



The title "Truly Devoted" is centered on the page. The word "Truly" is in a smaller, sans-serif font, and "Devoted" is in a larger, bold, sans-serif font. The text is surrounded by several black icons: a doghouse, a dog sitting on a chair, a paw print, a bone, and a ball. The icons are arranged in a circular pattern around the text.

# Truly Devoted

H. Norman Wright



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## Greetings

**I**t's been a long day at work. You're looking forward to getting home to your place of refuge. Your mind drifts to a delicious dinner, resting awhile, and all the family members eagerly awaiting your arrival. You pull into the driveway and “accidentally on purpose” hit the horn to let everyone know you're home so they'll come to greet you. A few seconds go by, and no one comes so you get out of the car and stroll to the door. Still no one around.

You go inside and yell, “I'm home!” Silence. One child runs by and mumbles, “Hi, Dad,” and keeps on going. You can hear another child in his room judging by the volume of the music. You make your way to the kitchen, expecting dinner to be in progress, but again there are no people around—only a note stating the cook will be late but there's food to put in the microwave.

No one came to greet you. What a letdown! But that doesn't happen to you or me. Why? Yes, you guessed it. We are dog owners! And our pups are always excited to see us. Let's rerun the scenario with them included.

You walk up to the door. What's that sound you hear from inside the house? You tilt your head to hear better. Yes, it's a whine and then a series of barks. The animal on the other side of that door is awaiting your presence. He's so excited to see you! You open the door and there he is. Depending on the breed, the dog may get so excited he piddles on the floor. Or he may run around and around, chasing his

tail. Or perhaps he's sitting patiently waiting for a pat on the head. Maybe he's jumping up to lick your face.

Some dogs follow us everywhere we go, while others try to talk to us with their doggy sounds. Some have tails that swish back and forth a mile a minute. Perhaps your dog is trained to bring your slippers to you. Or maybe your dog has OCBD (Obsessive Compulsive Ball Disorder). He brings his tennis ball to you the instant he knows you're coming. I know some dogs who bring their leashes because they want us to walk them. Yes, dogs are wonderful greeters, and we can learn a lot from them.

## The Importance of Recognition

We all want to be greeted, welcomed, acknowledged. If we're married, how we greet each other when we meet after an absence is vital. At one of the marriage seminars I conduct, a husband shared, "When I get home at the end of the day, I have to go looking for my wife. She never comes to the door to greet me. I get a better greeting from my dog. He comes running to see me, wags his tail like it's going to fall off, runs around me, licks my hand, and makes little barking sounds."

Before I could respond, another husband piped up. "You want your wife to do all that?"

Soon the entire group was responding to the comment and scenario.

Are you aware that how you and your partner, family members, and even friends greet each other when you first meet at the end of the day sets the tone for the evening? That initial greeting is so critical. The first four minutes establishes the foundation for the rest of the time spent together. If your first contact includes a listing of everything that went wrong during the day, or a list of negatives, or, worse yet, complaints and criticisms of the other person, you can just imagine what the rest of the evening will be like. But if that first contact at the end of the day is similar to the greetings we get from our dogs, what a difference that would make. What if everyone involved was positive and caring and bright during that first four

minutes of contact? Later on they could discuss the issues of the day, and everyone would probably be in a better mood and have a better attitude for that process. Yes, dogs model the art of greeting one another joyfully.

One of my favorite authors, Max Lucado, has an interesting story on the impact of how we're greeted when we arrive home. He travels quite a bit, and in *The Applause of Heaven* he describes what happens when he heads home.

Home. The longest part of going home is the last part—the plane's taxiing to the terminal from the runway. I'm the fellow the flight attendant always has to tell to sit down.

There is a leap of the heart as I exit the plane. I almost get nervous as I walk up the ramp. I step past people. I grip my satchel. My stomach tightens. My palms sweat. I walk into the lobby like an actor walking onto a stage. The curtain is lifted, and the audience stands in a half-moon. Most of the people see that I'm not the one they want and look past me.

