

# The End of the Struggle

by Stanley Voke - adapted for *Grace4Life* with a testimony by Johnny Long

*"Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress."*

- Count Ludwig Nicholas von Zinzendorf, 1739

**A** **LITTLE BOY** came home from Sunday School one day and said, "Mama, we had a new hymn today. It said that Jesus knows all about our struggles." Then he added thoughtfully, "You know, that isn't right. We don't struggle, only snails struggle!"

**This reminds me** of a pair of pictures that appeared in a Christian magazine, one of a snail crawling, the other, of a bird flying. The caption under them read: "Which are you, snail or bird?" During the great East African Revival (1930s), a group of Christians were returning home after a conference. They were singing and their faces were full of joy. Some of the people who saw them passing said, "Look at those Christians! They are like birds flying!" But those happy believers knew how different it had been prior to the conference when their hearts were not right with Jesus. Then they had felt more like snails—earth bound, self-bound, struggling, instead of soaring.

**It's true that each of us must** look at the perfect Law of God and, wounded by it, run to the sinner's place. But if we remain there, simply feeling sinful, we will become "spiritual snails"—struggling. Seeing our sin can't set us free; we need to see Jesus. "For every one look at your sin, take ten looks at Christ!" counseled Robert Murray McCheyne the young Scottish revivalist. <sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is *looking at Jesus* that makes Christians "fly!" But, many of us have "looking problems!" Why is that?

## THE STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

J. B. Phillips translated Romans 10:4 this way: "Christ means the end of the struggle for righteousness!" Think about it: There is in each of us a fierce struggle to earn and keep our own righteousness. That's the reason it's so hard to come to the sinner's place—much less to keep returning to it. Searching our hearts is painful.

**This struggle** is as old as Adam, Eve and Eden. When God charged them with sin, they first blamed one another and then the serpent—all the while wearing the clothes of fig leaves they'd made to try to cover themselves from the holy eyes of God. By the time Jesus came, man's struggle for righteousness had become a highly developed system designed to earn righteousness by "the works of the law." Paul lamented that his Jewish kinsmen were always "going about to establish

their own righteousness" <sup>2</sup> rather than submitting them selves to the gift-righteousness of God.

**Aren't we all that way?** Have you ever built a sand castle at the seaside? The problem is, of course, that the tide always comes in. No matter how much we try to reinforce our castle, the relentless waves eventually wash away your masterpiece. Spiritually, we do much the same thing when we labour to build up defenses against the "waves" of other people's criticisms. For some of us, life becomes one long struggle to be what we know in our hearts we are not.

There are several ways we Christians try, often unconsciously, to build or maintain our own righteousness. Let's take a look at three of them: the struggle for attainment, the struggle for reputation, and the struggle for appearance.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR ATTAINMENT

There are many ways to struggle for one's own righteousness. One way is trying to attain perfection in some area of life or ministry. Of course God's Law holds up a perfect standard, but the danger is that our lives may become just one prolonged attempt to reach it. Then we become Christians living under law instead of grace—under tension and guilt, instead of trusing in the gift-righteousness of Jesus.

### Sometimes we set the standard ourselves.

We picture in our minds the kind of Christian we think we *ought to be*, then chase after this ideal image. It is like seeing the person we ought to be standing on a high mountain, urging us on as we struggle vainly up the slopes, but never once offering a helping hand.



*Are you a snail struggling. . .*

**Or, we may let other people set the standard for us.** People are forever telling us what we *ought to be*. We hear good sermons and read how-to books that show us the kind of Christian we *should be*—which only makes us feel guilty if we're sensitive, and self-satisfied if we're not. People put us on pedestals expecting this and that of us until life can become one long struggle to be what others demand. So, we labor on under their law, trying to keep up their standards—while behind us is God's relentless law never letting us off, never lifting us up.

**Are you a Christian living under law?** Do you live under a sense of condemnation because you feel all the time you ought to be a better Christian, who *"prays more, does more, gives more?"*



... or a bird soaring?

