



*Discover the Riches
of a Surrendered Life*

MICHAEL BLUE

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“*Free to Follow* is an outstanding book! Michael Blue makes a compelling case for followers of Christ to surrender to him and wholeheartedly serve the Savior. It’s extraordinarily well-written. This book will challenge you, convict you, and convince you that the path where you will discover ultimate joy and freedom is on the narrow road following Christ. I heartily recommend it!”

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—GARY G. HOAG, author of *The Choice*, President & CEO,
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“This book serves as a great reminder, to all Christians, that God desires each of us to leverage our resources to meet urgent spiritual and physical needs around the world.”

—CHRIS HUNSBERGER, CEO, Radical

“As I read this book I experienced a clear and challenging call to a life of surrender. Yet I didn’t lose hope. Michael doesn’t pull punches on how wealth, our materialistic culture, and even our churches can stand in the way of surrender. But he also shows through Scripture, stories, and practices of what a life of surrender to the ways of Jesus looks like, especially in our possessions and lifestyles. This book is full of grace and truth.”

—PATRICK JOHNSON, founder of GenerousChurch

“In *Free to Follow*, Michael Blue deeply explores the implications of Jesus’s call to find our highest and deepest satisfaction not in the gifts, but in the Giver—the need to die to self when it comes to money so that we might grasp hold of the greater gift of relationship with Jesus himself. Michael shares his own journey—warts and all—in growing in obedience that leads to radically countercultural joy. Readers will find themselves challenged and confronted, but will find in *Free to Follow* a compassionate companion for the difficult journey of disentangling our hearts from our wallets.”

—TIM MACREADY, Chief Investment Officer, Brightlight Group

“Rooted firmly in biblical truth, this wisdom packed book has helped me see clearly how to approach finances so that they are not a stumbling block, or idol, but rather a tool for eternal riches. I know first-hand, that Michael Blue not only speaks, but demonstrates faith, generosity, and financial freedom with his life. Highly recommended for all of us in the West inundated by materialism, consumerism, and individualism.”

—DREW SHIH, Pastor, Living Stones Christian Church
in Silicon Valley

Free to Follow

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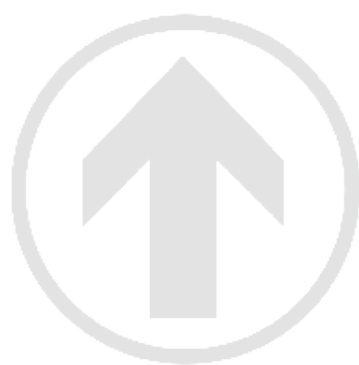
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INTRODUCTION

*JESUS HATH NOW many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of his cross. He hath many desirous of comfort, but few of tribulation. He findeth many companions of his table, but few of his abstinence. All desire to rejoice with him, few are willing to endure anything for him, or with him. Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of bread; but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many reverence his miracles, few follow the ignominy of his cross. Many love Jesus so long as adversities do not happen. Many praise and bless him, so long as they receive comforts from him.*¹

This was me. I was counted with the many. I'm ashamed to admit that a man living in the fifteenth century, Thomas à Kempis, put a pin so precisely on my life. The comforts of a Christian life were my lifelong companion, but I knew little of following in the way of Jesus.

1. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418–1427; repr., Chicago: Moody, 2007), part 2, chap. 11, Kindle.

My name is Michael Blue. You probably don't know me, but you may know my father—Ron Blue. My father is a well-known (at least to those who are older than fifty) Christian financial author, speaker, and entrepreneur. He literally wrote the book on managing personal finances from a biblical perspective.² As a child, my four siblings and I served as his test subjects. It was like living in a weird financial laboratory. We were weaned on the envelope system of managing money and each saved enough money by the age of sixteen to pay for half of our first car. Debt was a dangerous four-letter word and tithing was the unquestioned starting point for giving. Simply put, we knew how to be responsible with money. And we knew how to do it biblically.

