

# Chapter One

## The Struggle To Make It Work

*“At this point I feel that I am more than ready to abandon my faith and commitment to Christ... I have tried very hard to grow closer to God by having daily quiet times of Bible reading and prayer to spend time with Him, attending Bible College to better understand His Word, memorizing hundreds of Bible verses that the Holy Spirit might use them as a sword in spiritual battle, serving in several ministries so God could use me to accomplish His will, attempting to love others as Jesus would so that His name would be glorified, striving for obedience, making disciples, baptizing, fasting, praying in the Spirit, evangelizing, forsaking the world and holding back nothing, and following Him with complete faith. It all seems to be worthless. I tried so hard but nothing really happened.”*

I was stunned as I read those words, written to me by a youth leader in our church. Darrin was a college senior who modeled a strong commitment to Christ. Well-versed in Scripture and faithful in his ministry to our middle school youth, he was the epitome of spiritual

maturity. And yet, there I was, reading this twelve-page document in which he articulated the reasons for recently deciding to abandon his faith. I was shell-shocked.

I met with Darrin soon after and we talked specifically about several of his expressed concerns, many of which were faith struggles most all Christians have at one time or another—questions about why God allows suffering and how we know the Bible is true. But as I later processed this situation, it became clear the root of Darrin's faith struggle was actually much deeper than theological questions.

He was tired. He was tired of a Christianity that wasn't working. For years he had diligently pursued the spiritual growth path regularly encouraged by most Christ-followers. He had faithfully practiced spiritual disciplines like daily quiet times and Scripture memorization. He was actively involved in ministry and sharing his faith. He was busy doing what Christians are supposed to do but was increasingly troubled by questions simmering in the back of his mind: Why isn't this working? Why is this not really changing me or anyone around me? Why is this not bringing joy to my life?

Darrin was too ashamed to admit to anyone his feelings of doubt and disillusionment. He was able to keep up the spiritual game face ... for a while at least. Finally, in his darkness of soul, he came to the only conclusion he could see at the time: Renounce your faith. Stop trying to do this Christian thing because it's not working. Ironically, I believe God had Darrin right where He wanted him—utterly discouraged and disillusioned with his own efforts, so that he might embrace a completely different approach to spirituality—the spiritual life God had in mind for him all along.

Nearly a year after his supposed abandonment of Christianity,

Darrin stood in front of our church body, sharing the story of his initial renunciation and his more recent reaffirmation of his faith. As I listened to Darrin that morning, it became clear to me he had never truly renounced his faith in Christ. What he had abandoned was a Christianity rooted in self-effort, trying hard to measure up—which is no Christianity at all. Darrin’s spiritual crisis opened a door for authentic transformation—the very thing that many sincere Christians, like Darrin, are longing for yet missing.

## **Avis Spirituality**

In 1962, Avis was a relatively unprofitable company with only 11 percent of the car rental business in the United States. That year they launched an advertising campaign in which they relentlessly asserted what distinguished them as a company: We Try Harder. Within four years, Avis had tripled its market share to 35 percent. For many Christians, the Avis approach to business success becomes the fundamental approach to spiritual success—just try harder. After initially receiving Christ, we begin living our lives with an ever growing list of the things that please God coupled with an inner drive to try hard to do those things.

This describes my early years as a Christian: earnest, devout, disciplined. I remember my routine as a college student involved fasting once a week, having daily devotional times, and regularly memorizing large portions of Scripture—none of which is bad in and of itself. For me, however, I was too spiritually busy to recognize how dry my soul was becoming. My relationship with God was wooden and mechanical as I earnestly focused on one objective: trying very hard to please God by doing the things Christians are supposed to do.

This approach can look quite spiritual to those around us; however, it's often rooted in a soul deficiency, a deeply held inner conviction that our worth as a Christian is dependent upon *our* ability to perform and succeed. Behind this spiritual facade is a heart desperately attempting to get God to love us more by doing the "should's." Ultimately, our obedience is rooted in guilt and fear, not freedom. Can you relate to this? Does your spiritual life boil down to how you can do a better job pleasing God? If so, I'd like you to consider the possibility that the spiritual path you are on may not result in the kind of real transformation you long for.

## From Avis to Apathy

Often many Christ-followers, like Darrin, unintentionally find themselves in a place of *spiritual disillusionment*. After being on the "trying harder" spiritual growth path for several months or years, we eventually begin to experience a nagging feeling that something is not right. Frequently this manifests itself as a weariness of soul that has us wondering how long we can keep this up. The spiritual to-do lists offered in sermons and books that previously motivated and energized us now exhaust. We know we haven't mastered last week's list, and the thought of a longer list feels overwhelming. The words "spiritual failure" are continually whispered to our soul, but we're afraid to admit it to anyone else because they all seem to be doing okay. In response to this nagging feeling, we often settle into a place of passive resignation. Spiritual apathy. Like Darrin, we aren't *really* interested in *renouncing* Christ, but our motivation to live for Him is waning. We go through the motions of church and spiritual activity, but we're inwardly empty. Surely this is not what Jesus meant by life abundant.

