

Comfort:

Calling All Comfortable Christians



God hates all sinners.

This must be true, because a guy is standing on top of a soapbox, dressed in black and holding a large sign that says, "God hates all sinners." He has a microphone in front of him, and he's yelling into it, telling everyone within earshot that they need to repent because God hates sinners. I pause and consider whether I need to repent too, and because he is standing on top of a soapbox and speaking with the kind of authority that comes from being really loud, I'm tempted to accept him at his word. But then I remember something about God loving the world so much that He sent His one and only Son.

As I listen to what this man is saying, I glance around at the rest of the crowd, which consists mostly of people walking by and ignoring him. A few others linger, whispering quietly to their friends as they crack jokes at his expense, and to be honest, mocking this man would be easy. I know some people come to Jesus through gentle conversations, others come through fear of hell, and still others respond to hearing the gospel after

observing the love the followers of Jesus have for one another. But I am struggling to see the part of the gospel that says God hates all sinners.

Theological differences aside, this man has some guts. He's standing right in the middle of Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, an outdoor mall with a walking street down its center, and it's bursting at the seams with people. Just about anyone he knows—a neighbor, his boss, a high school buddy, or an ex-girlfriend—could be in that crowd, and nothing is more humiliating than doing something that feels embarrassing while people you know are watching you. As I leave this man's crowd and go about my way, I think of another fiery preacher—John the Baptist, working his whole camel's hair and locust thing—and I wonder why he's a hero of the Bible while I stand ready to mock anyone who dares to preach in public today. I know tolerance is fast becoming a virtue in our day, but is there such as a thing as being too tolerant?

I have thought about what it must be like to stand on top of a box like that and preach to a crowd. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I have felt like doing something like that before. Occasionally, I get the sense that maybe that's what I'm supposed to do, to be less concerned about what people think and more concerned about giving everyone who can hear me a fair shot at receiving the glorious news of the gospel. But this whole thing just sounds so uncomfortable, and for a good reason: I am a comfortable Christian.

I really am, and I have just recently recognized it. And I'm bummed about this realization. I have cravings for God that tell me I want so much more from my faith. I read amazing tales of saints who have put their lives on the line for the sake of Christ, and I long to be counted among their company, but I often end up on my couch thinking about what it would be like to take a step of faith instead of actually doing anything about it.

Part of me wants to blame our society. We live in the most prosperous nation in the history of the world, and we're all used to modern comforts



like soft mattresses, food whenever we want it, access to education and information, and money at the swipe of a card. Even if I were to do something crazy like double the amount of money I give away, I would still be pretty darn comfortable.

I would also like to blame my own personality—or maybe even God for making me the way He did. I am an introvert, and I would rather sit in a dark corner and read a book than talk with anyone. So if I am sitting in a bus or plane or standing beside someone on the street, and I sense God asking me to strike up a conversation with him or her, a conversation that might ultimately lead to me sharing my faith, I tend to pass on the opportunity more often than not.

But as much as I would like to blame society, my personality, or even God for my comfortable faith, I know the choice lies squarely on my shoulders. I am comfortable in my faith because I value comfort more than I do the glory of Christ. That's why a statement like "pick up your cross and follow me" hits me right in the gut. What are we supposed to do with something like that?

In the book *Crazy Love*, Francis Chan destroys the idea that it's all right to be a comfortable Christian:

[What if Jesus] just showed up and said, "Follow me"? No explanation. No directions. You could follow Him straight up a hill to be crucified. Maybe He would lead you to another country, and you would never see your family again... Many of us believe we have... a reasonable portion of God among all the other things in our lives... But the fact is that nothing should concern us more than our relationship with God; it's about eternity, and nothing compares with that.¹

Chan goes on to say that Christ may not call all of us to martyrdom, but He

expects us to follow Him just the same. But I'm staggered by the thought of going from "on my couch thinking about what it would be like to take a step of faith" to "follow[ing] Him straight up a hill to be crucified." This is not an easy transition, and I bet it rarely happens overnight. After all, Peter denied Christ after three years of knowing Him. But he also became willing to go up a hill to be crucified after seeing the resurrected Jesus.

So this transformation can evidently occur through an encounter with the risen Christ, as in Peter's case, but it can also occur as I inch my way toward Christ, toward His bright light. This goes back to making small choices each day that require me to trust in God and that bolster courage rather than fear.

