

A Fresh Encounter with God

"I Don't Feel Like A Very Good Christian."

Matthew 5:6

Pastor Eddie Idefonso

Why does it seem that you can never quite measure up?

Not too long ago, I was speaking with an acquaintance of mine about a conversation that he had with his wife. It was a very interesting conversation and it went something like this: "I could tell something was bothering my wife one evening—she was quieter than usual and didn't look at me as much. Finally, after the kids were put to bed, she said, "I don't know what's wrong."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "I don't . . . **I just don't feel like a very good Christian.**"

I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to tell her that of course she was a wonderful Christian, but she didn't look like she was quite ready to believe that. So instead I asked, "What do you think is making you feel like that?"

"I haven't had a quiet time for a while," she confessed. "After chasing two small kids all day, I feel wiped out; I'm too tired to read the Bible and pray. Mornings are crazy, and the kids don't nap at the same time, so I haven't had devotions in weeks. I'm not even sure I have a relationship with God anymore."

A week later, at a small group meeting we attend, the group broke into small clusters for prayer. Alicia (*not her real name*) intended to tell the two women she was with about her problem. But they mentioned their prayer requests first. Both described, haltingly, how they didn't feel they were doing well with the Lord because they hadn't been having their quiet times. Alicia was amazed. "So it's not just me," she said to me on the way home.

No, it wasn't just her. That week I had written in my journal, "Lord, I want to live more simply, as Jesus did, but I love money as much as anyone. I should be out ministering in some way, maybe at the nursing home, but I haven't got going. I haven't been reading my Bible and praying like I should. And I want to lead family devotions on Sunday nights, but I've been so sporadic lately. I feel like I've failed You."

The more I get to know committed Christians, the more I find many of them wrestling with an affliction I call "**not feeling like a very good Christian.**" They feel they haven't done quite enough to genuinely please God. Most people won't admit the struggle until you get to know them well. But I've come to the conclusion that it's probably one of the most common—yet least talked about—maladies in the spiritual life.

SYMPTOMS OF THE SYNDROME

After studying Scripture, reading books by the classic devotional writers (many of whom, I was surprised to discover, felt that way, too), and talking with other believers, I've found that Christians who struggle with this problem share some common symptoms.

A burning desire to please the Lord. The sense that **"I haven't been doing very well lately"** does not afflict the lazy or unconcerned believer. It saves itself for the earnestly committed. People who memorize Scripture, attend small groups, care about missions, and serve in their church are, ironically, the most likely candidates to feel they should be doing more. Only those who **"hunger and thirst for righteousness,"** as Jesus put it ([Matthew 5:6](#)), know the gnawing and growling discomfort of not being filled.

A fear that whatever you're doing isn't quite enough. The feeling's explainable, I suppose, when you haven't been able to have a quiet time for weeks. But oddly, it can continue even when you're consistent and active. If you begin praying for ten minutes a day, you feel that if you were really committed, you'd be praying for thirty. If you're reading one passage of Scripture a day, you feel a nagging sense of angst that a whole chapter would be better.

Those desires for more commitment may, of course, be the prompting of the Holy Spirit. But if you give more time to spiritual disciplines and *still* fear you're not doing enough, you may be in the **"I'm not a very good Christian" cycle.**

A growing anger or frustration with the Christian life. In his more honest moments, the Christian struggling with this has to admit, My Christian life isn't as much fun as it used to be. What happened to the joy? He recognizes a creeping anger about the burden of it all, the sheer work of keeping all the balls spinning: He has to get up early and jog to be a good steward of his body; then he has to pray, to be a good steward of his spirit; then he has to study and memorize Scripture to be a good steward of his mind. *All I want to do is please the Lord,* he thinks. *Why do I feel so weighed down?*

A tendency to compare your Christian life with others. Some speakers have exhorted me to pray more by citing the example of Paul Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church. *He prays for five hours a day.* I admire Pastor Cho, but I have to admit that statistic doesn't inspire me; it paralyzes me. Some days, I have trouble squeezing in five hours of sleep, let alone prayer. How can I ever keep up with that standard?