Fast-forward to age thirty. I've been married eight years, have two children, and have been working as a big-firm attorney for four years. We live in a nice house 2.5 miles from downtown Austin, Texas. We belong to a church, attend regularly, tithe faithfully, save diligently, and, from all worldly external measures, are prospering. We were living the catalog version of the successful, sweet Christian life. But there was a problem. I was spiritually empty. Going through the motions. Questioning my faith. Frankly, I didn't need God in my life. He was nice for staying out of hell, but otherwise, he didn't serve much purpose. I had taken care of pretty much everything else. Retirement, life insurance, disability insurance, college funding—it was all under control. The only thing I needed God for was a salve for my soul. And if that was all he was good for, was he even necessary?

2. Ron Blue, *Master Your Money: A Step-by-Step Plan for Experiencing Financial Contentment*, 5th ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2016).

So I began to search. Did I believe this stuff about God? With all that science had uncovered, could I believe in God? Was he necessary to understand the universe? What purpose did he serve in my life?

As I pondered these questions, I realized my view of God was flawed. My life with God was just like the “many” Thomas à Kempis described. He was someone I was associating with for my comfort and ease, but I had no understanding of what it meant to follow him. I didn’t know God. I couldn’t identify with the “few” Thomas à Kempis described. And I didn’t want to. I came to the humbling conclusion that my life showed I didn’t care about the things God cared about. I had satisfactorily checked the tithing box, but that was where it ended. I lived for entertainment, comfort, protection, and leisure. My life may have looked “Christian” from the outside, but in truth I looked nothing like Jesus. My heart was far from him.

This was the moment that brought me face-to-face with a devastating conclusion—I didn’t believe the things about Jesus I claimed to believe. If I did, my life would ooze forth manifestations of that belief. Not just in a few external gestures, but in deep desperation of knowing him and making his name known. This realization forced me to make a choice. Either start living my life as if Jesus is who he said he is or quit playing religion and get on with my life. Being stuck in the middle was a reality I refused to wallow in any longer. As you might’ve guessed, I chose the former. I chose to take off my man-made yoke of religion and pick up Jesus’s yoke. I decided it was time to quit playing at religion and start following Jesus.

And so my search became a journey, one that is still being written. A journey of learning to live a life testifying to the fact that God is a God who can still be trusted. And not just for eternity. This journey has forced me to radically rethink my

life. It has taken me far outside my comfort zone and brought new life to my dying faith. For the first time, I understand what Jesus meant when he said to save my life I must lose it—what Thomas à Kempis meant when he described the “few” who take Jesus’s invitation seriously. And this is now what I want. We’ve been learning surrender and trust as a family. It’s been beautiful and messy and hard. But death is always hard. But with God, we’re promised that death brings life. And that life is the only life worth pursuing. It’s the life the “few” are privileged to live.

I want to invite you on a journey with the few. Where we explore what it means to lose our lives following Jesus. Where we learn why the way of the few is far better than the way of the many. Even in hardship. Especially in hardship.

The invitation to follow Jesus is a hard call, and few find it. But it’s a good call. It’s the only call that leads to life. I want us to dive deep into troubled waters and disrupt our preconceived notions of what it means to follow Jesus, particularly as it relates to our money.

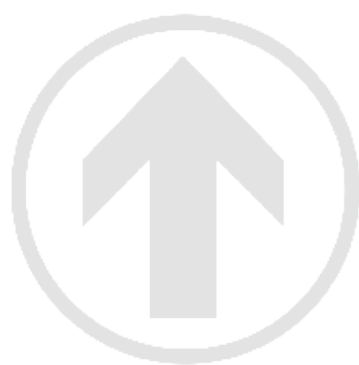
Money is one of the key barriers preventing us from living a fully surrendered life. Much of this stems from how we view money and its purpose in our lives. We’ve been shaped by the culture around us and become convinced that money is a resource we’re entitled to use for any purpose. This mentality has warped the way we relate to God and is keeping us from freely following Jesus. I want us to explore how to lay down this weight and burden in order to live the free life of a surrendered follower of Jesus.

We’ll begin this journey by exploring Jesus’s call to surrender and what that kind of life entails. We’ll look specifically at what the Bible teaches about surrender in our finances. Then we’ll turn to the great barrier to a surrendered life and explore

the ways our churches have dressed this barrier up in Christian clothes leading us to believe it's right and good. Next, we'll look at what our response to the physical and spiritual urgencies in the world testifies to others about what we believe. Finally, we'll close with a call to live distinctly and pursue God with our lives.

