



**mike  
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**messy  
spirituality**

**GOD'S ANNOYING LOVE FOR  
IMPERFECT PEOPLE**



# Messy Spirituality

## God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People

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By Mike Yaconelli

ZONDERVAN

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ISBN: 978-0-310-34555-8

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## CHAPTER 1

### Messy

#### The Workshop of the Spiritual Life

I stake the future on the few humble and hearty lovers who seek God passionately in the marvelous, messy world of redeemed and related

realities that lie in front of our noses.

**William McNamara**

Dear God,

I'm doing the best I can.

**Frank,**

*Children's Letters to God*

I go into churches and everyone seems to feel so good about themselves.

Everyone calls themselves a Christian nowadays. How dare we call ourselves Christians? It's only for Jesus to decide whether we are Christian or not. I don't think He's made a decision in my case, and I'm afraid that when He does I am going to be sent straight to hell. I don't feel I can call myself a Christian. I can't be satisfied with myself. We all seem to be pretty contented with ourselves in church and that makes me sick. I think all this contentment makes Jesus nervous.

**Robert Coles,**

*Wittenburg Door*

My life is a mess.

After forty-five years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life. I know Jesus is there, somewhere, but it's difficult to make him out in the haze of everyday life.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but I long for the continuing presence

of Jesus. Most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions.

I want to be a good person. I don't want to fail. I want to learn from my mistakes, rid myself of distractions, and run into the arms of Jesus. Most of the time, however, I feel like I am running away from Jesus into the arms of my own clutteredness.

I want desperately to know God better. I want to be consistent. Right now the only consistency in my life is my inconsistency. Who I want to be and who I am are not very close together. I am not doing well at the living-a-consistent-life thing.

I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham. I just want to be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow in maturity and stability. I want to have more victories than defeats, yet here I am, almost sixty, and I fail on a regular basis.

If I were to die today, I would be nervous about what people would say at my funeral. I would be happy if they said things like "He was a nice guy" or "He was occasionally decent" or "Mike wasn't as bad as a lot of people." Unfortunately, eulogies are delivered by people who know the deceased. I know what the consensus would be: "Mike was a mess."

When I was younger, I believed my inconsistency was due to my youth. I believed that age would teach me all I needed to know and that when I was older I would have learned the lessons of life and discovered the secrets of true spirituality.

I *am* older, a lot older, and the secrets are still secret from me.

I often dream that I am tagging along behind Jesus, longing for him to choose me as one of his disciples. Without warning, he turns around, looks straight into my eyes, and says, "Follow me!" My heart races, and I begin to run toward him when he interrupts with, "Oh, not you; the guy behind you. Sorry."

I have been trying to follow Christ most of my life, and the best I can do is a stumbling, bumbling, clumsy kind of following. I wake up most days with the humiliating awareness that I have no clue where Jesus is. Even though I am a minister, even though I think about Jesus every day, my following is ... uh ... meandering.

So I've decided to write a book about the spiritual life.

I know what you're thinking. Based on what I've just said about my walk with God, having me write about spirituality is like having Bozo the Clown explain the meaning of the universe, like playing Handel's *Messiah* on the kazoo. How can someone whose life is obviously *unspiritual* presume to talk about spirituality? How can someone unholy presume to talk about holiness? It makes no sense.

Unless. *Unless!* Unless spirituality, as most of us understand it, is not spirituality at all.

Sadly, *spiritual* is most commonly used by Christians to describe people who pray all day long, read their Bibles constantly, never get angry or rattled, possess special powers, and have the inside track to God. *Spirituality*, for most, has an *other* worldly ring to it, calling to mind eccentric "saints" who have forsaken the world, taken vows of poverty, and isolated themselves in cloisters.

Nothing wrong with the spirituality of monks. Monks certainly experience a *kind* of spirituality, a way of seeking and knowing God, *but what about the rest of us?* What about those of us who live in the city, have a wife or husband, three children, two cats, and a washing machine that has stopped working? What about those of us who are single, work sixty to seventy hours a week, have parents who wonder why we're not married, and have friends who make much more money than we do? What about those of us who are divorced, still trying to heal from the scars of rejection, trying to cope with the single-parenting of children who don't understand why this has happened to them?

