

## **Why Can't I Change?**

### **The Five Biggest Mistakes Christians Make in Learning How to Follow Jesus**

Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17). Certainly following Christ means leaving everything to go after Him, including developing new values, participating in His sufferings, obeying His commands, taking up one’s cross, and participating in His salvation. With the promise that “old things have passed away” and “new things have come,” it is not surprising that believers would anticipate real life transformation as they grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. The expectation is that Christ will shape our lives to be like Him as we give more and more of ourselves to Him. After all, Peter exhorted his readers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Pt. 3:18). After some time has passed, however, far too many Christians come to the realization that change does not happen as quickly or as easily as was first thought. Some, in fact, become terribly discouraged. Memorable slogans such as “let go and let God” have left many frustrated and without the lasting hope they had assumed was promised. Why is this? This workshop will consider the five biggest mistakes that Christians make in learning how to follow Jesus and introduce proven biblical principles of spiritual growth that will lead to encouraging and healthy growth in sanctification and with the necessary insights by which to disciple others who also long to follow Jesus without reservation.

**John Musselman** is the President of the Jackson Institute, a leadership development organisation whose mission is to contribute to the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual formation of individuals who are on a passionate quest to be welcomed, received, and acknowledged by God. He studied at the University of Alabama (Honors BS in Mathematics), Reformed Theological Seminary (MDiv), and Fuller Theological Seminary (DMin). After serving on the staffs of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and Perimeter Church in Atlanta, he founded the Jackson Institute in 1991. John has trained leaders in disciplinemaking in India, Nigeria, Romania, Poland, Australia, Mexico, Tanzania, Kenya, Belize, Spain, and the United States. He has edited John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, A.B. Bruce’s classic work, *The Training of the Twelve*, and Thomas Watson’s *Man’s Chief End: God’s Glory*. In addition, he has written *Classic Discipleship*, a manual for equipping leaders in Christian discipleship, and *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts*.

#### **I. Introduction**

#### **II. Living without Biblical Accountability**

##### **A. Biblical teaching on accountability (five principles)**

1. Giving an accounting to God is mandatory for all.
2. All secrets will be exposed.
3. The quantity and quality of our work will be measured.
4. Christ will judge us righteously and fairly.
5. Our eternal rewards will be based upon His judgments.
6. “God will not be mocked and cannot be deceived; the character of every man will be clearly revealed in the sight of God and in the sight of the man himself. All self-deception will be banished. Every man will see himself as he appears in the sight of God...His conscience will be so enlightened as to recognize the justice of the sentence which the righteous judge shall pronounce upon him” (Charles Hodge).

B. Why be accountable to another person?

1. God did not create us to live the Christian life alone.
2. If and when you yield to temptation and sin against God, they are there to lift you up and see you restored (Gal. 6:1-2).
3. There is an intrinsic value in having a relationship with the person who holds you accountable.
4. When your accountability partner unconditionally accepts you (not necessarily your behavior), and is committed to helping you grow spiritually, you receive a little taste of God's grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love.

C. Principles governing our accountability to another

1. It must be voluntary.
2. Establish the boundaries of accountability with your partners.
3. Aim for character development as well as performance standards.
4. Plan your evaluation time – when and how it will be done.

D. Two definitions of accountability

1. Accountability to God: Having our character, motives, words, and behavior (i.e., our lives) weighed and measured by Christ in the light of His standards as preserved in His righteous Word.
2. Accountability to another person: Openly and willingly submitting our character, motives, words, and behavior (i.e., our lives) to be weighed and measured by trusted friends in the light of God's righteous Word for the purpose of preparing us for the final Day of Reckoning when we will give an account of our lives to Christ.

E. Practical considerations: how accountability can help you change

### **III. Failure to Practice Spiritual Disciplines**

- A. "A discipline for the spiritual life is nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom" (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 156).
- B. "Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried" (G.K. Chesterton).

- C. “It costs a man just as much or even more to go to hell than to come to heaven. Narrow, exceedingly narrow is the way to perdition” (Soren Kierkegaard).
- D. The primary requirement is a longing after God.
- E. The Disciplines of the spiritual life are for ordinary human beings.
- F. Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities.
- G. The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear.
- H. We do not know how to go about exploring the inward life.
- I. We rely on willpower and determination to deal with ingrained sin. The will has the same deficiency as the law – it can deal only with externals.
- J. Inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received.
- K. God has given us the disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us.
- L. “A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is to provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed in the ground where the natural forces take over and up comes the grain. That is the way with the *Spiritual Disciplines* – they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where He can work within us and transform us. By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace.”
- M. It is possible to turn the disciplines into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound disciplines breathe death.
- N. Leo Tolstoy: “Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.”
- O. “Think of the *Spiritual Disciplines* as spiritual exercises. To go to your favorite spot for prayer or journaling, for example, is like going to a gym and using a weight machine. As physical disciplines like this promote strength, so the spiritual disciplines promote godliness” (Donald S. Whitney).
- P. Disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, etc.).

