

# JUNK DRAWER JESUS



A STUDY GUIDE

*For Individual and Small Group Use*



*Discarding  
Spiritual Clutter  
and Rediscovering the  
Supremacy of Grace*



# JUNK DRAWER JESUS



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*For Individual and Small Group Use*

**MATT POPOVITS & RACHEL RYDER**





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• S E S S I O N   O N E   •

## The Spiritual Junk Drawer

GROWING UP IN RURAL MICHIGAN, much of my childhood was spent outdoors. I spent endless hours running through the woods, building forts next to dry creek beds, and getting stuck in the mud while chasing friends through early spring fields. I would come home with pockets filled with interesting rocks, trash I thought was treasure, and burrs stuck to the laces of my muddy shoes.

Similarly, your spiritual life wasn't downloaded from the cloud; it has been built through years of exploring God's wild world. It's a collection of truths you've been taught and now believe, ideas you've stumbled upon and insisted on keeping, and notions you've brushed past but that have unknowingly stuck. You carry it all, forming the substance of your life with God and your relationship to the divine.

Growing and maturing in faith, or even deconstructing one's spirituality, must begin with acknowledging that what you possess is not a monolithic theological tradition you can take or leave as a whole. It's a collection that must be sorted through with a discerning eye. Recognize that you have parts and pieces, some worth holding on to, but many are burrs that need to be picked out and dead sticks that never should have left the woods.

For Christians, the great test of what to keep and what to toss is how it corresponds to Jesus. There are other criteria for curating your collection, such as how a particular assumption makes you feel or whether a religious idea fits within the current cultural

landscape. But for those aiming to grow in their grasp of the Christian gospel, the real test as you sift through your spiritual junk drawer is simply this: does this thing connect me to Christ?

## CONVERSATION

1. This passage uses the metaphor of exploring the woods as a child to describe the filling of one's spiritual "junk drawer." What metaphor from your own life represents your experience with your own faith or spirituality journey, and why?
2. Have you ever questioned or reconsidered your spiritual beliefs? What prompted you to do this, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. What are some challenges we may face in reevaluating our long-held beliefs? How can we create a safe space for open and honest discussions about faith and spirituality?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:20-31, especially verse 23.

1. Paul argues that in a world of competing emphases, it's the death of Christ for sinners that must get the focus, even if it becomes a stumbling block or an issue for others.
2. Do you agree with Paul's assertion—should the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus be the bellwether for the right teaching of the Christian faith?
3. What, if any, theological "deal breakers" exist for you as you wrestle with your faith and the religious messages offered by others?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. We collect spiritual "artifacts" throughout our lives. Consider a few "artifacts" (beliefs, experiences, ideas) that have shaped your current spiritual understanding.



2. What are they? Where have they come from? Are any of them positive or negative “burrs” that need to be addressed?

## PRAYER

*“Help me, God, to sort through my spiritual junk drawer with a discerning eye. Guide me to hold onto the truths that draw me closer to Christ. Show me where to let go of things that don't align with the promises of your Word. Help my faith to be anchored in the person, work, and promises of Jesus Christ alone. Amen.”*



• S E S S I O N   T W O   •

# The Myth of the Cosmic Scale

THE MEASURE OF A PERSON IS FOUND IN THE SUM TOTAL OF THEIR CHOICES.

This notion is deeply embedded in human thinking, much like the reality of gravity or the blue hue of the noon sky. Even if you never utter those exact words, you, along with everyone else, are caught up in the idea that to be a “good” person, you must stockpile a life of noble deeds and kind words. No one aims for perfection; we know it's impossible. But we all assume we must, at the very least, do more good than bad. Otherwise, how can we, in our final breath, claim to have lived a well-lived life?

My mother likes to tell the story of how, as a young child, I swallowed several handfuls of what were thought to be “poison berries” from a wild bush on our property. I remember lying on the living room floor with a stomach ache while Mom was on the phone with poison control, her eyes filled with tears and her face red with worry. For a few hours, at six years old, I pondered my mortality, wondering which of my brothers would inherit my He-Man figurines and whether Dad would let me be buried with my Dukes of Hazzard car. Thankfully, no such decisions were needed. The professional on the other end of our corded phone, wrapped nervously around my worried mother, determined that my wild snack was foolish but not fatal. I got to keep my toys.

