

## Ralph Twigger, Church Custodian

It was a cold January day and Ralph wasn't about to get doughnuts at Dorothy's Donuts even though the boys would want them when they got home from school. He was watching every penny right now. Why? Ralph's clock and watch repair business was down to a couple of jobs a month. He kept giving his work to God and Ralph kept hearing strange words, "I will take care of you, Ralph." He had always taken care of himself. This trusting God for your *daily bread* was not an easy thing to do, especially in our economy.

"God helps those who help themselves, boys." He shared the words proudly while they both buttered bread for a snack. "We've got to tighten our belts boys. No more doughnuts on Mondays for a while."

"That's not in the Bible, Ralph," said Josh as he licked the butter off his bread.

"What's not in the Bible?"

"What you just said—that 'God helps those who help themselves.'"

"It most certainly is in there."

"Where?"

"We'll just see, get my Bible over there, Jeremy."

Jeremy walked over to Ralph's coffee table and lifted a heavy study Bible. Just like Ralph's apartment, there were stacks of paper hanging out of it—church bulletin inserts, coupons for bookmarks, notes on 3 by 5 cards. And his Bible has lost its "brand-new" look. Ralph poured over it day and night.

“Let me see,” he said as he lifted it tenderly like a costly treasure.

Ralph looked up the word “help” in his concordance. Nothing.

“It’s not in there, Ralph,” said Jeremy.

“Just a second you two, the word ‘help’ goes on for a page or so here.”

Ralph flipped the page and then flipped back and reread down the concordance list. He flipped to another word and then another.

“Did you find it?”

“No.”

“That’s cause it’s not in there, Ralph. I only know that cause Mom said so.”

“Isn’t that funny. I’ve heard that saying all my life and I just figured it was in the Bible. Now, how did you two get so smart?”

“God and Mrs. Dingwald’s Sunday School class,” said Jeremy very matter-of-factly.

The boys heard the apartment door shut next door.

“There’s your Mama. Get your stuff.” Ralph hugged the boys and helped them with their things.

“Ralph, aren’t you coming to dinner?” asked Jeremy.

“No. A few of the deacons need to meet with me tonight.”

“What for?”

“That I’m not quite sure about, but I know I haven’t done anything wrong for a while,”  
Ralph laughed.

“Okay. See you tomorrow,” and they were gone.

Ralph shut the front door and headed to the bedroom to change his shirt, slip on a bow-tie and his sweater.

He had a nice dinner at Pearl’s Pies with three deacons, and over Pearl’s best pecan pie a la mode Ralph was offered a job.

“Church Custodian, Mr. Twigger, while Lewis Gray undergoes some medical tests at the hospital.”

Ralph couldn’t believe it. The words God had whispered earlier that day rang in his ears:  
*“I will take care of you, Ralph.”*

“Now, I’m flattered and I could use the finances, but Lewis is in his fifties. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m well into my seventies. Are you sure?”

“Ralph, you’re everyone’s first choice. Your age was never a consideration. We need somebody who will get the job done, someone with good common sense and an assortment of skills.”

“Well, I do love my church. When do I start?”

Three happy deacons smiled back at Ralph. “I wish we had more people like you, Ralph. Barbara will have the paperwork ready for you tomorrow.”

Ralph skipped home singing one of those newfangled choruses from his church. “The name of the lord is a strong tower. The righteous run into it and they are ... HOME! I gotta call Debra and the boys!” he then called Josh, Jeremy and their mom Debra, and told them the good news. He was now wide awake. He cleaned his apartment and laid out his khaki shirt, jeans and work boots from the work and witness trip last summer.

“This ought to do it for a uniform. Finally get some more wear out of these jeans.”

Ralph jumped into bed like a schoolboy awaiting his first day. He opened his Bible. Ralph had gotten into this habit of writing down what he believed was God’s thoughts in the 10 or 12 blank pages at the back of his Bible. He wasn’t sure what those pages were for, but it seemed a shame to waste good paper. There were the words God had spoken to him that morning, “*I will take care of you, Ralph.*”

“Thank you, God. You sure did take care of me.”