These are questions which followers of Jesus have wrestled with since the beginning. I take solace in the consistent witness on this topic as I seek to exhort us to live fully surrendered lives. I want us to take seriously the call of Christ. I want us to think deeply about this call. Sadly, all too many of us live in the shallows of faith; I want us to live in the middle of the ocean. I want to call us out of the shallows and into the deep.

Are you ready to leave the safety of the shallows?





CHAPTER
ONE

ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

“GOSPEL” MEANS GOOD NEWS.

That is why we call the story about Jesus Christ the “gospel.”¹ It’s good news. In fact, it’s the best news in the world. As the apostle Paul described it, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is God’s power to save *all* who believe. What better news could there ever be?

One thing has always struck me as odd in this verse: if this is such good news, why would Paul need to make it clear that he wasn’t ashamed of it? Good news, by its nature, is welcome. Good things are worth sharing with others. So, why be ashamed of something good? Before answering that, let’s look at another example of good news and how people responded to it.

On August 14, 1945, Japan unconditionally surrendered. World War II was over. As President Truman finished

1. For more theological unpacking of the gospel, see Paul Washer, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2016).

announcing this news to a throng of reporters squeezed into the Oval Office, the reporters rushed out of his office, grabbed the official announcement, and began broadcasting the good news. Within minutes, the world knew the good news. The war was over. The killing would stop.

Millions of people flooded the streets of major cities and celebrated for days. We can all envision the scenes as we think of soldiers kissing women, ticker tape falling, and Times Square overflowing. No doubt, in smaller towns, neighbors gathered to spread the news and celebrate the end of the bloodshed. Their boys were coming home. This news was the type of news that made strangers into friends and friends into family.

Good news like this is too good not to share. No one worries that they will offend someone by knocking on their door and telling them the war is over. Nobody would say, "I am not ashamed of the news that World War II is over." Simply put, there is nothing to be ashamed of in sharing good news like this. So why does Paul need to preface his statement about the gospel by saying he isn't ashamed of it?

If the gospel is indeed the salvation everyone needs to be made right with God and it is only through this salvation that we can be made right with God, then the gospel is good news we should unashamedly share. In fact, this good news is infinitely better than the news about the end of World War II. Why would anyone ever be ashamed of sharing it?

There is one glaring difference between the good news of World War II ending and the good news of the gospel. With the former, people were hoping for a solution to a major problem that affected every part of their lives, and with the latter, people don't think there is a problem needing a solution. Many people reject the gospel as good news because they don't think there is anything they need to be saved from. As a matter of fact,

the idea that they need saving is offensive to them. Knowing that people aren't looking for the good news of the gospel and may even be offended by the suggestion that they need to be saved from something, can create a sense of fear, or shame, for us when we want to share the gospel. This is why we might behave as if we're ashamed of the gospel.

I've spent much of my life wrestling with this sense of fear and shame. I know I should share the gospel with people, but I'm fearful of the possibility of experiencing social awkwardness or rejection. I get too concerned with the fear that if a person rejects my presentation of the gospel, they're also rejecting me and we'll never have a normal interaction again. As a result, I have far too often failed to share the gospel. I have lived as one who is ashamed of the gospel.

I don't think I'm alone in this.

I believe most of us have experienced this shame and felt guilty over our failed attempts to overcome it. I'm convinced the only way we will ever overcome this fear is by rightly understanding the magnitude of the good news of the gospel. News that is so good it makes the good news of the end of World War II look like news that there is a \$0.01 discount on a cup of coffee at the gas station. Putting the gospel's saving power into proper perspective allows us to overwhelm our feelings of shame and fear with the magnificence of its power. It is incumbent on each of us to bask in the unspeakable magnificence of the good news of the gospel and then share it with others regardless of how they may respond.

I believe these feelings of fear and shame are a major part of what Paul meant when he said he wasn't ashamed of the gospel. He wasn't going to fear telling anyone about it just because they didn't believe it or think they needed it. And the reason he

could do this was that he deeply understood the saving power of the gospel.

DIFFERENT SHAME

While this type of shame is certainly a part of what Paul addresses, I believe there is another type of shame—a more insidious type—with which Paul is also concerned. A shame that poisons Christianity in the West, a shame that has become so complete that we now glorify its opposite. What is it?

It's being ashamed of the call of Christ.

