

A stylized, dark silhouette of a city skyline with various building shapes, set against a background of vertical, rain-like streaks in shades of teal and blue.

CHRIS RATTAY

WORDS TO WALK BY

A DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE THROUGH THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT



In Chris Rattay's book, *Words to Walk By*, you'll find true treasures. Chris takes us back to the basics of our faith of love, reconciliation, forgiveness, and following Jesus with all of our hearts. Chris has not only lived out each of these chapters in his personal life and relationships, but has helped so many others find freedom and joy by simply obeying and loving Jesus. It is what has always changed the world and always will. His words and his life are powerful and needed for all of us today.

Jimmy Siebert, Senior Pastor, Antioch Community Church, President, Antioch Ministries International

Long before Chris starting writing down his words, I watched him study God's Words. And walk by them. Over nearly 20 years, I've seen in Chris a particular sort of courage and integrity: one that's caused him to make decisions—about the gospel, about money, about justice, about where he was going to live and who he was going to associate with—which haven't always seemed popular at the time, seemed to bear fruit right away, and which have come at great cost to him (and his family). But he's stood strong and persevered. And the result is in his family. And the people he's ministered to. And here on these pages. They're words Chris has walked by, and as a result, they have a sense of reality that's good for the soul. And an antidote to our shallow, just-words world.

John Lo, Lead Pastor, Epicentre Church

If you've had your fill of empty platitudes, hollow sermons, and out-of-touch preachers whose words say more than their lives, Chris Rattay is the leader you're looking for. Chris's life is the heart of his message; he doesn't say a word about God that he hasn't already lived out with his whole family and community. Your journey through this book will be one of sitting at the feet of a man who has put Jesus' words into practice, and who has the joys, the scars, the faith, and the failures to prove it. You're not about to read ideas about Jesus, you're about to read a challenge to life with Jesus.

*Scott Hall, Associate Director of Urban Programs,
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship*

Discipleship is messy, but it's where people best heal and grow and experience life change. Chris and his wife Maggie are disciples of Jesus who make disciples. In Chris' new book, *Words to Walk By*, he has provided a proven model with solid content for helping Christ followers to more intentionally go and make disciples as well. Don't get it twisted: discipleship is the assignment, and this valuable resource will help you fulfill it in community with those around you!

*Dr. Larry Acosta, Founder/CEO,
Urban Youth Workers Institute*

This book so clearly illustrates that obedience to Jesus brings life. Chris Rattay lays out the many ways we avoid grappling with our sinfulness at the expense of the transformation God offers us. This is not an abstract, theological reflection on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is first and foremost a practical manual for how to live into it, which, as Rattay rightly argues, is the most crucial element. He calls us to break out of our spiritual complacency to rediscover Jesus' lordship. But the best part of his reflections are the stories that prove that those who seek to live out Jesus' teaching will be liberated into true life. What he writes is not always comfortable to hear, but the words of life rarely are.

*Derek W. Engdahl, Co-General Director,
Servant Partners*

We all long to see transformation in peoples' lives, including our own. What does this actually look like on our streets and where we live our lives? Chris Rattay weaves together stories from years of life in East LA with principles from the Sermon on the Mount to show us how deep discipleship leads to the lasting transformation. A clearly written, insightful, and compelling guide that will help those who truly want to follow Jesus, and guide others on the way.

*Jude Tiersma Watson, InnerChange/CRM,
Associate Professor of Urban Mission, Fuller Seminary*

Chris Rattay has impacted me deeply both through his lifestyle and his teaching. I am so thankful that he has written a book on discipleship so a larger audience can learn from him. As I read Chris' new book, I was convicted by his humility and authenticity and was inspired to freshly apply Jesus' words to my life.

*Robert Herber, Lead Pastor,
All Peoples Church, San Diego*

Words to Walk By offers profound theology, compelling stories, and practical insights for urban disciples. Chris Rattay's depth in the Word and two decades of ministry experience are evident on every page. This book is an important resource for small groups and churches of all sizes, especially those in multiethnic and multi-class settings.

*Dr. John Teter, Senior Pastor, Fountain of Life
Covenant Church, Executive Director, FOL Antioch*

Chris Rattay brings us a gritty and honest look at Jesus' sermon on the mount. He first and foremost holds himself to Jesus' teaching. Then he applies it to us. His stories are inspiring and practical, seeped in his urban ministry experiences. Enjoy!