Ralph sat with his pen poised. “Okay, God. What do You want to say to me now?”

“*Feed my sheep,*” said the still small voice.

“Whoa. I’m no pastor, Lord. I’m just a 73-year-old repairman and custodian.”

It was as if God interrupted his excuses. “*Feed my sheep, Ralph.*”

“Okay, Lord. I hear you. Show me your sheep,” he said as he settled into sleep.

Ralph started the new workday at 8:00 am sharp. Barbara, the church receptionist and secretary handed Ralph a name tag, a set of keys, a work list from Lewis and a walkie-talkie.

“You sure I’m gonna need this walkie-talkie thing, Barbara?”

“Ralph, you’ll find it’s really handy. Oh, and our office staff coffee break is at 10:30.”

“That’s okay. I’m packing coffee, Barbara.” Ralph turned to reveal a Thermos strapped to his tool belt. “If you need me, I’m in the sanctuary. Ten-four. By the way, my handle is *Silver Eagle*.”

And with that, he was off. Ralph was shocked at the condition of the sanctuary. He thought a rock concert or something had happened. Then he realized it was just Sunday morning that had happened. He picked up trash, filled pew racks, stacked chairs, dusted the pulpit and left a note for the pastor that said, “God loved you, Pastor, and so do I.”

Ralph then tackled the bathrooms with lightening-speed, swept and emptied trash cans from all the classrooms. It was not 12:30.

“Come in, Mr. Twigger...I mean Silver Eagle.”

“This is Silver Eagle. What can I do for you, Barbara? Over.”

“We were wondering if you were ‘packing a lunch’ and you’d like to eat with us? Over.”

“That’s a big 10-4. I’ll be right over. Over.”

Ralph had lunch with Barbra and several other staff members in the lounge/meeting room/prayer room/workroom. Although Ralph was accustomed to leisurely lunches while watching Lunchtime Cartoon-a-Rama, this was a pleasant change and the company was

very nice.

Ralph was pouring coffee for everyone when Pastor Hickman walked in. “Ralph!” his voice sounded somewhat agitated. Ralph turned around not knowing what to expect.

“Yes, sir?”

“Ralph, the sanctuary is gleaming! What did you do to it?! And the bathrooms are immaculate! You’re a wonder, Ralph!”

And he was gone.

“Good job, Ralph,” said Barbara.

“Just doing what I learned in WWII. I cleaned a lot of latrines.”

“Oh, Ralph! You’re such a breath of fresh air around here.”

Those words meant a great deal to Ralph. Embarrassed by the compliment, he joked, “Ah, now, that’s just the Pine-Sol I was using.”

The afternoon flew by. Ralph returned with the boys at three and finished up his final hours of work. The boys did their homework and then joined Ralph on his final check and lockup.

“Well Barbara, I’m tired. This church custodian work is work!”

“See you tomorrow, Ralph,” she said as she handed Ralph some employee paperwork.

“Bright and early, Barbara.”

The next day was pretty routine. There were a few exciting moments. Chasing dogs off the church lawns, delivering the mail to the post office...oh, and a member was rushed to the hospital. Pastor Hickman flew out of the place like a cannonball.

The following day had its surprises, too. Ralph found some kids playing hide-and-go-seek in a darkened sanctuary. After scaring them half to death in the dark (well, they deserved it!), he walked them all down to the office of Doug, the youth pastor.

“Please, don’t tell on us, Mister,” they begged.

“Tell what? Doug, these kids would like to know about your Wednesday night Bible study. You’ll find these three boys are very interested in our church.”

“Thanks, Ralph. Come on in, guys.”

Ralph winked knowingly at the boys. “See you Wednesday night, guys.”

Late in the afternoon, Ralph took a bunch of boxes of clothes and canned goods to a room he’d never been in. It was filled with canned goods, staples, toiletries, blankets, coats. There were even some toys. “God’s Pantry”—that’s what the church called it. He had to check out a special key to get in.

