

Chapter 1 - Miserable Christianity

It was at 1:00 A.M. on October 6, 1990, that I lay on my face in my office, crying. The previous year had brought me to a place of absolute brokenness. I had prayed for God to make me stronger, but He had a different plan. He was making me weaker. So there I lay, broken and hopeless.

In seventeen hours I would have to stand in my pulpit on Sunday evening and deliver a “State of the Church Address.” Either I could build a straw man of success, or I could tell the truth. I didn’t have the strength to pretend or the courage to be honest, so I prayed and cried. When I finished, I prayed and cried some more.

It didn’t make sense. Had God brought me to this church only to set me up for failure? Couldn’t He see that I was doing everything I knew how for Him? I couldn’t imagine what more He expected from me than my best. And I had done my best. God, what more do You want from me? Silence.

At this moment He seemed light-years away. The weight of failure was suffocating, and not just my failure as a pastor. I felt like a failure as a Christian. If dedicating my whole adult life to God to do His work wasn’t enough, what more did He want?

I had left a church in Alabama where I felt very successful, where people loved and affirmed me. Our church was recognized for its numerical growth, and we led the denomination in baptisms in our county. I received recognition from the Jaycees for being an “outstanding young religious leader.” I served on various denominational

committees and held office in our ministers' conference. For five years, I believed I was a successful pastor.

Then one Saturday afternoon the telephone rang. "Would you be willing to allow our pastor search committee to attend your church and hear you preach? Then we would like to have lunch with you and your family after the service." I had declined this kind of invitation numerous times in the past few years. Yet I sensed during the first conversation with the chairman of this pastor search committee that I should let these folks come.

After we'd had many weeks of contact with each other, I decided that God was indeed bringing us together. A few months later, Melanie, our four kids, and I found ourselves following a moving van across Interstate 20 toward Atlanta. Our new church had been declining in attendance for several years, but every congregation I had served had consistently grown, and I was confident that this one would too. I unpacked my books, my sermons, and my church-growth programs, anxious to get started. We had moved from a small town to the big city, and there were lots of people just waiting to be reached!

I pulled out my box of sugar-stick sermons and previously proven programs and went to work for God. But nothing happened. This was a new experience and I was puzzled. I reassessed the situation, prayed harder for God's help, took a deep breath, and launched my second wave of church-growth plans. We had sanctified pep rallies with our Sunday school teachers, strategy sessions with church leaders, and long-range planning discussions with our newly formed Dream Team. But as the months passed, the dream began to look more like a nightmare. I had told the people that, as I approached the end of my first year as

pastor, I would share a “State of the Church” address on my first anniversary. Now, as I examined the measurable progress during the past year, I knew that our church was in a sorry state. For the first time in my seventeen years of ministry, a church I served had declined in attendance during my first year. I was appalled!

Many Christians are struggling to make their lives count for Christ, only to discover that so much the Christian life isn’t working out like it’s supposed to.

When one feels like a failure, especially in a culture that places importance on success, there is a dull pain that can’t fully be described.

In the movie *City Slickers*, Mitch, the character played by Billy Crystal, is talking to a friend at work on his thirty-ninth birthday. He asks, “Do you ever reach a point in your life when you say, ‘This is the best I’ll ever look, the best I’ll ever feel, the best I’m ever gonna do, and it ain’t that great’?”

American culture demands that we be successful. People often measure our significance by what we have accomplished.

From the time our parents applauded our first steps, we have been conditioned to seek approval and acceptance from others by what we do. That fact puts unbelievable pressure on us to succeed.

This demand for success doesn’t stop outside the doors of the church. Many Christians are struggling to make their lives count for Christ, only to discover that the Christian

life isn't working out like it's supposed to. They are sincere about their commitment to Christ and have given it their best effort. Yet, they are frustrated because they can't live up to what they think a Christian ought to be. They've concluded that their spiritual life is about as good as it's ever gonna get, and it ain't that great.

There Must Be More than This!