*Doug Schaupp, Associate National Director,
Evangelism, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA*

**WORDS TO
WALK BY**

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**A DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE THROUGH
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

CHRIS RATTAY



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Servant Partners is an interdenominational evangelical missions agency that sends, trains, and equips those who follow Jesus by living among the world's urban poor. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we seek the transformation of communities with the urban poor through church planting, community organizing, and leadership development.

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This book has been shaped by all of the people mentioned above; it has also been shaped by books. There is nothing written that is original, save for the words of Jesus, and my book is no exception. As you read, you will find J.C. Ryle, Martyn Lloyd Jones, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Dallas Willard walking through these pages, and though I might not be able to fill their shoes, I'm glad to be able to at least walk the path of discipleship with them.

INTRODUCTION

A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

IN CHAPTER 4 OF THE Gospel of Matthew, Jesus starts His public ministry with fireworks, as He defeats the devil in a three-round desert smack down. After He makes it clear that He is the shot-caller, He enters into His hometown of Galilee and begins healing the sick from every illness and casting out demons. Revival is beginning! There is excitement in the air, crowds are beginning to form, and power is experienced. The kingdom of heaven is exploding onto earth. However, as soon as the crowds begin to form, Jesus does a most interesting thing: He sits everyone down and offers them discipleship. He calls people to be close to Him and follow Him in the long, difficult transformation of every part of their lives. Before the revival even gets off the ground, Jesus makes it very clear that His priority is the long, deep work of transformation. He refuses to be made into a celebrity preacher or a quick-fix guru.

Jesus guides us toward this transformation with the greatest sermon ever given. His first words speak directly to our warped mindset: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven can be ours right now, this same kingdom that defeated the devil and where the sick are healed. But it is a kingdom which is far from the confident, the gifted, and the successful. It is found instead among and within those poor in spirit. It is found in those who are hungry for new life, for transformation. And as we will see, it is found in those who hunger to obey Jesus rather than simply to see His power without any kind of trusting relationship. When we work to transform our hearts as Jesus calls us to do in the Sermon on the Mount, we find that life with Jesus is so much more than we could have imagined.

For the past ten years, I have lived and worked in East Los Angeles, a traditional hub for immigrants from Mexico and Central America. After a year of deepening our understanding of God’s heart in the areas of racial and class reconciliation, my wife and I heard God call us to relocate to East LA. I knew that God was sending us to a neighborhood very different from our own, to both receive from the immigrant and Chicano community the character of God they uniquely carry, and to offer the character of God that we uniquely carry. Since East LA does not have a large percentage of people with post-high school education, and since it is a poor, working class community, it has sadly been stereotyped as a community that can only receive help. Yet, as we look at the totality of our Bible we realize that whether we are educated, wealthy, uneducated or poor, we all stand before God made in His image, and with the brokenness of sin. The more time my family has lived in East LA, the more we have realized how beautiful this community is. Our children are going through the public schools here, our

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friends are here, and we are experiencing Jesus here, in what we now call home.

Among the immigrants and “homies” of East LA, as well as those who have relocated from middle-class lives to be a part of this community, I have witnessed great transformation in the hearts of people I serve. People who were enemies of God—stuck in anger, depression, isolation, fear, and addictions—have been set free. I have seen Matthew chapter four lived out many times in these years. I have witnessed numerous physical healings and demonic deliverances, as well as the awesome power of the kingdom of God. I regularly ask Jesus for more!

Yet I have learned that Jesus desires to develop disciples. His power to heal us is part of our transformation process, but committed discipleship is at the center of this process. Jesus intends to change the world by raising up people who are dedicated to obeying His commands so that their hearts, minds, and lifestyles look like those of their servant-leader and model.

Hearts on the verge of transformation are hungry for the teachings of Jesus, desperate for His life-saving grace, and willing to take the Bible seriously and put the commands and promises of Scripture into action. True transformation happens when people believe in the teachings of Jesus so deeply that they actively live them out. In the end, any revival is nothing without the long and fruitful commitment of discipleship.

There's a scene in the movie *Transformers* where Bumblebee, the old, beat-up Camaro, takes offense when his passengers mock his appearance. He throws them out

of the car, leaves, and returns as a brand-new, beautiful yellow Camaro. I saw the movie on opening day, and the theater was packed. In that moment, when Bumblebee drives up for the first time and reveals his transformation, all of us in the theater collectively opened our mouths with one united, “Whoa!” followed by shared laughter. We were all caught with our mouths open, blown away by the utter transformation.