“We’ve had some break-ins, Ralph,” Barbara said it with such seriousness.

“Well, they must’ve really needed the stuff in here.”

“That’s why we’re so careful with the key. We’ve got to know who has the key at all time.”

“Who keeps this key?”

“Pastor Hickman.”

“Well, there’s your thief, Barbara!” Ralph chuckled.

“Oh, Ralph, I am not kidding.”

“I am—just kidding. Sorry. Got it—Pastor Hickman’s got the key.”

Ralph had worked almost a full week and he was not looking forward to working on his Saturday. Saturday was pancakes, cocoa, and cartoons with the boys. Instead, he’d be mopping floors, filling pew racks and stocking the bathrooms. It was only a half day, but it was half of a Saturday.

Saturday morning, Ralph reluctantly rolled out of bed and onto a cold floor. He chatted about a few things while shaving. God didn’t have much to say except the same thing he’d been saying for days: “*Feed my sheep.*”

“You know, Lord, this is really getting old. I’ve been looking for sheep all week. All I’m seeing is a bunch of well-watered and well-fed sheep. They aren’t looking hungry. In fact, some of ‘em look a little too satisfied, Lord.”

Ralph packed his lunch and made his Sanka. Then he strapped on his back belt, tool belt, Thermos, a muffler, hat, and coat.

Outside it was icy and cold. “Lord, it is too early, I am too old and it is too cold today...I know, feed your sheep.”

Ralph’s slid along in his car slowly from block to block.

“The whole world’s inside today, Lord. That’s a good thing because I would’ve run over several people by now.”

Ralph turned onto the interstate and drove past a man holding a sign that read. “Family needs food. Please help.”

“Sheep!” shouted Ralph.

Ralph pulled to a stop and got out of his car. He waved to the man and started walking toward him. “Okay, Lord, give me the words,” prayed Ralph quickly.

“Hi, my name’s Ralph Twigger. Call me Ralph. Here’s a really good lunch. I know because I made it, and some Sanka. I’m sorry it’s not the real thing.”

“Thank you.” The bearded young man took a drink out of Ralph’s Thermos.

“My church is just up the interstate. Come on, I’ll get you more food.”

The man nodded his head and they started walking toward Ralph’s car. Ralph was praying like crazy. *Give me the words, Lord.*

After a few moments, Ralph broke the silence. “Your sign says you got a family?”

The man looked at Ralph. Ralph was taken back by his eyes—he had the kindest eyes.

“Yes, sir. My wife and two boys are at a shelter.”

“The one on Sycamore?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good people run that place.”

“Yes, sir, real good people. They've been a great help to us.”

Ralph looked at the man as he looked straight ahead. His clothes were clean but old. He didn't have any gloves on—just a baseball cap and a sweatshirt. Ralph thought about all the clothes in his closet, the extra pair of gloves and jacket hanging on his hat rack. Ralph asked a few more questions and soon they were talking freely about how his family became homeless. Suddenly a homeless man with a sign became a husband, a father, a very nice man named Michael Davis.

“Well, we're here—this is my church.”

Ralph unlocked the doors and punched in the security code. “Come on in.”

“Maybe I oughta stay out here.”

“Nonsense, We don't bite. Come on in here.”

Michael stepped just inside the door of the office.

“I haven't been inside a church in a long time, Pastor.”

Ralph froze. “Oh no, Lord. He thinks I’m the pastor!”

“I’ve never met a pastor like you, Ralph.”

Nervously, Ralph rattled off some words: “Well, you won’t find a better church than this one, Michael. Oh, we got our quirks, but we love God. Let’s get some real coffee going.”

Ralph made coffee strong enough to wake the dead and rustled up some Pop Tarts and an apple.

“I wish it was more, Michael.”

“It’s great I didn’t eat this morning. I wanted to get out early.”

“Well, you sit tight. I’m going to go get a key.”

Ralph made his way back to Pastor Hickman’s office. I’d better get permission for this key. He tried Pastor’s house—no answer. Now Ralph was faced with a real dilemma.