Sadly, the same can't be said of the notion that we are the sum total of our works. This idea is deadly when consumed in the context of religion. It burdens the soul

and corrupts the heart, often beyond repair. It turns God into a tyrant and human existence into a losing battle against our own profoundly imperfect and sometimes evil proclivities. This is why many eventually try to shed their spiritual lives altogether.

If there is a real, joyful life of faith to be found, it must allow us to be honest about the good and bad we do without being endlessly tortured by our inability to tip the scale in our favor. There must be a way of living with God where who we are is not defined by what we do, but by something outside ourselves and apart from our performance.

## CONVERSATION

1. Do you agree with the statement “The measure of a man or woman is found in the sum total of his or her choices”? Why or why not?
2. In the book, the author uses the story of making pour-over coffee to illustrate a point. What is the point being made? How does it connect to your concept of faith?
3. What are some of the negative consequences of believing that your worth is based on your actions?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Ephesians 2:8-9.

1. What does this passage tell you about the relationship between grace and works?
2. How does understanding salvation as a gift impact your view of faith and actions?
3. Reflect on how forgiveness and compassion are integral to a right and healthy understanding of the relationship between faith and our good works?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Do you agree that our actions define who we are? Why or why not? Can you think of any examples from your own life that support your view?

2. Can you think of a time when you made a bad decision, but it wasn't necessarily a reflection of your character? What about your good deeds—can you think of a time you defined yourself by your “good” works? How do these things impact your spirituality?
  
3. How does the concept of self-worth, separate from actions, apply to your own life?

## PRAYER

*“Sometimes, oh God, it’s hard to see beyond the mistakes I’ve made. Help me to remember that I am not defined, in your eyes, by the things I’ve done, but by that which has been done for me in Jesus Christ. Give me the strength to learn from my choices, both the good and the bad. May my faith be built upon your work and your Word and not a stockpile of my good deeds. Guide me to live with kindness and compassion, knowing that I am forgiven and loved, as I am, in Christ Jesus. Amen.”*



## Of Mountains and Measurement

MY FAMILY AND I LOVE A GOOD ROAD TRIP. The idea of spending long hours, even multiple days, crammed into a car and cruising down the highway doesn't bother us. We look forward to it. We enjoy the snacks, the podcasts, and the adventure of finding a safe and clean restroom when cruising through the Midwest past midnight.

What makes a long road trip truly enjoyable is the destination. Knowing we will eventually arrive at a place filled with family or fun activities energizes us for the journey and makes it all worthwhile.

We are tempted to see spiritual life as a similar journey, viewing life with God as a religious adventure with a particular destination. The spiritual journey isn't a physical location like grandma's house or a theme park but a different state of being. We imagine we are journeying toward a spiritual mountaintop where we'll reside permanently.

We think we are progressing toward a place where God feels close at all times, where our worst habits and character flaws rarely appear, and where doubt is a word we know but not a feeling we experience. "It's a journey," we tell ourselves, believing each day brings us closer to a destination where we will be better, God will be closer, life will be good, and the road trip will have been worth it.

But what if true spirituality isn't a road trip at all? Yes, there is an eternal destination in mind. However, if we view the day-to-day reality of faith as perfecting and

progressing toward some ideal, we set ourselves up for frustration, spiritual exhaustion, or religious cynicism. Seeing that the cracks in our character persist and the presence of God still seems fleeting, we'll find ourselves repeatedly asking, "Are we there yet?" The answer will always be, "No. Just a little while longer."

As much as I love road trips, they have little in common with the life of faith. Spiritual growth and maturation happen, but they are not the goal or the point, certainly not this side of eternity. For Christians, life with Jesus is not about measuring our progress but learning to rest in, to abide in, the gift of grace each and every day, no matter what it holds.

## CONVERSATION

1. How do you typically view your spiritual journey? Is it a destination-based approach, like the story describes, or do you have a different approach to understanding your spirituality?
2. The passage mentions frustration and cynicism as potential outcomes of a "mountaintop" mentality. Have you ever experienced these feelings in your own faith journey? Why or why not?
3. The author suggests focusing on grace rather than progress. What does "abiding in grace" look like in your daily life?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Romans 5:1-11.