The call to lose our lives, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus. And Paul says that in addition to not being ashamed to share the gospel, we shouldn't be ashamed of the gospel's call, which is the call of Christ. Unfortunately, instead of embracing this call, we seem to insist that a life following Jesus requires nothing from us. As long as we said a little prayer, raised a hand, or walked an aisle, we're good. We now can get all this life has to offer—and eternity thrown in. Best of all, we don't have to deny ourselves anything. We have become so ashamed of Christ's call, that we live as if there is no call.

But Jesus disagrees:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. (Luke 9:23b–26)

Do you see it? Jesus tells us not to be ashamed of him or his words.

Which words? That following Jesus requires us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, go wherever he leads, quit trying to gain the world, and lose our lives. This is the call of Christ. And he tells us not to be ashamed of it. Paul paints the same picture in his second letter to Timothy:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, . . . for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Tim. 1:8–12)

Christ's call took Paul through prison and suffering. Paul viewed his suffering as a part of his call. A part that validated his faith and ministry. From this perspective, Paul tells us not to be ashamed of Jesus's call and what it will almost certainly lead to. This is the "shame" of the gospel. The reality we try to sweep under the rug and ignore. The counter-cultural call to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus. It isn't just that we've failed to teach this truth, it's that we have taught the exact opposite. We have taught that the gospel requires nothing from us. That it is a gateway to comfort. A gateway to happiness. A gateway to health, wealth, and prosperity.

Now don't let yourself off the hook too quickly when you see the words "health, wealth, and prosperity." Don't think that just because you say you abhor the prosperity gospel that it isn't codified in your heart. If the call to follow Jesus entails losing your life, what part of your life have you lost for him? What

part of your life is your church calling you to lose in pursuit of Jesus? It isn't just your old sinful ways. It's all of you.

As C. S. Lewis explains, Jesus says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it."²

This is a hard calling and the stakes are high. We can't afford to get this wrong. Look again at what Jesus says after he calls us to follow, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory" (Luke 9:26a). If we're ashamed of the call of Jesus—of the call to lose our lives—then Jesus tells us that he too will be ashamed of us when he comes again to judge the world. This isn't a little thing. This is, in fact, everything. We can't get this wrong. Jesus tells us there is a high cost in being ashamed of the call to follow Jesus—the call to lose our lives.

Are you ashamed of this call? Do you believe a life following Jesus is worth losing everything you hold dear in your life?

TWO RESPONSES TO THE CALL OF CHRIST

Two stories from the Bible will help us more honestly evaluate our answers to these questions. As we read these stories, let's ask ourselves which person we'd rather be?

The first story comes from Mark 10. In this story, a rich young man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him, and asks him what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus begins by telling him to obey the commandments. This man boldly declares that he has kept all of the commandments since he was young—which Jesus sidesteps. And then we read,

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 153.

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:21-22)

Here you have a man concerned with his eternal soul who had lived a righteous life. And, Jesus, instead of commending him for his righteous living, tells him that he lacks something. Whatever this lack was, the way for him to overcome it was to sell everything he owned and give it to the poor. If he obeyed, Jesus would welcome him as one of his followers.

The second story comes from Matthew 13:44. In this story, there's a man taking a walk. As he stops to rest in a field, he uncovers a hidden treasure worth more than anything he has ever seen. Quickly looking around to make sure nobody is watching, he reburies the treasure and hurries to find the owner of the field. Upon finding the field's owner, he inquires about the price of the field and immediately realizes that if he sells everything he owns, he'll have just enough to buy the field. And he does.

The Bible tells the story this way: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44).

Who would you rather be? The man in the first or the second story? Even the mood of the stories points us to the man in the second story. The second story says the man sold everything he had to buy the field "in his joy." Whereas, it says the man in the first story "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." The man in the second story ends up with a massive treasure, while the man in the first story is asked to dispose of his.

This is where we get a chance to see whether our hearts really think that following Jesus and eternity are worth losing our lives. As you consider which man you'd rather be, I'd like to ask a question: what's different about these stories?

In each story, the men are seeking eternity.

In each story, the cost of eternity is everything they owned.

