



*Getting Over Yourself* is a call for Christians to reject the hollow messages of personal prosperity and to return to the humble truths of the gospel. You'll learn how to identify this insidious, popular theology in culture and churches and examine its devastating effects. You'll learn how to combat it with gospel truth that leads to the abundant life Jesus desires for His people.

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# 1

## Loserville: Is Christianity for the Cool, Trendy, and Successful?

Rarely, if ever, in the history of the church have so many firm periods slumped into commas and so many triumphant exclamation points curled into question marks.

—FRED CRADDOCK

“Christianity is for losers.” I still remember the sting of offense brought on by these brash words from television tycoon Ted Turner. Not surprisingly, Turner took a lot of arrows for his comment and later apologized. It’s not that Ted Turner wasn’t qualified to call other people losers (although he did own the Atlanta Braves who regularly lost in postseason), but something about being publicly scorned didn’t sit well with a lot of Christians, including me. Sure, his words were flippant, mocking the millions of us who have committed our lives to Christ, but I wondered if the outrage said more of us as Christians than it did of Ted Turner.

The Bible makes it clear that the gospel message is foolishness to unbelievers (1 Cor. 1:18), so why wouldn’t Turner think

the way he did about Christianity? His opinion wasn't unique; he simply didn't keep the thought to himself. His perspective was based on worldly evidence and criteria, which is no surprise. Is it really that scandalous for an unbelieving billionaire to view prudence and self-denial as foolish? But it turns out Turner's definition of "winning" in this life is far too similar to that of many Christians, and that's why some of us felt offended or rejected. So let's consider where Turner got it right and where he got it dead wrong. In some ways, Christians are losers. And we shouldn't be ashamed of that. But in other very real ways, we are the most victorious of all humanity.

### **Where Ted Got It Wrong**

Christians have been given victory in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:57). Victory, by definition, is not for losers. The entire premise of this book is that spiritual victory and earthly victory are not synonymous. Yet every Christian should take heart in the fact that there is no silver medal with Jesus. No second class, no JV team (sorry to middle-school me with my T-shirt that read "second place is the first loser"). Our victory in Christ summarizes the salvation experience of all who come to faith in Christ.

Jesus Christ died a substitutionary death in the place of all of those who, by faith, will repent and believe the good news of what Jesus has done for them as they are made aware of their inability to save themselves from God's just punishment of sin.

For the believer, the eternal consequences of sin are no more, and death ultimately has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55–56).

All followers of Jesus Christ have been "born again" (John 3:3–8), liberated from sin and death by the risen Christ, the ultimate and true winner.

Jesus Christ was indeed delivered up for our trespasses and

raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Jesus declared on the cross that the work He was sent to do on behalf of His people was finished. His resurrection and ascension prove that He was correct.

All who have been born again possess victory over sin's eternal consequences (separation from God and eternal death) and will one day in the new heavens and new earth have completely realized victory over sin's power. As we remain here on earth, we have the victory over sin's control, and we are now able to obey God by His powerful grace.

In short, because of Jesus, His people continue to win where it really matters.

Given these mind-bending blessings and rewards we receive because of Christ, Turner couldn't be more wrong. But there was another way in which he was right.

## **Where Ted Got It Right**

Anthony Young, a former pitcher of the New York Mets, set the Major League Baseball record for the most consecutive losses as a starting pitcher. He earned his spot in baseball history on June 27, 1993, against the St. Louis Cardinals when for the twenty-fourth consecutive time he was the losing pitcher in a major league game.

Failing twenty-four times in a row is quite a losing streak. But think about the human condition before God. Romans 3:23 tells us that every single one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Each of us fails an inconceivable number of times daily. Scripture tells us that apart from Christ we are "dead in our trespasses" (Eph. 2:1) and "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Not the winsome, impressive bunch we'd like to be. But thankfully, and by the grace of God alone, our losing streak doesn't set the all-time record. God's free gift of His

perfect Son can completely overrule it. While all have fallen short, the good for those on the losing streak is that “they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). We come to God as failures in need of redemption, not as self-sufficient winners. But once in Christ, we are secure in our victory in Him. He will not drop us. He will not miss. He will not be overcome.

### **Why This Matters**

Ted Turner was not referring to the work of Jesus when he called Christianity a religion for losers, but he was onto something especially poignant for our current cultural climate. Something has shifted in American Christian culture. The “Jesus” of some American Christians has changed. For many, He’s no longer the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, or the Word present at creation and who now reigns over all, or the unique Son of God, co-eternal with the Father. Instead He has become a personal life coach, sent to help us be winners rather than losers in this world.