This is the disturbing side of the disease. Ever so subtly, and unintentionally, we begin to base our value as believers on how much we're reading Scripture, praying, witnessing, and giving. Then we compare ourselves with others in our church or small group (or in Christian books). If we come out unfavorably, it usually doesn't inspire us to new heights of faithfulness. Instead, it may make us feel we aren't as precious to God as they must be. *Why hasn't God blessed me as much as He has them?* we sometimes think. *I wish I had that kind of time to devote or that kind of discipline or those opportunities to minister.*

(Ironically, if our comparison comes out favorably, it usually leads to spiritual pride!)

HOW TO BE A "REALLY GOOD CHRISTIAN"

The "**I'm not a very good Christian**" syndrome is not strictly a modern problem; Paul once wrote a letter to a church full of people who felt these symptoms. In it he not only described the problem but also offered a straightforward cure.

After Paul had packed up and left his church, other guest speakers had come with an exciting new message: If you really want to please God, you need to do a few things—set aside certain days for prayer, and so on. These young and earnest church members did those, but there were some troubling side effects. These folks began to think God loved them less if they stopped keeping up with the commitments. If they faltered, their Christian lives were through.

When Paul heard about it, his blood pressure must have skyrocketed. He wrote a letter to these Galatians, and as you read it, you can practically see the color in his face:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? . . . I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. —[Galatians 3:1–3](#), [Galatians 4:11](#)

Allow me to paraphrase for those of us who live today. Paul is saying, "Now think: Did God adopt you as His children because you had completed a four-week study? Prayed every day for an hour during that time? Memorized thirty key verses? **No, you became a Christian by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection, and you keep living as a Christian the same way. It depends on His Spirit, not your effort.**"

The Galatians were struggling with **legalism**—the belief that God's love and acceptance depend on what we do, not what He's already done. Scholars believe that in the Galatians' time, the practices that assured them they were now "**really good Christians**" were circumcision and observing certain festivals and special days. **In our day, the practices are usually prayer, fasting, Scripture memorization, and Bible study.**

There's not the slightest thing wrong with any of those spiritual disciplines; they're great, and I and many other Christians benefit from them. But what makes us "**really good Christians**" is trust in Jesus. Period. It's easy, though, to slide into the idea that our stock with God rises and falls with our ability to perform certain spiritual disciplines consistently.

As soon as I think God loves me less because I've missed a quiet time, I'm in trouble. Suddenly my Christian life is resting not on trust in what Jesus did, but on my efforts at 6 a.m. As Paul explained to his friends in Galatia, "**We, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified**" ([Galatians 2:16](#)).

SHOULD I HAVE MY QUIET TIME?

If you're like me, at this point you're probably asking, "But if I trust completely in Christ, rather than my effort, for my Christian growth, does that mean I give up praying, reading the Bible, and doing these other things?"

That's the right question, and the answer is emphatically no. There's nothing wrong and everything right with these spiritual practices and disciplines. Spiritual disciplines allow the presence of Christ to become more evident in our lives. They're indispensable.

The problem is instead the attitude we can unknowingly begin to operate under: that they put us right with God, or that God is more pleased with us if we do them and less pleased with us if we don't. While we were sinners, utterly incapable of keeping a regular quiet time, God died for us. God's love for us can't be increased or decreased by our devotional life or lack of it.

Romans 5:8 (KJV)

⁸ But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 (MSG)

⁸ But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

Romans 5:8 (TLB)

⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

Romans 5:8 (YLT)

⁸ and God doth commend His own love to us, that, in our being still sinners, Christ did die for us;

Romans 5:8 (AMP)

⁸ But God shows *and* clearly proves His [own] love for us by the fact that while we were still sinners, Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One) died for us.

Robert Hudnut, a Presbyterian pastor and the author of *This People, This Parish*, points out that there are really only two motivating forces in our lives: love and fear. Both are valid, but love is the sweeter and stronger of the two. So I've learned to ask myself this question: "Am I doing this more out of love (for God) or fear (that He won't love me if I don't)?" I'd like to reach the point where every quiet time, every Bible study, every journal entry is done because I love God so much for saving me. Less and less do I want to do these things because I'm afraid He won't love me quite as much if I don't.

WHAT GOD WANTS US TO KNOW

The good news is that if anyone wants our Christian life to be infused with joy rather than guilt, it is God. He wants us to practice every spiritual discipline with the freeing knowledge that His love for us won't diminish if we blow it. He wants us to know and feel that we're very good Christians, kids that He cares deeply about.