How many Christians today cause this kind of jaw-dropping admiration from friends and family after they begin following Jesus? I’m sad to see so few. Every human being is a broken vessel. Unfortunately, all too often the Christian Church tries to fix the problem with new tires and a paint job, instead of walking people through the Sermon on the Mount and discipleship. Jesus wants to transform our hearts, minds, and souls from the inside out! He wants to wow us with the level of transformation He can bring to our lives and the lives of those around us.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

THIS BOOK IS AIMING for the foundations and the heart of living with Jesus. The Bible is its main source—I used the New International Version unless otherwise cited—because the Bible has something to say to *everyone*. Likewise, I did my best to write it so that *everyone* walking toward Jesus, from curious skeptics to seasoned church elders, would find something of value in it.

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At the same time, the people I pictured most often as I wrote this book were the committed new believers who participate in my church's Discipleship School. These students come from all over, but mostly from around our inner-city neighborhood. They are diverse in formal education, and as growing Christians, they are eager to learn all they can, every way they can.

We are a unique culture today in how we gather and process information. We simply do not read as our grandparents did. But that doesn't mean we are any less serious about following Jesus. Many of the first disciples did not read very much—they learned through more experiential forms instead—but the important point is that they obeyed what they learned. This book is for those who are ready to do something with what they learn, not just be more prepared for the next spiritual debate. This book is for those who want to roll up their sleeves and get to work on the serious business of transformation.

Each chapter ends with discussion questions to help stir up conversation around different topics. Don't be too locked onto these questions, and feel free to add your own! They're given here to help, not to control. Here are some ways you might use them in reading together:

In Reading Groups

AT MY CHURCH'S Discipleship School, a diverse group of Christians gathers weekly to talk about a book. Each member commits to reading the assigned chapter in time for the next group. Our members have full lives and many

don't read that often, so this accountability really helps. The discussions are often fruitful and interesting, and it brings our community close together.

To start a discussion group at your church or community center, begin by getting 2 or 3 committed people to start planning with you. Then, invite others and figure out when the most people are available. The group will be most rewarding if all members give a serious commitment to completing the reading each week.

If you have trouble with members showing up without having finished the reading, you can try a few different things:

- Give simple assignments, such as 'Mark your favorite passage to share.'
- Have a rotating discussion leader who should bring questions to ask the group, in addition to presenting the questions at the end of each chapter.
- Get a written commitment from each member that they'll read next time.
- Read key passages out loud together, rather than relying on individual reading.

After checking that everyone has a chance to read, make sure you create a safe space for honest conversation around the topics in the book. Build trust by setting rules around not gossiping outside of the group, and by practicing vulnerability yourself.

In cross-class groups, or groups where some are very experienced Christians and some are just beginning, be sure that everyone is sensitive to the diversity in the group.

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Good listening across racial, cultural, and socio-economic difference is not easy—but it is so worth it!

In Pairs

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN with discipleship in mind. If you are a more seasoned Christian mentoring or counseling a new believer, this book can be used to guide some fruitful conversation around what it means to be a Christian. I invite both mentors and mentees to be open and vulnerable to each other. Following Jesus for more years does not mean someone has it all figured out, and we have a lot to teach each other!

Many of the same suggestions apply to pairs as to groups: make sure you are both committed to the reading, and create a safe space for discussion. In a discipleship pair, you may be able to dig deeper. Make sure you take time to follow up on your partner's progress if they bring up a big issue.

While I recommend that groups, pairs, and individuals always close and open with prayer, pairs can be especially flexible with when and how much they pray because they can tune into and respond to each other's needs. Take advantage of this: let your reading meeting turn into a prayer session if it seems like that is what you both need.

As Individuals

YOU MIGHT BE READING this book by yourself, and that's okay. But if you are very busy or not used to reading regularly, you might miss the regularity of a partner or group.

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Try putting yourself on a schedule or asking someone else to check in on your reading progress from time to time.

You can tell others about what you're reading and you can even bring up the discussion questions in regular conversation. You can ask a pastor, mentor, or friend for advice on how to apply what you've read. All of these things will help you connect with others over the text, even if they can't read with you.

No matter who you're reading with, I invite you to dig deep! Don't leave the words of Jesus on the page—walk by them, wrestling and responding to these challenges in your own life. It's time.

