

One (of Many) Reasons I Was Afraid of God

Note: The following is an excerpt from Darren Wilson's new book, Chasing a God You Don't Want to Catch, available everywhere books are sold May 12. To find out more, visit:

Perhaps one of my biggest misconceptions was the idea that if I gave myself fully over to the Lord, He was going to force me to do a bunch of stuff I didn't want to do. My dreams, my desires and my passions would have to be shut away because I would now have to do "the Lord's work." And in my evangelical Christian subculture, the Lord's work was a pretty narrow window.

Once a year my church would have what we'd call "missionary Sundays," when the missionaries we oversaw and sent funds to around the world would come in and give a short presentation to update the congregation on the kinds of things they were doing on the mission field. I thought these were better church services than most because at least I got to look at pictures instead of staring at some dude talking all morning. But they also posed a problem for my narrow view of what it meant to "leave everything for the gospel." I mean, it seemed to me that being a missionary kind of sucked.

Everything seemed difficult. It looked hot. I was pretty sure those little homes they lived in didn't have air conditioning. I was also pretty sure they didn't have cable TV, which meant no ESPN and no sports. Their food didn't look too appetizing—seemed like a lot of rice and beans. We'd often hear about how they were slowly learning the language, and I was reminded how much I hated my ninth-grade Spanish class. Then we'd see pictures of smiling faces and hear about how each one accepted Jesus, and I would immediately feel horrible about all my judgments. But that didn't make my feelings go

away.

The missionaries' final statement was almost always pretty much the same: "It's definitely been tough, but it's worth it to sacrifice for the Lord. We miss some of the creature comforts of home, but we wouldn't trade our experiences with God and these people for anything." Then everyone would stand up and cheer, a special offering would be taken and I'd put some money in to help assuage my guilt for being such a lousy Christian compared to these people.

This was the height of self-sacrifice in my Christian world, the pinnacle to which we were supposedly all striving. I mean, Jesus was pretty clear when He said, "So likewise, any of you who does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:33). That verse, and others like it, absolutely terrified me. Deep down, my biggest fear was that God was somehow going to make me become a missionary and move to Africa. I'm pretty sure that's every evangelical kid's worst nightmare at some point in their life.

If I had a love-hate relationship with the Father and I completely ignored the Holy Spirit, then it's safe to say I had an uneasy truce with Jesus. I couldn't deny that He loved me. That truth was rock solid. You don't die for someone you don't love. But I also couldn't get past how often in the Gospels He came across as intense and inflexible. Sure, He'd say things like, "For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). But then He'd turn right around and say something like, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). OK, so which one is it? Because you say your yoke is easy and your burden is light, but asking me to give up everything, even my own family, sure doesn't seem easy and light!

Even when someone would come across Jesus' path who was really

trying hard to do the right thing, it seemed like Jesus would find one more thing, that pressure point, that would really hurt. It felt like no one could ever measure up to His impossibly high standards.

Take the story of the rich young ruler, for example. Jesus is on his three-year kingdom world tour, selling out fields and meadows everywhere, when a young man approaches and humbly kneels before Him. The kid asks Jesus what he needs to do to obtain eternal life, and Jesus gives him the company answer. You know the commandments. Do those. The young man then tells Him that he's kept all the commandments since he was a child. So Jesus ratchets it up a notch and tells him the last thing he needs to do is sell everything he has and give to the poor, then come and follow Him. This bums the kid out because he's super wealthy, and he walks away dejected.

I get the point of this story is to show that our riches are in heaven, not here on earth, and that we can have no other gods before Him. But I was always more interested in the humanity of this story than the moral of it. It seems this kid is sincere. He's humble, inquisitive and really wants to do well in God's eyes. But instead of encouragement, he gets a sucker punch.

But there is a telling statement in this story that is easy to miss. I always saw Jesus in this story as being impossible to please and overly demanding. But jammed right in the middle of all this is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment that should change the narrative a bit:

He answered Him, "Teacher, all these have I observed from my youth." Then Jesus, looking upon him, loved him and said to him, "You lack one thing ..." (Mark 10:20-21).

What an important detail. Without it, this can easily be read as Jesus trying to find a pressure point to teach a lesson about wealth. But with it, Jesus is exactly who He says He is.

Jesus saw something in this young man's heart that was genuine, something that had the fragrance of love for others and for God, and in return He felt a love for the young man swell inside of Him. Love always responds to love.

I used to read this story and see what I wanted to see. A rejection. Sorry kid, you're not good enough because you don't want to sell everything you have and become a missionary. I saw a God who wanted to force this young man to do something he didn't want to do to prove his love for Him. But this was no rejection; this was an invitation. Jesus offered this "rich young ruler" a seat at His table as a part of His inner circle of friends. His name could have been talked about for thousands of years, and stories and sermons and devotions could have been written using the many adventures and lessons he learned in his friendship with Jesus—with God Himself. This was an extraordinary offer.

Jesus doesn't look for pressure points; He simply looks into our hearts. He is not trying to find something to pick apart, and He's not trying to find that one thing you're most terrified of doing because He wants to test your feelings for Him. He's simply looking to see if there is anything in your life that is an idol—something that you deem more important than God.

While filming my movies around the world, I've seen lots of man-made gods and idols. I've been in small homes with tiny shrines to demons in a corner, and I've walked through massive temples filled with statues and smoke and noise and people desperately trying to make their magic gods happy so they can get something from them. In settings like that, it's easy to identify idolatry.

But then I come home and walk around a shopping district; go to a sporting event; glance around my own home at my entertainment options, my full refrigerator and the picture of all my kids and my beloved dogs, and suddenly it becomes much

more difficult to identify my own idolatry. We don't have Asherah poles we worship in America, but we do have field goal posts in stadiums. We do have "mothers, fathers, husband, wives, children" in our lives whom we consider more important than anything God would ask of us. The idol may change, but the idolatry stays the same.

I've gone through seasons in which I've lost or nearly lost people, dreams, a company, a dog or whatever else meant the world to me, and each time God brings me to a place when I have a decision to make. Either I can hold onto this thing that has become an idol in my heart, that I feel like I can't live without, that I spend way more time obsessing over than I do the Lord, or I can choose to place it on the altar of my heart and offer it up to God. What He does with it is up to Him. He may take it (which He's done) or He may take it and replace it with something even better (which He's also done), but I have learned time and time again that anything in my life that keeps me from an undiluted friendship with Him is something to be hated. Nothing is worth giving up a friendship with the God of the universe. With my Father. My Jesus. My Spirit. They are my dearest friends and my life depends on them.

So when Jesus tells this rich young ruler to do one more thing, He is simply asking Him to make a decision. Do you love money or Me most? And when the man walks away from Him, Jesus doesn't rain down judgment on him, but instead simply states the obvious. It's tough for someone to have the kind of hunger you need to become true friends with God when that person doesn't feel the need for God because they're comfortable. And instead of becoming one of the great people of faith in the Bible, we never even learn the kid's name.