But from the side I hear the familiar shriek of two little girls. "Daddy!" I turn and see them—faces scrubbed, standing on chairs, bouncing up and down in joy as the man in their life walks toward them. Jenna stops bouncing just long enough to clap. She applauds!

Can you imagine what that must be like? To have a family member *applaud* when she sees you? Dogs don't applaud like we do, but they certainly do it in their special way. Max goes on with his story:

Faces of home. That is what makes the promise at the end of the Beatitudes so compelling: "Rejoice and be glad, because great is our reward in heaven."

What is our reward? Home.

The book of Revelation could be entitled the book of Homecoming, for in it we are given a picture of our heavenly home.

John's descriptions of the future steal your breath. His description of the final battle is graphic. Good clashes with evil. The sacred encounters the sinful. The pages howl with the shrieks of dragons and smolder with the coals of fiery pits. But in the midst of the battlefield there is a rose. John describes it in chapter 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev. 21:1-5, NIV).<sup>2</sup>

Max concludes the chapter this way:

I'll be home soon. My plane is nearing San Antonio. I can feel the nose of the jet dipping downward. I can see the flight attendants getting ready. Denalyn is somewhere in the parking lot, parking the car and hustling the girls toward the terminal.

I'll be home soon. The plane will land. I'll walk down that ramp and hear my name and see their faces. I'll be home soon.

You'll be home soon, too. You may not have noticed it, but you are closer to home than ever before. Each moment is a step taken. Each breath is a page turned. Each day is a mile

marked, a mountain climbed. You are closer to home than you've ever been.

Before you know it, your appointed arrival time will come; you'll descend the ramp and enter the City. You'll see faces that are waiting for you. You'll hear your name spoken by those who love you. And, maybe, just maybe—in the back, behind the crowds—the One who would rather die than live without you will remove his pierced hands from his heavenly robe and...applaud.<sup>3</sup>

Can you imagine? Applause in heaven when you arrive! As I write this devotional, I'm a bit sad this evening. It's August 15, my son Matthew's birthday. He would have been 45 today. He died when he was 22. He was disabled and, although he was that age physically, mentally he was only 18 months old. He was such a blessing, and he changed our lives. When I first read *The Applause of Heaven* and came to this homecoming part, I felt a sense of joy as I realized that when Matthew was called home there was a tremendous round of applause for him in heaven. There will be for you too if you have a personal relationship with Jesus. Dogs greet us. Family and friends greet us. Even strangers greet us. But the ultimate greeting awaits us in heaven.







## The Master's Voice

Your voice has a certain ring to it, and so does mine. Some voices are quite distinct. Mothers seem to have a unique ability to hear their children's voices in a room of 20 or more yelling children. In a herd of cows, there might be 50 bawling calves, but each mother cow knows which one is her own. Your dog knows your voice too, and he responds to it. In fact, dogs love to hear their masters' voices. There's a familiarity and sense of comfort in hearing the sound.

There was a Boston terrier by the name of Tad. He was brought into his family when he was three months old, and it didn't take long for everyone to think, and excuse the expression, he was the cat's meow. Tad was adopted when the family was on a trip visiting their daughter Kayla. He loved each family member—but especially Kayla.

The family stayed for their three-week visit, and Tad developed a routine of playing with Kayla before she left for work. He would be waiting at the door each day when she returned home from work.

When the family left with Tad, they let him talk to Kayla on the phone a few times as they drove home. And whenever they called her from their home, they always let their pup talk with her. As many dogs do, when he heard her voice he would listen, cock his head, scratch the phone, and look into it to find her.

One day Kayla called and left a message on the answering machine. When Tad's owner pressed the button to listen to the message, the pup was standing there watching and listening and wagging his tail.

He enjoyed it so much that his master played it again for him. A few days later, his owner was taking a shower when he heard the answering machine turn on. He recognized his daughter's voice leaving a message. He heard the message repeat, and then he heard the machine announce, "End of messages." A few seconds later he heard his daughter's voice again. *How strange*, he thought. His curiosity got the best of him, so he turned off the water, got out of the shower, dried off, threw on a robe, and went quietly into the other room. Tad was standing by the machine listening. When the message was over, he stood up with his front paws on the edge of the low table. Then he slapped the answering machine with a paw. The message came on again! He experienced an immediate, positive reinforcement for his efforts.