In my own journey, this disillusionment and weariness of soul eventually surfaced at a time when life was going great. The church was growing, things were happening. I was invincible, or so I thought ... until that moment when, out of the blue, I experienced my first anxiety attack—cold sweat, pounding heart, feeling as if the walls were closing in on me and I couldn't escape. It lasted for just a few minutes but felt like an eternity. I didn't know what was happening to me. I thought I *might* be losing my mind but was *certain* I was going to lose my job—which only increased my anxiety. In the midst of my struggle, I went to see a counselor who helped me uncover the underlying drivenness in my soul—a desperate need to be affirmed through success. Anxiety was God's tool to get my attention and help me see that something was not right in my relationship with Him. Whatever God's method, whether it be an overwhelming sense of failure or fear, the disillusionment is real. Maybe this describes you right now. On the outside, you are busy and look like you have it all together, but on the inside you know something is not right. You feel stuck. Your soul is tired of trying harder to please God and always feeling like you fall short. Perhaps you have thought about giving up on this stuff entirely. Please don't. You are exactly where God wants you to be.

## A Rediscovery

Looking back on my life, I now realize that God was slowly opening my eyes to rediscover the spiritual growth path He had in mind for me all along. Being somewhat thick-headed, it took me awhile—several years actually. But I'll never forget the day all these puzzle pieces of my past experiences, my drivenness and disillusionment, as

well as my understanding of the Bible, began to fall into place in a way that radically impacted my life.

I had asked a pastor friend to join me for lunch because I had a question for him. Over the course of several months, I had noticed that Shane was always talking about the gospel—which I realize is normal for us pastor-types—but he would talk about the gospel in a way that was different than I'd ever heard before. I knew all about the gospel, how Jesus had died on the cross for our sins and how through faith in Him we could enter into a relationship with God. I knew all about that and had preached it for years, but there was something in the way Shane talked about the gospel that intrigued me.

As I asked him about this during lunch that day, he explained to me how the gospel is not only for the lost but also the found. Shane claimed we all need the gospel preached to us every moment of every day, because the gospel is the *means* whereby we experience authentic transformation. Now I'm not intending to sound overly dramatic, but at that moment I honestly felt like a blind man beginning to see. I felt like a little kid at Christmas who, while unwrapping a gift, suddenly realizes what the gift is and can't wait to get it out of the package. I began to see the gospel in a totally different way—in fact, I began to *hear* the gospel in a totally different way.

Not long ago, my wife Raylene asked me about a song on a particular CD that I had in my car. Having borrowed my car one day, she happened to listen to this song and had been touched by it. Now I'm one of those people that remembers words to songs very easily, so when she mentioned it I immediately began reciting the lyrics to her. "But what does the song *mean*?" she asked me. I didn't know. I was familiar with the words but didn't really know what they meant.

The next time I was in my car I cued the CD player to that song and settled in to listen. After thirty seconds, I was weeping. I had listened to the song dozens of times and was familiar with the lyrics, but I had never really *heard* the music.

That is exactly how many of us experience the gospel. We understand the content of the gospel—that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. We humbly received this good news at some point in our lives and experienced a genuine conversion. We look for opportunities to share the gospel with others. We are familiar with the lyrics of the gospel...but are not really hearing its music in our soul. Listen to how Rose Marie Miller describes her own experience: *“I love to be in control. I am addicted to duty, order, my rights, my ways, and to outward performance. I am outwardly moral, yet inside I am full of anxieties, fears and guilt. For years, I heard the words of the gospel, but I never heard the music.”*<sup>21</sup> Could it be possible that our fears, our addictions, our control issues, and our relational difficulties are not a result of our lack of trying or our lack of sincerity, but rather are due to how clearly we’re hearing the gospel’s music in our soul?

## Good News or Old News

Now I have a hunch some of you are thinking to yourself, *Oh, the gospel. I already know this. This is basic stuff that I learned a long time ago.* Whenever I tell anyone this book is about living the gospel, there is an immediate and almost universal glaze that settles into their eyes. It’s the glaze of familiarity. We think we understand the gospel, but the truth is most of us don’t. I was a Christian for decades and a senior pastor for years, faithfully preaching the gospel to the lost, but I now realize I had only scratched the surface in understanding the

impact the gospel can have in our everyday lives as Christians. I'm not alone. I believe that most Christ-followers have far too shallow an understanding of the gospel, and because of that our spiritual lives are not what God intended or what we would want them to be.