CHAPTER ONE

SIN IS A CANCER

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

- Matthew 5:21-22, 27-30

WHEN MY WIFE AND I first moved into East LA, we lived in a small, overcrowded apartment complex. This was very new for me as I had always lived in houses. I was used to a lot of privacy and separation from my neighbors.

Yet here, it was as if we were all living together. I was pushed into a greater depth of relationship. I got to see more deeply what makes us human.

I have fond memories of hanging out on the balcony late at night, laughing with other men in the complex about the frustrations of maintaining our hair styles, playing football in the alleys between the buildings, and barbecuing while listening to music. As soon as our neighbors established that we were trustworthy, we felt as if they had our backs. I experienced a sense of loyalty from new Mexican-American friends that I had not known in previous contexts.

On the other hand, I saw a lot of anger. The walls were thin, so people's business was exposed. The alleys surrounding our complex were dark at night and used by a tiny percentage of people for dangerous activities. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, in order to reach my car, I had to wade through used lighters and walk by a prostitute asleep on a ragged couch. On so many levels, the move to an inner-city apartment was a shock to my system. It wasn't that evil in this complex was any worse than in the middle-class neighborhood I grew up in; it was just more visible. People didn't live in big homes that could hide all their family drama and frustration. Living for many years in this complex helped me understand more about the human condition that exists in all neighborhoods and the ever-present reality of sin.

The reality of my new apartment complex was not a shock to Jesus. Jesus entered and understands the broken human condition better than any of us. He sees our sin and its destructive consequences. In the beginning of the

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Great Sermon, He is clear that victims of sin will receive mighty blessings as they follow Him (Matthew 5:2-12). He begins by rallying all those who are broken in spirit, depressed, weak, and sad, those who hunger and thirst for victory in their lives, who long to see mercy win over revenge, who strive for purity and peace, and who are willing to take the blows for following Jesus. He rallies all those who would follow Him and promises that through our trust and obedience to Him, we will change the world. Yet He is not merely an inspirational speaker. Immediately after this rallying cry, He gets practical—*really* practical.

The first practical truth He gives us is that our standards for what we consider healthy and holy are way too low. He reveals this truth by addressing the reality of anger and lust as equivalent sins to murder and adultery (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-30). How does God judge between someone who murders and someone who has an angry thought? He doesn't; they are both guilty. How does God judge between a man who cheats on his wife and a man who looks at another woman and thinks something sexual about her? He doesn't; they are both guilty.

I imagine some of you are a little frustrated right about now. This probably sets off alarms in your mind: How can it be that God judges the one who gets angry in the same way He judges the one who murders? We should ask why this is true, and how this is fair.

WHAT GOD SAYS

JESUS HELPS US understand this tension by giving us a revelation about sin. He says if our eye or our hand is

causing us to sin, we should cut it off so that the rest of our body doesn't enter hell (Matthew 5:29-30). Some people, at times, have taken these words literally and cut off all kinds of body parts.¹ Yikes! Thankfully, we know that Jesus is not telling us to literally mutilate our flesh, both from the complete teaching on sin we get from the Sermon on the Mount and from other teachings. (For example, in Mark 7:1-23, He shows that sin is something that comes from the mind and heart, not something that physical action can cure.) While Jesus is not being literal about mutilating flesh, He is being sober about the organic, destructive power of sin.²

Back in Jesus' time—first century AD—there was a limit to medical and technological solutions to illness, so doctors would often amputate or “cut off” the infected area before the disease could spread and kill the entire body.³ To this day, gangrene and deeply infected wounds often require the same treatment. The most common affliction that requires this type of intense, sacrifice-part-for-the-whole kind of treatment is cancer. Cancer is a disease that spreads throughout the body. Every treatment that exists today, in some form or fashion, is attempting to remove the cancerous cells before they spread. Skin cancer and breast cancer are two forms of this deadly disease that often require physical amputation. But even in chemotherapy, the prescribed drugs are killing good parts of the body in order to keep the cancer from spreading. Jesus is telling us that sin is basically *spiritual cancer*. If it is not cut out of our lives, it will grow until it can kill us spiritually.