I believe these stories are fundamentally the same story. They're practically identical. Yet, for some reason, we look at the story of the first man and feel sorry for him. Why? It even says in the story that Jesus looked at him and *loved* him. That means Jesus considered what was best for this guy—as we all would do for someone whom we loved. So, why do I feel sorry for him and why did he walk away sad? On the flip side, why do I not feel sorry for the second guy when he had to sell all his stuff and why was he able to do it with such joy?

It comes down to how we view eternity. Do we see eternity as immeasurably valuable such that there is no cost we would be unwilling to pay for it? Or, do we see eternity as a hoped-for reality, but not one we're willing to sacrifice much for?

I believe the reason we feel sorry for the first man is we're ashamed of the call of the gospel. We want the promise (eternity) without the call (now). We're not even convinced that the promise is worth the call. We certainly don't live like we believe eternity is worth losing our lives over. Bluntly put, we have a low view of God and eternity. We don't believe that getting to be with God for eternity is vastly superior to all the world offers. We don't even believe it's a little bit superior. When Jesus tells us to lose our lives to follow him, our first thought is—the cost is too high. We'd rather keep this world than gain the next.

To make this even harder, we live in a world intent on making us love it and disregard everything else. And to a large extent, the world has been far more effective at making

disciples than we have. With the constant deluge of advertising, branding, self-exaltation, and a general promise of finding a soul-satisfying life in this world, we're being disciplined with the message that this world is the best we could ever want or need. This message has been intentional and methodical. So, like a frog being boiled in a slowly heated pot of water, we're being subtly disciplined into a love for this world. As Screwtape wrote to Wormwood, "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."³ And as a result, without noticing what's happening we've come to believe this world is our home—that this world will satisfy our souls and any call to lose any part of it is too costly.

THE CALL IS COSTLY

The thing about belief is that it is costly—at least from the perspective of this world. It's a call to come and die to ourselves. It'll make us uncomfortable since it'll root out anything we treasure over Christ. We must die to these idols. And when we die to anything, it hurts. But one thing I know about the gospel is that following every death there is resurrection. Our death to these idols leads us to life.

In many churches today you can attend every Sunday and never hear the call of Christ. The call to lose your life. The call to die to the idols of the culture and to die to yourself. Many pastors are silent about the multitude of warnings relating to wealth and greed, even though Jesus warns about greed ten to twenty times more than any other sin.⁴ Instead, you're more

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942; repr., San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 60.

4. Timothy Keller, "The Gospel, Grace, and Giving," November 19, 2015, Vimeo, 16:00, <https://vimeo.com/146255187>.

likely to see the idols of the culture celebrated and lauded as rewards for godly living. You'll be told that God must really be pleased with you because he has given you so much of the world's treasure to enjoy. Further, you'll be told that if you raised your hand, prayed a prayer, or walked an aisle, then you're saved. But if you look at people's lives after such events you often see no change, no evidence of belief, no fruit. Instead, you see a deep and unyielding love of self and the world.

When you ask most people in a church what Christianity is all about, you'll likely hear answers such as, "Jesus saves me," "Jesus forgives me," and "Jesus loves me." Of course, none of these answers is entirely wrong, but there is a subtle problem with each of them. Who is the object of these sentences? I am. But you and I aren't the focal point of the Christian faith. Christ is. When we treat Christianity like this it turns Christ into our ticket out of hell instead of our treasure for eternity. Jesus saves me, forgives me, and loves me *so that* his name would be known on the earth (Ps. 67). It isn't for me, it's for him. That's the point of Christianity.

Merely to believe that Jesus is God will do us no good in eternity. The book of James tells us that even the demons believe Jesus is God and shudder (James 2:19). I fear demons have more belief in God than many who fill up a church on Sunday. They not only believe Jesus is God, they shudder at his power. They know that if a person comes face to face with God in his full divinity and power they will be changed. Because when we come face to face with the God who created the universe it changes us.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying salvation can be earned. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This isn't us doing enough to prove our belief; it's us coming face to face with God and believing he is who

he says he is—believing he is trustworthy and worth our lives. That Jesus’s work on the cross alone saves us. An understanding of this grace and the work of Christ transforms the way we respond to the call of Jesus. The only proper response to salvation is the response of the second man—joyfully losing our lives for the gospel. We’ll certainly not do this perfectly, but this type of belief will always cause our heart to move toward this end.

