

# Why You Need to Stop the Christian Performance

The alarm rang sharply at 5:30 a.m. Refusing to be summoned so abruptly, I hit the snooze button and rolled over. Nine minutes later, the alarm's shrill cry was repeated. Again I hit the snooze button. This exhibition of personal discipline, or lack thereof, continued until 6:30 a.m.

Now, with hardly enough time for a quick shower and a cold bagel, I leaped out the door for another challenging day. Unfortunately, this particular morning had become the rule rather than the exception. Day after day the routine continued with the same goal in mind: getting up early for devotions.

I had committed to spending time alone with God before each day began. But it seemed that every time I tried to prove my love for Him by dragging my tired carcass out of bed early, I just could not rouse myself. This serious lack of discipline had become so familiar that I could not summon the energy to change.

All my life I had heard about the importance of personal devotion and private worship. Desiring above all to gain points with God, I knew I must rise to this level of pristine performance if I were to get anywhere in the kingdom.

After all, I thought, grace from God is only available after I've exhausted every other natural resource. I must prove my worth as a lover of God, or He cannot help me. I must endeavor to prove I am a man of God who is after His heart. I must must prove.

Part of me wanted to bless the Lord with genuine love and faithfulness through this obedient act of a "quiet time." However, the proverbial "flesh-and-spirit" battle was raging within me. I wondered, Will there ever be a decisive victory

in favor of the righteous side of me, or will I be held in the grips of this mediocre spiritual life forever?

With tenacity waning, I knew that somehow I had to stop and take some personal stock. I had to ask the hard questions: Why do I do what I do? What's really inside of me, anyway?

My distorted views of Father God were based on years of practice. I rehearsed ways in which I could please the God whom I believed to be an eternally angry potentate. Though I was a Christian from an early age, I believed that perfection was the only acceptable offering.

Proving myself and my love for God was based on nothing but what I thought I should do for Him. Therefore my worship of Him became nothing but a "performance with a smile" on the stage of life. And if others were fooled into believing I was holy, then I too could believe I was.

Still, deep in my heart I knew there had to be more to this private life of devotion. I ached to know the God so many people talked about on a deeply personal level. I longed to hear His voice and be comfortable with Him.

What a grim existence! My faith was built on my ability to perform well for God. I had reduced my relationship with God to the need for approval from spiritual men. This state of idolatry kept me marching to the drumbeat of man rather than resting in the heartbeat of God's love.

I recognized my sinful nature and how large the chasm was between God and me. I thought even the blood of Jesus couldn't span that. The treadmill of performance was the only way to gain acceptance from God and access to His love.

The guilt of sin was a factor, but shame was the real culprit. I was ashamed of who I was. The person I had become with all my serious, hidden faults was not acceptable to me, and I erroneously believed there was no way I could be acceptable to

God—even through Jesus Christ. Self-deception was catapulting me toward disaster.

## **Drowning in Shame**

The gerbil's wheel I was on came to a screeching halt when I fell off, landing in immorality. The pattern of iniquity I had become so familiar with paved an enticing path to destruction. With my limited scope of God's love and the way I operated to please Him, it was only a matter of time before my energy level was depleted. I lost my proverbial footing, slipped and plunged headlong into the abyss of adultery.

Sometimes when we sin greatly, we are merely attempting to prove that we do not deserve God's love. We unwittingly believe that because we have been rejected and have rejected ourselves, we can out-sin the magnitude of His love. And yet, it is only when we hit bottom that we find God's merciful arms stretched out to catch us.

I never intended to hurt my wife, my children or the church family I belonged to. But the choices I had made, based on my inability to maintain the pace I had set for myself, did a world of damage to those I loved and to those who loved me. The guilt was overwhelming. I couldn't bear to face anyone.

I thought there could be no forgiveness and restoration for me. My sin was much greater than the love of God. The idol of self-sufficiency, which I had worshiped for so long, contributed to the length of time it took me to find God again.

