



COAL

by christine prater

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I would still consider myself a “baby-Christian.” I have not been doing this Jesus thing all that long. I am struggling still with some of the qualities that go with Christianity; things like patience, virtue, and self-control. I practiced life for a pretty long time the other way, so such godly attributes do not come as naturally as I would like.

So when I was asked to speak to a women’s group on the topic of discipleship, I wondered why no one else saw the irony. But that was my assignment, so I dove right in. And by “dove right in,” what I really mean is that I waited until the last minute to even write out what I would say.

And when I sat down to miraculously pump out some wisdom on paper, I quickly discovered that not only should I have taken this more seriously from a time-management standpoint, but that I was completely inept to teach anyone about anything remotely related to discipleship.

As I sat staring at that blank paper before me, I rationalized to myself that I had not offered to give this talk; therefore it could not possibly be my fault that I was so ill-prepared. It was not as though I had even a fleeting thought that maybe I was good enough at anything to go and speak to others about it. I HATE public speaking and especially in a circumstance where some level of credibility might be required. When I had been asked to participate in the conference, I had said yes simply because I was too stunned to say no, and it was only much later that I was told what topic I would be discussing. I had subsequently thrown up a little bit in my mouth.

I realized what my hang up was. For me, the word discipline has a glaring resemblance to that nasty little word “discipline.” And that was a problem. How am I to talk about something I struggle with and fail at pretty much every day? Perhaps the only wisdom I could possibly offer on the topic was what not to do. Maybe I could share my failures and struggles and tell them that no matter how hard I try, I never quite get it right.

Certainly it seemed like those failures had resulted in some of the best lessons I have ever learned. Pain really has a way of making a lesson stick, if you know what I mean. And I felt like maybe those failures might resonate with the group of women I would be talking to. Because really, who doesn't struggle with discipline in their lives? Even Jesus' disciples had their own struggles with faith, obedience, and trusting him. I started to feel like I was really onto something and finally began to sketch out an outline for my speech. But then I hit another wall.

If even the people who got to walk with Jesus and touch him and look him in the eye struggled with discipline and other godly attributes, what hope could I give these women? I was supposed to be sharing encouragement with these ladies and all I had so far was a long list of personal failures.

And that is when the epiphany hit. I realized, in a slow dawning moment, that in my walk thus far, I had been pushing and pushing towards this unreachable goal – this level of holiness where I could finally call myself good enough. I recognized that somewhere deep down, I had decided that if I were just disciplined enough, I could claim to be a good disciple. That if I made enough spreadsheets and set enough goals, and cursed 30% less and read the bible 40% more... then would I be able to call myself his follower.

And for a brief moment, as I stared at that too long list of failures, complete discouragement took over. And I thought, “I will never, ever be good enough.”

So I began to pour myself out to God in prayer. I went systematically down that list and I began to give each of those failures to God. And as I did, He began to minister to me. He began to bring to my mind scriptures that reminded me that He loved me and accepted me unconditionally. And he took me back to that moment just a few years before, when the girl who had led me to Christ told me the one thing I had never before heard or believed about God; that He loved me, just as I was.

How had I so quickly forgotten? How could I be so grateful that he had accepted me into His Kingdom the day I gave my life to him, and at the same time continue to try to earn my place in his presence? For it was my imperfection that compelled him to die for my sins. And it was for that same imperfection that he offered his salvation through grace.

He then reminded me of more scripture, where he had promised to guide and enable and strengthen me through the power of his Holy Spirit. He showed me that I will never achieve perfection, at least not here on earth. I am still, and forever will be, a work in progress. And in that moment, as I accepted and understood that God loves me right where I am now and is helping me become more like him each day, **my spirit was finally at peace.** I was able to just rejoice and rest in His love. And I finally knew what discipleship was really all about.

As I thought about how to share this new-found wisdom with those women, God spoke to me in that semi-creepy way he likes to do where the world stops for a second and you hear (not audibly of course) this still small voice speak to you and you think “**maybe I have a brain tumor.**” He told me how to share this message with that women’s group, and I was aghast. But so grateful for my new understanding of discipleship, and so eager to make sure my audience understood that God loves us even through our deepest flaws, I promised to obey Him.