The call of the gospel isn’t easy. The way is narrow. I fear that until we can say with Paul, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8), that we’re merely playing games with Christianity. We may want to use Christ to gain eternal life, but we don’t want Christ for Christ’s sake. Paul valued Christ and wanted nothing more than to be in his presence. He was willing to pay any price, including his life, for this one simple thing.

Let me ask you again. Are you ashamed of Christ’s call? Are you embarrassed by Paul’s dedication? Are you willing to lose your life for Jesus? Are you willing to lose it all just to know God more?

RICH MAN'S RESPONSE

Let’s return to the story of the rich young man. In this story, after Jesus asks him to sell everything, he invites the man to follow him. Think about this invitation. It’s an invitation to walk with Jesus, listen to him teach, eat with him, and rest with him. To simply be with Jesus while he walked the dusty roads of Galilee. This man is being offered the chance to walk with God’s Son as his prelude to eternity—and his response is sorrow. Why? Because he had great possessions. Because what

Jesus asked him to do was excruciatingly hard. And he wasn't convinced it was worth it.

So what did he do? "He went away sorrowful" (Mark 10:22b).

I've always assumed that his leaving in sorrow was tantamount to his rejection of Jesus. His final decision to keep his stuff and not follow Jesus. That in the end he missed the kingdom. The problem with this common assumption is nothing in the text tells us this is what actually happened. All it says is "he went away sorrowful." It's entirely possible this man went away sorrowful and then obeyed.⁵ It's possible that his act of going away was his first act of obedience to Jesus's command for him to *go* and sell. We simply don't know.

As I've considered the possibility that the rich young man didn't ultimately reject Jesus, but was instead sorrowful because of the weight of Jesus's call, I've come to realize that I can relate to the rich young man much more than the joyful man. For much of my life I've seen the offer of eternity and a life of following Jesus as a difficult invitation to carefully consider. I've rarely responded like the second man with joyful abandonment rushing to sell everything to gain eternity. Instead, like the rich young man, I drop my shoulders and despair over the difficulty of the call, asking why it has to be so hard.

But I don't just relate to the rich young man, I am the rich young man. While I long to be the joyful man, for most of my life I've heard Christ's call and responded with sorrow. It has only been through slow, painstaking, begrudging obedience that I've grown to see the call to lose my life as a call to joy. A

5. Gary G. Hoag, *Wealth in Ancient Ephesus and the First Letter to Timothy: Fresh insights from Ephesiaca by Xenophon of Ephesus* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 218–20.

call to life. Perhaps this is the story of the rich young man as well. Perhaps, in the end, he sold it all and followed Jesus.

I don't think I'm alone in my response. I think many people read Jesus's call to the rich young man and think Jesus is asking too much. The cost is too high. But the good news is that Jesus knows his call is hard. He knows we'll see the cost as impossibly high. Look what Jesus says as the rich young man walks away: "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23b). This isn't condemnation, it's compassion. Jesus loves this man and feels compassion as he walks away. And in this infinite compassion, Jesus acknowledges that his call is difficult. Even still, he doesn't diminish the call. He doesn't lower the bar. Instead, he promises that if we rely on him, he'll provide the way. He says, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27b).

Then, Jesus shows us the joy awaiting us when we, through his power, respond to his call with obedience. He says when we obey his call we will "receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:30b). What a promise! What Jesus describes is God's kingdom and the community of all believers who walk the path of surrender. He doesn't say it'll become easy. He actually promises the opposite when he says "with persecutions"—but, he says it'll be worth it. One hundred times so. He says that when we align under our heavenly Father in abandoned obedience, we'll receive immeasurably more than what we gave up. In this age, we will be grafted into a community of Christ followers who have lost their lives for the sake of Christ; who have said everything I have has been given to me by God and is available to be used by God. This is the promise now. This

is the community that fulfills his hundredfold promise. Not only that, he promises eternal life in the age to come—in the presence of God and his glory. Each of these promises draws us intimately into a deeper knowledge of God and his glory, both now and in eternity.

Understanding these truths allows us to move from the response of the rich man to the response of the joyful man. Understanding these truths and responding in obedience—even amid sorrowful obedience—is the only way we'll ever become free to follow in the way of Jesus.