I wish I could say that we can *do* something to free ourselves from Christian legalism and the accompanying guilt feelings that we're not very good Christians. But the problem, for we who wrestle with this, **is that we're depending too much on our doing already**. The weak spot we need to develop is in the area of rest and receiving from God. Isaiah put it exquisitely: "**In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength**" ([Isaiah 30:15](#)). What we who struggle with Christian legalism need to learn is **not the fight of faith** ([1 Tim. 6:12](#)) but its partner, **the rest of faith** ([Hebrews 4:3](#); [Hebrews 4:10](#)).

But there are some movements of God we can learn to watch for. And we can join in those with prayers of acceptance and gratitude.

The first step God uses in the healing process, I've discovered, is to allow us to become utterly frustrated and despairing that we will ever be able to please Him. It seems we must reach the point where we realize our inability to pray, to keep commitments, to really thirst for God. *I used to be disciplined*, we think. *What's gone wrong with me?* If you feel or have felt this way, you're in good company. So did the Apostle Paul. He agonized, "**We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do**" ([Romans 7:14–15](#)).

I remember falling to this spiritual confusion during my first years as a new Christian. Nothing in my Christian life worked anymore. Regardless of how hard I tried, I seemed unable to do any of the spiritual disciplines I wanted so badly to do, and used to be able to do. One night, in frustration, I walked to my pastor's office. I collapsed in a chair in his office and began to complain. "Pastor," I said, "I can't do it anymore. I'll never be the Christian I want to be. I just can't do it."

Pastor looked at me and said, "**I'm glad you finally realized that.**"

Some compassion that was! But Pastor was right. I was never going to trust Jesus more if I were still able to trust in Eddie. Only when I gave up on that shifty old Eddie would I be able to throw myself completely upon God.

If you take a Red Cross lifesaving course, they teach you how to rescue a drowning swimmer. The first thing you do—and this seems cruel—is immobilize him; you drag him under if you have to. But only when the victim gives up on his own thrashing efforts to stay afloat will he be able to be carried safely to shore.

Paul got to the point where he gave up his efforts and depended solely on Christ's rescue. "**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me,**" he wrote. "**The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**" ([Galatians 2:20](#)).

The second step God uses in the healing process is to convince us that He loves us. "**Perfect love drives out fear,**" John wrote ([1 John 4:18](#)). When we've been loved in God's perfect way, we gradually lose our fear of not measuring up.

Often this step will be partly accomplished through a loving person in our church or family or small group. If we can confess the awful and embarrassing sins in our life to someone and still find love from him or her, it helps us to believe that God could love us that way, too.

It may be that we realize God's love through a period of rest, where we can't be loved for what we're doing because we aren't doing anything. Dave Johnson, a pastor in the Twin Cities, says, "You need to know that God loves you even if you don't teach Sunday school. So you may have to quit teaching for a month to find that out."

Third, God will teach us that he is ultimately responsible for our spiritual growth. Until now, we've wanted so much to grow in Him, but we've assumed it was largely our responsibility. Instead, God wants us to learn that He's more concerned about it than we could ever be. He wants us to be **"confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"** ([Phil. 1:6](#)). God will get the job done. He will give us the desire to pray; He will give us the discipline to stick to it; He will give us the self-control to say no to distractions. We have to learn to trust Him for that. We have to believe that God does work in us **"to will and to act according to his good purpose"** ([Phil. 2:13](#)).

All of this takes time. Most of us, from the time we were babies, learned that acceptance depended upon our performance: not crying, sitting still, keeping our clothes neat, earning merit badges, doing well in sports, getting good grades. Psychologists tell us that many people grow up doubting their parents would really love them no matter what they did. So we have to be patient for God to retrain our way of thinking, to convince us He has a love for us that won't and can't quit.

But God's not in a hurry. He'll complete His work in us; He'll set us free from the snare of Christian legalism; He'll cause us to realize we're always **"good Christians"** as our faith rests on a good Christ. Until then, Jesus' words in ([Luke 12:32, KJV](#)) shelter us against the occasional sinking feeling that we're not very good Christians: **"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."**