1. How do Paul's words connect to the concept of abiding in grace, and how can this be lived out practically in our day-to-day lives?
2. In what ways can an emphasis on grace change your perspective on your spiritual journey?



## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Imagine your spiritual life is not a road trip to a destination but a landscape you currently inhabit. Describe this landscape in as much detail as you can.
2. What parts of this landscape bring you closer to God? What challenges do you encounter? How can you practice “abiding in grace” within this landscape?

## PRAYER

*“Help me, God, to let go of the idea that my faith is a journey towards a perfect destination. Open my heart to receive the promise of your grace each and every day. Guide me to peace and joy in the present moment, knowing that I am counted righteous in your eyes, and loved unconditionally, in Christ. Amen.”*



• S E S S I O N   F O U R   •

## The Why of Work

MY FIRST JOB WAS AT A DRUGSTORE IN MY HOMETOWN, a type of store that you don't find these days. The owner, Howard (we called him Mr. Price), was the pharmacist and floor manager. He gave orders to the teenage staff between counting pills and chatting with customers. I learned a lot at that job: how to count down a cash register, stock shelves, and subtly encourage customers to leave at closing time. However, the most important lesson I learned was from watching Mr. Price.

Every night, after we nudged the last customer out the door, Howard followed the same routine. He played polka music over the store PA, starting with the classic “Roll Out The Barrel.” Then he prepared his favorite snack: a tin of sardines from the shelf, a sleeve of saltine crackers, and a small glass of scotch whiskey. As he enjoyed his snack, while we cleaned and closed the store, Mr. Price told jokes, asked us about our lives, and shared wisdom. He gave us insights on handling difficult customers, managing a successful business, and other essential skills for adulthood.

From Mr. Price, I learned that work should be joyful. He saw his work of filling prescriptions and running the store as a gift to his neighbors and to us, his employees. He felt privileged to offer us a small paycheck and a place to learn and develop skills, showing his joy each night through his stories and sardines.

I got that first job because Howard was a member of the same church my family attended. Long before he was my boss, I watched him worship on Sunday mornings, two rows ahead of me on the right side of the sanctuary. I like to think that what Howard knew about work, and what he passed on to me, he first learned from Jesus. The Christian faith teaches that work has a specific purpose: to bless others. When you understand this, any labor can become a calling we are privileged to live out, rather than a curse to endure or a ladder to climb.

## CONVERSATION

1. What are some of the common ways people view work in your culture? (e.g., a burden, a path to success, a privilege, etc.)
2. The passage describes Mr. Price finding joy in his work. Have you ever experienced joy in your work? What factors do you think contribute to that feeling?
3. The author connects Mr. Price's work ethic to his faith. How does your faith, or lack thereof, influence your perspective on work?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Ecclesiastes 2:18-26.

1. How do these words handle the tension between both the futility and the enjoyment that can come from work?
2. Have you experienced these two ideas in your work, and how do they coexist?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Think about your current work or the tasks that you have each day. Imagine you could approach this work with the same joy and purpose displayed in this story.

2. What would that look like? How might you change your attitude or approach to your tasks? How could you use your work to bless others? What do you want others to say about the work you do?

## PRAYER

*“God, help me to see my work not just as a job, but as an opportunity to bless others. Grant me the wisdom to find joy and purpose in my daily tasks, even when they seem meaningless or mundane. Guide me to use my skills and talents to make a positive impact in the world and to your glory. Help me to work from a love that I already possess in Jesus Christ and not toward a love that I am trying to earn. Amen.”*



• S E S S I O N   F I V E •

## How God Speaks (And How He Definitely Does Not)

LONG BEFORE THEY COULD SPEAK A WORD, my wife was having entire conversations with our kids.

It started with their cries. Each one, according to Lisa, had a different sound, tone, and timbre, conveying a unique message. All I heard was an angry infant. But not my wife—in one cry she heard her daughter saying, “I’m hungry,” and in another, her son shouting, “I’m tired.” And she was always right.

