

JUSTICE.



MERCY.



HUMILITY.



A Simple Path to
Following **JESUS**

Rusty George

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For Lorrie.

No one has modeled Micah 6:8
more for me than you.

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Why Is This So Complicated?

Ads for pharmaceutical products can be both entertaining and horrifying. The disclaimers for all the possible side effects are often longer than the explanation of the benefits of the drug. This is what we often refer to as the fine print.

**May cause anxiety, depression, an itch on your back you can't reach, fear of clowns, running with scissors, barking at the moon, and an unhealthy obsession with fire.*

Obviously, I'm exaggerating, but still. When did drugs intended to help anxiety start inducing anxiety? And more than that, when did commercials for anxiety drugs start making me practically need anxiety medicine? When did the fine print get so long?

Ever feel like the call to follow Jesus comes with some fine print?

If someone were to ask you, "So all I have to do is believe?" wouldn't there be a part of you that pauses and thinks, *Well, yes . . . but . . .* And here comes the list. For me, this list is what I've grown up with, what I've spent my life telling others to do, and is just part of life. But for others, it's fine print.

This is what makes some of us reluctant to share our faith in the first place. We know we have a great message to share—“Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. He offers forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. All you have to do is believe.” But it’s the fine print that seemingly holds us back.

Yes, believe in Jesus, but also . . .

**love others, forgive those who hurt you, pray for those who persecute you, have joy, be patient, stay faithful, be gentle with your words, give to the hurting, tithe, live in peace, serve in your church, be kind to everyone on the freeway, go to church every week, read your Bible every day, pray without ceasing, don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t chew tobacco, don’t go with girls that do, and confess your sins every night, for if you don’t you might wake up in hell. God bless!*

Why do we do this?

I think we don’t know what to do with all the things in the Bible that seem to be necessary, so we make them into a to-do list. Then we treat them as the way we get God’s attention and favor.

For centuries we’ve been trying to figure out how to get God’s attention. And not only get his attention, but gain his approval. It has driven some to exhaustion, others to disbelief, and some nearly mad. Is this really what Jesus intended when he said, “Follow me”? Is this what God had in mind when he said, “You will be my people and I will be your God”?

Sometimes people do seemingly crazy things to live out the fine print.

I had just completed what seemed like a typical day at the office, and I was heading outside to begin my short drive home when I heard an awful noise across the parking lot. It sounded like a trumpet, and the only thing that kept me from looking for the return of Christ was that I assumed Gabriel would play better than what I was hearing. I scanned the area and saw an old Pontiac circling our lot with a passenger hanging out the window blowing a trumpet.

Apparently I stood stunned long enough to catch their attention. Once we locked eyes, they seemed intent on chasing me down. The car barreled up to the sidewalk and came to a screeching halt. The driver and the passenger bounded out of the car and headed over to me. Just before I got into the Karate Kid stance to defend myself, the trumpeter asked, “Are you the lead pastor?” Several responses came to my mind, the first being, “No.” Of course, this would be a lie, but doesn’t the end justify the means? I also thought about referring him to another pastor, hoping that would distract him. Instead, I went with the truth. “Yes,” I said hesitantly.

Once I correctly identified myself, they were resolute on their mission: to pray a blessing on this church and its pastor. I admit I need prayer as much as the next guy, so I gladly received it. However, once the prayer began, one of the gentlemen left the holy huddle and went back to the car for something. After he returned, he began to anoint me, pouring oil he had just retrieved on my head and hands while the other prayed for me. I’m not sure what he said. He might have prayed for me to turn into a chicken for all I know, but I do know I’ll never forget the experience.

What causes someone to do this? Why did this manner of prayer and worship captivate these guys? What persuaded them to drive around a parking lot blowing a trumpet over a church and then anointing and praying for its pastor?

It is probably the same thing that has caused me to get up at three in the morning and put a suit on.

I was in Bible college and was resolute in my passion to know God and be found faithful in his presence. My roommate and I had heard about one of the professors who had a daily practice of getting up at three in the morning, showering, shaving, and putting on a suit to meet with God. He did this every day. So one day we decided to give it a try. After all, the professor was a devout man of God who had all the indications of Christ being fully formed in him.

//

We set our alarms for three and laid out our suits, giddy with anticipation. One factor we'd failed to consider was that, since we were college students, we usually stayed up past midnight. We tried to go to bed earlier, but we just couldn't sleep. No sooner had we finally dozed off than our alarm clock sounded. That didn't discourage us, though. We bounded out of our beds and showered, shaved, and suited up for our meeting with God. Then we grabbed our Bibles, notebooks, pens, flashlights, and a couple of lawn chairs and went out to a nearby hillside to set up our makeshift prayer cloister.

