

Spiritual Surrender

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The word “surrender” conjures an image of giving up, of raising a white flag and throwing down one’s weapons in a painful acknowledgement of defeat. In its spiritual application, however, it is an act of liberation, not defeat. Spiritual surrender is a posture of yielding to God. It is a giving up of our expectations of the universe, a laying down of our defenses that keep God at bay, an intentional dismantling of the structures we have built to control our life and circumstances, and a giving permission to be undone. Most of all, it is a posture of unconditional vulnerability before God. Allow me to make the case for how such a radical surrender can be liberating.

Control is the Opposite of Surrender

We invest our energies to control every aspect of our lives, those we think we can control and those we fool ourselves that we can control, each a territory we have to govern. Like a frantic parent, we try to keep all our children territories subject to us, compliant to our directives and wishes. This is a difficult task for anyone. We feel pulled in multiple directions and are sometimes overwhelmed by the responsibility. We can only relax when every territory has relative peace, otherwise we are stressed and on edge. This is the situation that Jesus addressed in Matthew 11:28 when He invited those who are “weary and heavily-burdened” to come to Him to receive rest.

When our white-knuckled grip on life slips, then we become subject to our circumstances or to other people, which puts us at the mercy of outside influence and unkind fate. We struggle to get our grip back, to reassert our control, and then we try even harder to solidify our control. It becomes an exhausting, uphill battle. We’ve been taught that this is just the way it is, the only way one can succeed at life. But it doesn’t have to be this way. We can surrender up this machinery and let God take over its operation, as He offers a completely different model for living.

The truth is that control is an illusion. We never really have as much control as we believe. Our lives and circumstances can spin out of control with just a

little shove. Something happens we can't foresee. Trusted people let us down. Bad fortune comes out of nowhere. We try to plan for all scenarios, but we are fooling ourselves to think we have it all covered because it is impossible to prepare for everything. And if we are scrambling to do it out of fear, then it is fear, not you, that is in control. Given that we can't truly control our circumstances, I suggest that we stop trying. I'm not saying that we stop planning. I'm saying that we stop trying to exert control over our lives, that we stop trying to enforce our wills, that we embrace surrender instead.

A Definition of Spiritual Surrender

Surrender is the opposite of control. It is a letting go, in contrast to taking hold and dominating. I'm not suggesting that we surrender ourselves to our circumstances. That would be defeatist. Instead, we surrender ourselves to God, entrusting our circumstances to Him. Now, this surrender has many levels, mostly because we generally only surrender what we perceive to be already out of our control. People sometimes choose surrender out of desperation when they find themselves at the end of their rope, but desperation surrender usually only lasts until we find our footing again. Regardless of how we initially embrace surrender, it can be a starting point, but the path to peace requires a fuller surrender. This means that we surrender not just what is out of our control, but those things that we are fiercely and firmly controlling.

Surrender is not an apathetic giving up. Apathy implies that one stops caring altogether, that one ceases to value one's situation. In surrender, we entrust what we care about to the guardianship of God. Surrender is a willful action, whereas apathetic giving up is an abdication of will, an abandonment of healthy self-regard, as nothing seems to matter anymore. With surrender, we choose to matter to ourselves, and we entrust our lives to God because our life matters.

Surrender is a state of being. It is not a one-time act. We continually relinquish our control and yield our lives to God, trusting Him with the reins of our lives, believing He is better equipped than us to manage our lives. For those

who think that giving up control to God is foolish, I say that one must give God the opportunity to show Himself capable, instead of dismissing Him immediately. There is nothing that is beyond God's capability. He is greater than our circumstances. However, God is not one to be controlled, so one must park one's expectations outside the door, and let God be God in His own way and timing. Yet, God's delight is to show Himself to those who seek Him (Matthew 7:7-8).

Jesus teaches that when we seek God's kingdom first (Matthew 6:33), then the things that we worry about, the things that we try to control, will be taken care of by God. Jesus is challenging us to put God's priorities first. Said differently, if we dedicate ourselves to what God cares about, to His priorities, then God will commit Himself to addressing the things we care about.

The Importance of Trust

Given that surrender is a releasing of control, it implies that we also relinquish our expectations, our need for predictability, our reliance on desired outcomes. We must, therefore, trust. Surrender without trust is terrifying. Taking little steps, we surrender and trust, entrusting to God what we have surrendered. In my book, *Four in the Garden*, Creator explains that "trust grows by trusting." By choosing to trust, we grow in trust, until we can relax into our trust in God. It is then that we find peace in our surrender. It is then that we are liberated from the exertion and burden of having to control our lives.

Surrender is not only a state of being, but also a process. As we learn to trust, we find courage to submit more of our lives to God. We learn to surrender our priorities to His, our will to His, our agenda to His. We surrender our fears and insecurities in exchange for spiritual confidence in His ability to direct our lives, to nurture us even in the midst of hardship. Finally, we reach a point where we find the courage to surrender our very selves to Him, after He has nudged us lovingly to that precipice where we can step off that frightening cliff and discover that He will catch us and uphold us, even enable us to fly. It's the

familiar “push the bird out of the nest” analogy, but the choice is ours, the choice between staying where we are or trusting God more fully in willful surrender.

Choosing Vulnerability

Surrender requires vulnerability before God. Vulnerability is an intentional dropping of our defenses, a setting aside of our self. I think this is the hardest and scariest thing to do, but it’s the only way that God can get hold of us. When we make ourselves vulnerable, we give God permission to be God within our lives, giving Him the freedom to be real and the freedom to remove any obstacles that get in the way of that spiritual reality. Because vulnerability leaves us exposed, that is why learning to trust God is so important. As we risk trust, we find the capacity for surrender. If the risk feels too daunting, then we honestly admit our fears to God and ask Him for courage so we can trust.

The Liberation of Trustful Surrender

The liberation that comes from spiritual surrender is evidenced by the freedom from fear, the freedom from stress, the freedom from ultimate responsibility over our lives. Thus, we are free to live for God and for others, the burden of having to micro-manage our lives now in God’s hands. We still have to manage our affairs, but the weighty burden of that management is now lifted. Anything that we surrender to God becomes His, and by implication, His responsibility. So we can enter the rest that Jesus spoke of. He goes on to say in Matthew 11:30 that “His yoke is easy and His burden is light.” Trusting in ourselves is a weighty burden that we have to carry alone. When we put our trust in Jesus, then He offers to carry our load in exchange for His load, which is easy and light because it is rooted in love, grace, and humility, instead of control.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can you recognize the areas in your life where you are exerting the most control?
2. Which area of your life do you think you might be able to surrender and entrust to God?
3. What scares you most about surrender? How might you address those fears?

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