Jesus wants to give you rest! *"Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy, my burden is light."*  
- Matthew 11:28-30

### THE STRUGGLE TO EARN AND KEEP A REPUTATION

**Another aspect of this struggle** for righteousness is the quest for *reputation*. All of us are "reputation conscious!" Some of us *have* a reputation—it may be for holiness, efficiency, leadership, preaching, tidiness—anything! Others of us *wish we had* a reputation, but once a "rep" is acquired (or assumed), it can haunt us, dog us, beat us down, and wear us out. Bondage to reputation is sheer slavery, and we need to see it for what it is—just another form of the struggle for our own righteousness. It makes us unwilling to be seen as weak in or failing at anything.

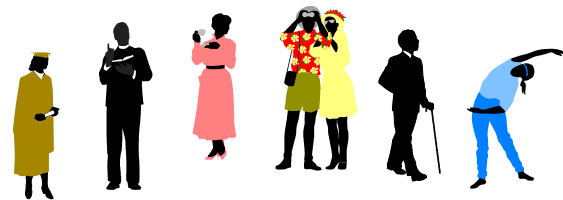
### THE STRUGGLE FOR APPEARANCE

**Our struggle for reputation** will inevitably lead to a struggle for *appearance* since at some point, we'll end up "cooking the books" about who we really are on the inside. Jesus described the Pharisees this way, *"Everything they do is done for men to see."*<sup>3</sup> For them, *appearance* was everything. A teacher illustrated this to children by using three eggs, each having a label. One egg was labeled "STALE," declaring that it was not what it *used* to be. The second egg was "HALF-HATCHED," announcing that it was not what it *hoped* to be. The third was labeled "ROTTEN." It *looked good*, but it was honest enough to admit that it was not what it *appeared* to be.

**Like me, do you sometimes pretend to be what you're not?** That was the Pharisees' game, and their struggle for appearance inevitably led to a lifestyle of hypocrisy. These clever men succeeded in appearing righteous in the eyes of men (and, they thought, God), but they failed miserably in the eyes of Jesus who always insisted on judging them by what was in their hearts. And the trouble with this sort of apparent success is that once we achieve it, we dare not be seen to be failing at anything. To keep our hard-earned reputation, we can never admit to ignorance or sin. That would be tantamount to destroying our lovely sand castle *before* the tide comes in! No,

we feel that it's better to struggle on—even to the point of breaking. We just will not allow people to see us as we really are—weak and needy.

**The tragedy** of such vain attempts to produce our own righteousness is this: we slip ever more deeply into the notion that we can (and must) earn favor with God. And, as we do, the Gospel loses its power in our lives. Romans 10:5 tells us: *"The man who perfectly obeys the law shall find life in it"* (Phillips). In theory, if we *could* keep the law perfectly, we would be blessed, but we cannot. So, try as we may, we end up being cursed. What's more, when we remember that Jesus and Paul taught that the essence of the Law is nothing more or less than loving God and others perfectly, we see how utterly impossible the standard really is (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8ff). Because we are sinners, the Law will always be a "means of death"—not because the standard is faulty, but because we are hopelessly unable to reach it. (Rom. 8:3)



### The Image Is the Thing

Have you ever worn your achievements, possessions, or spiritual gifts as a robe of righteousness with which to "clothe" yourself?

### CHRIST IS THE END OF THE STRUGGLE

**What a relief it is** when we see Jesus as *the end of the struggle for righteousness*. He not only fulfilled the law for us, but was cursed for us as well. He not only attained our perfection but atoned for our imperfection. There is nothing more to struggle for! He has done it all for us, and God asks for nothing now but repentance and faith in Him. *All the fitness He requires, is to feel your need of Him.*

**Joy Davidman**, wife of C.S. Lewis, put it beautifully. *"The only way to be rid of sin is to admit it. Without such honesty, repentance, forgiveness and grace are impossible. The Christian does not go around all the time feeling guilty. For him, sin is a burden he can lay down, for he can admit it, repent and be forgiven. It is the unfortunate creature who denies the existence of sin in general and his own in particular who must go on carrying it. The way to freedom consists in honest confession and repentance that can open our hearts to the Comforter."*<sup>4</sup>

**To open up our souls to God's grace** means that He not only saves us from being the people we are, but changes us into the people we ought to be! This is so simple a child can understand it: "*The only way to be rid of sin is to admit it!*"