“Lord, what do I do?”

“You are doing it, Ralph.”

“No, the key Lord. What do I do, Lord?”

“*Feed my sheep.*”

Ralph tried Pastor Hickman’s home again, then Barbara’s home and Doug’s home. There was no answer at any of them.

“Where are these people?”

Ralph sat down at Pastor Hickman's desk and put his head in his hands. "Think Ralph, think. Where would Pastor put the key?"

"Excuse me? Are you the pastor?"

Ralph looked up to see a young woman standing in the doorway.

"I hate to bother you, Pastor, but my tire's flat and I managed to make it into the parking lot and..." Her voice trailed off and she began to cry.

Ralph got up and walked around the desk with Kleenex.

"There, there, now. I can fix your tire."

"Can you fix a marriage, Pastor?" and she began to cry again.

"Pardon me?"

"I'm running away! I'm 26 and I'm running away! I can't take it anymore! But I can't even run away right. He told me he was going to check my tires. Yeah, right! Just like everything else—he's too busy. Too busy golfing or too busy at work. We haven't been out to eat in months!"

"Are we talking about your husband?"

"Of course we're talking about my husband! We've only been married six months, but I know the honeymoon's over."

"Well, I can fix your tire Mrs., Mrs..."

"Mrs. Scott," and she started crying again.

“Mrs. Scott, I can fix your tire, but I can’t fix your marriage. Only God can do that. We can call your husband and see if he’s willing to talk. Does he know you’re gone?”

“No. I wonder if he’s even noticed?”

“Really? Well, I’m going to get a friend of mine to help with your tire. Why don’t you call your husband and let him know that you’re here at the church.”

“All right, Pastor.”

*I’m not the pastor! I’m just a church custodian. I wish he were here, though,* Ralph thought as he walked back to the workroom. There he found Mike standing at the sink doing dishes and it looked like he’d straightened the place up.

“Is that Pine Sol I smell, Michael?”

“Well, you’re helping me out, Pastor Ralph. I thought I’d help you out.”

“Thanks. Do you know how to fix a flat tire?”

“Can do it blindfolded, Pastor.”

Ralph walked Mike to the office door. “See that little VW with the flat tire and the rocking chair hanging out the window?”

“Say no more.”

“I’ve got tools in my trunk.” Ralph unclipped his keys and handed them to Mike.

“Thanks. I haven’t forgotten your need either, I’m gonna go find that key right now.”

Ralph walked Mrs. Scott to the workroom and got her a Pop Tart and a cup of coffee.

“Did you call your husband?”

“Yes. I did not leave a note because I wanted him to worry about me, for once. He’s so selfish. He always...”

Ralph was about to lose his pastoral compassion. He tried to use a nice voice. “Excuse me, Mrs. Scott, but I wanted you to know this—your tire is being repaired right now by a man who has no job. He and his family have no home either. They’re staying at the shelter over on Sycamore.”

“Well, why would he fix my tire?” she said confused by this detail.

“Because he’s a good man...a good man, Mrs. Scott. Probably a lot like your husband. Excuse me, but I need to get his family some coats and some food from God’s Pantry.”

Ralph walked back to Pastor Hickman’s office and made phone calls. Again no one was home. Where are these people? Don’t they know I’m dealing with pastoral emergencies here?

*“Where would I be if I were the key to God’s Pantry?”*

Ralph started searching Pastor’s office. He felt like a thief, but he had to find the key. After 15 minutes of searching, Ralph knew Pastor’s sermons for the next six months, that he had a stash of bobble gum in his left top desk drawer, and Pastor Hickman did not throw too many things away. Ralph was exhausted—emotionally and physically.

“Excuse me, Pastor? I’m looking for my wife.”

Ralph looked up and there stood a nicely dressed, and worried young man.

“Mrs. Scott?”

“Yes, Pastor. I understand my wife is here.”

“She’s eating Pop Tarts in the workroom down the hall.”

“Thank you, Pastor. And thanks for fixing the flat tire, too.”