Is there a spirituality for the rest of us who are not secluded in a monastery, who don't have it all together and probably never will?

## Spirituality for the Rest of Us

The answer is yes!

What landed Jesus on the cross was the preposterous idea that common, ordinary, broken, screwed-up people *could be godly!* What drove Jesus' enemies crazy were his criticisms of the "perfect" religious people and his acceptance of the imperfect nonreligious people. The shocking implication of Jesus' ministry is that *anyone* can be spiritual.

Scandalous? Maybe.

Maybe truth *is* scandalous. Maybe the scandal is that all of us are in some condition of not-togetherness, even those of us who are trying to be godly. Maybe we're all a mess, not only sinful messy but inconsistent messy, up-and-down messy, in-and-out messy, now-I-believe-now-I-don't messy, I-get-it-now-I-don't-get-it messy, I-understand-uh-now-I-don't-understand messy.

I admit, messy spirituality sounds ... well ... *unspiritual*.

Surely there are guidelines to follow, principles to live by, maps to show us where to go, and secrets we can uncover to find a spirituality that is clean and tidy.

I'm afraid not.

Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are *now* in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws but because we *let go* of seeking perfection and, instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixeness.

Look at the Bible. Its pages overflow with messy people. The biblical writers did not edit out the flaws of its heroes. Like Noah, for example. Everyone thought he was crazy. He certainly *was* a little strange, but Noah was also courageous, a man of great faith and strong will. Against the backdrop of unrelenting ridicule, Noah built a huge ark in the middle of the desert because God told him it was going to rain. No one believed him, but the rains did come and the flood happened, and after the water receded, Noah triumphantly left the boat, *got drunk, and got naked*.

What? *Drunk and naked*? I don't recall any of my Bible teachers or pastors talking about Noah's ... uh ... moment of indiscretion ... er ... weakness ... um ... failure. The Noah I've always heard about was fiercely faithful, irrepressibly independent, and relentlessly resolute. Noah was the model of great faith. Very few ever refer to Noah's losing battle with wine. Maybe being strong and faithful has its downside. Maybe for flood survivors life is more complicated than we would like to think, and maybe even Noah could have bouts of depression and loneliness.

Why should I be surprised? Turns out *all* of the biblical characters were a complex mix of strengths and weaknesses. David, Abraham, Lot, Saul, Solomon, Rahab, and Sarah were God-loving, courageous, brilliant, fearless, loyal, passionate, committed holy men and women who were also murderers, adulterers, and manic depressives. They were men and women who could be gentle, holy, defenders of the faith one minute, and insecure, mentally unstable, unbelieving, shrewd, lying, grudge-holding tyrants the next.

The New Testament characters weren't much better. Look who Jesus hung out with: prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers, mental cases, penniless riffraff, and losers of all kinds. His disciples were hardly models of saintliness. They were committed to Jesus, were ready to follow him anywhere (with one notable exception), but they were also troubled by infighting, always jockeying for position, suspicious of each other, accusatory, impulsive, selfish, lazy, and disloyal. Most of the time, they did not understand what Jesus was talking about, and when he died, they had no clue what to do next.

One very clear example of the messiness of the disciples took place in a tiny Samaritan village. On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples stopped in this village for the evening. The Samaritans, however, weren't in a mood to

cooperate. Most Jews didn't give Samaritans the time of day, so the Samaritans decided to return the favor by making it clear that Jesus and his disciples weren't welcome in their town. James and John (this would be the *beloved* disciple John) were furious, storming up to Jesus with the very undisciplelike question, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"<sup>2</sup> Not exactly an example of mature, unmessy discipleship.

You might say Christianity has a tradition of messy spirituality. Messy prophets, messy kings, messy disciples, messy apostles. From God's people getting in one mess after another in the Old Testament to most of the New Testament's being written to straighten out messes in the church, the Bible presents a glorious story of a very messy faith.

