I knew God wanted me to love them too. That's when I first began to understand that no one was off-limits to the love of Jesus.

The accounts in the Gospels of Jesus stepping into the lives of hurting people weren't just interesting anecdotes to me—they were more than that. Those scriptural accounts let me look into the compassionate heart of God. In Jesus, love wasn't just an idea or a philosophy; it was an expression of His character. Jesus was as bold as a lion and as gentle as a lamb. That's what it takes to love like He loves. When He saw people in trouble, He acted. He brought healing to the sick, forgiveness to the wayward, power to the powerless, and light to those in darkness. That's the kind of person He was calling me to be, and that's the kind of person He's calling you to be.

The problem, of course, is that being the person Jesus is

calling you to be is both the greatest adventure and the biggest challenge life has to offer. If you're finding that difficult, then you're not the first person to come to that conclusion.

FAMOUS AND INFAMOUS

If you were to ask people to name Jesus' most memorable parable (an earthly story with a heavenly meaning), most people would put the parable of the prodigal son at the top of the list. And rightly so. The story may be very familiar, but many miss the main point. This section of Scripture actually has three stories, and they're all about something that was lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son (or actually two lost sons). Luke starts us off by painting this picture: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (Luke 15:1-2).

This scene was as emotionally tense as Humboldt Park was during the riots. Two sides didn't trust each other, didn't like each other, and didn't want anything to do with each other. Back then, the tax collectors didn't have respectable jobs like IRS employees have today. These were Jews who collaborated with the Roman occupying force to extract taxes from their countrymen. Tax collectors were considered traitors, and the people despised them.

What about the sinners who were mentioned? Sinners were a class of people that included prostitutes and thieves. Quite frankly, they were the scum of the earth. What were they doing? They were hanging out with Jesus and eating with Him. In that culture, eating a meal with someone signified acceptance and welcome. The outcasts of society felt

completely at home around Jesus, and that made the religious leaders furious!

During that time in Palestine, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the ones who upheld the traditions of the Jewish faith during the demoralizing occupation by the Roman legions. They were the custodians of God's truth, the scrolls of the Bible, and were diligent about protecting the faith from any threats—threats like traitorous tax collectors, blatant sinners, and anyone who stooped to get involved with them. Was Jesus a threat to the religious leaders? Absolutely! They believed His acceptance of outcasts and misfits was completely wrong, against God's law, and detrimental to God's purposes. That's why they muttered in disgust when they walked up to the scene.

In response to their contempt, Jesus told the three “lost” stories. In the first, a sheep was lost, and the shepherd left the ninety-nine others to look for it. I can almost see the look of joy on Jesus' face when He explained,

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

—LUKE 15:5–7

Then He told them about a woman who had ten silver coins, perhaps given to her by her father as her dowry,⁴ making those coins her most precious possessions. When she lost one, she lit a lamp in the house that probably had

no windows, swept the dirt floor to look in every corner, and scoured the room until she found it.

The smile came back to Jesus' face when He told both audiences around Him,

And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

—LUKE 15:9–10

The third story is longer and more complicated, plus there's a twist in the plot. In this parable a father has two sons. The younger brother has lived in the love and prosperity of the family, but in his selfishness, he asks his dad for his share of the inheritance so he can leave home and live as he pleases.

In that day, the older son got a double share of the inheritance, so in essence the younger son was asking for a third of the estate. They didn't have stocks and savings in those days. Wealth was in land and livestock. The father must have been brokenhearted, but he sold enough to give his son all that he asked for.

The boy left home and wasted his wealth on wine, women, and song. When he was dead broke, a famine devastated the land. In his poverty and hunger, the only job he could find was feeding a farmer's pigs. For a Jewish kid, this was the greatest indignity since pigs weren't even supposed to be touched, let alone eaten. Finally, "when he came to his senses" (v. 17), the younger boy started the long trek home. Since the most he could hope for was to become a hired hand on his father's estate, he practiced his apology on the way.

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As the boy approached home, his dad saw him from a distance and hiked up his robes so he could run to his son. The boy probably wondered what kind of greeting this might be. When his father got to him, the old man hugged him and kissed him. When the boy started into his confession, his dad interrupted him.

But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

—LUKE 15:22–24

What a great story about a father’s grace-filled love for his wayward son! But that’s only half of Jesus’ message. When the older brother heard the sound of a party, he discovered that his wayward brother had come home, and he was furious. When he refused to join the celebration, his dad went to him and begged him to come. Still, he refused. The elder son argued that he had been obedient while that “son of yours” wasted much of the estate (v. 30). He added that he had worked hard while his brother partied and blew all his money, and now his dad was throwing a lavish party with a fattened calf for dinner to boot! He’d never even gotten a goat to eat with his friends.