CALL BEFORE US

This is the call before us. Will we deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus? Even if it means losing our lives? Will we obey even when it's hard to trust that the promise is better than what we already have? Are we willing to trust that when Jesus calls us to follow, he is calling us to real life? Are we willing to trust God that eternity, his kingdom, and the community of followers are infinitely better than any of our stuff? Are we willing to follow Jesus even if it appears impossibly hard?

When we understand who Jesus is, what he has done, and the promise of eternity, there is no idol, there is no thing in our lives, there is no price we must pay that seems costly.

Simply stated, if Jesus is worth anything, he's worth everything.

This is what this book is about. It's an invitation to take seriously the call to lose our lives. It's an invitation to things that seem hard but results in life that is indescribably sweet and nearer to God's presence. We'll look at the reality of our world and the importance of the church waking up and living unashamed of Christ's call. We'll delve into the question of what it means to lose our lives with regard to money and possessions.

Living in one of the wealthiest nations in the history of the world, the pursuit and worship of wealth have been canonized in our culture and even in the church.

Do we truly believe that following God is worth our lives and our stuff? Are we willing to purge ourselves of the culture's idols to make God's name known in the world?

THE TRIP THAT TRANSFORMED OUR HEARTS

The rivalry raging in my heart between this world and the Lord came to a head a few years ago on a trip to East Africa with a relief organization called Crisis Aid. During this trip, my wife and I were privileged to see all the work being done to combat physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. We saw feeding programs, hospitals in action, red light rescue operations, orphan care, well digging, and more.

We looked into the eyes of a mother who had walked twelve hours to get food for her child who was days away from starving to death. We cared for a widow who was on the brink of death and attempting to care for her two kids alone. As we walked into her home made up of a few sticks and a tarp, we surveyed all of her earthly belongings and all the food she had left, a half-eaten ear of burnt corn. We sat down with a woman confined to a room no larger than a closet, condemned to a life of prostitution, as she showed us pictures of her children, each of whom she had given up for adoption. We saw people sick and dying from simple, preventable diseases. We saw poverty on an extreme scale. It was shattering.

As we went from place to place and saw need after need, we couldn't shake the sense that God was asking us what we were going to do. He kept pointing us to the stockpile we were building in our savings and retirement accounts and asking us why we would hold on to that money for a day that may never

come (retirement, an emergency, etc.) when the need before us is so present and urgent. It was as if the Lord was saying, “Why are you holding onto something for a future that is uncertain when the need before you is so certain?”

What would we do if any of these things were happening to one of our friends or family members? Why would we only consider these needs urgent if they were happening to people close to us? Wouldn’t our love for God and our neighbor necessitate that we treat their urgent physical and spiritual needs as we would our own?⁶

These are the questions that have convicted and challenged me the last few years. I’d like to invite you into my journey as we wrestle with the question, “Are we willing to lose our lives for the sake of Jesus, and if we are, what does that mean?” I ask you to read with an open heart and mind as we explore the call of the gospel. There is joy and there is hope, but to get there we need to take a hard, difficult look at where we are.

6. You may protest that in a world of brokenness we can’t possibly address everything gone wrong. While this is certainly true, I fear we all too often use that as an excuse to address very little. We’ll explore this line of thinking in this book and examine whether we’re using that as an excuse to do nothing or living in submission to God and his call in determining how, where, and when to help. We may not be able to respond to everything, but we can almost certainly respond more faithfully.



DISCUSSION AND PRAYER GUIDE

CHAPTER 1: ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt ashamed of the gospel or the call of the gospel? How?
2. Whose response to the call to sell everything to gain eternity do you relate to most, the joyful man or the rich young man? In what way(s) do you relate?
3. Discuss Jesus's response to the rich young ruler walking away in Mark 10:15–30. How does this response encourage you to respond to Jesus's call to follow him more like the joyful man?
4. What would change in your life today if you took Jesus's invitation to lose your life and follow him more seriously?

Prayer

Father, I cannot unburden myself from the things of this world without you doing a work in my life. In my own ability, I will fail every time. Yet, I want to want to lay down my life and follow you with a willingness and readiness that has no borders. I want to leave behind whatever you want me to leave behind to follow you. Please do a work in my life that moves me to respond to your call to follow you like the joyful man. Do a work in my life in your power. Help me see eternity with your eyes. In Jesus's name, Amen.