Suicide became such a viable option that I soon believed there was no other choice. Fortunately, I had a major emotional collapse before I could do anything too damaging to myself or my family. I now see that experience as God's mercy upon me. Looking up through the bottom of life's darkest dungeon, I realized that if God didn't save me, I would never climb out of the hole I was in, and I would surely die.

I did not want to live without Jesus and His help. But I could not live with Him either, consistently faced with the reality of what I had done.

Then slowly—ever so slowly—the process of God’s healing power began to peek over my dismal horizon as I daily chose to give up the ideas of who I thought God was. The aloneness I had experienced was the plan of God to reintroduce me to a brand-new concept of life—Jesus.

It took all the years of my growing up in the church, through Bible school and into adulthood and ministry to come face-to-face with a holy God amid the shambles of my life. I had no “props” to support me or any trophies to justify my worth. There was no proving that I had done enough good to merit God’s blessing upon me. There I stood, naked and alone before my Maker with nothing to offer Him but all my misunderstandings, bad attitudes, and a lot of pain and fear.

Then, with nothing but brokenness to offer and His mercy to appeal to, I heard Him say, “Ahh, now we can begin again.” Instantly, the walls of my performance orientation began to penetrate the darkness of shame’s imprisoning walls. Through the valley of the shadow of death, I finally met the real Jesus.

Up to this point, I had lived my life thinking, I am what I do. I was a gifted musician and worship leader, and it was easy to find my identity in those things. From time to time I would revolt against this pigeonhole I found myself in. I wanted to be treated like a person rather than a commodity, but the transition was too great.

But now I saw that even through the darkness that had overtaken my soul, a thread of hope had been woven into the tapestry of my life, bringing a true revelation of His glorious calling. God did have a plan for me in spite of the enemy’s designs to destroy the precious seed. And Jesus was

literally redeeming my life from the pit, setting me free from the lies that defined me.

That day I began a journey, which I intend to pursue as my life's goal: to consistently acknowledge my utter dependence upon God; to allow myself the luxury of this holy quest; to find His favor outside of my "perfect" performance; and to cultivate an awareness of Him through living life and giving myself to Him.

The result? True worship.

### **Resting in Jesus**

True worship flows out of freedom—the freedom to be real before God and, therefore, right with others. For me, that meant admitting my mistakes and humbling myself before my wife and friends. I had to fight my pride, my defensiveness and my desire to blame. I had broken their trust and left a lot of wreckage in my wake.

But because God had met me at the crash site, I now trusted Him to help me pick up the shattered pieces of my life and transform them into a tool for ministry to others. And that is just what He has done. The result is a life that overflows with gratitude that I am forgiven. And such undeserved forgiveness is manifested in praise that is demonstrated in heartfelt worship.

As the years have passed, I've come to believe the responsibility that I assumed by confessing my sin to my wife and the church elders has produced an "on purpose" accountability that is now a comfort rather than a constraint. In submitting to an extended process of restoration, the Lord has truly restored me to my family and to the ministry that He called me to years ago.

Today I want to live and be free to love Him potentially more

than yesterday. The pathway of learning that nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus has been paved with pain, but it has taken me to a place of grace—the promised land—where life is no longer dependent on my performance but on His undeserved forgiveness and favor. I now live, breathe and find my life in Him.

The ongoing, progressive revelation of God as my loving heavenly Father and His truth caused me to finally find Him and the answers I had searched for all my life. I finally realized the truth that “He who has entered His rest has himself also [rested] from his works” (Heb. 4:10, NKJV). A lifestyle that is pleasing to God is one that finds its rest in Him so that He can do His work in us and eventually through us. Someone has said that we must constantly beware that the work we are doing for God does not interfere with the work He is doing in us.

My time with God in private devotion and worship became very much the same as tending a garden. It took a serious investment of time and energy before the Lord brought permanent change to my life through personal times of devotion.

It became evident to me that just as certain seeds need more time than others to germinate, God’s truths have germination times as well. Some truths of God and His character are more easily assimilated than others. More time is necessary for the deeper truths because of the extent of their root systems.