So what's our deal with the gospel? It's not that we don't believe it or that we don't desire to share it with others. Our problem is that we aren't necessarily being transformed by it in the present. Why is that? Why aren't we hearing its music? Here's my take on it. For many of us, the good news of the gospel has unintentionally become yesterday's news. We tend to think of the gospel as the *entry point* into Christianity, the wedding music of our spiritual lives. Let me explain.

When Raylene and I got married, we had lots of music in our ceremony—the traditional stuff and some contemporary. I was moved by the music throughout the entire ceremony. But you know what? I don't voluntarily listen to any of that music any more; in fact, I haven't since our wedding day. It powerfully reflected the beginning of our lives together but not the every day continuation of our relationship. I believe the gospel was never intended to solely be the wedding music of our relationship with Jesus, an expression of the *beginning* of our life with Christ. Rather, it is to be a life-giving song that is heard in our soul every moment of our spiritual lives—a beautiful soundtrack that plays from beginning to end.

For those of you who aren't really into music, how about another metaphor to describe our experience with the gospel. Many of us tend to view the gospel as the starting line of our life with Christ. Once the "gospel gun" goes off, we are earnestly running the race, trying our best to grow spiritually. But from a Biblical perspective,

the gospel is not simply the starting line. It is the race itself. The gospel is *how* spiritual transformation happens.

## But Is It Biblical?

Now this all sounds fine and good, but is this what the Bible teaches? Does the New Testament really talk about the gospel in this way? Immediately after my lunch conversation with my friend, I went back to my office to examine this further for myself. I began looking at passages of Scripture that discuss the gospel, passages I had read dozens of times. I turned to Colossians 1 where Paul is writing to *believers* who have already embraced the gospel, and he says to them, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you *since* the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth” (Col. 1:6). He is talking about how the gospel is *continuing* to bear fruit and to grow in the lives of these believers who had already received it.

I turned to the book of Romans, which I believe is the most complete description of the gospel contained in the New Testament. In chapter one, Paul writes to *believers* in Rome saying, “That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome” (Rom. 1:15). Now why would Paul need to preach the gospel to people who had already embraced it? He knew what I was just beginning to hear. That we need the gospel preached to us every day, every moment of our lives. In my office that afternoon, I became convinced that Paul understood the gospel in this way, but I also began to wonder ... what about Jesus’ perspective? Did He understand the gospel in this way as well? Did He preach the gospel as the entry point into Christianity or as a way of life?

I opened my Bible to Matthew 4 and read how Jesus' ministry began: He "went throughout Galilee.... preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23 *NASB*). The gospel of the *kingdom*. It was not simply a gospel of forgiveness, an entryway into God's presence. Jesus was preaching a gospel of continual life transformation, as described immediately after this in the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–16). The language of "kingdom" implies a life constantly influenced and impacted by the King. Jesus was and is inviting us to experience the gospel of the kingdom every moment of every day.

I remember an old Corn Flakes commercial which ended with the phrase, "Taste them again for the first time." That's how I suddenly felt about the gospel. It was as if I was tasting it again for the first time, experiencing it in a way that would begin to radically impact my life and the lives of many others around me. Suddenly the gospel was not just about our initial salvation experience but was about our everyday life with Jesus, a continual melody to dance to. I now saw the gospel as a way of life.

But what exactly does that mean? So the gospel is a way of life—but what kind of life? How exactly does the gospel impact our day to day experiences—our work, our marriage, our friendships, our activities, our prayer lives, our battle against temptation? What does the gospel have to do with these things? How can this good news radically impact every part of our lives?

## Living the Gospel

At the heart of the gospel is the glorious good news that Jesus, God's Son, died voluntarily on the cross, a complete and total sacrifice for

our sins (1 Cor. 15:3–4). At that wonderful moment of initially turning to Christ, we hear two distinct melodies of the gospel that together are music to our soul. We hear the melody of *brokenness*—that we are sinners desperately in need of a Savior. And we hear the melody of *faith*—that there is an all-sufficient Savior named Jesus who paid the price we couldn't pay, who lived the life we couldn't live. In Him, we place our trust. At that moment of conversion, these two distinct melodies—brokenness and faith—begin playing in our soul and bringing joy and life. Do you remember your initial experience with Christ when you realized with a heavy heart the depth of your sin and at the same moment the sufficiency of His grace to meet you in that place? That was the music of the gospel. Wasn't it glorious?

