



Into the Light

All things are possible with God

July—August 2013

Unless We Say Yes

By Bob Van Domelen

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt 16:24-25)

I get many letters from individuals in prison who are frustrated because they are trying to change their lives around by developing a healthier, God-centered attitude in their choices. They are frustrated because they still fall into some of their sinful habits/behaviors despite promises to God to sin no more.

I have often used Paul's words, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) because he speaks words most of us can recognize. Even though I want to do right, I still give in and fail in my resolve. Truth be told, I think most of us have said at one time or another "What's the use? I keep doing what I don't want to do. I'm still right where I started."

A few years ago, I read that the reason we fail is that we don't *hate our sins enough*. The writer shared by example that if something truly disgusts us, we have no trouble keeping that at arm's length. Neither I nor my wife really like the taste of beets, so in our household we have an agreement that they won't be served. Over the years, it is a resolution that hasn't been hard for us to keep. Hating beets, however, isn't much of a moral issue.

So I began to think of sin as something to be hated, as something that might make me sick just to think of it. After all, if my resolve has succeeded where beets were concerned, why not in areas of pride, anger, or any other weakness I claim as my own. Granted, I still have moments to confess where I am pride-filled when I should be humble, and I still get angry but somehow I put that in the category "Everyone Does." It's hard to hate something everyone hates because there is nothing special in doing that.

I know that over the years I have built up a subconscious catalog of memories, past actions, and inappropriate responses to appropriate needs. And though I have had some success in dealing with them as they surface, I don't always succeed to the extent that I want. My failures, like those of those who write me, are confessed with often repeated resolutions to do better.

Paul's open admission of doing the very things he hated rings true and is, I suppose, a balm for my conscience. After all, aren't we all like Paul? Don't we seek God in our lives? Don't we want to finish life saying as Paul said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept

the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7)? Paul sinned. We sin. But Christ came to atone for our sins and to open the door to eternal life. It is that truth that must anchor us in our daily walk.

Let him deny himself

Let him take up his cross

Wait a minute, isn't this what we claim to be doing each and every time we face temptation? Isn't saying yes to God and no to our temptations the same as denying self? Yes, but there's more to it.

I think that the "very thing I hate" is usually something I like or at least my physical self likes. You might ask "How can anyone like sin?" The physical body doesn't know right from wrong, goodness from sin. The body knows what *feels* good and what doesn't feel good. So we are indeed at war within our very selves. It is the truth that Paul recognized, a truth within him that helped him to clearly understand the difference between behaviors that were sinful and those that were not.

Anyone who is human and honest will admit that making the right choices and avoiding sin is *not* always easy. If it were, we wouldn't sin. We might even laugh at temptation because the notion of choosing anything contrary to God's will would simply not cross our minds.

Yet we may have to deal with those who look at us with eyes of judgment and as the saying goes, cut them a little slack. For them, the presence of temptation is proof that the label sex offender is appropriate. Temptation is, for some at least, and either-or condition. One either has no temptation to re-offend and can be considered safe for re-entry or the presence of temptation is a molestation waiting to happen.

In theory, however, the DOC is charged with a responsibility to do what it can to avoid releasing anyone bent on molesting children as soon as he/she is released. Treatment programs look for ways to measure the probability of re-offense, and I think an individual's level of admitted temptation might fit that.

The process is, therefore, one of dying to self (no secrets) and of taking up one's cross (day to day living, no shortcuts) with an eye on the prize (eternity in the presence of God). And with this focus the journey in this life will not be without challenge, nor will it be without joy.

Whoever saves his life will lose it

Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it

It's about choice and not merely the choice of what to wear, what to eat, or where to go. It's about complete surrender, the kind of surrender that is unconditional.

The truth be told, most of us offer God a conditional surrender. We surrender things that we really don't want

anyway. We surrender choices that don't really seem like life or death when we evaluate them. The irony is that when we make these conditional surrenders we tend to feel very good about ourselves. We also stand like the Pharisee praying in the temple saying "I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector (Luke 18.11)." Talk about arrogance even if unintended.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that making conditional surrender is a bad thing. Sometimes that kind of choice is like taking a first step in the process of change without knowing where it will lead.