His owner watched, and when Tad did it again, his master said, "No, Tad. Bad dog!" Then he pushed the machine's erase button. A few days later he heard a voice from the living room. "You have no messages." Then it played again. "You have no messages." And it played again. He got up to investigate and found Tad by the machine. The dog was upset because every time he tapped the button he heard the machine's voice instead of the message he wanted to hear. He began hitting the machine with both paws. When he was told to stop and leave it alone, he looked at his owner, ignored the command, and increased his efforts to hear the voice he wanted. He then ran back and forth between the machine and his owner, who decided to solve this problem once and for all. Kayla was called and asked to call back and leave Tad a message. When she did, the owner didn't erase it. That way Tad could play the message and listen to the voice whenever he wanted to.

Dogs recognize the voices of their masters! Tad delighted in hearing Kayla's voice more than any other. He could distinguish her voice. In our daily lives, we listen to voice after voice throughout the day. Some we like, some we don't. We even have voices in our heads! Some of them are attached to experiences from our past, good and bad. Sometimes these voices, or old memories, from the past dominate

our present. Sometimes we need to press the erase button on the machine that recorded the messages.

We're all influenced by voices from others or from our culture. Some we discard; some we heed. Some we shouldn't follow. There is one voice, however, that we should always listen to, but sometimes we don't hear it or we may even chose to ignore it. It's the voice of our Master. He leaves messages all the time. They come through His Word, through other people, or even silently during our times of reflection:

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon (Psalm 29:3-5).

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:3-5).

As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Hebrews 3:15).

Some people look forward to hearing God's voice and following it. Others prefer not to or simply tune Him out. The messages keep coming in, but the people never check their messages or go back to the answering machine to hear Him again. God pursues us more than we "scratch and paw" at the answering machine so we can hear His voice. I like how Howard Macy describes God's pursuit of us:

Those who recall Francis Thompson's haunting image of God as the Hound of Heaven, pursuing us down the halls of time, might well ask who, in fact, is the hound and who

the quarry, whether we seek God or whether we are sought. What we discover is that all the while we have been pursuing God, he has been rushing toward us with reckless love, arms flung wide to hug us home. God aches for every person, for every creature, indeed, for every scrap of life in all creation to be joined again in the unity that was its first destiny. So while we are crying out, “Where are you, God?” the divine voice echoes through our hiding places, “Where are you?” Indeed, the story of the Garden of Eden reminds us that it is God who calls out first, and to this we answer. God’s yearning for us stirs up our longing in response. God’s initiating presence may be ever so subtle—an inward tug of desire, a more-than-coincidence meeting of words and events, a glimpse of the beyond in a storm or in a flower—but it is enough to make the heart skip a beat and to make us want to know more.<sup>1</sup>

What does the voice of God say to us? “I love you. I want you. I sent My Son for you.” Let’s listen...listen to the voice of our Master and delight in Him.



## Secret Sins of Your Dog

**D**oes your dog ever sin? Of course he does. All dogs do. Oh, you might not call it sin. You may use a nicer word, such as misbehave or disobedient. But sin is sin. Have you ever asked your dog, “Did you take that?” or “Did you eat that?” and then hear a confession or see true remorse in his eyes? “Oh, yes, it’s true. I did that. I’m so sorry.” Usually they lie themselves out of their responsibility with a puzzled look, or a dumb look, or grovel because of our tone of voice, or ignore us. I know because my dogs have lied to me. Like the times when I’m ready to take them for a walk so I ask if they need to go potty or if they already did. They look at me with an expression that says, “Of course we did. No problem.” And 30 feet down the sidewalk they defecate on the neighbor’s new flowerbed.

