

CATHERINE PARKS



Real

the goodbook
COMPANY

*For Mom and Dad,
who taught me the joy and grace of forgiveness.*

*And for Amber,
who patiently loved me and waited for me to get real.
Your friendship is one of God's kindest gifts to me.*

Real: The Surprising Secret to Deeper Relationships
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FOREWORD

by Trillia Newbell

I've always had a sensitive conscience: even before I became a Christian, I would confess wrongdoing to my parents. Vulnerability was never difficult for me when I was younger.

Oddly, once I became a Christian, I started to become more aware of how I would be viewed by others, and that vulnerability all of a sudden felt much more risky. I was 22 and wanted to be accepted. But God was gracious to me and gave me two friends, two accountability partners, two people serious about God and eager for true and honest fellowship.

My two close friends and I did accountability consistently for several years (and even to this day, one of them and I will catch up as if those college and single years aren't long gone). We would meet every other Friday afternoon. Our times together would consist of eating

spaghetti, confession, encouragement, and prayers. We cried and laughed and shared the most intimate parts of ourselves. We were honest and open, often sharing things that might even make one blush with embarrassment.

Those formative years in my Christian walk were priceless. I learned the gift that is repentance and that I could bring anything before my heavenly Father. God was and remains incredibly approachable to me, because I know that if I confess my sin, he is faithful and just to forgive me and purify me (1 John 1 v 9). I know that I can come before his throne of grace and receive mercy and help in my time of need (Hebrews 4 v 16).

God also used those relationships to solidify my view of the church as a family. I knew that my friends and I weren't simply three girls pouring out our hearts to one another. We were, and still are, sisters—co-heirs with Christ! Relationships in the church are essential for our walk with him. I know this because there were times when I wasn't sure if I could walk the walk of faith. God used those relationships to keep me from wandering off course. Those sisters were in the race, in the fight, or—as my friend Catherine Parks has written here—on my team.

Those college friendships expanded beyond college into our single years and then through the beginning of our marriages. But as many of our stories go, two of us ended up moving away, beginning a search for new, deep relationships in our new homes.

In walks Catherine.

When I moved to the Nashville area, I knew that the only way for me to truly settle in and make our new location feel like home was to (1) find a church and commit to it and (2) find some friends and begin to build deep and true relationships. The Lord was faithful in both cases. I had known of Catherine Parks via her online articles and book. I reached out to her to see if we could meet up, and it was one of the best decisions I could have made.

Catherine and I hit it off quickly and easily. I don't remember all that we talked about, but I do remember going from "Nice to meet you" to "Let's confess our sins" within a matter of a few hangouts (it may have even been our first!). I'm not good with surface-level conversations, so I dove right in. It was something I was used to; but it wasn't necessarily Catherine's default. Yet she made sure to let me know that for her, it was good and challenging to think beyond the surface and resist the urge to give coined answers of "I'm fine."

I share this with you because I am both a reader and an author. As a reader, I want to know that the author is authentic and can write with at least a measure of authority on the topic; and as I'm a Christian reader, it's even more assuring when I know that the author has integrity. Catherine has walked out and wrestled with the truth that she writes about in *Real*. She isn't writing from a place of superiority or as someone who has arrived. Rather, Catherine is a fellow sojourner in the faith, on a mission to finish the race well. Confession, repentance, and being real are essential in that goal.

In *Real* you will find wise counsel, biblical exposition, and personal stories that will inspire, encourage, and challenge you as you seek to be honest with yourself and with those around you. We will learn the futility of chasing after what we think we want versus the value of chasing after what is right. We will learn to face our sin for what it is. No excuses. No defending.

But Catherine doesn't leave us to wallow in condemnation and self-pity. That isn't the point of confession, nor is it the goal of repentance. It is indeed God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2 v 4). God's word tells us that if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1 v 9). We can trust that God will do as he says—he meets our sin with forgiveness and grace. As Catherine has written, “When we're assured of our Father's forgiveness, instead of covering up in front of others, we can confess—be honest about our sin” (p 31).

We will never outgrow this message of grace and repentance. And we will never outgrow our need for one another. Whether you have a core group of friends who are thriving and already committed to seeking Jesus together, or the concept of confession is absolutely new to you, this book is for you. Anyone at any stage will benefit from the pages ahead.

Trillia Newbell

Author of *God's Very Good Idea* and *Fear and Faith*



INTRODUCTION

Before we begin, I really want you to get to know me.

I'm successful.

I'm intelligent.

I am a wise and self-sufficient woman.

In other words... I don't want you to know me at all. Not the real me. I only want you to get to know a carefully crafted version of me.

This has been my problem for as long as I can remember. I've spent a lifetime mastering the art of managing perceptions. I've learned to hide certain things about myself and to highlight others. Why? So that you'll like me. So that you'll be impressed by me. So that you'll want to be friends with me.

As a child, my shelves were lined with Bible memorization trophies and academic awards. I wanted people

to know I was smart. As I grew older, rather than displaying awards, I walked around with the title of a book facing outward so that people could see I wasn't just reading a "beach read," but something weighty and important. That was how much I cared about what other people thought of me.

But I've come to suspect that I've been short-changing myself all along. And here's why.

Thirteen years ago, I was a newly married 23-year-old in a new city. My husband and I started attending a church, and Amber, a girl from our new small group, invited me to lunch one day. We quickly became friends and would often get together for dinner.

It was nice to have someone to hang out and laugh with. But to be honest, I thought Amber needed me more than I needed her. She would tell me her problems, and I would try to fix them. (Note: This is *not* what verbal processors want. I learned this the hard way.) But I rarely reciprocated in being honest about my own struggles to her—and there were definitely plenty of *those*.

Why all the hiding? Because I wanted to be friends with Amber, but at the same time I wanted to be the one who had it all together. I wanted depth without opening up. I wanted closeness while keeping my distance.

So I kept Amber at arm's length for years. And all the while I was pushing away the thing that I wanted most of all: a real relationship. This is the other desire that has motivated me for decades. Deep down, I long for

the kind of friendships where I can let down my guard and not have to manage perceptions. I want to be truly who I am—to laugh with abandon, cry without embarrassment, and confess fears and failures. I long to be able to be honest and real and be loved unconditionally despite all the mess. And the irony is that I went about trying to build those relationships by hiding the mess, managing perceptions, and covering up my failings. Amber was just one of a long line of people to whom I refused to show the real me.

But over time, something changed. Gradually I *did* start to find the deeper relationships I was longing for.

And it didn't happen in the way I expected.

The secret to deeper relationships definitely wasn't in managing other people's perceptions of me.

It wasn't in learning to love myself, either—as if the mess inside me is really somehow beautiful. Contrary to what conventional wisdom sometimes tells us, I can't find freedom in accepting myself just the way I am and expecting others to do the same.

Instead, the secret to deeper relationships was simply in learning to be... real. Yes, real with myself. Yes, real with others. But most fundamentally, real with God. There's so much joy and freedom to be found in honest relationship with him. For me, that has meant developing an often-neglected biblical habit: repentance. Instead of hiding my flaws or trying to love myself in spite of them, I regularly bring them to the One who can take care of them completely.

The surprising secret to enjoying real relationships with those we know is to practice real repentance with the God we love.

That's the key that opens us up and allows us to invite others in.

That's the gateway to the friendships we're longing for.

So that's what we're going to explore in this book. Will you join me on this journey? It's a journey away from fake smiles and keeping up appearances, and towards a relationship with God where you get real with him so you can be real with others. I hope you'll grab a friend to join you, and I pray God uses this book to bring you real joy and real relationships.