Bible teacher Charles Trumbull described his spiritual frustrations this way:

There were great fluctuations in my spiritual life, in my conscious closeness of fellowship with God. Sometimes I would be on the heights spiritually; sometimes I would be in the depths. A strong, arousing convention; a stirring, searching address from some consecrated, victorious Christian leader of men; a searching Spirit-filled book; or the obligation to do a difficult piece of Christian service myself, with the preparation in prayer that it involved, would lift me up; and I would stay up for a while and God would seem very close and my spiritual life deep. But it wouldn't last.

Sometimes by some single failure before temptation, sometimes by a gradual downhill process, my best experiences would be lost, and I would find myself back on the lower levels. And a lower level is a perilous place for a Christian to be, as the devil showed me over and over again.¹

Sound familiar? It may describe the way you feel right now. I became a Christian at the age of eight, and Trumbull's description of his Christian experience pretty much parallels mine for the twenty-nine years after I

trusted Christ. I don't think I've been alone in this. Many who have professed Christ as Savior have secretly wondered, "Is this all there is to it? Surely the Christian life is meant to be more!" They know that they are supposed to be experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised, yet they find themselves in a life of mediocrity. These Christians want a victorious Christian life, but they don't know **how** to find it.

Matt was a young man who struggled with an addiction to illegal drugs and alcohol. I had given him all the pat answers about reading the Bible more and praying harder. But here he was again sitting in my office, wanting my help. "It's not that I don't want to live for God," he said. "I pray for Him to help me and I really mean it, but things just never seem to change." I knew he meant it. His sincerity was obvious. That's what frustrated me. I had told him the same answers over and over again, but they weren't working for him.

In one way, Matt and I weren't all that different. No, I wasn't addicted to drugs or alcohol—my sins were far more respectable than that. But, in spite of all my efforts to be free, I could still point to areas of my life where I felt enslaved. Until God revealed the key to enjoying victory in the Christian life, I tried a lot of things that didn't work. And Matt and I weren't alone in this frustration. Maybe you can relate to some of our efforts to find the fulfillment you have hungered for.

If at First You Don't Succeed...

We live in a culture that commends effort. From childhood we have been told, "Don't give up. Don't be a quitter. Keep trying until you accomplish your goal." You've seen the

Avis ad, "We try harder!" In the natural world, trying harder is commendable and often effective. But God's ways aren't our ways. Sometimes they seem to be opposite from ours. In the spiritual world, trying harder is detrimental. That's right. Trying harder will defeat you every time.

No Christian has a problem with the previous paragraph as it relates to salvation. If an unsaved person were to suggest to you that he was trying hard to become a Christian, what would you tell him? You would probably make it clear that he could not be saved by trying, but by trusting. You would tell him that there is absolutely nothing he could do to gain salvation. It has all already been done. Salvation is a gift to be received, not a reward to be earned. A person who tries even a little bit to gain salvation by works cannot become a Christian. As Paul said about salvation, "If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6). In other words, it has to be either grace or works. We are saved by grace, and trying hard has absolutely nothing to do with it.

But many Christians who understand that trying is detrimental to becoming a Christian somehow think that it is essential to living in victory after salvation. The truth is that victory is not a reward but a gift. A person does not experience victory in the Christian life by trying hard to live for God. It just won't work! I know because that's what

I did. Have you tried to live for God? Did your efforts cause you to experience real victory? I rest my case...temporarily.

I lived many years of my Christian life trapped in what I call the motivation-condemnation-rededication cycle. From the earliest years of my Christian life, I had a mental picture of what I thought I should be. In this picture there was always a wide gap between where I ought to be and where I was. Sometimes when I was especially motivated, I would feel that the gap had narrowed a bit. When I was winning people to Christ or spending a lot of time praying and studying the Bible, I felt that I might actually one day be able to bridge the gap and be a victorious Christian.