Simple, yes, but at the same time, terribly hard. Why so? Because it means letting go of our own righteousness which is the very thing we do not like doing. But we must. Believers cannot wear Jesus' perfect robe of righteousness if we insist on weaving and wearing our own. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, founder of the German Moravian Missionary Order, contemplated the return of Jesus and how he would stand in that great and terrible Day of the Lord: "*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress; midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.*"

**Jesus is our perfect righteousness.** When we come to Him, we need no other. The struggle for righteousness is over. As we stand clothed in the Saviour's perfect righteousness, the Father looks at us and Jesus' reputation is our reputation, His attainments are our attainments, and His appearance is our appearance. There is no need to fear coming to the sinner's place, for when we do, we find ourselves at the foot of the Cross, and there we lay down our own working, stop trying to be what we are not, and admit instead what we are. *At that point* we can trust in Christ's righteousness once again and be free from the struggle for our own. This is the place of grace, rest and peace the Gospel was designed to give us. Wonderfully, this rest in the Gospel is the fountainhead of the energy we need for serving this Christ who died for us and lives for us!

**So, my brother, my sister, isn't it time to...**

*"Lay your deadly doing down,  
Down at Jesus' feet.  
Stand in Him — in Him alone,  
Wondrously complete!"*



<sup>1</sup> *Memoir and Remains*, Robert Murray McCheyne, p. 252

<sup>2</sup> Romans 10:3;

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:5

<sup>4</sup> Davidman, Joy, *Smoke on the Mountain: The Ten Commandments for Today*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1955.

This article has been adapted with permission to World Harvest Mission from *Personal Revival* by Stanley Voke, Christian Literature Crusade, 1964 (out of print).

## Dear Reader,

**I**n November 1990, my wife Becky and I were attending *SONSHIP Week*, a pastor's conference sponsored by World Harvest Mission of Philadelphia, PA USA. Mind you, I went to this conference not because I sensed any need in my life, but as a last-ditch effort to find the magic formula that would change the congregation I'd been pastoring for ten years. What a shock to discover that the one who needed changing was me. Since then, God has been at work, transforming my life, family and ministry through the simple truth of Romans 10:4 that "*Christ is the end of the struggle for righteousness.*" Up to that time, I had been blind to the search for significance that was destroying me.

**Here I was, 25 years into my ministry** as a youth worker, church planter in Africa, and pastor in the USA, but totally unaware of my desperate need for revival. My doctrine and outward life were spotlessly pure, but my thought-life was impure and my heart-relationship to God was shallow and dishonest. It never occurred to me that my soul was withering away because of my secret sins. What sins? Radical self-centeredness, sexual lust (yes, including an addiction to pornography), vanity, and pride in what I felt was the good

reputation I had earned through a succession of successful ministries. (None was quite as successful as I imagined them to be, but, when you're not consciously relying on Christ to make you beautiful, you must fiddle the record to feel better about yourself.) The truth is, I had become a Christian *actor*—someone who could say and do the right thing at the right time and thereby win increasingly greater leadership roles. Sadly, given the state of the church today, the appearance of competence is well rewarded. Looking back, I can see that "playing a part" had virtually replaced the passionate first love for Christ I had known at the university. There I had enjoyed a vital prayer life, sweet intimacy with God, a hunger for the Scriptures, and a simple, childlike dependence on Jesus. But when I entered the seminary, as my professional qualifications and experience grew, my love for The True One was gradually replaced by my pride in learning more truth *about* him.

**“I felt that God was fortunate to have a chap like me on his team.”**

**As my reputation** as a leader and conference speaker grew, so did my love for the praise of men (viz. John 5:41-44). The praise of others became like a drug, a "false gospel", an *idol* that fed my soul and made me feel worthy when I earned it, and fearful and insecure when I didn't. It was my ministry, not Jesus, that made me feel worthy, so I boasted about everything I did for God. It made me feel... *righteous*. I quoted Jeremiah 17:9 to others ("The heart is

deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it.") but was blind to my own heart's condition. I felt I was a cut above others, and that God was fortunate to have a chap like me on his team.