She would take the hungry child into her arms for a feeding or lay them in their bassinet for a nap, and soon enough, the crying stopped. Later, when they began babbling and cooing, Lisa would lock eyes with them and chat up a storm: “I know! Is that right!? I love you too!” What I heard as generic baby noises, Lisa heard as an entire language, in which she was fluent.

As a young dad, I marveled at her ability to understand and connect with our kids. If I’m being honest, I was also a bit jealous. How could she instinctively speak the language of babies while I struggled to communicate with adults? But I wasn’t about to complain. Being married to a woman fluent in baby babble and infant cries meant our children were incredibly well-loved.

As my children grew, so did Lisa's skills in understanding them. She's still the "kid whisperer," ensuring our son and daughter are seen and understood, with every need met. They've turned out great, and I am still in awe of her skills.

Many believe that communicating with God is like communicating with children: you either have an instinctual ability to hear and grasp what God is saying, or you don't. If you don't, it all just sounds like noise—if you hear anything at all.

This idea leads to frustration in attempts to connect with the divine. Hearing others say, "God said this" or "I heard the Lord say that," they wonder, "What's the matter with me? Am I doing something wrong? I'm trying to tune in, but I'm getting nothing."

God is speaking. He does communicate. But it's not a secret language that few understand while the rest flounder. If God exists, is good, and wants to be heard, he would speak in a way that is objective, readily available and easily understandable. He'd speak so even the most undiscerning of dads, like me, can decipher his promises and be comforted by his truths.

## CONVERSATION

1. How do you typically experience communication with God? What are some other ways we might connect with God's message, even without hearing a clear voice?
2. The passage argues against the idea that communicating with God is an ability some possess and others don't. What are your thoughts on this?
3. Is communication with God something available to all, or is it a skill some have and some lack?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider John 1:1-17.

1. What do these words tell us about how God communicates in this world through the person of Jesus?



2. Does this passage influence your view of how God communicates to you? If so, how?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Think about times in your life when you felt a connection to God or a sense of receiving guidance. Did it come through a specific event, a feeling, a person's words, or something else entirely?
2. How have you experienced God communicating with you on a regular basis?
3. How does your understanding of how God speaks to you influence your life, whether in big decisions or day-to-day life?

## PRAYER

*"Oh God, lift my eyes to Christ so that I might ponder his work, hear your voice, and rest in its promises. Help me to be your voice to others, pointing them to the work of your son. And guide me, each day, as I seek to discern your will, bringing glory to your name and blessing to my neighbors. Amen."*



• S E S S I O N   S I X •

## On Pietists and Party Animals

EACH OF US HAS A UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RULES.

Whether it's the code of conduct at work, the syllabus in a college course, or the speed limit on the highway, our lives are filled with laws, policies, expectations, and responsibilities. Depending on how you're wired, your feelings about these expectations can differ.

Some of us focus on complying with and conforming to these expectations. We prioritize obedience. Others see rules as suggestions, boundaries to press against to express freedom and exert identity. Think back to high school. In math class, were you more focused on following the teacher's expectations and making the grade, or did you spend your time trying to get your friends' attention, planning after-school activities, and figuring out the bare minimum required to pass the class?

Our relationship with rules and expectations is unique. For some, thriving means adhering to the law and excelling at its demands. For others, it means finding a way out from under the pressure and asserting your own will. Which one are you?

This question is crucial because our relationship to rules, authority, and expectations profoundly impacts our spirituality. We often conceive of God as a rule giver and policy setter, someone who places expectations on us. In the Christian faith, this is partially accurate. We then apply our relationship to rules—whether as a conformer

or a contrarian—to God. We try to “please” him by meeting or exceeding every expectation, or we try to escape him by doing our own thing.

What we quickly find—leading many to spiritual exhaustion or cynicism—is that the binary of obedience or rebellion doesn’t work with God. Either way, you come up short. No matter your efforts to adhere to the playbook, you know it’s never enough. Or despite your insistence on doing your own thing, you can’t shake the heaviness of living outside the designs of a God who calls himself good. Neither way works.

There must be a different path, a third way. There must be a better way to orient ourselves to “rules” than just legalism or license. And indeed there is. The third way, the better way, is love.