I was expecting the heavens to part and a bright light to shine down on us to welcome our presence. Instead, after we prayed, read, and journaled, we both just fell asleep in the chairs.

Did we get through to God? If he said something to us, we were too asleep to hear.

People Have Always Strived for God's Attention

You may not blow a trumpet or put on a suit at three in the morning, but all of us have our routines. Perhaps you go to church. You may like it, you may not, but something inside of you probably thinks, *If I go, I'll get in good with God. If I don't, then I shouldn't bother asking for anything this week.*

Maybe it's Bible reading and prayer. You have a Bible filled with highlights and notes in the margins. You keep a prayer journal, and though you are faithful to this time of reading and reflection, inside you secretly wonder if that is enough. *Am I doing it right? Why does it seem some of my prayers aren't getting past the ceiling?*

Maybe you're a worshiper. You love attending services and singing out to God at the top of your lungs. You don't even need to be in a church setting because sometimes you and God alone on a long drive is enough. You turn on your favorite worship playlist and pour out your heart to God. However, as soon as the service is

over or as soon as someone cuts you off on the road, the euphoria quickly dissipates. It's easy to wonder, *Did I not do it right? Why can't I live in constant communion with God?*

Maybe you're action oriented. You prefer to be serving, giving, working, and helping. You love the mission trips your church goes on. You thrive in the local soup kitchen. You can work for hours helping others. But you can't escape the thought, *Is this enough?* You really don't know the Bible as well as your friends. You aren't sure if you pray enough. Secretly you wonder, Am I doing this "Christian thing" right?"

Whatever your efforts are to connect with God, you're not alone.

History is filled with people who sought God's attention and wanted his smile upon them. For review, let's start in the Bible.

The first had to be Cain and Abel—the sons of Adam and Eve. The boys grew up outside of Eden and had never known what it was like to have walked with God in the cool of the day like their parents had. So getting God's attention and gaining his favor was something that was not only new to them, but something they sought to attain. They each prepared offerings to present to God, but someone went cheap. While Abel brought a gift that was both extravagant and intentional, Cain brought leftovers. Abel brought meat, and Cain brought grain (is this proof God is not a vegetarian?). Whatever the case, Abel's sacrifice was accepted and Cain's was not. Their story tells us very early on that there are right and wrong ways to try and connect with God.

The Tower of Babel may be the next one. Was it pride or passion that caused these foolhardy people to decide to build a tower toward heaven? They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to touch the sky. They wanted to be godlike in their

You can work for hours helping others. But you can't escape the thought, *Is this enough?* . . . Whatever your efforts are to connect with God, you're not alone.

presence and notoriety. Was this an attempt at immortality? At any rate, it seems to be a rather pronounced effort to be noticed by man, disguised as a method to reach God.

Fast-forward to the New Testament and you see the Pharisees taking things up a notch. They received the Old Testament law and made it their priority to be close to God. They kept the laws and then some. They even had laws to keep the laws to keep the laws. These guys were the masters of overkill. No one would utter the name of God (Yahweh), so they shortened it to “Ya” (thus, Hallelu-Ya, or Hallelujah). When writing that name, they would write a letter and go wash themselves, then write another letter, and repeat. I’m sure they were grateful God’s name was not Rumpelstiltskin. The problem with their way of life is that they were so focused on the law of God they couldn’t see the Son of God when he arrived.

Simon Bar-Jesus was another person who tried to get God’s attention. This guy was a magician who ran a pretty good game of parlor tricks until Peter came along with his miracles. Once Simon saw his crowd running to be healed by Peter, he begged Peter for these abilities. He even offered to pay for them. Peter was outraged at this man using God’s power for personal profit, and so are we. But before I point a finger, I know there are times I’ve stooped to this. Maybe not for profit, but I know there are times I’ve sought a connection with God just to either impress him or impress others—to get what another person has or to amaze those who lack it.

This strange collection of efforts doesn’t end there.

In AD 400 a man named Saint Simeon was also rather extreme. He joined a monastery at the age of sixteen, but even this proved to be too worldly, so he shut himself in a hut for three years and went the entire time of Lent without eating or drinking. After this, he moved to the desert to “imprison” himself in a small cave, but too many people would seek him out, asking for him to pray for them. So Saint Simeon finally decided to withdraw as much as he could. He had a pillar erected fifty feet in the air, where he built

a small platform to live out his days up there in communion with God until his death. He stayed on the pillar for thirty-six years.¹ (And you thought the Sunday service was long.)