**My once childlike faith** and intimacy with Jesus were gone, but I felt strong, mature! I knew God as Savior, but thought of him as an overlord rather than as my "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). I served him more out of a sense of duty than as a conscious response to his love for me. At the Sonship conference, Dr. Jack Miller asked us pastors a tough question: "Have you ever done anything or stopped doing anything just because you love Jesus?" It dawned on me that almost everything I did was motivated by duty or a desire to earn



HURRY, HURRY, GO-GO-GO! Puff, puff. I've got to keep up my reputation!"

praise. And, if I had stopped doing some sin, it was just to make me look better. My whole life and ministry was about me, my glory and my reputation—not God and his glory and his reputation! I began to feel that the conference speakers were out to slay me by slowly pushing the sword of the truth about myself into my heart. And they were! They were calling me to die to myself and my reputation so that I could cry out with Paul, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live... it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me!" It occurred to me that I hadn't understood a verse I'd recently had my congregation recite aloud, "If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." But the cross isn't a suitcase we carry by a handle; it's an instrument of death we die on!

**And there was more.** I realised I was a *theoretical* trinitarian—that I had no robust working theology of the Holy Spirit. I had never sensed a need to consciously depend on the Spirit as the power for daily life—or to energise my ministry. "After all", I had reasoned, "I have a new heart, a strong will, a superb theological education, and a respectable gift-package!" What more did I need? Love, for one thing—a supernatural love for others. Oh, I loved people—as long as they were lovable. But, if they failed to live up to my expectations (which was often), I tended to cut them off emotionally and move toward others who could perform up to my level.

One Sunday after church, I was approached by a lovely couple who were among my most faithful church workers. The husband said they were leaving the church. When I asked why, he said bitterly, "Johnny, you're trying to breed a race of thoroughbred Christians here, and Donna and I just can't keep up." I didn't have it worked out that serving people is not necessarily synonymous with loving them.

**LOVE is the cardinal fruit of the Holy Spirit**, but since I was not relying on the Spirit, really loving God or man was impossible. (Matt. 22:37-40). Whereas God had called me to love people, I tolerated and used them. My inner motives for serving God had become so twisted that instead of laboring out of a joyful obedience fed by love, I was more often than not driven by a deep desire to be *thought of* as a wonderful pastor and a mature Christian leader. What people thought of me had become more important than what God thought of me—just like the Pharisees in John 5:44. Standing firmly (and proudly) on the rock of justification by faith, by trying to make myself "beautiful" to God and others by an outward show of ministerial performance, I had fallen, rock and all, into the ooze bed of Folly Ditch.<sup>1</sup>

**Hearing the lectures and reading Voke's article at that conference**, I was struck by the revelation that I had been consumed by a struggle for righteousness, attainment, reputation and appearance. *I was cut to the heart* as God exposed me to the core. It was not just painful, it felt like dying. But along with the appalling realization that I had been stealing God's glory, I felt his love roll over me like a mighty ocean, melting the heart of this wayward son who had for so long forgotten that all he needed to be beautiful in God's sight was Jesus' blood and righteousness! The Father spoke to my heart, "Johnny, let go of your reputation; let it all go; you don't need it; I love you, son; let me cleanse you; let my Son be your righteousness; He makes you beautiful; that is what he died for."

“Have you ever done anything or stopped doing anything just because you love Jesus?”

**His love was irresistible.** I surrendered and yielded up the filthy rags of my record. Suddenly, it was like that day in January 1962 when I was converted and first laid the burden of my sin down. Now, laying down the burden of years of Christian righteousness, it was like being converted all over again! I was set free, free of my need to earn and own a reputation. Why should I? I have the reputation of Jesus himself! Like the Gentile churches in Galatia who at first gladly received the Gospel, but then went over to the law, I had lost my joy. (Gal. 4:15) I understand now why Paul said, "May I never boast except in the cross of Christ Jesus my Lord through whom I have been crucified to the world and the world to me!" (Gal. 6:14) As I repented of my idolatry, my first love for him returned, as did my joy! Why? Because once again, I was willing to be what I really am—just a big sinner who every day stands in need of, and has, a Big Savior!

I had always kept a diary of the hours I spent in ministry every day. Not only was I building a record of righteousness, I had it in writing! After we returned to Birmingham, convicted of this sin of pride and self-protection, I wrote these words in the

inside cover: "Henceforth may this book be a log of my partnership with God and of Christ's blessings to me and through me to others - rather than my "record", my "proof", to God, myself and others - that my ministry is significant, that I am worthy, and that my existence is therefore justified. - JWL, 14 Nov. 1990

**I have been singing this great hymn** by Charles Wesley since I came to Christ, but now it's my "freedom song" in the Gospel:

### **Arise, My Soul, Arise!**

**"Arise my soul, arise!** Shake off thy guilty fears!  
The Bleeding Sacrifice in my behalf appears!  
Before the Throne my surety stands;  
My name is written on His hands!