Sounds like you and I are in good company.

*Messy Spirituality* unveils the myth of flawlessness and calls Christians everywhere to come out of hiding and stop pretending.

*Messy Spirituality* has the audacity to suggest that messiness is the workshop of authentic spirituality, the greenhouse of faith, the place where the real Jesus meets the real us.

## **Notorious Sinners**

A few years ago, I was introduced to a group of uncouth Christians who call themselves "the Notorious Sinners." These are men from all walks of life who meet once a year to openly share their messy spirituality with each other. The title Notorious Sinners refers to the scandalous category of forgiven sinners whose reputations and ongoing flaws didn't seem to keep Jesus away. In fact, Jesus had a habit of collecting disreputables; he called them disciples. He still does. I like people who openly admit their notoriousness — people who unabashedly confess they are hopelessly flawed and hopelessly forgiven. Graciously, these men invited me to be a part of their group.

The Notorious Sinners meet yearly at spiritual-retreat centers, where from the moment we arrive, we find ourselves in trouble with the centers' leadership.

We don't act like most contemplatives who come to spiritual-retreat centers — reserved, quiet, silently seeking the voice of God. We're a different kind of contemplative — earthy, boisterous, noisy, and rowdy, tromping around our souls seeking God, hanging out with a rambunctious Jesus who is looking for a good time in our hearts. A number of us smoke cigars, about half are recovering alcoholics, and a couple of the men could embarrass a sailor with their language. Two of the Notorious Sinners show up on their Harleys, complete with leather pants and leather jackets.

I admit I run with a rough crowd — Christians whose discipleship is blatantly real and carelessly passionate, characterized by a brazen godliness. Unafraid to admit their flaws, unintimidated by Christians who deny their own messiness, these guys sometimes look like pagans and other times look like Jesus. They are spiritual troublemakers, really, which is why they look like Jesus (who was always causing trouble himself). They are full of mischief, laughter, and boisterous behavior, which is why they look like pagans. Truly messy disciples. The Notorious Sinners are definitely a bizarre mix of the good, the bad, and the ugly, living a spirituality which defies simple definitions. Oh, and they are some of the most spiritual men I know.

*Messy Spirituality* is a description of the Christianity most of us live and that few of us admit. It is an attempt to break through the religious wall of secrecy and legitimize a faith which is unfinished, incomplete, and inexperienced.

*Messy Spirituality* is a celebration of a discipleship which is under construction.

*Messy Spirituality* is the scandalous assertion that following Christ is anything but tidy and neat, balanced and orderly. Far from it. Spirituality is complex, complicated, and perplexing — the disorderly, sloppy, chaotic look of authentic faith in the real world.

Spirituality is anything but a straight line; it is a mixed-up, topsy-turvy, helter-skelter godliness that turns our lives into an upside-down toboggan ride full of unexpected turns, surprise bumps, and bone-shattering crashes. In other words, messy spirituality is the delirious consequence of a life ruined by a Jesus who will love us right into his arms.

## The Scandal of Spirituality

Jesus is not repelled by us, no matter how messy we are, regardless of how incomplete we are. When we recognize that Jesus is not discouraged by our humanity, is not turned off by our messiness, and simply doggedly pursues us in the face of it all, what else can we do but give in to his outrageous, indiscriminate love?

Anne Lamott, a fellow messy Christian, describes perfectly what happens when Jesus pursues us. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne recounts her conversion to Jesus. Things were not going well in her life: addicted to cocaine and alcohol, involved in an affair that produced a child whom she aborted, helplessly watching her best friend die of cancer. During this time, Anne visited a small church periodically. She would sit in the back to listen to the singing and then leave before the sermon. During the week of her abortion, she spiraled downward. Disgusted with herself, she drowned her sorrows in alcohol and drugs. She had been bleeding for many hours from the abortion and finally fell into bed, shaky and sad, smoked a cigarette, and turned off the light.

After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there — of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. ... I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever....

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling — and it washed over me.

*(Continues...)*

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