

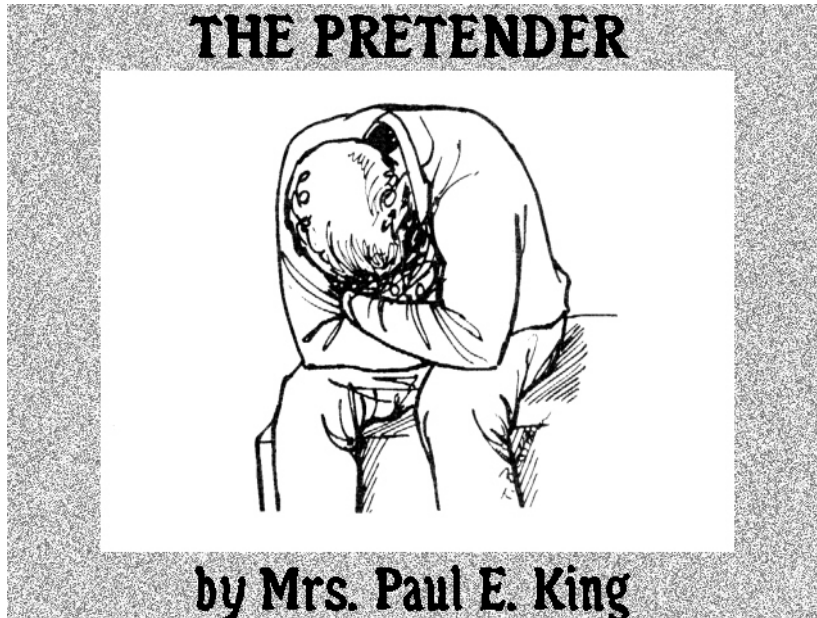
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001  
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon  
May 30, 1993



**THE PRETENDER**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

I watched in shock as my once best friend, Jay, acted like a real dunce in the pavilion of the park where we were having a school picnic. I say "once best friend" because I'm not sure that Jay wants anybody as his friend these days. He's changed, and I can neither understand the radical and sometimes embarrassing change nor do I know what to do to help him get back on track again: He keeps me at a distance these days.

I saw him, now, as he turned the ketchup bottle upside down and dumped the tangy-sweet, spicy, sticky, gooey mess over Danielle Collins' head, turning her beautiful gold-blond hair into a bloody looking mess and staining her blouse with blobs of red that dripped when she moved or walked.

Danielle screamed, then blushed scarlet. She was a shyly sweet junior in Laurel Christian School, much respected, greatly admired and loved and held in reverence and awe for her devout Christian life and godly walk and example.

"Jay, you . . . how dare you!" Brandon's voice registered incredulity. Going quickly to Danielle, where a bunch of girls had rallied around her, he took a cloth and started to rub it over her head.

"Thanks, Brandon," I heard Danielle say kindly. "But I think it will be better if it's not rubbed in. You mean well, I know, and I truly appreciate it. But I'll have to go home and shampoo it out of my hair. And I'll need a bath and a change of clothes, too. Robin said she'll take me home as soon as she gets Mr. Pinkerton's permission. He's playing horseshoes with some of the fellows somewhere here in the park."

"I hope Robin tells him what that self-styled, anything but funny, clown did to you. It's about time Jay's foolishness was stopped. I enjoy having a good time and having clean, wholesome fun but not at someone's expense. That isn't funny; not at all."

"Jay needs our prayers," I heard Danielle tell Brandon. "He's . . . he's . . . well . . . I don't know what happened, but Jay's changed. He didn't use to be like he is now. And there was a time when he wouldn't have done what he just did to me: Jay was sensible and studious and quiet and nice. Treat him with kindness and courtesy, Brandon. And please don't ostracize him nor become bitter toward him. There's a reason for his changed behavior."

"You mean you . . . you . . . expect me to act like nothing happened, Danielle?" Again Brandon was incredulous. "He needs someone to put some sense into that head of his", I heard Myla Ann DeCosta remark to Brandon.

"Right," Brandon agreed. "And I'm just the one to do it. If I can get Danielle's permission," he added, starting toward where Jay stood, away

from the pavilion now among the tall pines that were everywhere in the beautiful park.