**Five bleeding wounds He bears**, received on Calvary.  
They pour effectual prayers; they strongly plead for me:  
'Forgive him, O forgive!' they cry,  
'Nor let that ransomed sinner die!'

**My God is reconciled!** His pardoning voice I hear.  
He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear.  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And 'Father, Abba Father!' cry."

**The rediscovery of this most basic of Gospel truths** is transforming my thought life, and my relationship to God and others—especially to Becky and our three adult children. In the safe embrace of the Father, I am able and willing to look honestly at and repent of my sins. Oh, I'm still a big mess. The difference is that now I repent a lot! The power of the Gospel to change a big sinner like me as a *husband, father and pastor* has amazed me, my wife, my children, and my friends. The new confidence Becky and I gained in the power of the Gospel to change us, led us back to Kenya in 1994 with Mission to the World and World Harvest Mission. There we wrote the *SONSHIP for Africa* discipleship course for the benefit of national pastors and fellow missionaries. We recruited a team of three wonderful couples, and, traveling to seven African countries, trained trainers to carry on the work before disbanding the team in late 2003 (2Tim 2:2). Now, we've been in London for almost four years. With the help of a number of English pastors, we're writing this *Grace4Life* course, trusting that it will give Christian workers in the UK (and beyond) an effective tool for discipling their hearts and the hearts of their people.

**So, what about you?** Do you need to join us in rediscovering the simplicity and power of the Gospel in your life? Will you follow the growing number of men and women in Africa, America, England, Europe, and the East who are enlisting in the "Big Sinners Club?" Will you ask God to break you? Will you surrender your heart to what the German reformer Martin Luther called "*the wholly alien righteousness of Christ*"? Join us! We're learning to repent of this awful business of using

God to gain honor for ourselves. If revival like this spreads, the world will begin to take the Gospel seriously as, to their amazement, they see this Jesus we talk so much about breaking us of our pride and self-righteousness. Spiritually speaking, nothing is more attractive to an unbeliever than a humble, freshly broken Christian.

*Yours, clothed in the righteousness of Christ,*

 JOHN WADE LONG, JR.

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## **MARTIN LUTHER'S INVITATION TO JOIN 'THE BIG SINNER'S CLUB'**

**On 21 August 1544**, Martin Luther wrote a letter to George of Spalt (hence the nickname, "Spalatin"), one of his faithful and trusted coworkers in the Reformation. Spalatin had given what he thought was sound pastoral advice to a family, but discovered later it was harmful. Convinced he should have known better, he fell into a depression and took to his bed, refusing to be consoled. When Luther heard of it, he wrote he fired off a letter. The following is an excerpt from that epistle which is brimming with a hearty sarcasm designed to shock Spalatin back to his spiritual senses.

*"... My faithful request and admonition is that you join our company and associate with us, who are real, great, and hard-boiled sinners! You must by no means make Christ to seem petty and trivial to us—as though He could be our Helper only when we want to be rid from imaginary, nominal, and childish sins. No, no! That would not be good for us. Christ must rather be a Savior and Redeemer from real, great, grievous and damnable transgressions and iniquities—yes, from the very greatest and most shocking sins—in brief, from all sins added together in a grand total. . ."*

Luther ends his letter with a personal recollection:

*"One time Dr. Staupitz [Luther's Augustinian confessor] comforted me when I was. . . suffering from the same affliction as you. He said to me: 'Aha! You want to be a painted sinner, and accordingly, expect to have in Christ a painted Savior! You will have to get used to the belief that Christ is a real Savior and that you are a real sinner! For God is neither jesting nor dealing in imaginary affairs, but He was greatly and most assuredly in earnest when He sent His own Son into the world and sacrificed Him for our sakes.'"*<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist* - Folly Ditch - where the evil Bill Sykes met his grisly end

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin, *Companion to the Contemporary Christian*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1982.