SIN IS A CANCER

Sin goes way beyond bad heart attitudes and choices that lead to destruction. Bad behaviors are the symptoms of the root problem: sin, a broken condition of our souls that negatively affects our ability to believe what is true, have joy, and live in line with the heart of God. Any destructive action that we do is not an isolated event, but rather the product of a cancerous condition of our souls that the Bible explains is a part of our very nature at birth.⁴

Now does Jesus' teaching make sense? Murder and anger come from the same root. To kill someone with a gun and to be angry at someone in your mind are both products of the condition of sin that is alive in your soul. They both are the result of your spiritual cancer flaring up. Clearly, there are greater social consequences for actually murdering someone than there are for being angry, as there should be. Someone who murders another person has let their sin cancer grow and dominate their lives to the point of taking another life, but both the murderer and the constantly angry person are living in their sin cancer. Both people are breathing life into evil. Thus, both are guilty before a God who has never been, and will never be, infected with even a speck of sin cancer.

LIFE IN THE CITY

ONE OF THE FIRST GUYS I got to know in our new apartment was Joey. Joey and I were so different. I grew up in the suburbs with both of my parents, both of whom had master's degrees. I spent my teen years playing sports, and at least one of my parents was at every one of my sports games. Joey grew up in the projects with no dad

and a not-so-present mother. Joey started to play sports when he was in elementary school, but by middle school he'd started running with a gang. He spent his teenage years learning how to fight and shoot guns. He spent his twenties in jail. I spent my twenties as a campus pastor.

Joey lived a few doors down from me, and one day his wife Andrea was walking past our apartment to go to the laundry machines. Being a hot summer day, our door was open, and my wife and I started talking with her. Joey looked over and could only see me chatting with Andrea. For the next month, I kept wondering why Joey was always mad-dogging me and not responding when I greeted him in passing. Thankfully, his wife and mine became close, and we were invited to their son's birthday party. At one point during the party, Joey, with a little alcohol influence, confessed he had wanted to hurt me for what he perceived as me talking to his wife on that hot summer day. He had actually picked up his knife and started to walk toward my apartment, when suddenly he felt something in his gut that caused him to stop and go back home. As he finished his confession, I mumbled out a traumatized, "Thank you for not killing me." He hugged me about seven times, telling me that I was "legit" and that we were "homies" (slang for friend or brother). From that point forward, we were great friends.

As I got to know Joey, he confided in me that he had a horrible habit. Whenever he was stressed or tired from work or fighting with his wife, he would get his gun and start driving around town, looking for a rival gang member to mess with. He knew it was not a healthy way to deal with his problems. He knew it was destroying his life, and

that looking for a fight could get him killed, and yet he couldn't stop. It was an addiction. He loved the rush of a fight. That, along with alcohol, was how he dealt with stress and anger.

At first I didn't know how to respond to Joey in those moments when he vented about this addiction. I didn't know how to be a good friend to him. All I could do was listen and agree that it was time to stop the habit immediately.

About six months into knowing Joey, I got a little more insight into his struggle through a long talk I had with my wife. At the time, our family situation was really difficult. We were raising a two-year-old boy and a newborn baby in a tough apartment complex. My efforts at planting a church were failing, which put me in a depressed state. The long talk I had with Maggie was centered on me "checking out" at home. I would come home from work, usually depressed or unhappy, and definitely not excited to enter into the chaos of dirty diapers, sick babies, and the destruction our two-year-old boy had wrought on our apartment. So I played video games—violent video games. I was stressed, and I was angry, so I killed virtual people until I was tired enough to go to sleep. Sound familiar?

Yes, Joey's actions had greater practical consequences than mine, but our actions came from the same root. Both of us were infected with the same cancer-like condition. Both of us were infected with the same sin. Both of us stood before God, judged and guilty.

GOING FORWARD

WE MUST DEAL WITH, root out, cut off sin. But in order to do that, there are several steps involved.

Own up to sin

THE FIRST STEP in our journey toward a more transformed life is to understand, identify, and own up to our sin. Understanding sin for what it really is—that's the secret to a new life. Once we can see the power of sin, we can then start to deal with its corruption and ability to spread into every part of our lives. But the more we minimize sin's reality, downplay its power, or limit it to "bad actions," the less we'll be able to grow with Jesus. If we're not willing to confront the sin in our own lives and cut it off at its root, then it will eventually consume us.

Sin has always been the most complicated and difficult struggle in human history. We can create a computer that fits in the palm of our hands today, and tomorrow replace it with a gun used to kill innocent people in a movie theater. We can write some of the most soul-stirring poetry, screenplays, and music today, and then tomorrow shred our brother's soul apart in five minutes with some of the most creatively vile words ever invented. We can sacrifice our very lives to save a stranger from a burning building in the morning, and then in the evening not give an ounce of energy to deal with the fire of anger raging in our own home.