You know those times when you feel as if God might be asking you to do something, and it's just sitting there in the pit of your stomach, and you have an internal debate about whether you should do it? Perhaps the choices we make during those times, whichever way we choose, lead us to choose the same way again the next time. This is great news if we are choosing Christ over comfort, but it's troubling news otherwise. Those of us who are comfortable Christians are growing more comfortable with every decision we make that does not require us to trust God in the midst of our own fear. And that should make us all uncomfortable.

These thoughts of being uncomfortable reminded me of my encounter with the street preacher in Santa Monica. His version of the gospel was so horrible that I made a rash decision on the spot to go back to the Promenade to talk to people about God in a more constructive way. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I wouldn't tell people that God hated all of them. I shared this decision with a few friends and asked if any of them wanted to go with me, but none of them seemed interested, and the whole thing just fell apart after a while. To be honest, I was too fearful to go alone, and when I couldn't find anyone to go with me, I was secretly relieved.



I shared this fear with the guys at Newmen one evening, telling them that this idea had been sitting in the pit of my stomach for years and that I had been consistently ignoring it. In a self-centered attempt to see if I was alone in this fear, I asked each guy to talk about the one thing he was most uncomfortable doing in following Christ. We went around the circle.

The first guy in the group said it was particularly hard for him to turn a normal discussion into one of spiritual matters.

The second and third guys both said it was difficult for them to share their faith with friends.

The fourth guy said it was hard for him to talk about God with coworkers.

The next five guys all said they were intimidated by having to answer questions about the Bible or the gospel.

The last guy said he found it hardest to truly connect with God in worship (which I took to mean he found it hardest to share his faith).

You undoubtedly notice the pattern here. I once read this quote from George Barna, the noted social researcher: "The typical church member will die without leading a single person to a lifesaving knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ."² This bothers me, as does my own fear of sharing my faith and the responses of my brothers at Newmen.

I knew that being a comfortable Christian wasn't solely about evangelism; lukewarm faith invades every aspect of our relationship with Jesus. But overcoming this fear violated my sacred space of comfort more than any idea I could conceive, and apparently I had plenty of company. So in desperate disregard for my own sense of well-being, I decided to get off the couch and take a step of faith.

I told the Newmen I was planning on going to the Promenade that Saturday to talk to people about the gospel. And then I paused for a moment,

feeling all of the air being sucked out of the room in anticipation. Nerves came over me, the kind that spring up a half-second before you are about to speak, reminding you of how awkward it's going to be after you say whatever it is you're going to say. But I posed my invitation anyway: "I think it would be great for all of you to come along, so if you're interested, let me know."

No one said a word; the room was absolutely silent. Tension filled the room like spray foam in a small, confined space. This seems to happen to me a lot. After a few uncomfortable moments, someone made a comment that diverted the discussion elsewhere. Ignoring the hint, I issued the invitation for a second time. The silence grew even quieter, and again, no one volunteered. Their eyes went down to the floor to avoid contact with my own. Someone shifted in his seat. At this point, I was feeling a little flushed, and my eyes were pegged to my shoes. As the silence rolled on like never-ending waves, my heart began to sink.

Finally, like a burst of fresh air after sinking to the bottom of the sea, the voice of my friend Erik came soaring across the room. "I'll go." This was just what I needed, not because my invitation went off as I had planned (I had expected everyone to think it was a fantastic idea and join in with celebratory enthusiasm), but because it made me feel like less of a fool.

Later, that evening, I got an e-mail from my friend Jeff, who said, "I felt a tugging on my heart on the way home from Bible study, and I could not think of a reason *not* to do this. It is what we are called to do. You guys can count on me to be there." Anna said she would go as well, so we had a quorum.

This is when the fear really set in. Before, my idea was just an idea, something I could think and talk about without ever having to commit. But now others were involved. I had stood up from my couch, and there was no sitting down once more.

The question we faced at this point was *how* to go about sharing our faith. Should we just walk around and wait for people to come ask us about the hope we have in Jesus? Should we go to them and ask if they want to talk about God? Or should we get our own little soapboxes and microphones to tell the crowds that God doesn't actually hate all sinners?

Still tinged with hesitancy, I wanted to find a balance between being comfortable and uncomfortable—but not *too* uncomfortable. So I decided we would not stand on top of soapboxes; rather, we would sit on them. More precisely, we would take some folding chairs with us, set them up in a conversational setting, and invite people to talk to us if they were interested. I thought that the best way to invite them would be through the use of signs, so I worked through different ideas for a few days, praying over them and trying to find the perfect invitation. On Friday, the day before we were set to go to the Promenade, I came up with this:

If you'd like to have a meaningful conversation—about God, life, love, religion, purpose, your passions and interests, relationships, money, right and wrong, heaven, hell, politics...anything that is meaningful to you—we're here to listen and talk.