- Q. Disciplines of engagement (study, worship, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission, etc.).

#### **IV. Not appropriating the Power of the Holy Spirit**

- A. The Scriptures on the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
- B. Another look at Ephesians 5:18.
- C. How to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- D. Key reasons that keep believers from experiencing the fullness of the Spirit:
  - 1. A spirit of self-sufficiency or pride.
  - 2. Unconfessed sin.
  - 3. Disbelief.
- E. Evidences of the filling of the Holy Spirit (fruit, love, joy, hope, songs and hymns, giving thanks, oneness, prophetic words, boldness, evangelism, etc.).

#### **V. Grieving or Quenching the Holy Spirit**

- A. What it means to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30).
- B. How we grieve Him: when we...
  - 1. Do the works of the flesh.
  - 2. Fail to realize His presence in us.
  - 3. Fail to respond to His promptings and leadings.
  - 4. Commit any sin.
  - 5. "Grieving the Holy Spirit may well be a synonym of 'sinning against the Spirit'; nothing but death can be its consequences" (Marcus Barth).
- C. Why we should not grieve the Spirit of God
  - 1. Because He is God, the third person of the Holy Trinity.
  - 2. Because to grieve Him demonstrates base ingratitude.
  - 3. Because it shows we are ignorant of the whole meaning of redemption.
- D. Personal consequences of grieving the Holy Spirit
  - 1. It will lead to a loss of the gracious manifestation of His presence.
    - a) You will lose a sense of God's love to you.
    - b) You will lose the joy of your salvation.
    - c) You may lose assurance of your salvation.
    - d) You will lose your inner peace and vitality.
    - e) You will lose power.
  - 2. You will miss and lose the comforts of your relationship with Christ.

3. You will lose all the wonderful experiences of the times when He comes and embraces you and enfolds you in the arms of His love and lets you know that you belong to Him.
  4. He will leave you to the power of your flesh.
  5. You will have a general sense of uselessness.
  6. God will close His Word to you.
  7. Evidences of your sealing by the Holy Spirit will become faint.
- E. Safeguards that the Lord has given to us by which we may avoid grieving His Spirit.
- F. What it means to quench the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19).
- G. How believers quench the Spirit:
1. Resisting His work.
  2. Declining to yield to His leadership and influence.
  3. Failing to heed God's Word.
- H. Indicators that let us know when we have quenched the Spirit:
1. The power of the Spirit is missing from our lives.
  2. Following tradition becomes more important than following the movements of the Holy Spirit.
  3. Exhaustion follows from doing God's work in the strength of the flesh.
  4. More effort is put into the work and less time is spent in prayer.
  5. Spiritual fruit is not forthcoming.
- I. Returning to God in repentance, asking Him to rekindle His work in our lives.

## **VI. Embracing a Wrong View of Sanctification**

- A. Wrong teaching as left us with little hope of real transformation. We have tried to "trust His finished work on the cross," but the promised victory always seems elusive. So often we seem so *unchanged*.
- B. The road to inner and outer transformation begins with putting off the old self. We died to sin (Rom. 6:2,11), the result of our union with Christ in His death.
- C. What does it mean when Scripture says "we died to sin"? Through our identification with Christ, we are dead to the guilt of sin and from condemnation.

D. What about the power of sin?

1. We are not dead to the influence or power of sin in our lives.
2. By Christ's death, we have the power to fight and overcome sin's pollution.
3. There is a vast difference between committing a sin and constantly living and delighting in it.
4. We can come to the place in our lives where we no longer desire to be slaves of sin.

E. Our part

1. We are to consciously and purposefully regard ourselves as dead to sin – this is something we must *do*; it will not be done for us.
2. We must effectively disassociate ourselves from our sinful tendencies or be defeated.
3. By the power of the gospel, we are enabled to think in certain ways that are “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy.
4. We are enabled by grace to die to the world's values.
5. Having died to self, we are enabled to submit our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness.
6. We must consciously direct our bodies so that they will “automatically” serve righteousness rather than sin.
7. Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (I Tim. 4:7).
8. “So we see that God has made provision for our holiness. Through Christ He has delivered us from sin's reign so that we now can resist sin. But the responsibility for resisting is ours. God does not do that for us. To confuse the potential for resisting (which God provided) with the responsibility for resisting (which is ours) is to court disaster in our pursuit of holiness” (Jerry Bridges).

**VII. Conclusion**