

How Do You Spell Relief?

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The scene is familiar. A man overindulges on rich food (on TV it is usually a man). He goes to bed, but soon awakens with his "innards" on fire. Desperate, he stumbles to the medicine cabinet and fumbles around, agony blazing from his eyes.

Then he finds it—his favorite antacid saves him again. As the scenario ends, our hero is back in bed with total relief written across his face.

When it comes to physical miseries, most folk are satisfied with relief. "Don't tell me to change my eating habits; just make me feel better."

The resulting health problems are bad enough, but real tragedy comes when the same attitude is extended to all of life, especially to spiritual values.

People in general want to be made comfortable just as they are, with a minimum of personal adjustment. Fundamental change meets with adamant resistance. They avoid the real issue, seeking only relief. They dislike people who tell them to change their ways but are drawn to anyone who will make them feel better the way they are.

Years ago a prominent business executive made a profession of faith. Later when someone questioned him about the business he was in, he replied, "I didn't think becoming a Christian would mean I'd have to change my lifestyle."

Yes, people resist a change of heart. Self-will is stubborn, and sinners can be real masochists. They hold onto their sins as long as they can stand the pain. Most are not yet miserable enough to surrender to God.

The Bible contrasts two kinds of sorrow for one's actions. "Godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

The sorrow of the world is selfish. It does not regard the real values at stake. Instead, it is concerned about the effects of sin on one's self, for example, the pain of remorse. Such persons are sorry for their sin only because it hurts them.

Such sorrow is only a passing feeling and never produces real repentance. The heart remains committed to its indulgences, and soon the person is pursuing them again.

Godly sorrow is genuine sorrow for what one's sin has done to God and to others. This kind of sorrow leads to permanent repentance.

People spell relief in a variety of ways. When problems stack up and the stress level rises in school, on the job, or at home, an easy way to spell relief is Q-U-I-T. That way they can run from the problems instead of facing them and solving them.

The way many couples spell relief from marriage difficulties and responsibilities is D-I-V-O-R-C-E. That way they do not have to face themselves and get a handle on their real problems. Having escaped, they can take their problems with them into the next relationship.

An increasing number of people are spelling relief D-R-U-G-S. That includes alcohol. Sex, bizarre entertainment, social exhibitionism, and peer identification and dependency are common components of this self-destructive trap.

Generations raised on instant gratification demand more and more. The lack of immediate gratification means instant boredom, and boredom contributes to depression. Sometimes it all ends in suicide.

When people put self-gratification at "home plate," the price gets higher each time they "go around the bases."

Pity the person to whom to be without stimulation is to be without a purpose to live. Pity a generation that realizes it is expendable and finds the hurt and anger almost too much to cope with.

Some people spell relief W-O-R-K, whether it be an escape into the busyness of one's job, business or profession, or the "rewarding" work of religious and community service.

Entire cultures spell relief R-E-L-I-G-I-O-N. Yes, man-made religion is "the opiate of the people"—a conscience salve for some, and for others an escape from life's stark realities. It is a spiritual fabrication that serves as a moral basis for the cultural *status quo* with its evils and injustices.

One wonders—and only God knows—how many are attracted to the Christian faith only for the relief it provides. How many spell relief C-H-U-R-C-H? We think not only of such things as penance and the confessional but also of Spirit-energized worship. Let us weep over those who spend an hour or so in our pews on Sundays only because the sweet atmosphere calms their minds and relieves their stress—who find the music soothing, the prayer uplifting and the pastor is interesting, but who have never died to sin and become a new creation in Christ.

Their hearts say, "Pastor, make me feel good." Like the prophet Ezekiel, "Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them" (Ezekiel 33:32).

Some people try to spell relief J-E-S-U-S, but He told Nicodemus that he must be born again and the rich young ruler that he had to sell all, take up his cross, and follow Him.

Jesus made clear to the fickle crowd that followed Him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), and soon many of them were gone. No wonder Christ wept over them as sheep without a shepherd.

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:3, 4).

If we tell people what they want to hear, make them feel good, preach a self-centered utilitarian gospel that reverses reality by proclaiming God as our servant, people will come and bring their checkbooks with them. But such a gospel only heals "the hurt of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14).

We are grateful to God for church growth. We want to reach as many people as possible. At the same time we must remain faithful to Christ and to the souls of the people lest we build congregations that are a mile wide numerically but only an inch deep spiritually. Let us preach and so labor that the people in the pews will also have been to the cross and are now following Christ in true discipleship.

Paul was speaking of the churches he founded when he said, "I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it" (1 Corinthians 3:10).

Jesus Christ is not merely an escape. He is the Answer. He gives real relief because He brings about real change.

"Change? Me, change and lose control of my life?"

Friend, if you are not born again, you do not have control of your life. Sin does.

Jesus Christ came to deal with the real problem—sin. "You shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

We need to be saved from depravity, not just depression. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Our yearning must be for righteousness more than relief. We must see ourselves as the "wretched man" of Romans 7:24, and then come by saving faith to Romans 8:1, where "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Millions of minister-hours are used up annually in counseling people who are seeking only relief. But when people walk through the door of the pastor's study, or come forward at the church service, and say, "I am sick and tired of living this way, and I'm ready to surrender completely to God," the basic problem is solved.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus Himself extends the invitation: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The Savior will do much more than relieve your symptoms. He will make you a new person. Come to Him now.