I begged God for the miraculous “zap” that would turn me into the holy, righteous and godly person I desired to be. I asked Him to “grow me up” in a hurry, but He didn’t work like that. He used the process of time-developed relationship to show me that His principles of sowing and reaping are both natural and spiritual laws.

I learned that lasting changes happen over life, not

overnight. We don't get a life—we cultivate a life. It must cost us something because we must invest in the land to fully appreciate it. Financial investments, job seniority, child rearing and education all fall into this same category. Paying the price includes time, energy and money.

Likewise, there is a cost to the pursuit of holiness that most are unaware of or perhaps unwilling to pay. And many who are willing are looking for the bargain rate. The price of holiness, however, never goes on sale. We who have invested time and energy walking out of a performance-based relationship with God often find it hard to know what to do with the idea of investing in godliness without stepping right back onto "the stage."

Our challenge is to establish the fact in our hearts that the love of God is forever secured and cannot be earned or shaken. But the blessings of God are contingent upon our obedience. If the Lord says, "Seek My face," our response must be, "Your face, Lord, I will seek."

I'm reminded of King David's plan to build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor. The property was being given to David by the owner, but David would not accept it. He said, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). It would seem that David understood the need to "pursue" God by making his search valuable and calculated.

There was something uniquely special about David's ability to express himself. What was it that enabled him to freely and emotionally articulate his praise and worship as well as his pain and fears to God? Could it be the simplicity of an open heart before Him?

Perhaps it was that there was no guile or deceit in David's heart. It seems that he didn't need to prove anything to

himself or to others. David did not live for the praise of people—He lived for openness with God. He refused to hide his humanity from God by wrapping himself in a religious cloak.

I can almost hear you saying: “I want a heart like David’s—one after God’s own heart. But my personality won’t permit me to be so emotional. I tend to be more reserved and in control of my feelings. Can I still have that kind of relationship without all the hoopla?”

The answer is yes—when you allow God, who created you, to be your Master. This means that what He desires is what gives you the greatest pleasure.

It’s time to open the hidden areas of your life. Let Him know you, warts and all. You cannot shock Him. He sees and knows more about you than you know about yourself.

Get to know Him through His Word. Let the depths of His character touch the roots of your being. Let His unconditional love uproot your shame until your heart is overwhelmed with gratitude—then all that you do will become an act of worship, and your life will become a song of praise.

## **Break Out of the Trap!**

Are you performing for God and other people in order to win acceptance and love? Here’s how you can escape this spiritual bondage:

**1. Pour out your heart to God.** Tell Him about all the times you’ve blown it. God is not shocked by our imperfections. “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14, NKJV). Honestly emptying yourself before Him and learning to rely on His grace as the basis of your acceptance will help you break the cycle of shame.

**2. Renew your mind.** Stop reading the Bible with the idea that God is mad at you. Read the story of the prodigal son (Luke

15:11-32), and meditate on the fact that your heavenly Father loves you even when you stray from Him. Recognize that He wants to lavish His love on you in spite of your shortcomings and mistakes.

**3. Submit to His surgery.** Ask the Lord to show you areas in your heart where you are being religious and legalistic. Are you trying to prove your love for God by going to church, reading your Bible daily or overcommitting yourself to certain ministry activities? All these things are good, but we must do them from the proper motivation. Ask God to show you any wrong motives in your heart.

**4. Get honest with a close friend.** Share your struggle with a prayer partner. If you are hiding secret sins, being vulnerable about them with a trusted friend can bring healing and help develop humility. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

**5. Lose yourself in worship.** Transformation happens when we are with the Father. By simply spending time in His presence, and by listening to Him and obeying what He says, the Holy Spirit will produce the character of Christ in us. We can rest while He does the work! He redeems our broken lives, and then He works through us to help others.\*

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*The late **David Morris** was a worship leader at Manna Fellowship in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and author of A Lifestyle of Worship (Renew).*