## CONVERSATION

1. The passage describes two ways people approach rules: obedience and rebellion. How do you typically view rules and expectations? Are you more of a “rule follower” or a “rule bender”?
2. How do you think your view of rules influences your relationship with God, with others, and with yourself?
3. The story suggests that neither a focus on strict obedience nor outright rebellion works in our relationship with God. Why do you think that might be?
4. How does understanding and embracing God’s love for us in Jesus Christ change the way we approach God and His expectations?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Matthew 22:15-22 and 34-40.

1. What do you believe these passages tell us about Jesus and His relationship with rules? What stands out to you?
2. How do these passages influence your perspective on the expectations placed on us as part of our faith journey?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. How might focusing on God's love for us and our love for others change your perspective on following rules?
2. Consider writing out your understanding of rules in connection with love and how this might impact your day-to-day life. What struggles have you faced when you've been "a conformer" and when you've been "a contrarian," and how might love be a solution to these struggles?

## PRAYER

*"God, move me beyond a relationship with you based on rules and fear. Open my heart to experience your love in Christ, a love that makes no demands but offers only rest and peace. May your love, in Christ, be the foundation of my faith journey, filling my life with freedom, peace, and joy. Amen."*



# The Shallowness of Happiness

“BUT WHAT IF THERE’S SOMETHING BETTER?!”

Some of us can’t shake that question. It haunts us when we make decisions about work, pick out clothes, choose friends to see over the weekend, or decide which restaurant to order from on a Friday night.

My teenage daughter calls it FOMO—the fear of missing out. It’s the paralyzing worry that you’re making the wrong decision, forsaking an option that might be the key to your joy.

For what it’s worth, I don’t suffer from FOMO. Quite the opposite, in fact. I like to say I suffer from FOBI—“fear of being included.” My schedule is packed, my body is tired, and I love you, but please don’t invite me to your meeting.

Whether it’s a fear of missing out or of being included, we all worry about our happiness. Some worry about fostering it by finding the right relationships and experiences. Others worry about protecting it by setting boundaries and keeping distractions at bay. Whatever your tactic, our aim is the same: we all want to be happy.

This even plays out in our spiritual lives. If we are religious, it’s likely because we see it as a key ingredient in the recipe for our bliss. We expect that any worthwhile faith will let us scratch whatever itch might fill us with satisfaction and offer practices—tips, tricks, “10 easy steps”—to maximize our happiness.

Frustration sets in when we discover that the prescribed path to enlightenment doesn't instantly satisfy us or that the spiritual framework we are working within has a dramatically different understanding of happiness.

This is certainly the case for the Christian faith, at least orthodox and biblical expressions of it. Life as a follower of Jesus is not focused on achieving personal happiness but on experiencing grace—over and over again—and extending it to others. This experience of grace will force us to confront, confess, and sit with things we will not find “fun” but that will drive us deeper into God’s love.

For the Christian, happiness and its more mature cousin, joy, are not the aim but the *byproducts* of focusing on something higher than personal satisfaction: God’s love for imperfect people.

## CONVERSATION

1. How do you typically define happiness? Is it about avoiding discomfort, experiencing pleasure, or something else entirely? How does our culture define happiness?
2. The passage describes FOMO (fear of missing out) and FOBI (fear of being included). Can you relate to either of these fears? How do they impact your decision-making? How do they impact your happiness?
3. The story suggests that many people see religion as a path to happiness. Do you agree? What are your thoughts on the Christian perspective of grace being the focus, with joy as a byproduct?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Matthew 6:19-34.

1. What does Jesus say about the pursuit of worldly things versus seeking the kingdom of God? How does this perspective align with the idea of finding true joy through the knowledge of God’s grace rather than through the pursuit of happiness?



2. How can trusting in God's provision and focusing on His kingdom help alleviate fears like FOMO? How does this trust influence your overall sense of well-being?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Think about a time you were focused on achieving happiness. What did it look like? Did you ultimately achieve happiness?
2. Now, consider a time you focused on something other than happiness, perhaps a time you focused on cultivating someone else's happiness and wellbeing. How did this experience impact you? Have you had times in life when you felt happy?
3. Describe this situation in depth, and consider what it tells you about God's grace and love for you.

