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Dear Church Family,

In the summer of 1941, Hitler's tanks tore across the Bug River into Russia. To resist the invaders, Stalin employed the time-tested, scorched-earth policy. The scorched-earth policy is a retaliatory retreat in which, as civilians and military personnel abandon the frontline, they take or destroy anything that could be utilized by the invader. In a speech delivered shortly after the attack began, Stalin implored his countrymen, "to the enemy must not be left a single engine, a single railway car, not a single pound of grain or a gallon of fuel." His plan worked. By the time the German army had pushed east to Stalingrad the following year, their supply lines buckled and broke and they were forced to surrender.

Like good soldiers, Christians are engaged in a bitter struggle against a brutal enemy. "Put on the whole armor of God," Paul urged the Ephesians, "that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (Eph 6:11). Isn't it good news that Jesus Christ died not only to liberate us from the guilt of our sins but also to equip and empower us to charge after Him, our glorious King, the Man of War, into the fight of our lives against indwelling sin? Ours is not the religion of pacifists but of warriors.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Christ issued timeless instructions, a scorched-earth sanctification strategy: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Mat. 5:29-30)." Was Jesus prescribing barbaric self-mutilation? Certainly not! Rather, he was calling his followers to cherish personal holiness above the comforts of Christian liberty. John Calvin commented, "However difficult, arduous, troublesome or painful God's rule may be, we must make no excuse for that, as the righteousness of God should be worth more to us, than all other things which are chiefly dear and precious. Christ in hyperbole bids us prune back anything that stops us from offering God obedient service, as he demands in His Law. He does this deliberately, for men are too generous to themselves in the limits they allow over these things."

Given the context in Matthew's gospel, it seems that Jesus' instructions deal particularly with battling habitual sins; those stubborn stains that drive despairing believers to their knees crying, "O Lord, will you ever free me from this?" Prevalent sin patterns in our day and age include drunkenness, drug addiction, enslavement to pornography and sexual immorality, vulgarity, fits of rage, anxiety and fear... to name a few. All too often, our efforts against these enemies fail because we approach the battle lines of spiritual warfare committed firstly to the preservation of our liberties rather than a willingness to sacrifice any freedom, "making no provision for the flesh (Gal 5:13)," to put sin to death. This is scorched-earth sanctification.

I first saw this godly grit, this scorched-earth sanctification, in my dear friend and college roommate when, upon returning from winter break, I noticed that his desktop computer was gone. The cables strewn across his desk indicated that his computer had been taken in haste or, perhaps, stolen. You see, when everyone else had gone home for the holidays, my friend had stayed on campus to take a class geared to prepare him for his entrance exams into medical school. When I asked him about the computer, he told me, with a palpable grief, that the temptation and solitude had overpowered him and he had fallen to temptation. “So,” I asked, “where’s your computer?” He replied, “It’s gone. I threw it away.” My jaw dropped. Had I heard him correctly? Surely, my friend had overreacted! “But how will you get your school work done?” I begged. “I’ll use the computers in the library.” He said quietly. “Nothing is worth hating myself this much. Nothing.”

It is impossible to overestimate how this influenced my budding faith. I had never known such radical, eye-gouging commitment to personal holiness. God granted me a front-row seat to witness a religion that far-exceeded my own. His was more than the cultural Christianity of my youth, which I had convincingly decked in the external accoutrements of sincerity. His was a living religion in which, Jesus, having graciously accomplished everything for him on the cross now demanded everything from him. And he, as a blood-bought son, was striving to “walk in a manner worthy of his calling” (Eph. 4:1) to the glory of God, his Father.

Friends, what stubborn sins torment you and cloud out the joy of your salvation? Are you making provisions for the flesh because you refuse to sacrifice your liberty on the altar of obedience to Christ? Are you warring against addiction to pornography while clinging in unwavering and unaccountable dependence to your screens? Gouge out your eye! Are you struggling with drunkenness and moderation with a stocked liquor or medicine cabinet at home? Cut off your hand! Is your life woefully pocked by fits of rage while you devour violent music, films, and games? Hear Paul’s urging, “If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21).

How often do we dream about the kind of Christian we aspire to be tomorrow while comfortably wallowing in spiritual mediocrity today? For how long have you put off making the hard and even radical changes that will bring about real growth in godliness and victory over stubborn sins? God fill our hearts with such love for Christ that we would do anything and everything that’s necessary, sacrifice any liberty that the Lord should lovingly require, to be found pursuing Christ-likeness. Such pursuit is our joy and privilege as those who have been redeemed by his blood, clothed in his righteousness, and enlisted into his service.

Your grateful servant,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jim McCarthy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "J" and a long, horizontal stroke at the end.

Jim McCarthy  
Senior Minister