My plan was to have this sentence printed on a large placard that we could set up beside our chairs. I was really excited about it; I thought it perfectly captured the right ingredients for a constructive dialogue about God. It had the word *conversation*, which is so much more inviting than *lecture*. It talked about important matters of spirituality, like God, love, religion, heaven, and hell. It was socially current, offering air time for subjects like politics and personal interests. And it had the magic word that would awake a sleeping heathen population from the mindless drudgery of their lives: *meaningful*. So I shared this idea with Anna over dinner that evening and asked her what she thought of it.

"I think it's lame," she said.

My wife has a way with words. I don't know why I had not seen it until then, but it was kind of lame. She said it was really long and people might be put off by the whole "meaningful conversation" bit, as if they had never had a meaningful conversation before with someone else, or as if I presumed they would consider a conversation with some guy sitting in the middle of the street on the folding chair to be the highlight of their week. She suggested I come up with something simpler, something that would invite people to be open to talking about God in a way that was comfortable for them.

So I scrapped the previous plans and spent several hours at Kinko's the following morning putting together a series of new signs. I had the signs printed and headed over to church to pick up some folding chairs. The time had come; I was so busy running around that I didn't have much time to be nervous. I picked up Anna and Jeff and headed toward Santa Monica. Erik planned to meet us there.

As we drove west on I-10 toward Santa Monica, I finally had the chance to consider what we were doing, and that is when the fear pounced once more. Feeling the burden of responsibility for this outing, I tried to pull myself together. Feigning confidence, I asked Anna and Jeff how they were feeling. Jeff said he was pretty nervous but was glad he was doing it. Anna said she was scared out of her mind and had no idea what she was going to say to these people. I secretly shared her sentiments.

We were about to join the circus, becoming one of *those* people, people I see on the street doing weird things. I didn't consider this behavior as "weirdness for the glory of Christ" but rather "weirdness that I hope no one I know sees me doing."

But turning back wasn't an option, so we proceeded onward. As we

approached the Promenade, I drove up and down several cross streets to get a feel for the best spot to set up. The place was overflowing with people walking up and down the street. They were moving in and out of shops and restaurants, packed tightly like sheep in a pen. We parked my truck in a parking garage, sat there for a moment, and decided we should pray. We felt as if we were in the calm before a storm because we knew that once we were done praying, the show was on.

At this point, I thought about bailing on the whole idea. Maybe we could just go catch a movie or have dinner instead. If I had been there alone, I might have done just that. But three other people were there, people who presumably had been called by God to be out there on that particular night, and I was the idiot who had suggested it to them.

We gathered our signs and folding chairs and headed for the elevators, clanking metal along the way like a Salvation Army volunteer with a Christmas bell. Once at the bottom of the parking garage, we turned our sights and our steps to the Promenade. I felt every eye watching us as we walked awkwardly along with hands full of chairs and signs, and as I was fully aware of the fact that we were there to do something strange, I assumed everyone else knew it too. Only a special kind of person can be completely self-absorbed right before sharing the gospel with someone, but I was that kind of person.

We soon found our set-up spot on the circus floor tucked warmly between two street performers: a break-dancing troupe and an amateur singer who fashioned herself as a pre-K-Fed Britney Spears. This spot had its benefits; not only was there a booming soundtrack to our conversations, but a huge crowd was gathering around the street performers and, subsequently, us.

We set up a single chair in three separate locations, and we set two chairs facing each single chair in an attempt to construct a cozy little conversation

environment. We then set the three signs down on the ground on the backside of the two chairs. Anna situated herself in front of "Confess your sins." Jeff took his place in front of "What is your prayer request?" And I sat down confidently in front of "Ask anything about God."

There we sat, all by ourselves, for the longest five minutes of my life.

People poured around us like a river around a rock. Some stared, some smirked, and a few chattered. But mostly we were ignored. I quickly abandoned any confidence I was feeling and drowned myself completely in the fear that we would sit there all night by ourselves and that Anna and Jeff would hold me responsible and would never again want to talk to people about God.

My vision narrowed as the darkening fear overtook my mind. I became less aware of what was going on around me as I sank further into the depths of anxiety; all I could see was the empty chair before me. Just before I succumbed to the pressing waters, a man walked up to me and said "Hey. So...um, what does God mean to you?" My gaze met his eyes, and I buoyed to the surface, finally able to notice what was going on around me once more. Seconds later, I saw a man sit down in front of Anna and begin talking to her. A few minutes after that, a man pulled up a chair in front of Jeff.