Catherine of Siena lived in the 1300s, and she would practice self-punishment to connect with God. Some of her odd practices included drinking from sores, drastic fasting, and even inserting sticks down her throat to make herself vomit after eating. She became known as Saint Catherine.²

This practice of self-punishment was derived from some of the apostle Paul's teaching of "buffeting" his body till he became more holy.³ Years later this was taken very literally in an expression of "corporal mortification." One would actually punish one's own body as a spiritual discipline. As strange as this sounds, it was used by such revered Catholic saints as Francis of Assisi and Thomas Moore.

Creative and painful ways to connect with God are not found only in the past, but also in the present. Recently the news has chronicled the adventures of Carl James Joseph. Carl is referred to as a Catholic pilgrim from Detroit, Michigan, and has been living without money and depending on the generosity of others for twenty years. He dresses like Jesus and even sometimes carries a cross down the street. Because of this, he has been given the nickname "The Jesus Guy." The Jesus Guy has now visited over twenty countries and has become a well-known figure in the old city of Jerusalem. When asked about all this, Carl states he simply wants to emulate his Lord.⁴

How Do *You* Try to Get God's Attention?

So is that what it takes to follow Jesus? Self-inflicted pain? Walking the streets in a robe while carrying a cross? Standing on a pillar for thirty years? Of course we'd say no, but don't we have our own version of this?

Some of us are pretty quick to punish ourselves for whatever wrong we've done or the lack of good we've accomplished. It's one

thing to be convicted: “I need to say I’m sorry” or “I should have helped that man on the street corner.” But it’s another thing to feel condemned: “I don’t deserve anything good” or “How could God ever use a misfit like me?”

Personally I’ve struggled with this. Sometimes after giving a message at a weekend service, someone will say, “Great message!” To which I feel obligated to say, “Oh, it was all God.” I think deep down I believe if I don’t deflect all praise, then God will stop using me. But is that true humility?

Or have you ever done this: You hear about a friend who is going through hard times and you think, *I should help them*. So you follow that conviction to take them a meal or give them some money anonymously. It feels good for a moment, but then you begin to think, *I should have done more. I could have given them my car, or house, or a kidney*. Obviously I’m being facetious, but many of us let conviction turn to condemnation: “I didn’t do enough. God will not bless me anymore.” And the self-mortification continues. Does this really help us connect with God? Does this really help us follow Jesus? Is this exactly what Jesus intended when he said, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me”?⁵

And while we scoff at the Pharisees for their long lists of ways to keep God happy, don’t we do the same? We may not have over six hundred laws to help us keep the law, but we look for biblical qualities to turn into lists: love God, love people, follow the Ten Commandments, abide by the fruit of the Spirit, learn from the Beatitudes, pray without ceasing, cast all your fears on Christ, take every thought captive, watch out for the weaker brother, heed the long list that starts 2 Peter, and of course listen to everything John tells the seven churches in Revelation.

These are certainly inspired, authentic words from God for how to live, but they move from life-giving to a death sentence when we see them as a to-do list for the favor of God.

One of the clearest ways I've seen this is with Bible reading. We all know we should read our Bible, and every day is best. I've tried devotionals in the past, but that seemed too easy. So I started memorizing of one verse at a time, but that seemed too little to read. Recently I did the "Read the Bible through in a Year" plan. That seemed noble enough, but many days I found myself just logging pages to get it done. So the guilt I removed from not reading enough was replaced with the guilt of not absorbing enough.

And that's just the Bible reading. Ever tried praying "enough"? I've kept lists and journals and taken prayer retreats and refrained from TV and spent hours listening to God all to be left with a feeling of "That's good, but it could have been more." Why do I do this? Think about all the prayers we learn, the psalms we recite, the Rosary beads, the Serenity Prayer, even the prayer of Jabez. These are all good. They are all centering. But they can often feel like they are not enough.

Even generosity can feel as though it is not enough. How much is "enough" to be considered generous? The Bible gives a number at 10 percent, a tithe, but is it enough to treat God like you do the IRS? "I'll give you what I owe you, but not a penny more!" It's possible to tithe, give to other charitable organizations, serve on mission trips, and still wonder, *Have I done enough?*

Why do we often operate with this internal voice that says, "Good, but not great. Jump higher"?

Why do we do this to ourselves? What is it about these methods of self-mortification and self-imposed legalism that is so appealing?

Consider two reasons.

