

## The Fine Print

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When I was younger, some of my first memories are from reading books. I read everything; I always had a book in my hands. I could even read in the car, which was important because my father liked to go for long drives down dirt roads that seemed to go nowhere in particular, which was very boring in my opinion. My mother hated it that I would read in the car. She would always say, “Don’t read in the car. You’ll hurt your eyes.” I ignored her and read anyway.

Later when I started working as a caseworker, my supervisor stressed that we were guardians of the children in state custody. And as such, we were never, ever to sign anything regarding the child on our caseload if we had not read everything, even the fine print. There were things that agencies asked to be able to do that we could not allow, like using pictures of the children for media purposes. That was one of the things I always crossed out whenever I found it in a release. This made the intake process longer, and I’m sure the staff with whom I was meeting to do the initial paperwork were impatient with me. But I took my charge seriously, and I definitely didn’t want something to appear in the newspaper that shouldn’t be there and have my supervisor be upset with me.

When I went to close on my house, I read every word of every document I signed. The bank officer commented that they’d never had anyone read everything first. I was a little appalled; this was a big deal and people really didn’t read what they were signing? I just shrugged and said I was taught to read everything. I didn’t get the same sense of impatience there that I felt in the previously described situation.

Now the fine print is everywhere, and I admit, I don’t read it. Those privacy terms, the documents that you agree to for updates to apps, and whatever else they say you have to sign or check the box that says, “I agree.” At first I tried—really, I tried. But have you ever read them? They’re so long, wordy, tangled, and written in hard-to-decipher legal language. Probably on purpose so people like you and me don’t read them. I just accept the terms, hope for the best, and move on.

When I was a teenager, I did the whole accepting Jesus as my Savior, confessing my sinful self and sobbingly asking for forgiveness. I attended church regularly, went to Sunday School, and attended Youth Group. My church leaders talked about the Bible, but not in terms that I could understand or in ways that invited me to explore what it meant for me. Not only didn’t I understand, but I didn’t understand that I didn’t understand. No one told me about the fine print.

I think that the Bible is full of people who didn’t read the fine print. You know that whole, “By the way, if you follow me, this, that, and the other might happen to you.” Like the disclaimers on

those prescription advertisements that appear on your television screen in itty-bitty print or are spoken so fast that it's like a long run-on sentence that's impossible to decipher.

Moses didn't read the fine print. God's disclaimer could have been, "After you've done what I ask, leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, be aware that you will wander in the wilderness for decades listening to bratty, whiny people." Elijah didn't read the fine print either. God's disclaimer could have been, "After you've destroyed all the false prophets and proven that I AM God, Jezebel will hunt you down and kill you, but I'm going to send you out to do my work anyway."

Our lives are full of fine print. The fine print we learn subconsciously from our families, our teachers, our leaders, society, television, our pastors and church leaders. The do's and don'ts of going about our daily lives. Some of the fine print from my parents stays with me whether it's useful or not. For example, my mother always said, "Be careful what you say, because you never know if the person you're talking to is related to the person you might be talking about." This turned out to be important when my job was to knock on doors of people that I didn't know—but found out later they were related to someone I knew in another context.

My father didn't say much, but his expectations were the fine print that I hear often. "The world doesn't owe you anything, work hard, pay your bills on time, and provide for your family." Unfortunately, not everyone's fine print is positive or good advice. Society tells us all kinds of contradictory things hidden in the fine print. I could go on and on about that, but what I want to focus on is the fine print that God gives us.

Last week our story from the Gospel of Matthew was about how, after they haven't caught any fish, Jesus appears to the disciples after his death and tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Always impetuous, Peter recognizes Jesus, jumps into the water, and swims to shore because he can't wait for the fish-laden boat. In today's reading, Peter tells Jesus, "If it is you, call me and I will be able to walk on the water towards you." What Peter is really saying is "If it's you, call me so I can be like you." Jesus accepts Peter's challenge and tells him to come to him. Peter starts to walk on the waves, but he gets scared or distracted, looks away, and starts to sink. Jesus pulls him up and says, "Why? Why did you look away?"

Peter strikes me as someone who, even if he reads the fine print, doesn't pay attention to it. He seems not to care about what the fine print says. In Matthew 16:16, he proclaims Jesus as "the Messiah, the son of the Living God" and says he is willing to die for Jesus. But left to his own devices, he loses sight of the fine print and fails. Anna Case-Winters says, "In Peter's mix of faith and doubt, Peter exemplifies the experience of most followers of Jesus; his experience is our experience."<sup>1</sup>

How often are we like Peter? Bravely stepping out in faith, only to find ourselves frightened and even paralyzed by the fine print of what others say we should be or what the situation might

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

demand of us? What others say Jesus should be? The church should be? Case-Winters goes on to say that the word *doubt*—when Jesus asks Peter, “Why did you doubt?”—is a translation of the Greek verb *distazo*, which can mean “hesitate” and signifies the kind of personal confusion or uncertainty that prevents action or commitment. Jesus doesn’t condemn Peter for his doubt, distraction, or fear. Instead, he asks why, wanting Peter to discover the reasons for himself about why he started to sink. I think that we should substitute the word *hesitate* for the word *doubt* in our own lives and then ask, “Why am I hesitating?”

In Romans 10, Paul says, “All that energetic setting-things-right with God” is not our job. Referring to all the fine print in the Jewish Mosaic Law, Paul says that this is a way of not dealing with God on God’s terms—making our own way and ending up with nothing to show for it. So all those things I did in my youth to show my commitment to Jesus didn’t have anything to do with what was written in the fine print, even though I was told it did. Paul says that it’s good that we can do those things, but the fine print may be telling us much more.

Romans 10:8 says that God’s word is “as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest.” God is that close, as near to us as our own breath and our own heartbeat. We can pay attention to the fine print of the world, but really our job is to pay attention to what God has written in our hearts.

And here’s another thing: That fine print? It isn’t the same for everyone. Just as we each have our own gifts, so has God written something different on each of our hearts. It’s that fine print that we should be paying attention to.