But unfortunately what starts out in our soul as the William Tell Overture slowly becomes elevator muzak we hardly pay attention to. Very soon after our conversion, the life-giving melodies of brokenness and faith unintentionally get drowned out by a growing and incessant drumbeat that sounds so spiritual: "*Just try harder. Just try harder. Just try harder.*" The cadence of this drumbeat begins to drive our spiritual lives. "You *were* broken but now you are getting better. If you do these things Christians are supposed to do, you will continue to grow spiritually—becoming more holy, sinning less and less. God will be more and more pleased with you because of how Christ-like you are becoming."

Without even realizing it, the melody of brokenness gets replaced by the march of self-effort; the melody of faith gets overtaken by the relentless drumbeat of performance. "*Just try harder. Just try harder.*"

We stop hearing the music of the gospel and begin pursuing a spiritual growth path that is actually *removed* from the gospel! The impact of this subtle shift on our spiritual lives is devastating. Listen to Paul's words to a group of believers who without realizing it were doing this very thing:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all...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?* (Gal. 1:6, 3:1–3)

We could summarize Paul's words very succinctly: "What the heck are you doing???" or "How in the world did this happen???" Paul was not mildly concerned. He was beside himself with frustration. What could possibly provoke Paul to such a response? Were these believers renouncing Christ? Were they following other gods? No. What they were doing was politely relegating the gospel to their salvation experience alone and then trying to attain spiritual growth another way—through human effort. "*Just try harder.*" They began with the gospel but were now trying to attain their goal apart from the gospel, which will not work.

## Gospel Drift

Everyone of us is vulnerable to this gospel drift in our spiritual lives. Without realizing it, we stop hearing the melodies of brokenness and faith and instead begin pursuing a spirituality of self-effort and self-sufficiency. We can look and feel so spiritual—and the enemy of our souls loves it. This was the same way he seduced Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Not by appealing to their desire for blatant rebellion but rather by tapping into their vulnerability to spiritual self-sufficiency: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). Do you hear what Satan whispered to their soul? “Don’t trust God on this one. Trust yourself. You’ll be better off if you do this on your own.” It doesn’t sound *that* evil, does it?

This is what makes gospel drift so insidious—we often don’t see it. I didn’t ... for years. For much of my Christian life I pursued and encouraged others to pursue a spiritual growth path that was removed from the gospel. It looked so spiritual on the outside but it was ultimately rooted in self—in the fundamental belief that through discipline and effort I was becoming more Christ-like. You may be thinking, *Well isn’t that what spiritual growth is all about? Aren’t we supposed to be becoming more Christ-like?* Certainly, but the critical question is, *how* does that happen? How do we become Christ-like?

For most Christians, the goal of Christ-likeness is thought to be achieved through certain spiritual activities—prayer, Bible study, giving, church attendance. Now all of these things are good and helpful activities, but do they *make* us more Christ-like? Do they *make* us less sinful? That’s what I believed for years... until one day I had a frightening realization: When we define spiritual growth as *us*

becoming more like Christ, as *us* becoming less and less sinful, what we are actually pursuing is a spiritual growth path in which we need Jesus less and less. I need Him less today than yesterday, because the power of sin is not as strong in my life. Is that what spiritual maturity looks like?

## Gospel Music

In this book, I want to offer a different path to Christ-likeness, an alternative approach to spiritual growth. What would happen if instead of subtly turning down the music of the gospel immediately after our conversion, we turned it up? What would happen if the melodies of brokenness and faith were continually and increasingly playing in our souls throughout our spiritual journey? Here's what would happen: Rather than trying harder to be less and less sinful, we would experience the authentic transformation we long to experience. Don't believe me? Then keep reading...as we together turn up the volume of brokenness and faith in our lives.

## For Personal Reflection/Response

- How much of your spiritual experience would you describe as “trying hard”? Is it 10 percent? 50 percent? 75 percent? What is the effect of this in your life—spiritually, emotionally, and physically?
- In this chapter, the gospel was described as a familiar yet “unheard” song. What might happen if you listened to one

of your favorite songs in a different way? Give it a try. For example, if you usually listen to a song in your car, try listening to it at home or print off the lyrics and sit somewhere and sing along. The goal is to listen to a familiar song, but rather than simply hearing the words, let your heart experience it. How does the song impact you differently than before?

- As you think about your spiritual life at this moment in time, would you say there is a *greater* sense of your need for Jesus than a year ago? How do you feel about your answer to that question?



*Heavenly Father, help me understand this  
incredible thing called the gospel so that I don't  
miss its life-changing melody. I ask You, by the power  
of the Holy Spirit, to open my spiritual ears so that  
I might hear afresh the melodies of brokenness and faith.  
In Jesus' name, amen.*