One of my golden retrievers, Aspen, has some Marley genes (I hope you’ve read John Grogan’s book *Marley and Me* or seen the movie). Aspen eats sticky notes off the counter, loves to eat grass, eats the last pages out of novels, and steals and eats washrags, socks, and T-shirts. My wife had a favorite royal-blue shirt that she laid on a chair. Later when she looked for it, she asked me if I’d put it somewhere. I hadn’t, but I guessed who did and pointed at the suspect. Tess looked at Aspen. “Aspen, did you take my shirt?” He gave her what I call the DDL—“dumb dog look.” You know, the “Huh, me?” attitude. The “You’re asking *me* that? How could you even think such a thing? I’m shocked.”

I cut in. “Aspen did.”

“How do you know that?” Tess asked. “He looks so innocent.”

“I know Aspen. Besides, I found the remnants outside on the lawn—at least the parts he didn’t eat.”

Did Aspen look guilty? Nope. Did he repent? Nope.

Sheffield was my first golden retriever, and my wife and I were very attached to him because he came into our lives eight months after our son, Matthew, died. When I was asked to create a video on personality types to go along with one of my books, I decided to use Sheffield as an example of some of the differences since he was more of an extrovert than an introvert and more of a feeler than a thinker (speaking in Myers–Briggs Type Indicator terms). So during the filming I would have him come up at certain points. And he obediently came, *after* he greeted everyone in the audience, which is what an extrovert does. He responded well to my requests to sit, lie down, stay, give a high-five, answer the phone, pick up trash and put it in the trash can.

Everyone was impressed with Sheffield since he was being so obedient and compliant. Well, up to a point, anyway. When we took a break and most of the audience left, Sheffield and I walked to the back. We had to pass the area where the video crew worked. I didn’t notice, but they’d left a plate of donuts on a chair next to the aisle. Sheffield noticed though. The smells and the looks were too much for him to resist. Without missing a step, he grabbed half of them and drooled on the rest. I missed it, but other people laughed and told me about it. So much for my “sinless” dog!

When the cameramen came back, they stopped, looked at the plate, looked around, saw Sheffield, and smiled and said, “Aha! Your old nature overtook your new nature, Sheffield. Come on—confess and repent.” I’m pretty sure he did neither. Perhaps he needs to memorize the Scripture verse that helped me so much through high school and college:

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you

be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Dogs aren't perfect, and neither are we. At times, we all violate what we know is right or best. Dogs definitely have problems resisting food. One day I failed to pay attention to this trait. I was in a boat fishing with a friend. I had my sheltie, Prince, along. On my line I had a double set of hooks about a foot apart that were baited with cheese. I turned my head for a second, and when I turned back I saw my line and one of the leaders with bait still dangling but the other hook...well, it was down Prince's throat. We left the lake as fast as we could and rushed him to the vet. Fortunately, he was fine, but it was several agonizing hours before we reached that point. The situation wasn't Prince's fault; it was mine. I put temptation in his way. In spiritual terms, I caused him to stumble.

When we do what we know we shouldn't, we get into difficulty. Temptations are always around us, and sin often appears so attractive...so enticing. We're a bit like dogs. We need training to avoid temptation and stay safe physically and spiritually. Humans have a bent toward doing wrong. In Christian terms, it's called the "old nature." Second Corinthians 5:17 NASB says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." Like it says in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The consequences and solution are recorded in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Dogs have instincts; we have the reasoning power to make logical choices. Sometimes we choose well; sometimes we don't. What can help us stay on track? First Corinthians 10:13, which I cited a few paragraphs ago, can make a difference. It did in my life. I memorized it in high school and remember it to this day. Over the years there have been numerous occasions when I've had a choice of doing something right or wrong. The Holy Spirit brought that verse to my mind,

and it acted like a guide to keep me on the right track. (I admit that I didn't always appreciate the reminder at the time.)

But what if we do blow it? What about when we sin? God has given us a solution! "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God isn't out to punish us when we sin. He wants to restore our relationship with Him that is interrupted by our sin, so He provided a way for that to occur. He is such an awesome God! Why not pause right now and thank Him for His grace and provision?