"Don't go, Brandon. Don't hurt Jay anymore than I feel he's already hurting," Danielle insisted quietly and kindly. "I can always wash ketchup out of my hair and my clothes, but 'a brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, So says Proverbs 18:19. I'm sure he feels shame and remorse for what he has done; that's punishment enough in itself."

"But Danielle, he's acting childishly . . . and . . . and abnormal. Where will this end?" Myla Ann asked.

"I can't answer that, Myla." But I do know that Jesus told us to love one another as He loved us. I think we should all put Jay on our prayer list. I feel he's hurting inside."

"Hurting! What about those he's embarrassing and hurting?" Brandon asked impatiently.

Danielle looked at Brandon for a long while without answering. Then finally, she said softly, "What would Jesus do, Brandon? I . . . I thought you said you . . . you . . . knew Him and . . . and loved Him, when I asked you if . . . if you were a Christian. I'm sorry if I misunderstood you." Tears shimmered in Danielle's blue eyes.

"Well, I'm certainly not a heathen," Brandon retorted. "And I guess I'm just as good as some others I know. I'm better than that clown over under the pines, that's for sure."

"But are you born again, Brandon? Jesus said unless a person is born again -- born of God -- he cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven. Heaven's a pure and a holy place prepared for a pure and holy and clean and righteous people. In the Book of Revelation, John tells us that nothing, defiling or wicked or sinful and evil, nor anything abominable, nor any liars, shall enter that beautiful City called Heaven. Only those who have been washed in the blood of Jesus will be there"

Brandon mopped the perspiration from his forehead. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "That was quite a sermon, Danielle. And you so shy and timid

ordinarily. I confess humbly. I'm not ready for that City. But I'd like to be. I just never heard anything like what you just told me, and it scares me."

You can get ready, Brandon, by confessing your sins to Jesus and asking Him to forgive you for them and then inviting Him into your heart. And now I must go; Robin's here with the car. She must have gotten Mr. Pinkerton's OK. I'll talk to you later, God willing. And promise me, before I leave, that you won't try to get even with Jay. Jesus wouldn't do that."

"I promise, Danielle. . . ."

Brandon then spied me at a table and meandered over to me. "What's with Jay?" he asked, straddling the bench across from me.

I shook my head negatively, feeling at a total loss for words. What could I say? I didn't understand Jay's strange behavior any more than the others did.

"But surely, Chip, you must know what's wrong!" Brandon insisted. "You and Jay have been best buddies for so long as I can remember."

"True enough, Brandon," I admitted. "But I honestly and truly don't understand Jay any better than you do. I . . . I'm mystified and shocked, to say the least."

"But I thought Jay was a . . . a Christian. At least he told me he was." Brandon sounded disappointed.

"He used to be different than he is now," I answered simply.

"Then why don't you find out why he changed? You should be helping him, Chip. Isn't this what friends are for?"

"A real friend is helpful all the time," I told Brandon. "And I've tried to find out what's bothering him, if anything; but I get nowhere. And now he keeps me at a distance: he avoids me."

"Danielle feels he's hurting inside," Brandon related.

"I heard what she said. And she may be right; but what could it be? He's never been a pretender or a . . . a show-off before. Never. He looks downright silly and stupid and . . . and sickening, trying to be something he isn't. Dumping that ketchup over Danielle is the worst thing he's done yet. I'm sure if Mr. Pinkerton knew what happened and why Robin had to take Danielle home, he'd have been over here in short order and Jay would have had some explaining to do."

"But knowing Danielle like we all do, he'll not find out what happened if she has her way. She's a real peacemaker, Chip. And a genuine Christian too. She's well, she's real."

"That's for sure. There's not the slightest speck of hypocrisy in her. And if Jay is hurting inside, like she thinks he may be, it's about time I fulfill the 'bear ye one another's burden' scripture. C'mon, Brandon, we're going over to Jay and find out just what is wrong."

"I'm afraid I won't be welcome, Chip. After all, I said some nasty things about him; said them loud enough so I knew he'd hear them," Brandon admitted.

"Well, you want to get to Heaven, don't you?" I asked, adding, "I heard you tell Danielle you want to go there. Begin now by humbling yourself and going with me to Jay and telling him you're sorry for what you said, then ask him to forgive you. Each of us who knows the Lord has had to ask God for forgiveness, as well as people whom we were nasty to and whom we wronged. This is the way to find forgiveness in Christ, Brandon."