We often brag about how far we have evolved as a human society. We display our new technology, our new ideas, and our new fashion. Yet from the first day we

have existed until now, we struggle to be able to relate rightly to each other and to God. We have worked so hard to transform the surface, while sin continues to destroy us on the inside.

Sin is a living, breathing condition that we all struggle with. It is the main enemy that prevents us from transforming into people after God's own heart. We must first see sin for what it is—a spiritual cancer. Once we acknowledge and understand our enemy, then we can start working on how to defeat it.

We are easily convinced that our sin is not that big of a deal. Can you imagine how frustrated a doctor would be if you kept disagreeing with her diagnosis of cancer, convinced instead that it was just a common cold? To own up to our sin condition is to submit to Jesus' diagnosis of our problem, instead of dismissing Him as too extreme.

There is freedom in honesty. There is transformation to be found when we own up to our condition. The condition of sin works so hard to convince us that we are fine. Sin wants to stay alive; it wants to continue to dominate your life. So do what any healthy person would do when they realize someone has ill intentions—fight with everything you've got!

Understand the aspect of deceit

SIN IS CHARACTERIZED by deceit. It lies to your soul, heart, and mind; it distorts what is right and truthful. Initially, sin deceives us with a great first impression. Sin rarely approaches as a scary monster, but rather as a smooth, attractive, easy option. We often say yes to that first invi-

tation sin offers. We say yes because we think we have found what our hearts truly desire, and if it's our heart's true desire, it cannot be harmful, right? Wrong. Sin often moves just like a charming, attractive person asking us to dance. We think there is no harm in one little dance, yet we don't realize that we are slowly being danced over to the back door. The only ending is being taken out the back door, and tortured to death in a dark alley.

Scripture is very clear on the dangers of giving in to temptation.⁵ The only ending is where sin pulls you deeper and deeper in, so that the final result is eternal spiritual death. Take a deep breath and try to take this in. Spiritual torture, death, and isolation—this is the end awaiting you if you keep letting sin have its way in your life.

Don't fall for cheap grace

ONE WAY THAT SIN has deceived us is by convincing us to play the “grace of God” card in inappropriate ways. It is a golden truth that God's mercy and forgiveness are endless and can cover anything, but God's mercy is not meant to be a crutch, allowing us to ignore the severity of our sinful condition under the pretense that all will be forgiven later.

God calls us to repent of our sins—which includes acknowledging them in the first place—in order to receive forgiveness and the power to heal. Acts 20:21 says, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” Sin lies to us by telling us that we can do what we want now and simply be forgiven later, but God calls us to a transformed

life. He calls us to live out the commandments (Exodus 20:1-17, John 15:10) and bear spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-23, John 15:4), becoming like Christ in our thoughts and deeds (1 John 4:17, 1 Peter 2:21, John 13:15, Matthew 11:29). The mercy of God is not meant to convince us that we just have a common cold, and thus make us lazy people who are unwilling to take the appropriate medicine. Remember, we don't have a cold, or even broken bones; we are infected with a serious cancer.

Cheap grace is saying a prayer, going to church every Sunday, and feeling justified to judge those on reality TV. Cheap grace is believing that your sin is not that big of a deal, because you are “in”—in God's club, on the list for Heaven, covered. Cheap grace avoids truthful examinations of our souls, and concludes that we are actually good people with just a few annoying habits. True grace opens up our eyes to the horrendous nature of our souls and sets us on a lifelong path of humility and freedom.

When we step back and realize what it cost to receive the mercy of God, we should be in utter amazement at the severity of our condition. How do we, as broken humans, even begin to understand that the only cure for our condition was for the eternal source of all love, life, power, and creativity to become human and be tortured and killed by His own creation?

Receive Jesus' help

GRACE IS A GIFT we do not deserve. Grace is a constant, intimate relationship with Jesus in the midst of our sin

cancer. Jesus sacrificed His life so that we could be free from sin's destruction. He conquered death and sin and made a way for us to follow Him into victory. These words of His—the Great Sermon—give us the tools and the power to overcome the effect of sin in our lives. Like any parent, Jesus won't sit back and let this enemy keep killing His kids. He has sacrificed everything to save us.