Generosity can feel as though it is not enough. How much is "enough" to be considered generous?

1. Control

There is something about knowing our list of things to do right that we enjoy because it allows us a sense of control over how God feels about us. After all, if I do all these things, then God is obligated to love me, bless me, and maybe even like me.

Recently, a family in our church had a child diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. We were all saddened to hear this news and we raced to their side. They were in shock and were still trying to get all the details for possible treatments and how to proceed. I recognize that in these situations our deepest fears emerge and our faith is shaken. Inevitably they asked the questions that we all ask at that moment: “Why did this happen?” “Why us?” “Why our child?” And then they followed it up with what many of us wrestle with: “We are good people. We love God. We do what he says. So . . . why?” I recognize that our worst theology comes out during the most difficult of times.

Why is this happening to me? After all, I've checked off all the boxes and done everything God said. We had a deal. I obey. He blesses.

I think this is what Jesus was cautioning us on when he said,

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁶

God is not always fair. And he gives to whom he wants. And he seems to be using a different playbook than just who keeps all the rules.

The problem with our trying to itemize and categorize our relationship with God is that we can't control God or force his hand. And every now and then he reminds us. Which is so frustrating for those of us who like to know “how to succeed” at everything we do. Legalists and perfectionists like lists and rules so we can

control our lives, our blessings, and sometimes our God. But even though God gives lists, he still cannot be controlled.

2. Score-keeping

There's another reason we are drawn to these types of discipleship methods. It's easier to keep score. We can determine how "good" we are and we can determine how "bad" someone else is. Furthermore, when we don't feel we are very good, we can just look at someone worse than us and not feel so bad anymore.

Isn't this what made the Pharisees so mad? They kept all the rules of what to eat and who to associate with, and when Jesus wouldn't eat with them they said, "He eats with sinners."

I know I went through years of being a closet Pharisee. I criticized those who smoked, drank, swore, had long hair, got tattoos, played the lottery, listened to secular music, and drove over the speed limit. It was easy to evaluate my success by what I *didn't* do, and it was easy to judge someone else's spiritual maturity by how many of these vices they avoided. But one day it hit me. I was moral. I was virtuous. But I didn't truly love anyone, and Jesus said a lot more about loving others than he did about cigar smoking or dancing. Jesus didn't seem to keep score. Jesus seemed to just love others.

Now, I know the pushback: "But we Christians are called to a different way to live. We are called to be renewed and transformed and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling." But it seems that there must be a way to do this that is less self-serving. How would Jesus really want us to follow him? What is God really expecting? And how do we protect ourselves from letting our efforts to connect with God turn into efforts to impress others?

Could it be that the way to follow Jesus was given to us before we were even introduced to Jesus?

A Better Way

Around four hundred years before Jesus, we were given a proclamation from a prophet who was trying to get God's people to follow God again. They were God's royal priesthood, a holy nation, blessed to be a blessing, but they were living below their calling. They were consumed with hedonism, selfishness, and idol worship. They drifted into pits of despair, were obsessed with self-preservation, and wallowed in their own fears and misfortune. It is into this setting that the prophet Micah was called to bring a word of realignment.

I wonder if you need to hear those words. Perhaps you are stuck in what seems to be an endless cycle of selfishness, despair, self-preservation, and exhaustion. Perhaps you know what it's like to be stuck in the performance trap of religious perfectionism. Maybe you are wondering if there is another list you've missed or another scorecard to fill out. What does it really take to get God's attention, to stay in God's good graces, and to live a life in the center of his will and blessing?

The prophet Micah gives Israel words that will be overlooked and passed over, but, fortunately, passed on. From Micah's proclamation we can learn what God does look at, how God does judge the heart, and what we should focus on. It's not another set of tasks to add to our already growing religious to-do list; rather, it's a statement that encapsulates the heart of God.

**Following Jesus is not
always easy, but it
was never meant
to be complicated.**

And starting in the next chapter, I hope you'll begin to see how three words, in particular, can change everything.

Granted, as my friend Mike Breaux said, following Jesus is not always easy, but it was never meant to be complicated.

TO-DO LIST

Create your own prescription label of the version of Christianity you are most familiar with along with its own “fine print.” Take note of what you include in both, as this can help you view the rest of the book from your own beliefs and/or experiences, as well as give you something to build on or goals to set in order to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What’s the most interesting thing you’ve ever done, or heard of someone doing, to try to get God’s attention?
2. Why do you think we make following Jesus so complicated?
3. Based on what you’ve read, know, or have experienced about Jesus, what do you think he expects of us in our own time and place?