

Living in Denial

Luke 18:22

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Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the last time. He was on a mission—a mission of mercy for the human family that would cost Him His life on a cross intended for us.

Suddenly, His mission was interrupted by a man who came running up to Him and fell to his knees in a posture of servitude. Mark doesn't give the man a name or a title, but Matthew describes him as "young" (Matthew 19:22), which is also implied by his "running," something an older man would never do. And Luke says he was a "ruler" (Luke 18:18), that is, a member of the honored council of the Jews. All three Gospel writers mention his wealth. Therefore, we have come to know this person kneeling before Jesus as "the rich young ruler."

Touched by seeing Jesus bless the children, this young man desired to be blessed in the same way. He asked Jesus the most important question a human being can ask: "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17).¹

In reply, Jesus quoted several of the commandments of God and pointed out the necessity of keeping them. The young man affirmed his compliance with these commandments and then wanted to know, "What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:20). Though his life was morally pure and religiously orthodox, he was still unsatisfied. Something he had seen in the interchange between Jesus and the children eluded him, and he felt incomplete somehow.

If you've grown up in the church, perhaps you know what this young ruler was feeling. You never rebelled against the religion of your parents. You adopted the culture of your parents' faith system and stayed in conformity to the rules and traditions of the same. You went to Sabbath School, memorized Bible verses, competed in Bible bowls, earned honors in Pathfinders, ate Veja-Links, attended academy, knew the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs (at least the major ones), were in church faithfully every Sabbath, and returned an honest tithe. You don't lie, cheat on your income taxes, or run around with women (or men). Certainly, you've never killed anyone or stolen something that didn't belong to you. Yet, you feel something is missing. What is it?

The rich young ruler had worked hard for everything he had gotten in life. He planned his work and worked his plan; life had rewarded him. He assumed that God and eternal life worked the same way. "Just tell me the plan, Jesus. I'll work the plan and be rewarded with eternal life."

"Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (Mark 10:21). Jesus saw that the young man was sincere in his pursuit of eternal life. He loved him. He loved him enough to tell him the truth. Sometimes love must be tough. Today, many of us have a wimpy notion of what love is. We think that to be loving means we can't offend. That a person's self-esteem is all important. That everyone must win a trophy. That the loving thing to do is to just let a person live a life of sin and not confront them.

But what would Jesus do? Well, look what Jesus *did*. Jesus loved this rich young man enough to pull him out of oncoming traffic. He loved him enough to tell him what he needed to hear. Jesus said, “You still lack one thing.”

Only one? The young man must have perked up. *I’ve been doing many things. If there is only one more, I’ve got it made.*

But a quick review of the commandments Jesus quoted shows that, with one exception, they are all negative. That is, they all deal with things you *don’t* do. Is that how we define our faith—by the things we *don’t* do? When the young man affirmed that he had kept all these commandments from his youth up, he was basically saying, “I’ve never done anyone harm in my whole life.” That may have been true, but the real question was, “What *good* have you done?” With all your possessions, with all your wealth, with all that you could give away, what positive good have you done to others? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others?²

Like many commandment-keeping, highly moral, letter- of-the-law Christians, this young man had a religion of “respectability” that mainly consisted in *not doing things*. But if that’s all your religion is, you’re like the servant who buried his master’s talent in the ground. Stewardship is more than *not* doing things; it is doing the best things with everything you’ve been given.

“One thing you lack,” Jesus told this young man. “Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me” (verse 21).

“Sell all that you have” (Luke 18:22). *Make a total commitment. Give up what you have so that you can receive everything I have.* Jesus wanted to cure the young man’s “I-sight.” He wanted him to see that although he thought he was a commandment keeper, he was breaking the first—“You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). The young man thought he wanted to be Jesus’ disciple, but he didn’t realize that the call to discipleship is a call to stewardship, and that the call to stewardship is a call to living in denial of self.

Jesus wanted all of the young man, but the young man wanted only a part of Jesus. He didn’t realize that a relationship with God is exclusive—that he couldn’t serve two masters. What would he do?

“At this the man’s face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Mark 10:22, NLT). He missed out on the greatest miracle of his life, because in spite of all the things he had been willing to do, he wouldn’t do the most important thing—he wouldn’t give himself completely to God.

What causes my face to fall? What does God ask of me that I think is too much to ask? This man went away sad because he had great possessions. But would I go away sad because I had great obsessions? Great amusements? Great fashions? Great ambitions? Great passions for sex, food, sports? For some people, giving up a TV program is too much to ask. For some, getting out of bed on Sabbath morning is too much. For others, thirty minutes to pray and study the Bible is too much. Our face and our faith fall at the call of stewardship, because we want the benefits of living with Jesus without the sacrifice of living in denial of self.