But when we making an unconditional surrender we are saying yes to all that God has for us. I wish I could say that from the moment of surrender onward that everything would be rosy and free of problems. I can't. Most often an unconditional surrender will require that we be vulnerable and transparent at the same time and that can be a scary thing.

Unconditional surrender for Jesus meant stretching out his hands and feet for the nails that employees of the Roman state would drive through his flesh without concern for how much pain they inflicted. Unconditional surrender meant enduring the taunts of people looking for entertainment as Jesus died on the cross. Unconditional surrender didn't remove the pain and suffering. It made that possible.

In my heart I know that we are all called to offer an unconditional yes to God, but I know that most of the time our surrenders are conditional. It's the human in us that gets in the way and God knows that. But there is complete healing with unconditional surrender. The invitation has been offered but we cannot enter in unless we say yes. □

Serving Together 2013

Wheaton College

In the last issue of *Into the Light*, I asked for your prayers as I was in the final days of preparing material for my workshop, "Churches and Sex Offenders," at this conference. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for that support.

Over 400 people attended "Serving Together" sponsored by the Wheaton College Institute for Prison Ministry, and it only took a moment for me to feel the welcoming and accepting atmosphere. These are people who see every person in or out of prison as a work in progress, a success story just waiting to be written. What's not to like about that?

I could fill a newsletter with everything that happened but I'll use this space to let you know what happened at the workshop rather than share a minute by minute diary.

Telling "my story" is always an experience because each telling includes something I had never shared before or, if I had, using new words. I have learned, however, that when I trust God in this way, things work out.

The topic of church response to those with sex-related offenses is critical for one in re-entry, yet finding a church with an active support system and a cautious, though welcoming attitude is very difficult. They exist but they

generally don't advertise, so it ends up being a hit-or-miss thing. I offered information covering what I felt might be starting points yet I know that even with this information each church will look unlike the church just down the road. This perhaps frustrated some in the room who wanted a formula that would work everywhere.

Being realistic is difficult when discussing those in re-entry. There is nothing I'd like more than to offer assurances of a flawless approach where everything works as it was designed to work. It doesn't happen that way because people define churches. They bring personal experiences and attitudes to any response their church might offer.

In the end, the workshop was both a success and a disappointment depending on the individual asked. But the critical factor was that there was an opportunity offered to talk about this issue. As much as I think every church should be willing to talk, they don't.

Thinking about the outline I offered and matching it against the evaluation comments, there are points I could have stressed and examples I could have given. On paper, everything seemed to fit well. In the actual room setting, however, expectations were varied and complex.

The most important thing is in believing that God's design for reconciliation and restoration between churches and those with sex-related offenses will happen. And I believe that God is using each one of us in His plan. Pray that we are listening.

Bits & Pieces

The following are taken from letters I have received since the last issue of this newsletter. Some are meant to offer hope and encouragement while others call out for us to be in prayer.

God is where he needs to be, in my heart and the way I work, live, and respond to the world being all I can be through his grace and his help to live this life here in prison the way he would have me witness not only through my words but who I am on the outside, the one who reflects his being in me as well.

One of my facilitators asked if I use my faith to manipulate people and to get what I wanted. I was offended by the question and of course other patients seized the opportunity to attack my faith. I tried by my actions, walk, and talk to witness for Christ, and when someone questions me, I take the opportunity to witness.

When your heart is broken, when you feel abandoned, when you're out of options, when the pain is great—you turn to God alone. These can be the most profound and intimate experiences of worship. It is during suffering that we learn to pray our most authentic, heartfelt, honest to goodness prayers. When we're in pain, we don't have the energy for superficial prayers.

Breaking the mold and redefining myself is a never ending battle of wits. But as long as I'm always trying to be the best and keep a prayerful relationship with God, all things will fall into place.

My simple prayer for today should be to ask for the desire to want to lead a pure and pleasing life for God. But I need to do my part.

What a loving and caring God I have. I now count my blessings all of the time. Oh, there are bumps along the way, but God is always there for me. I just need to call to him.

There are no two ways about it— being in prison sucks big time but Jesus is greater.

Many of us who work for peace are not at peace. We still have anger and frustration, and work is not really peaceful. We cannot say that we are touching the kingdom of God. To preserve peace, our hearts must be at peace with the world, with our brothers and sisters, and with ourselves, even in prison.