But inevitably, my motivation level would diminish and my fury and fire would die down. That decline always led to a sense of condemnation. Even when I had done nothing wrong, I would feel guilty for not doing all the things that I believed I should be doing. The devil had a field day with me during this phase. Sometimes I would become spiritually indifferent. Other times I would wonder if I would ever be consistent in my Christian life. I would wallow in my misery until I couldn't stand it anymore; then I would finally rededicate myself to God, confessing my spiritual slothfulness. With genuine contempt for my inconsistency, I would ask God to help me be more consistent. I would promise to read my Bible more, pray more, win more souls, whatever I thought it took to get back on course. I resolved to try harder than ever to live for God. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I never experienced real peace about my Christian life. If I read five chapters of the Bible, I felt that I should have read ten. If I led one person to Christ, I thought it should have been two.

My wife, Melanie, used to tell me, "You'll never be satisfied." I was a classic Type A personality trying hard to

do something for God. It was a miserable ride on a spiritual roller coaster!

Many other people have acknowledged a similar experience. They live in this vicious cycle, moving from motivation to condemnation to rededication. If this describes your spiritual life, after a while this constant spinning around and around will make you sick. But I want to give you hope. There is a way to get off this ride! I know because I got off this nauseating roller coaster, and I have found the Christian life to be much more wonderful since then.

You Know the Rules!

An important cornerstone of a civilized society is law. Without laws to govern the behavior of its citizens, a nation would exist in anarchy. Webster's defines law as "a rule or order that it is advisable or obligatory to observe." We have all been taught that if we don't obey the rules, we will be punished. Whether it is a child sneaking cookies before dinner or an adult driving 70 in a 55-mph zone, if we get caught breaking the rules, we pay the price. Because we are taught from the cradle to the coffin that we must obey the law, it is very natural to transfer this system into the Christian life. The law of God is good because it accomplishes an important function. But many Christians have misunderstood the purpose of the law. The law was given so that people might see their own absolute inadequacy to live in a way that glorifies God. In the Old Testament the law revealed to Israel God's righteous standard. The story of the Hebrew people chronicles their repeated failure to live up to God's laws. Because God is omniscient, He knew before He gave the law that they wouldn't keep it.

Through the law God revealed that righteousness cannot come from external regulations. Every person understands this at the time of salvation, but many seem to believe that the rules change after they are saved. Some who are quick to point out that keeping religious rules won't cause anybody to become a Christian believe that keeping certain rules will help them grow in the Christian life. These folks spend great amounts of time trying to improve their spiritual performance.

After the service one Sunday morning, Vicki came to me with tears in her eyes. "Steve, can I talk to you a minute?" We walked to the office area and sat down. Nervously fidgeting with a crumpled Kleenex, she began to cry. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I have rededicated myself to God over and over again. I'm reading my Bible, although I don't seem to get much out of it these days. I set my clock to get up early and spend time in prayer. I even agreed to work in the children's church so that I could serve the Lord there. But I still feel empty. I've asked God if I'm unhappy because of some sin in my life, but I can't think of anything.

Why don't I have the joy that Christians are supposed to experience?" Vicki is typical of many Christians. Instead of experiencing joy in Christ, she was trying to find fulfillment through her Christian lifestyle. Her lack of contentment caused her to believe that God must not be pleased with her.

I can certainly relate to her experience. For many years I thought that God accepted me more when I served Him as I thought He wanted me to do. I knew that He always loved me, but felt that He probably didn't really like me at times.

I pictured God sitting in heaven keeping His patience, like a parent whose anger is about to explode if the child's conduct doesn't improve soon. When I was in a motivation phase, I would do as much as possible to gain His approval. One time a friend and I agreed that we wouldn't eat until we led someone to Christ. We started out visiting hardened "prospects" and gradually worked our way down as we became increasingly hungry. Finally, we got a kid bicycling in the park to pray the sinner's prayer; then we made a beeline to McDonald's!

Sometimes I would fast and pray for hours. Once I spent three days in my office without coming out. At the end of my "time with God," I was starving and dirty, but didn't feel any closer to God! Don't miss my point. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to witness to unsaved people, or to fast and pray. I am saying that it was ridiculous to have thought it was somehow possible to cause God to accept me more than He already did.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard people lament a lack of fulfillment in their Christian life and then conclude that the answer was to get back in church, witness more, start tithing, or pray more. Take it from one who did all those things and still felt unfulfilled—polishing your performance is not the answer! Some of the most miserable people in the world are drowning in a sea of religious activity. The sad thing is that they are absolutely sincere.