In his book *Not a Fan*, Kyle Idleman tells about extending an invitation to follow Jesus at the end of a message he preached on a mission trip to Africa. Two young men in their twenties accepted Christ and made a commitment to follow Him. The next afternoon these two young men showed up at the house

where Kyle was staying, each carrying a bag over his shoulder. Kyle asked the local missionary why they were there. Kyle writes,

He explained that these two men would no longer be welcomed by their families or in their village. When I heard that, I was afraid that maybe this was going to be more than they would be willing to go along with. About that time the missionary said to me, "They knew this would happen when they made the decision."

They were choosing Jesus over their families. They were choosing Jesus over their own comfort and convenience, and fans don't do that.

Followers are willing to deny themselves and say, "I choose Jesus. I choose Jesus over my family. I choose Jesus over money. I choose Jesus over career goals. I am his completely. I choose Jesus over getting drunk. I choose Jesus over looking at porn. I choose Jesus over a redecorated house. I choose Jesus over my freedom. I choose Jesus over what other people may think of me." A follower makes a decision every day to deny himself and choose Jesus . . . even if it costs everything.³

"Whosoever desires to come after Me," Jesus said, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). Jesus is looking for followers, not fans. Idleman describes fans as "enthusiastic admirers." A fan is the guy who goes to the local football game with his hair painted the school colors, brandishing a big foam finger, and shouting, "We're number one!" He's there to have a good time and cheer his team to victory, but other than the ticket price, it doesn't cost him anything to be there. He, himself, never gets in the game. And if he's a fair-weather fan, he'll take his foam finger and go home when things get tough for his team.

The church is full of foam-finger Christians—enthusiastic admirers but not self-deniers. The rich young man was an enthusiastic admirer of Jesus, but he wasn't willing to live in denial of self for Jesus.

Too many of us are trying to get to heaven on a technicality. We are like teenagers who are always asking, "What's wrong with . . . ?"—trying to get as close to the edge as possible, which really means trying to get as far from the will of God as possible without letting go completely. What does that mean? It means that we really don't care for the will of God, but we know we're lost without it, so we'll take as little of it as we can—just enough to technically still consider ourselves Christians. But according to whose standard?

And here's the truth: if the will of God is so offensive to you that you are trying to get by as a Christian based only on a lukewarm technicality, you won't have to worry about falling over the edge; God will spew you out of His mouth! Living in Laodicea is living in spiritual denial; that is what it means to have a form of godliness while denying the power of godliness (see 2 Timothy 3:5). Stewardship is living in self-denial. God is calling you out of spiritual denial and calling you into self-denial. And it's only because He loves you that He asks this of you. Because He knows that selfishness will be your undoing. Ultimately, if you're unwilling to say No to self, you will be all too willing to say No to God.

Now, this is where the message gets very personal for me. A pastor friend sent me an excited text message, asking whether I'd read *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He took a photo with his iPhone of the page he was reading and sent it to me. This is what I read:

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.⁴

I was sure I had a copy of the book and began searching the shelves in my library. As I scanned the spines, I soon became aware of the many book titles—titles about consecration, holiness, surrender, fixing the eyes on Jesus, revival, and so on. The longer I looked, the more I began to have a battle with myself. I had to ask myself, “Am I any better as a follower of Christ for having read all these books? Am I more consecrated, any holier? Any more revived or like Jesus because of them? Or am I just living a ‘respectable’ life, with self well protected and well preserved?”

I preach for a living. But there are times when a preacher can't escape what Paul calls the “foolishness” of preaching (see 1 Corinthians 1:21). Why foolishness? Because so little seems to result from it. This series of sermons on stewardship has been hard for me because of the personal challenge it has presented to me concerning my time, talents, temple, and treasure. I've been thinking about what comes next, and I've been wondering whether it will have mattered that we took the time to do this series in the first place. I asked God this week, “Is anyone encountering You? Is anything worthwhile happening for the kingdom? Are we becoming more consecrated? More holy? More devoted? More engaged in mission? More passionate to serve the poor? More liberal in giving? Less worldly? Better overcomers of habits and addictions?”

And today Jesus is looking at me in love, and He is looking at you in love and saying, “One thing you lack.” I don't know what that one thing is for you. But for me, it's total surrender. For me, I find myself holding on too tightly to what I think is mine when it all belongs to Him. Are you and I going to go away sad today because we love our stuff more than we love God? Because we want foam-finger Christianity instead of the real thing?

It's not about works. Jesus didn't tell the young man to sell everything because that act would win him enough points to gain heaven. If it seems that Jesus has asked the impossible when He says, “Sell whatever you have and give to the poor, . . . and come, take up the cross, and follow Me” (Mark 10:21), then consider what He said to the disciples in verse 27: “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.” That's grace. But it's not cheap.

Stewardship comes down to one thing: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Won’t you pray right now? And as you do so, consider the rich young ruler and ask yourself whether you’re willing to live in denial. If you’re willing to take up your cross and follow Jesus. If you find yourself struggling with the answer, God’s grace is sufficient for you. It’s not cheap, but it is available if you’ll reach out and take it. Don’t let your face, or your faith, fall. “With God all things are possible.” Now is the time to live in denial of self.

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New King James Version.
2. See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 244.
3. Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 145.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 45.