The older son felt angry and self-righteous at the same time. Even though he believed his anger at his brother and his father were completely justified, I’ve often wondered why the older brother was so furious. It occurred to me that someone had to pay for the robe, the ring, the sandals, and

the banquet—and since he was the heir, all that money was coming out of his own pocket, maybe not at that moment but certainly later. That’s why he was so angry.

In a moment of great tenderness, the father tells him:

My son, . . . you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

—LUKE 15:31–32

So, to put this all together:

- The father represents God.
- The younger brother represents the tax collectors, prostitutes, pimps, and thieves.
- The older brother represents the religious leaders.

In the first two stories, someone looked for the sheep and the coin. Jesus said this is a picture of people who go out to find the lost and point them to God for salvation, and heaven rejoices when the lost are found. But in the third story, who went to look for the lost younger son? Nobody. Who should have looked for him? That’s right—the elder brother.

Jesus broke social and religious boundaries to love those whom the religious people detested. He didn’t just love them at arm’s length—He ate with them, laughed with them, and made them feel completely comfortable. Jesus is the true elder brother who left His comfortable home in heaven to search for us, find us, and bring us home. And if you follow

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Him, you'll become a true elder brother who loves sinners so much that they'll feel accepted and celebrated.

When Jesus got to the place in the story where the father was inviting his angry older son to come to the feast to celebrate his brother's return, the dad called him "my son," or "my child," a term of wonderful tenderness. Jesus wasn't blasting the Pharisees for not loving the people who were having dinner with Him. He was pleading with them—and us—to join Him in God's great purpose of seeking and saving the lost. The moment is even more moving because Jesus knew that these Pharisees would collaborate with the Romans to have Him crucified only a few months later. Just as He was gracious to outcasts, He was equally gracious to those who hated Him.

It's human nature to put others down and feel superior to them. We find flaws in others and resent them. But that's not the way of the cross. Yes, there are plenty of ways people

Jesus broke social and religious boundaries to love those whom the religious people detested.

offend us and plenty of reasons to stay away from them, but Jesus calls us to love them anyway. Jesus was criticized for loving too much. What would our world be like today if people criticized us for that "flaw" instead of our being angry, judgmental, and indifferent to other people's problems?

Being religious isn't love, and insisting that we're always right is repulsive. Jesus moved past those barriers to love the "younger brothers" by eating a meal with them and to love the "elder brothers" scowling at Him for accepting people who were far off track.

NO BARRIERS

The little church I started attending when I was a teen became my spiritual home. Throughout my teen years, I served in many different ways and grew in my faith. Humboldt Park remained a crime-infested neighborhood, however, and the church often experienced break-ins and vandalism. Thieves stole music equipment, and gang members threw rocks through windows. The church replaced the broken glass a few times, but eventually the elders decided to brick in the windows. The church already had a fence but erected a strong gate to keep people out and prevent theft. Looking back, I'd have to say that the gate was motivated by fear and self-protection, not love. The Pharisees missed the love of Jesus because they were afraid of losing their high position and the power that came with it. Are you and I any different?

You may be thinking, "What is Choco accusing me of? Where is he going with this? Does he assume I'm a Pharisee?"

These are very good questions. They're exactly the questions I hope you're asking. Now let me ask you a few direct questions:

- Think about the two groups of people around Jesus as He tells these three stories. Are you more like Him or more like the Pharisees?
- Do people who are far from God feel loved and comfortable in your presence?
- Do you go to places where they are so you can search for them and find them, or do you avoid those places and those people because you consider them unacceptable?

LOVE THEM ANYWAY

- Do people know that even if you don't agree with them politically or affirm their lifestyle that you still love them anyway?

To help you think through these questions, let me pry into your heart just a little more.

We can define and describe love in many different ways. For instance, British professor and Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis identified four loves.⁵ For our purposes, I want to focus on two types of love: because-of love and in-spite-of love.

The vast majority of the love we experience is conditional. We love somebody because the person has some admirable traits, makes us feel good, or enhances our reputation in some way. I'm not sure I've ever heard a popular song about love that wasn't about this kind of affection or fondness. This type of love is attractive and even intoxicating because no matter how much love you get, you're always afraid it won't last or be enough.

The other kind of love is the exact opposite. We love somebody in spite of his or her flaws, in spite of how that person makes us feel. You love even when your relationship with that person causes others to question your sanity and even tarnish your reputation. That's the kind of love Jesus had (and has) both for those who are blatant sinners and for the better-than-you, nose-in-the-air church people.

