

This Counter-Cultural Message Is Your Key to Spiritual Freedom

Others will say, "Compete to be first," "Live for yourself," "Get yours," "Do what feels good," "Pad your 401k." Jesus says differently. There is no shortcut. Jesus invites you to come and pay a cost. The price is your life. He declares in Mark 8:34-35, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever would lose his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." The degree of death determines the degree of life.

The apostle Paul writes a similar message to the church in Rome in Romans 12:1, "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of worship."

This process of mortification sounds fun right? It can't be watered down, and there is no other way. Sin is serious. Sin is missing the mark. It is breaking God's law and a departure from His character. Sin causes a gap in your intimacy with God. There is nothing you can do on your own to earn salvation. God has brought all things near through the blood of the cross. Every time you look at that cross, remember God did everything on His part to save you from your sin, selfishness and hell.

Jesus compares your race to a way that is narrow, difficult and found by only a few. It is difficult because dying to yourself is counter to the desires of your flesh and the culture of this world. There is a reality check waiting to happen so you too can discover you are nothing without Christ.

When is the last time you were broken over your sinful condition in the presence of God? Only when you realize your sin broke His heart, will you be comforted. Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). Those who are rich in spirit have no need for a Savior. Denying yourself and taking up your cross means being stripped of your pride. It means being broken, dependent and humble. Find the tree that will be your rugged cross and give God space to do this work in you.

Repent and Believe

Is there any part of your life not consistent with his character and teaching? If so you are at war with God. Lordship equals obedience. As you obey what the Lord commands, you grow and develop. Your learning is progressive in the faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a learner. It never stops. You either obey or you don't. There is no middle ground. If I told you I'm 90 percent faithful to my wife, Stephanie, you wouldn't believe I'm faithful. When God looks at the condition of your heart, what does He see? Are you trusting and obeying or disobeying? If you are in disobedience, His first request is that you repent. Stop sinning. God never gives a commandment without the grace to obey it. When God asks for repentance, He means it. It's not pick and choose.

"Repent" is a hard word, and unfortunately, it is going extinct, but its process is vital to starting your race. It comes from the Greek word, *metanoia*. *Meta* means "change." *Noia* means "mind." It literally means "to change your mind." Change the way you think about God and yourself. Think like Jesus. Possess the mind of a Christian endurance runner. Ephesians 4:22-24 explains repentance this way, "that you put off the former way of life in the old nature, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that you put on the new nature, which was created according to God in righteousness and true holiness."

Repenting is the process of changing the way you think, talk, and act. You see Jesus as more valuable than the temptation of sin.

You are guilty and must take responsibility for your sin. It is essential to believe and trust in Jesus. However, salvation is more than raising a hand, saying a prayer or walking up the aisle. There is nothing wrong with that, because it can be a very wonderful beginning, but it is the start of your race, not the finish line.

Acts 2:37-38 declares, "When they heard this, they were stung in the heart and said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to "cheap grace" as "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

Blue-Hole Baptism

The author of Hebrews 10:22 says, " Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse them from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." Find your blue hole in a river somewhere and get baptized. Jesus commanded you to be baptized in water because He never wants you to forget outwardly what you've expressed inwardly. It's both a wedding and a funeral. You now identify with Christ as His bride. You celebrate your new life as a new creation from the burial of sin.

Honor Jesus as Lord

You'll never start your race well if it's all about you. Jesus asks a paralyzing question in Luke 6:46, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I say?" Everyone wants a Savior; no one wants a Lord. Christ is called "Savior" 37 times. He is called Lord 7,836 times. It is healthy to bow. David writes in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's, and its fullness, the world, and those who dwell in it." There must be a bowing in reverence and fear before the holiness of the Lord God Almighty. God is God, and you are not. You don't make Jesus Lord. He is Lord on His own merit. It will never be about you. Your life revolves around the Lord Jesus. There is a link between salvation and lordship—you can't have one without the other. Glorify the King whose rightful place is on the throne of your heart.

God gave you time, treasure and talents. Manage them well. What would it look like if you changed your thinking and believed the first part of the day belonged to the Lord? Imagine waking up and acknowledging Jesus as Lord and surrendering your day to Him? Would you spend time with the Lord through prayer and Scripture reading? Would you seek His kingdom first? It takes faith to recognize God is first. Are you giving Him your best or what's left over?

If you live in the United States, you are blessed. Most of the world lives on less than two dollars a day. The Bible instructs you to give His tithe back to Him first before anything else. It is sacred. Your entire paycheck is a gift from God, but He only asks for 10 percent to be given back to Him. There is more blessing on God's 90 percent than your own 100 percent without Him.

God has given you talents. It's not for your personal benefit alone. You are unique with strengths and gifts no one else has. How are you glorifying God with what He is entrusting you with? Build His kingdom inside and outside the walls with those talents. Needs go unmet if you don't steward your gifts well.

Surrender Your Rights

It will be tempting to cling tightly to what you feel is important. The reason we must live dead is because we will be tempted to earn God's salvation or favor. Your best performance apart from God is molding laundry. He knows your heart and knows your good works were achieved out of pride and self-love. John the Baptist said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). You surrender out of love, not out of labor.

What is the one thing God is telling you to do? Is there anything in your life that competes with Christ for your allegiance? Obey the one thing God is asking you to surrender. Giving up your rights is not burdensome, it's one of the most loving things you can do. Safety and security. Right to be offended. Losing self-control. Provision. Comfort. Achievement. Did Jesus hold onto to these rights? Does Jesus want this for you? He says if you don't take up your cross and follow me, you can't be my disciple. What is the cross? It's not jewelry or wall art, it's death. It's an invitation to come and die.

Give up the right to have your own way. Jesus has a demand on your life. You have been bought with a price. You must set aside your preferences. The litmus test of dying daily is asking those closest to you if you demonstrate more fruit of the Spirit than you used to. Are you more patient than you were six months ago? Do you have more self-control with your words and thoughts than before? If not, it's time to take up your cross again.

Imagine what life could be if you didn't care about getting the credit for your accomplishments? No ego. No pride. Train yourself to see your life with the eternal prize always in mind.

Surrender to God your very best. God the Father gave you His

best in the form of his only begotten son Jesus. Jesus gave you His best in the form of His life. Don't dare insult those gifts with leftovers. If God gave His best for you, give Him your best in return. You must be ready to sacrifice anything for the glory of God. Then, and only then, will your life "echo throughout eternity." {eoa}

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