Can you relate to this? If you can, stay tuned, because I've got some good news for you!

Why Can't I Be Successful?

Some people think that ministers have it all together, but I'll let you in on a secret. Sometimes I don't have it all together. In fact, at times I've felt that it was all falling apart! Preachers are just like other people in many ways.

A friend of our son David came home with us after church one Sunday afternoon. That evening he went home and told his mother, "They're just like us!" It's good he figured that out early in life. Pastors don't speak King James English. We sometimes yell at our kids and argue with our wives and worry about our bills. We can even act like idiots, laughing at silly things. Some of us are Trekkies. We know about Indiana Jones and Rambo. We might even offer an opinion about the characters on the latest sitcom.

Got the picture? I'm just a regular guy like you. There is something else pastors have in common with other Christians. We all have had the desire to be successful in our spiritual life. The popular belief is that success comes by commitment and hard work. That's true in the business world. A person dedicated to accomplishing something in business has every reason to be optimistic about his chances in our free enterprise system. But it doesn't work that way in the spiritual life. The criterion for measuring success in the world is production. The person who produces impressive results in business is considered successful.

Successful people have learned how to accomplish the desired results. But here is where we get into trouble

in the Christian life. Christianity isn't built around performance, but is centered on the person of Jesus Christ.

When we transfer a worldly approach to success to the Christian life, we are in for disappointment. And, unfortunately, this understanding of spiritual success has infiltrated the modern church. When Paul met the brethren, he greeted them with the words “grace” and “peace.” Today pastors often greet each other with words like “How many are you running now? What’s your budget? How many baptisms did you have last year?” I am embarrassed to admit how often I have asked those questions in the past. My concept of success in the church was tied to production and performance. I had the same understanding about my personal life. I thought that to be a successful Christian, I must read the Bible enough, pray enough, do enough evangelistic outreach—more production and performance.

My whole life was wrapped up in rules and routine. Have you experienced this in your life? It was a thrilling day when I finally came to understand that Christianity is not rules and routine, but a relationship! God never intended for our focus to be on performing and producing. He desires that our focus be on the person of Jesus Christ!

Your sense of failure may be
the catalyst God wants to use
to bring you to a new understanding
of the meaning of the Christian life.

So many Christians today measure the success of their spiritual lives by whether they live up to religious rules. They focus on their performance. They try to live up to the standard they have set for themselves, but they can never do enough. No wonder they feel defeated!

When Christians try to live by rules, the outcome will be the same as it has always been. They will discover that they just can't measure up, regardless of how hard they try. The law is intended to make people realize, "I just can't do it. I've tried and tried, but I just can't live a successful Christian life." If that's how you feel, then you might be closer than you know to enjoying success. Your sense of failure may be the catalyst God wants to use to bring you to a new understanding of the meaning of the Christian life.

For a long time I thought that to experience success in my Christian life, I had to work harder. But I discovered that the key to enjoying success is not strenuous work, but spiritual rest. This is a paradox in Scripture—we must rest while we work! Many Christians feel like spiritual failures. Satan knows that as long as he can keep them feeling and thinking like defeated failures, they will behave that way.

There is a way to enjoy a successful Christian life every day! There is a quality of Christian living that I didn't know existed until twenty-nine years after I was saved. I don't blame you if you don't believe it yet. Just don't close your mind to the possibility that there might be more to the Christian life than you are experiencing right now.

All those years when I struggled to do something for God, I was sincere. And God graciously gave me some wonderful times in my Christian life and ministry. But then He began a work in my life greater than anything I had ever known. But it wasn't a happy process. In fact, God's work in my life had brought me to the place where I lay on the floor wondering whether or not I would continue in the ministry. My feelings were beyond disappointment or even

discouragement. I felt despair. God, if this is all that ministry will ever be, I want out. I just want to quit. I think God must have smiled, because that's exactly what He had been waiting to hear. Now what He would do in my life would make the former days look mediocre at best.