No matter what label we want to put on our sin—issues, brokenness, bad habits—we can never change the severity of the problem, and our inability to overcome it without the love and power of Jesus. Your sin is really that bad. And Jesus' love is really that good.

Fight against sin by cutting off what needs to be cut off

AFTER TALKING WITH MY WIFE about my addiction to the violent video games, I finally realized how anger was damaging my soul. I saw how sin cancer was growing through each violent game I played. I knew that I had to obey Jesus and cut off the rotten "limb." So I gave away my gaming system. It has been ten years since then, and I have never missed it. The "cutting off" of the system was simply the first of many steps I needed to take to become a husband and father who does not allow my sin cancer to affect my family. I am a different husband and father today than I was then, yet I am still growing, still in a battle to keep sin from messing up my life. Joey is still alive, currently working his first full-time job, faithful to Andrea and their kids, and moving away from destructive living. Jesus is a great doctor!

Fight against sin by being accountable

DURING ANOTHER DIFFICULT SEASON, I remember calling a friend every single night to check in until that particular temptation was no longer trying to ruin my life. Of course, calling someone every night so they could check my behavior was rather humiliating. There were times before dialing the number where I would feel frustrated or annoyed, like I was in prison or on probation, but that is exactly the problem! We hate facing reality when that reality reveals something negative within us; we don't want to believe that we are sick, or a danger to ourselves and the people around us. Sin inflames our pride, and we begin to convince ourselves that we don't need healing or help.

Some people argue that setting up practical consequences for sin or bringing in peers for accountability relationships leads to legalism and competition. Of course it can—we can twist anything into an evil. We also have a funny way of talking and exegeting our way out of obeying Jesus. But Jesus says to live in such a way that you are a walking, mutilated, free person, eternally bound for a new life. Scripture commands us to confess our sin to others, and help each other every day in this journey.⁶ If setting up practical consequences and having an accountability partner help us live out this calling, then by all means, let's do it. The point of being a disciple of Jesus is that people can see our theology being worked out in the practical aspects of our lives.

Fighting sin is exhausting. I have learned that Jesus' call to be radical in fighting sin can often be more difficult for those of us who are older in age and further along in

our journey with God. Sin never completely goes away. It is built into our nature. It is like weeds in our garden, or cockroaches in our kitchen. We're energized for the fight initially, but when we realize it is going to be a lifelong fight, we try to find ways to get around it.

Instead, we must get on our knees and ask Jesus for a new kind of humility—a humility that will overcome the sin of pride that stops us from seeking help, a humility that will radically change how we live our lives. We need to stay vigilant and practical. Sin is more deceitful than presidential candidates in televised debates. Sin will tell you whatever you need to hear to let it live. We can't be deceived any longer. We must fight against sin's pull toward the alley. We must fight against the cancer that seeks our destruction.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In this chapter, we saw that sin like uncontrolled anger can show up in many different ways. Joey's anger showed up in the big, obvious sin of taking out a gun and looking for people to mess with. My anger showed up in a less obvious way: through violent video games. Share a way that sin shows up in your actions, whether it's an obvious 'sin' or not.
2. What's hard about owning up to your sin cancer? Do you find yourself assuming that certain types of people or certain neighborhoods have greater sin than your own? Do you believe that owning up to your sin cancer is crucial to your growth?

3. Cheap grace is grace that doesn't cost you anything, and doesn't require you to address your sin cancer. How has cheap grace shown up in your church, your family, your life?

¹ Matt Kuelfer, "The Practice of Self-Castration in Early Christianity," *Trans Christians*, accessed November 29, 2016, www.transchristians.org/archive/the-practice-of-self-castration-in-early-christianity.


² Jesus often uses hyperbole and intense language to prove or emphasize His point. See Matthew 23:23-24, Matthew 7:3-5, and Mark 10:24-25 as examples.

³ Earl E. Vanderwerker, Jr., "A Brief Review of the History of Amputations and Prostheses," *The Inter-Clinic Information Bulletin* 15, no. 5 (1976): 15-16.

⁴ Isaiah 53:6, Psalm 51:5, Psalm 58:3, Romans 8:3, Colossians 3:5-10. For a thorough look at the biblical teaching on sin, consider J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1995).

⁵ Genesis 4:7, Mark 9:42-48, John 5:14, 1 Peter 5:8.

⁶ James 5:16, Hebrews 3:12-14, 1 John 1:5-10, Matthew 6:9-13.



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