Because-of love produces comparison, worry, and fear because this type of love can easily be lost. But in-spite-of love isn't shaken by disagreements, flaws, and struggles. This is the sacrificial love that puts a lump in your throat when you hear about soldiers who suffer and die for each other. This is the it's-about-you-and-not-about-me kind of love

when you take time to listen to people who hold convictions and practice lifestyles that are different from yours.

This kind of love is stunning because it's seldom seen these days, but when it's real, it's contagious. In-spite-of love breaks through defenses and destroys walls that divide us. It's costly. It requires time and humility. At least for a while, it's very uncomfortable, but it's worth it. Genuine love pulls you toward people you used to avoid, and it pushes you beyond your previous boundaries. Love like this asks more from you than you've ever given. It's inconvenient, and it's not safe.

In-spite-of love is beautiful, and it changes lives—yours and others'. All of us have individuals and classes of people we may tolerate but we don't truly love. If we're honest, we may have to admit we genuinely despise certain people. Love is the answer, but only if we admit our resistance, fill the holes in our hearts with God's in-spite-of love, and choose to love them anyway.

Jesus asks you to see people and situations through His lens of faith, hope, and love. When you do that, your passions will be redirected, your purpose will be refined, and you'll see God use you in ways you never imagined.

Choosing to love has always been one of the most important challenges for God's people. It's easy to see the world through the lens of what will give you the most pleasure, prestige, or power, but Jesus asks you to see people and situations through His lens of faith, hope, and love. When you do that, your passions will be redirected, your purpose will be refined, and you'll see God use you in ways you never imagined. Isn't that what you really want?

Now that we've come to the end of the first chapter, I've

LOVE THEM ANYWAY

prepared some questions to stimulate reflection and prayer and, hopefully, great discussions with your family, friends, and small group. Don't rush through these. You're not on the clock! Instead, take time to consider what God is saying to you as you and your group answer the questions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe the environment of your childhood, family, neighborhood, opportunities, and hardships.
- How did these experiences shape your optimism or pessimism? Your faith or your doubts?
- Read the first two verses of Luke 15 again. If you had been a tax collector or a prostitute when you heard Jesus tell these three stories with the Pharisees standing next to you, how would you have felt? How would you have responded?
- If you'd been a Pharisee, someone learned and respected in your culture, how would you have felt and responded after Jesus told these three stories?
- As you think about the two groups of people around Jesus as He told these parables, have you acted more like Him or more like the Pharisees?
- Do people who are far from God feel loved and comfortable in your presence?

- Do you go to places where people you might not readily love hang out, or do you avoid those places because you consider them unacceptable?

ACTION POINT: WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

A commitment to love like Jesus starts with a humble and honest analysis of the condition of our hearts. None of us love as deeply and compassionately as Jesus does, so we all have some steps to take. Identify the fences you've erected to protect yourself and keep people out. I'm sure those barriers seem reasonable, but do they keep you from connecting with and loving people Jesus wants you to love? This week, move toward one person each day whom you wouldn't normally engage. Speak a word of kindness, and see what happens.

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LOVE BREAKS THROUGH DEFENSES AND DESTROYS WALLS THAT DIVIDE US.



Love demands more of you and me than we often want to give. But what about... *them*? What about that race, or that person in a political or socioeconomic class who doesn't behave like you, doesn't believe like you, and, if you're honest, makes you uncomfortable? What is love in that context? You know that Jesus' love sees past difference, disagreement, and offense. But loving *them*?

If you consider yourself a Christian, then love should be your primary characteristic. If you say you follow Jesus but are not loving like Him, then what's the point?

There is a better way. Love may be hard. It's not convenient, and it's not always safe. But your love can be contagious. It can change lives and transform culture. Love is the answer.

Using the incredible story of how he chose to *love them anyway*, Pastor Choco will expose your prejudice, connect you deeper with God's love, and challenge you to love the people around you—including the people whom you would rather pass by. When you learn to *love them anyway*, your passion will be redirected, your purpose will be refined, and you will see God use you in ways you never could have imagined.



Wilfredo "Choco" De Jesús, former senior pastor of New Life Covenant Church in Chicago, one of the largest US congregations in the Assemblies of God, has met Presidents Obama and Trump. Recently he was elected General treasurer of the Assemblies of God. He is the founder of the nonprofit agency Chicago Dream Center, which serves the city of Chicago through residential, outreach, and rescue programs. In 2013 De Jesús was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world in recognition of his authentic Christian leadership in evangelical and Latino communities. De Jesús lives in Springfield, Missouri, with his wife, Elizabeth.

 **CHARISMA HOUSE**



Cover design by Lisa Rae McClure