

**FALL TO GRACE**  
**November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**Text**

John 12:24-25  
Ephesians 4:22-32

**Introduction**

“Unless a grain of wheat is buried...”  
“Put away your former life ...”  
“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...”  
“Take up your cross ...”

So many verses about self- denial & dying to self – no wonder people don’t want to become Christians!

Is this what faith is all about? Giving up stuff? Even our lives?

***The Tradition of Self-Denial***

Suffering & self-sacrifice have been persistent themes in Christianity since its beginning. Jesus’ execution at the hands of Rome was a terrible shock to his friends & first followers.

Early Christians also struggled to make sense of his murder. But, instead of starting an anti-death penalty movement, the Jesus’ movement embraced the idea of suffering & death. They decided that a horrible death was a sign of holiness. And so 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Century believers would travel to areas where Christians were being martyred just so that they could get in on the act.

When the persecution of Christians died out, self-imposed & Church- imposed forms of suffering took their place. From fasting to self-flagellation, pain & misery were considered essential for sacred living.

Not surprisingly, women were expected to suffer more than men. They had to make up for Eve’s mistake! It was considered particularly holy for a woman never, ever to wash. That way she wouldn’t become a sexual temptress like the wife of poor, innocent Adam!

We laugh at those beliefs today – they seem so primitive & so punitive. But, in truth, they have never fully gone away. Doctrines forbidding this or condemning that are still alive & well. As Joan Chittister likes to say:

*“Dancing is bad;  
Drinking is bad;  
Haemorrhoids are good.” !!!*

Poor God! Imagine being labeled as the One who prefers piles to a party!

### ***Abundant Life***

Jesus said exactly the opposite!

Both his preaching & his lifestyle declared that God is a God who is happiest when we are happy. John's Gospel (10:10) records Jesus as saying that he came to bring "abundant life" to humankind.

### **Abundant life is a life that is joyous & fulfilled.**

Suffering might occur – in fact, will occur - but it will not be able to extinguish the joy. Sacrifices might have to be made – but the rewards will outweigh any loss that's incurred.

Jesus came to declare for all time that God thinks drinking & dancing are way better than rectal problems!

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So how did we get into such a muddle about suffering? Partly, it was primitive logic. It was reasoned that: *"If Jesus' suffering was good, then all suffering is good."*

Inflicting pain & humiliation on others is also a huge power trip. That's why abusers do what they do. Sadly, people of God can just as easily fall for these power games as perverts. Turning suffering into a sacred act is something dreamt up by humans, not God.

Nevertheless, there are those troublesome Scripture passages about putting away certain behaviours, cutting off offending parts of ourselves & dying to self. What are we supposed to make of them? And how should they impact the way we live?

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None of those texts is a commandment to suffer. They are invitations to a richer & fuller life. Their focus is not death but wholeness & holiness. In other words, they are telling us to "get a life!"

### ***The Call to New Life***

You see, Jesus really meant it when he said that his mission was to give people abundant life. But abundant life requires us to get rid of all the stuff that impairs full living.

To have healthy bodies we have to alter our lifestyles – giving up the things that harm our bodies & taking up healthier habits. Spiritual & emotional wellbeing are exactly the same. We have to develop habits that are healthy for our souls. We have to give up thinking & doing stuff that prevents us from being whole & holy.

In his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul names the behaviours & attitudes that threaten spiritual & emotional wellbeing. He lists addictions, dishonesty, stealing, anger, arguing, hurtful speech, bitterness & hatred.

*“Get rid of them!”* the Apostle pleads.

*“Start afresh on the inside - just like you put on new clothes to look fresh on the outside.”*

Paul didn't tell his parishioners that God was mad at them or that they were on their way to hell. He wasn't issuing threats. Paul simply reminded them that Jesus was able to help them remake their hearts & souls - & it would be a shame to let the opportunity go to waste. God's grace was freely available to enable them to conquer bad habits & inner demons.

*“Go for it!”* Paul said.

*“Let Jesus give you a total spiritual makeover! You have nothing to lose but your old & grimy selves!”*

### **Letting Go & Letting God**

And that, of course, is where spiritual makeovers get scary.  
We're not sure that we really want to give up our old selves.

Sure, we might have a few bad habits or a nasty side to our personality; but that's who we are. Who's to say how we would end up, if we let God clean that stuff out?

We fear that being too good would turn us into everyone else's doormat.  
We worry that we would somehow be diminished.

We're not sure that we want old wounds healed – they're reminders of all that we've gone through.

As for forgiving past hurts – wouldn't that encourage those people to hurt us again?

The compulsion to pick at old wounds;  
The cheap thrill of remembering other people's sins;  
The concern that too much God would result in too little us ...  
These things keep us from making the changes that would transform our lives.

It feels safer to stay just the way we are.  
And so, that's what we do.

We stick to our unhealthy lifestyles because they require less effort.  
We do nothing to control our temper in case others see us as push-overs.  
We don't forgive & we don't move on – because “somebody has to make them pay.”

Who needs a new life when this one works?!

***Falling to Grace***

For those of you who think this way, here's the good news:

you won't go to hell!

And God won't stop loving you!

If you want to carry on not being the absolutely best person you can be, you go right ahead.

But here's the bad news about that choice:

You'll be missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime.

You see, grace offers you the chance to get your body & mind & soul into shape.

With God's help you can become the totally amazing person you were created to be.

**It will take some work on your part –  
but God will do most of the heavy lifting.**

I know that change is scary – especially change within ourselves.

We fear it ...

We don't think we need it ...

We believe that, after a lifetime of coming to church, God should accept us the way we are.

God DOES accept you the way you are...

But he loves you so much, he wants to help you become even better.

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You know how it is after a really bad day: you eat your way through a mound of French fries or a tub of ice cream. And you tell yourself, "after my day, I deserve this."

Fitness gurus tell us we should change that note to self. What we should say is:

"After my day, I deserve to stay healthy" or "I deserve to be thin."

How we describe our actions determines what those actions will be.

Over the centuries, pastors & theologians have used threats & punishments to control people's lives. Jesus offered us a promise:

*Do things my way & you'll have abundant life.*

It wasn't a trick to make us give up our favourite activity or go as missionaries to China. Jesus didn't do "bait & switch"!

Life lived on Jesus' terms REALLY IS happier & healthier & more fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus said that unless we undergo death & burial, we cannot experience abundant living.

He wasn't talking about martyrdom or radical self-denial.  
His promise had nothing to do with life after death.

Jesus was encouraging us to get rid of the habits & attitudes that keep us from being completely whole & holy.

### **He was inviting us to radical wellbeing.**

Your moodiness – bury it!  
That night-time snack habit – let it die!  
The grudge you've nurtured for decades – let it go!  
That hurt that refuses to heal – take it to the Great Physician!

Psalm 139:14 declares,  
*"I am fearfully & wonderfully made!"*  
I am!  
And so are you!

But over time, stress & sorrow & sin have marred God's wonderful creations.  
You're not as clean & shiny & perfect as God intended you to be.  
It's not too late to spruce up!  
With God, it's never too late!

A new life – fresh & whole & holy – is yours for the asking.

**Go ahead -**  
**You deserve it!**