"It is? Then I'm going with you, Chip. I want to get to Heaven, no matter what I must do to get there."

We wasted no time in leaving the table and heading for the pines outside of the picnic pavilion. But when we got to where we had last seen Jay, he was no where to be seen.

"How about that!" Brandon exclaimed. "Gone like the wind."

"He's somewhere here in the park," I said, feeling sudden pity for Jay. "We'll find him."

And find him we did. Never have I seen a more desolate looking person than he. Sitting with his back against a pine tree in a secluded area of the park with his knees drawn up close to his chin, Jay's face was buried in the palms of his hands, which were resting on his knees, and he was sobbing violently and brokenly. He was lonely, I was sure, and embarrassed, too; for his unusual behavior, no doubt.

It was easy to sneak up on him; the pine needles made a thick, noiseless carpet over which to walk.

As if planned -- which it wasn't -- Brandon sat down on one side of him and I sat on the other. He was startled when he saw us and became aware of our presence.

"Leave me alone!" he cried, trying to get away from us.

"Don't leave, Jay," I said quietly. "You're staying here with us. We're your friends." I pulled him gently down to a sitting position again.

"Friends? Yeah?" he retorted, looking at Brandon. "Look, Jay, I'm sorry for what I said," Brandon began, sincerely. "Forgive me, please. I want to go to Heaven. I was nasty. Cutting, even, with my words and my tongue. I'm really sorry. Will you forgive me, please?"

Jay was shocked. He was speechless too. Then, slowly, he said, "You're serious, aren't you, Brandon?"

"Dead serious, Jay." Tears hung on Brandon's eyelashes.

"I . . . I forgive you. Bu . . . but . . . I . . . I need . . . to ask forgiveness . . . too. I created the problem and I made all the trouble. . . ."

"Why, Jay? Why?" I ventured to ask brokenly. "What's wrong?" I prodded. "Danielle feels that you . . . you're hurting inside, Jay. Is she right?"

If ever I saw anyone's defenses crumble and topple and fall, I saw Jay's come crashing down. Danielle was right, I realized: I touched Jay's "sore" spot when I told him what she felt.

"Please, Jay, let us help you. Jesus said we are to bear one another's burden and so fulfill the law of Christ. What's wrong? What happened? Why are you so changed? Don't you love the Lord anymore?"

Jay buried his face in his hands and began sobbing again. "You . . . wouldn't understand," he stammered brokenly.

"You've never given us an opportunity to even try to understand," I stated. "What's wrong, Jay?"

Lifting his head; he looked at Brandon and me. "It's Cory," he blurted. "He has something bad wrong with him that . . . that will make him . . . unnatural after a while."

"What do you mean by unnatural?" Brandon asked kindly.

"It . . . it's too terrible to even talk about. Or . . . or to think about. I've tried to forget about it by acting silly and . . . and funny and . . . ridiculous, but . . . but.

"Oh, Jay!" Brandon and I exclaimed together.

"I'm sorry," I added tearfully. "You should have told us sooner."

"I couldn't, Chip. I love Cory too much. I kept hoping the doctor's prognosis was wrong. But it wasn't. My little baby brother will be much like a . . . a lunatic. Already, since he's developing physically, it's obvious. I love him. Love him. But I . . . I . . . well, I must confess it -- I was afraid everybody would make fun of Cory; and I . . . I . . . I'd be made fun of too. I couldn't stand the thought."

"Jay, I guess that puts you and me on the same level," Brandon aid brokenly.

"What do you . . . mean by . . . that?" Jay asked.

"That each of us must get down at the foot of the cross and ask the Lord to forgive us."

"Anything to get rid of this burden and to help me stop pretending," Jay cried. Looking at me, he said, "Pray with us, Chip. I know there's victory and deliverance in Christ, and I'm ready to come back and make a new start. I've been so miserable and unhappy. I never was one for pretense I made a real fool of myself. . . ."

Well, I will never forget our school picnic Neither will Brandon and Jay; it marked a new day for each of them; a brand new and glorious day of newness in Christ. And a total deliverance of pretending for Jay.