## PRAYER

*"God, lead me to a place where I can let go of the pursuit of personal happiness as my ultimate goal and tune my heart to long for higher things. And grant me the gift of joy—a deep and unshakeable joy—flowing from the truth that you see me and accept me as good, in Jesus Christ. Amen."*



# The Centrality of Idolatry

WHERE YOU FIX YOUR EYES DETERMINES YOUR DIRECTION.

I learned this while learning to drive. At the start of my instruction, I was very concerned with what to do with my feet (brake and gas) and where to position my hands on the steering wheel. These things are important, but my instructor quickly informed me that they pale in comparison to where I focus my eyes.

“Focus is everything,” he said. “Where you look is where you go.” He demonstrated that if we fixed our eyes just beyond the hood, it was difficult to drive straight. If we let our eyes linger to the right or left for too long, the car would follow, meandering to the other lane or the side of the road.

“You have to keep your eyes higher and straight ahead, on the horizon in front of you. That’s your focus.” This nervous teenager took in the instructor’s advice, and he was right. With my eyes on higher things, looking straight ahead, I stayed on the road with ease.

In many ways, life is like driving: where you fix your eyes determines your direction. It’s less about the mechanics of life—our hands and feet, our day-to-day choices—and more about ultimate focus. As on that country road, we drift toward where we look.

If we aim at career success and proving our worth through professional performance, everything else in our life will drift in that direction. If we are most concerned

with personal enjoyment, positive feelings, and keeping negativity at bay, then everything else will follow. If we are hyper-focused on health and fitness or the well-being and development of our children in comparison to others, then everything will turn toward those paths and be shaped by those priorities.

The Christian faith contends that whatever your focus, whatever your ultimate aim, that thing which shapes the path and priorities of your life is your god. And not all gods are equal.

In fact, all but one will lead you to the wrong lane, the other side of the road, or directly into a ditch. If it sounds like an exclusive claim, that's because it is. Christianity asserts—as does every major religion—that there is but one true horizon line to aim at, one right focus that will keep you on the road and lead you to safety.

Where you fix your eyes determines your direction. Where you focus is where you go. Any honest, sincere effort at renovating one's spiritual life or clearing out one's religious baggage must ultimately embark on a focus assessment.

Am I aiming for the right things? Where is this god taking me? Can it get me home?

## CONVERSATION

1. The passage suggests that our ultimate focus (our “god”) shapes our priorities and direction. What are some things people might focus on in life (career, pleasure, health, etc.)?
2. The story gets to the heart of idolatry, suggesting that anything but God can lead us astray. Do you agree with this concept? Why or why not? How have you seen this play out in your own life or in the lives of others?
3. The story concludes by calling for a “focus assessment” in our spiritual lives. What are some ways we can evaluate where our focus lies? How can this assessment help us realign our priorities?

## DIGGING DEEPER

Consider Matthew 6:19-24, especially 22-23.

1. What does Jesus mean when he talks about the eye being the lamp of the body?  
How does this relate to what we focus on in our lives?
2. How can storing up treasures on earth create “gods” in our lives? What are the consequences of having misplaced focus, according to this passage?
3. How can you apply the teachings of this passage to your own life? Can anything be done to help ensure that your focus remains on God rather than on temporary or material things?

## JOURNAL PROMPT

1. Imagine yourself driving down a highway. What is the “horizon line” you are aiming for?
2. In a world where there can be so many distractions, how does what you focus on impact your life and your spirituality?
3. How do you know when something has become too much of a focus, or a “god” in your life?
4. How can you aim your focus back to God in spiritual and practical ways?

## PRAYER

*“Loving God, make me aware of the things that compete for my attention and become functional saviors in my life. Show me the things that I am tempted to offer my trust and hope, and in your lovingkindness, turn me back to the finished work of your son Jesus Christ, whose love is the source of true fulfillment and lasting peace. Amen.”*

# Looking for more resources?

You can find more materials related to *Junk Drawer Jesus*, as well as other books, podcasts, and articles at [1517.org](http://1517.org) and [makeitsimple.org](http://makeitsimple.org)