So I finished my outline, went to the conference, and I did what he told me to do. I shared what I had learned about discipleship and I even shared that list of failures. And then, in keeping with my promise to do as he said, I did the ultimate thing.

I sang.

Now let me qualify this. I did not sing a glorious song of praise to the King of Creation in a pitch perfect falsetto. Not even close. I stink at singing. Perhaps I will get to sing in a heavenly choir someday, but here on earth, I am not at all blessed in this area. My own mother has repeatedly asked me not to sing out loud in public. As a result, I have never done it, at least not since a humiliating experience in grade school that haunts me still.

Paradoxically, God has given me a great love and passion for music. So in addition to my promise to obey him and sing in front of all those women, I simply didn't feel like I could tell my story without the help of it. Music has always been a great source of inspiration to me and I have

always believed that almost no story can aptly told without the help of an aching melody or lyric.

Now, I don't mean to misrepresent myself as overly deep when I say this. The real reason I feel this way is because I actually suffer from an affliction that my family calls "Lyrical Rainman." Essentially, I have a jukebox in my head that plays millions of songs, *non-stop*. Nearly every memory I have is related to or triggered by music, and a result, nearly every thought or emotion I have is accompanied by a song playing in my head. In addition, (and this is where the term affliction can be applied,) if someone says a certain word that reminds me of a lyric somewhere, my brain-box immediately begins to play that song. It is rather distracting at times, to say the least, especially since there is apparently no screening process to get on my playlist. So when I thought about this topic of discipleship and how we aren't perfect just yet, naturally a song popped into my head. And stayed.

So when I found myself needing to communicate, scared silly before this huge group of women, I wanted the lesson to stick. I wanted to give them something to remember when they left – a tiny morsel of God’s grace all wrapped up in a little ditty they could keep in their heads and their hearts. I wanted them to have a song.

So I sang. Not some beautiful rousing song of praise or a solemn hymn of repentance. I sang part of a chorus to an old country and western song by Billy Joe Shaver. And to top it all off, I sang it so badly that I saw a few women actually physically wince. But God had asked me to do it, and so I did.

And I sang,

“I’m just an old chunk of coal

But I am gonna be a diamond someday”

Now, likely that will be the only time I ever sing in public (and after that performance, I will likely not be asked to speak again either.) But I did it. I sang it because it was silly and funny, and because it is one of the truest biblical statements ever uttered in a song or in my walk with Christ. I felt like it was the theme song, if you will, for discipleship.

I love the illustration the song lends to the promise of change and refinement under his care. And I love that all throughout God's word, I see story after story of God taking someone the world deemed as a worthless chunk of coal and making them into a **diamond disciple**.

Following him isn't about having perfect discipline in every area of your life. Just as religion is not the same as relationship, discipline is not necessarily discipleship. Sure, discipline and self-control are godly attributes, but there are thousands (possibly millions) of people in this world who live far more disciplined lives than I do, but are not his disciples. Listed as a "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23, self-control certainly speaks to obedience in our walk with Christ. But **obedience and perfection are two very different things**, as was evidenced in my singing that day.

The problem with perfection is that it leaves no room for grace. And in a world that strives for more and perfect, discipleship asks only for love and surrender. If I were perfect, I wouldn't need him so desperately. And it is that very desperation and desire to follow him that makes me his disciple. Discipleship is simply having the courage to follow Him daily, and believing his promise to guide, shape, and refine me into something beautiful.

And it isn't about me anyway. It is because of who HE is that makes me who I am. Because I am HIS, I am good. And because of HIS love for me and my love back, HIS sacrifice has made me whole. He is a good God, He is a loving God, He is a merciful God, He is a forgiving God. And He is a God who keeps his promises.

I can trust that in paradise with him some day, I will be finally be a diamond –a gleaming glorious treasure all shined up from a life lived under the comforting weight of his love. And in the meantime, I can rest in the knowledge that He loves me just as I am and does not judge my past

sins or failures. He is a God that values, not based on what is now, but on what will be. So when he looks at me, he doesn't see the mess I am today, but instead the woman his love is molding and shaping me to be. He does the same for you.

So if you have found yourself in that same frustrating place I have, where your life-song is just a little out of tune; rejoice. If you have listed out your failures and determined that you will never be good enough; celebrate. Join me, my fellow some-day-diamonds, in a song of praise to the God who isn't finished with us yet.