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To many professing Christians, Jesus has become a success guru who dispenses positive thoughts to help them get the next big promotion. The victories this Jesus gives do not involve overcoming sin, but rather come through the lens of the American Dream: success, empowerment, motivation, and personal fulfillment. These ambitions have become a central focus for many North American Christians. That’s why we want to jump to our own defense when we’re called losers and point to

lives that look just as successful and shiny as the world. We want to be able to have Jesus *and* the career, the finances, the body, and the influence of those who are “winning” in this life.

## **How Did We Get Here?**

I’m afraid a look into popular Christianity in America reveals teachings of a religion far from what the early church would have recognized. This Christianity worships a god who wants us to achieve worldly happiness, make our dreams prosper, and reach our fullest potential, proving people like Ted Turner wrong in the name of Jesus. We have largely set aside dated “prosperity gospel” preachers in fancy suits and gaudy television studio sets, yelling into a camera with a phone number to call at the bottom of the screen to receive a special blessing or prayer cloth. This kind of instant health-and-wealth teaching is now a fringe movement, more broadly mocked than followed. But in its place is a new prosperity gospel carried into the mainstream by trendy, attractive, compelling speakers.

This new teaching (which I’ll call “pop-Christianity” or “new prosperity theology”) is not centered on overnight rags-to-riches stories or immediate physical healing, but rather on the idea that God is “in my corner” waiting to give me my “breakthrough.” The new prosperity gospel comes with the message of “God-sized dreams” and a “vision” that God has for your life, which includes finding your “destiny” and “reaching your true potential.” No longer is our depravity the actual tragedy. Now, the cardinal sin is failing to achieve “God’s best” for oneself. Instead of standing on the character of God, the focus is now to lay claim to “greater things,” because if God really loves us and if He’s as powerful as He claims to be, then “the best is yet to come.” It’s not difficult to see why it is so appealing!

There’s truth to some of these platitudes, which is why we have



to be careful. And that's what makes them so dangerous. If we're not careful, we can turn legitimate confidence in our victory in Christ into the idea that God wants us to walk in earthly victory as we define it for ourselves. It's certainly true that God cares greatly about our well-being and wants to give us abundant life (John 10:10). But so often the way we perceive blessing and victory is not the same as the Bible's definitions of blessing and victory. And the American church has largely fallen prey to the idea that God being "for our good" means God is for our worldly good.

From the first pages of Scripture, we see God's people fail to live in light of God's sovereignty and provision. In the book of

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Exodus, the recently rescued Israelites crave the comforts of captivity in Egypt over the hardships of freedom in the desert. New Testament churches had bouts with false teachers, and churches throughout the modern era have fallen into various traps as well. This one is our generation's trap—a fully-fledged "me-focused" faith of which I'm afraid we haven't even yet seen the long-term effects. And we shouldn't be complacent. Throughout Scripture, God never applauds or excuses

His people's idolatry. He corrects it. Consistently. Painfully.

Pastor Ray Ortlund is quoted as saying, "Christianity shows us something profound. Moment by moment, we are either centered on God or we are centered on ourselves. There is no alternative."<sup>1</sup>

To follow Jesus is to deny oneself (Matt. 16:24) rather than seek one's personal elevation. The easiest litmus test I can think of for evaluating the competing messages heard in churches nationwide is this: Is the message promoting or rejecting a "for you" theology? While I certainly hope and believe that all orthodox theology is *for us*, in terms of receiving the truth of Scripture and its significance for our lives, the "for you" message is an unofficial theology that functions as if God's reason for existence is . . . *you*.

Is God's primary business making sure you are able to fulfill your greatest longings? Is God's main goal helping you reach your "potential" via notoriety, worldly comfort, personal happiness, or achievements? Do we measure God's faithfulness by how often He behaves like a personal genie? Do I exist for God or does God exist for me?

Apart from being unbiblical, a theology centered on one's own individual desires and comfort is unrealistic for most of the world. Even in a first-world context, not everyone can pursue the career or lifestyle of their choice and see nothing but success. These faulty applications of Scripture's victory stories allow professing Christians to feel justified in valuing the things they lusted over prior to conversion and in viewing Jesus as the perfect cheerleader along the way. But this is the new era of the Western church, and it is in the mainstream of popular Christianity. I'm afraid many haven't yet realized the significance of this shift.

The reality is: Most Christians in America simply aren't okay with being "the least of these." We don't want to be losers, when in reality we should be the least afraid of failure. If we are truly in Christ, we are certainly

**It is impossible to deny oneself until you get over yourself.**

now winners in the eyes of God but are guaranteed to be losers in the eyes of the world (John 15:18–19). This is part of the cost of being the people of God. We cannot worship both God and the things of this world.

It is impossible to deny oneself until you get over yourself. There is something so much better that God has for His people, and winning in this world is not what He has in mind.

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