Our confidence grew as the conversations progressed, and more people began stopping by to talk. When a chair opened up, it only sat empty for a few moments before being filled once more. On and on it went like that, man after man, woman after woman, group after group, for the next three and a half hours. We listened and talked with men, women, white, black, Indian, Hispanic, Asian, old, young, homeless, rich, educated, not-as-educated—all genuine people who were interested in talking about God. Some wanted to debate, but most of the people just wanted to have a conversation, ask some questions, listen to our perspectives, and share

some thoughts of their own. A number of folks said that never before in their lives had they had real dialogues like that with Christians.

The conversations now escape me, but I do remember the joy I felt after a few hours. The fear vanished like a shadow under a spotlight, and I didn't realize until much later how comfortable I felt sitting in that chair. This was life-altering fun, enjoying heart-level conversations with perfect strangers in the middle of a surface-level environment. At one point, Anna came over to me and said, "This is so easy! Why aren't we doing this every week?"

We ended shortly before midnight, packed up our signs and chairs, and floated back to the car, this time with less anxiety about the stares. We met up with Erik, who had spent the night walking around and had caught up with a homeless guy he had met once before, and as we drove home, we all had the chance to talk through our feelings about what had taken place. Something special happened to us that night; the ice of our fears had melted in the dazzling heat of our obedience. We each had our own unique experiences, but we were collectively moved by God's faithfulness to comfort us in the midst of our fear.

That was the interesting thing about the experience. It felt so uncomfortable at first, and just showing up felt like scaling an enormous wall. But after making it over to the other side, we felt right at home, feeling comfortable in our folding chairs and in our conversations.

Since that time, we have gone back to the Promenade six or seven times. I think about 15 of my friends have now made the trip. I even went once by myself, and it wasn't that scary. Sure, I was still a little nervous anytime I struck up a conversation with someone, but it wasn't anything like the first night. I think that is part of God's blessing. When Jesus asks us to follow Him, we find He is not only leading us but also right by our side as we take each step. And we're not likely to feel scared when the Lord of the universe has our backs like that.

Interestingly, we all stopped going after about nine months; the trips just got lost in the midst of our busy lives. And when I think about starting them up again, I find the fear has crept back once more. So from time to time, I revisit my thoughts from that first night, trying to tap into the courage I once felt and the joy I had at the time. And the one thought that has lasted through time is a simple one Erik shared that night.

He said he loved the idea of going to a place where he and his wife might normally go on a date, like a mall or restaurant or store, not with the thought of being entertained but rather with the thought of being available to God. By going to the Promenade that night, we were all intentional about being there to minister to people. This is a mind-set I don't typically have, an awareness that every part of our day and every place we go are sacred. I can serve God and look for opportunities to love others every moment of every day and not just when I am "doing ministry."

I can't go to the Promenade every day with my sign and my chair. But I can take that same mind-set to my home or my neighborhood or my office, making myself available for His use and looking for opportunities to advance His work. So this is the question I have to continually wrestle with in my battle against comfortable Christianity: How do I bring the intentionality of that night to my typical day?

The answer to this question requires a huge shift in perspective. To live life like this, we must understand that our lives are not about us at all; they are about God and other people. This makes sense to me in light of Paul's stinging statement: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price."³ If our lives are not our own, then they belong to Someone else and therefore to many someone elses.

But I struggle every day with giving my life in service to God and other people. I am far more likely to act in my own self-interest, to meet my own needs without fully considering the needs of others. I think this is how I



became so comfortable in the first place, thinking primarily about myself and making decisions that maximize my own security.

If you are anything like me, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You've settled for comfort rather than Christ, but your cravings for God are slowly thawing your cold heart. The only remedy I can see for our comfortable Christianity is to do what Paul told us, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to a God who is worthy to receive them.⁴

So Jesus is speaking to all of us comfortable Christians, asking us to get off our couches and follow Him, to lay ourselves on the altar of life for His sake. He may indeed lead us down a path of martyrdom, or He may lead us into the heart of the inner city to care for the brokenhearted, or He may lead us into the living room of the rich to speak truth into their empty lives. He may even lead you or me to step up on top of a soapbox one day to preach the gospel.

But if we find ourselves there, feeling alone on the stage, rest assured He will be there beside us, filling us with the comfort that passes all understanding.