“Well, we can fix flats, but we can’t fix marriages. Only God can do that, son. That’s what I told your wife.”

“And that’s exactly what Mike just told me. If his family can get through what they’re going through,... well, we can find a way to deal with our much smaller problems. By the way, Pastor, when does church start tomorrow?”

“We’ve got a 9:15 contemporary service with drums and all that *hoohaw* and a 10:45 traditional service with choir and orchestra.”

“Thanks, Pastor. We’ll be at both! See you tomorrow.”

Just then the phone rang. “This had better be Pastor.”

“First Avenue Community Church. Ralph Twigger speaking. Lewis, I am so glad to hear your voice! Where does Pastor hide the key to God’s Pantry? Under his bubble gum?”

Ralph opened the left top drawer and there it was: the key to God’s Pantry. “Very clever, Pastor. How are you doing, Lewis?”

Ralph listened as Lewis explained the tests they’d run. He had cancer.

"I don't know what to say, Lewis. I wish one of the pastors was here right now. Not a one of 'em is home either because I've been trying to get a hold of 'em all morning."

Lewis interrupted Ralph. "Could you come see me, Ralph?"

"Of course, I'll come see you, Lewis. Just give me an hour and a half. You hold on there, because I'm bringing pie--one of Pearl's best pecan pies. I've got to catch up on some things here first. I've been feeding sheep all morning!"

"What did you say?!" This excuse did sound odd to Lewis.

"I know that did sound strange. I'll explain it all later."

Ralph hung up the phone and headed for the workroom. There was no sign of Mr. or Mrs. Scott. He headed out to the parking lot and found all three of them, Mike and Mr. and Mrs. Scott. They were talking and laughing like they were old friends,

"Hey! I need your help, kids." They all walked over to Ralph.

"What is it, Pastor?"

"I've got to go visit someone in the hospital and I have to get to get this place ready for Sunday morning. I found the key to God's Pantry, Mike. Let's go get that food."

"He won't need any food, Pastor," said Mr. Scott.

"But we will need the coats," added Mrs. Scott.

"Excuse me?"

“We’re going to take Mike back to the shelter and get his wife and the boys. They’re going to come and stay at our house for a while.”

“Excuse me?!” Ralph couldn’t believe his ears. They weren’t even church members. And Mike, well, he looked like he was about to cry.

“That’s great! Well, then let’s go get those coats.”

It was the right key. God’s Pantry had everything Mike’s family needed to stay warm, and a few toys too.

“Thank you, Pastor.”

“Yes, thank you, Pastor, for being here this morning. Next time I feel like running away, I’m going to turn to God.”

“That’s good, Mrs Scott. You know he’s always home, just waiting for you.”

Ralph looked at the three of them. They were sheep all right. *I’ve got to tell them the truth*, he thought. He took a deep breath. “I need to tell you three something before you all take off. You’ve been calling me ‘pastor’ all morning and, and ... and I’m not the pastor.”

“What?”

“I’m the church custodian. I wasn’t trying to lie to you. It’s just that you all needed *someone—someone* to be a pastor for you. I was the only person available this morning, ...believe me. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you about this church.”

Everyone was silent for a few seconds.

“I am disappointed,” said Mrs. Scott. “I’m disappointed that you’re *not* the pastor!”

Now, that was quite a tickle to Ralph. “Oh, Pastor Hickman’s a good man. His sermons pack a wallop! You’re gonna like him.”

Mike stood there not saying a word, tears were running down his cheeks. “I’m coming tomorrow morning, Ralph. Do you make the coffee on Sunday morning?”

“How’d you know?” Ralph hugged Mike and Mike hugged him, too.

Ralph could barely hear the words. “*Thank you, Pastor.*” Mike then looked at Ralph with those kind eyes and a smile that said, you heard the words I just said.

Well, it was almost two hours, but the bathrooms smelled like Pine Sol, the trash was dumped and the floors were mopped for Sunday morning. Pearl’s best pecan pie was sitting next to Ralph in the car as he slid along the icy roads to the hospital. He had one more sheep to feed.

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