The sky drips with counseling programs for drug and alcohol addictions. The world seems to bend over backwards for that, and money funds those programs very nicely. But God forbid that sex addiction clinics and programs be given nearly equal consideration.

I am in an institution where there are 90% sex offenders but that's okay, we have all sinned. There are many, however, who continue to engage in sexual activity. It is all over the place here. But I don't point fingers. Even though I have never struggled with same-sex issues, I did struggle with inappropriate sex issues. This place needs a lot of prayer because that's where our fight is.

I think we as men have developed an attitude that it's unmanly to show emotions and to openly talk about what's happening within us. But it takes a real man to be brutally honest and to be able to communicate openly with other men.

For whatever reason, justifiable or not, we do not dare to believe that we will be loved just as we are with all our weaknesses and foibles. But that is just what we must do. Rather than frittering away our lives in fear and mistrust, our attitude should be one of willingness to trust others time and again, even those who betray us.

How do you know when sorry is enough? How do you know when it's okay to simply move on? In this stance, it is easy to step on some toes, but how do you know whether they're just bruised or broken? And is sorry enough for broken toes? What do you do when the other person won't even tell you how badly you stepped on their toes? What if you don't know?

Your publication is a blessing, uplifting offenders spiritually, giving us hope, not to mention the spreading of humor.

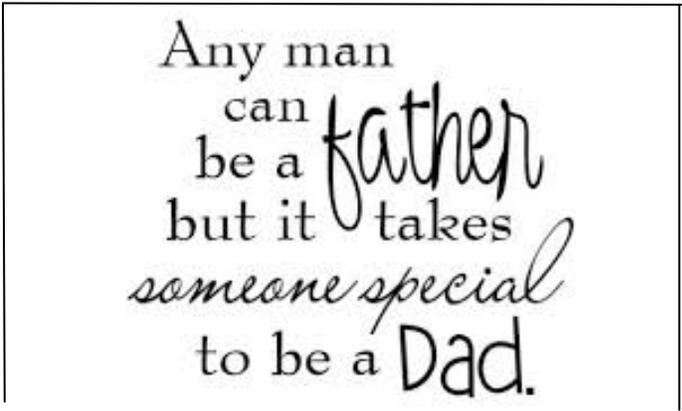
In prison life, the reality isn't marriage. It celibacy. And spiritual and emotional fulfillment is hard to find, so again Christ has to fill that empty place. When the imitation is so often available, it's difficult.

Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For all who want to say yes to unconditional surrender, that they feel God's presence on their journey.
- For all nearing a time of re-entry, that they are able to trust God to meet all their needs.
- For churches, that they are able to see how they are a much needed part of the healing process.
- For dealing with temptation, that they not lose heart in God's desire to transform their lives.
- For those dealing with isolation, that they find the strength to make healthy and healing connections.
- For family members, that they see themselves as needed for support, not as solutions.
- For those in civil commitment, that they do all they can in treatment and not give up hope for eventual release.
- For all who serve in ministry to those in prison, that they are able to see God's presence in each and every person they serve.
- For this ministry, that Broken Yoke Ministries continues to be blessed with the financial support needed to meet basic expenses like this newsletter.
- Finally, for those who are still abusing and are reading this newsletter because God made that possible, that they will do whatever it takes to stop the cycle of abuse and harm caused to their victims.



Any man
can
be a father
but it takes
someone special
to be a Dad.

I know that most of us have fallen far short of being the ideal father. Some of you have had no role model. But our Heavenly Father still calls us His own, still remembers us from the time we were in the womb. Trust God to help you pick up pieces, to learn healthy choices, and to turn to Him when you are in need. This is late, but Happy Father's Day!

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A Little Humor . . .

The congregation of a small stone church decided that the stone which formed the step up to the front door had become too worn by its years of use, and would have to be replaced. As a sign of the faithfulness of members over the years, the stone had a pronounced dip in the middle, well-worn by parishioners entering and leaving the chapel.

Unfortunately, there were hardly any funds available for the replacement. Then someone came up with the bright idea that the replacement could be postponed for many years by simply turning the block of stone over.

Unfortunately, they discovered that their great-grandparents had beaten them to it.

