

NO SUBSTITUTIONS!

Simple Keys to Help You...
Know Your Value
Live With Purpose
Make a Difference

a mini-devotional

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*If you want to know your value, to live with purpose,
and to make a difference, there can be no substitutions.*

Take a moment to count how many substitutes you can think of. How many things with the word “substitute” in the name can you come up with?

If this had audio, I would play some quiz show “thinking” music.

So, what did you come up with?

How about substitute teacher? Substitute bus driver? Salt substitute or sugar substitute? Have you ever substituted something in a recipe?

What about the stand-ins that don’t necessarily have “substitute” in their names?

Understudy? Pinch hitter? Counterfeit dollar bill?

Which do you prefer in *your* life? Does it depend on what it is?

One thing is for certain; if we are given the choice between seeing the lead actor or the understudy in a very expensive Broadway play, we will usually choose the lead actor. Unless, of course, the understudy is our cousin. Then we might choose the understudy, even if only to keep from getting an ugly sweater for Christmas.

Webster’s dictionary tells us that a substitute is “a person or thing that takes the place of someone or something else.”¹ A substitute isn’t the first choice, and we usually just tell ourselves it will do.

How often do we accept or even seek out substitutes in our spiritual lives?

How many times do we think the “real” things required for our growth are just too much trouble, too time-consuming, too much work, and not that important, anyway? It’s a trade-off that has far greater consequences than receiving a sweater with a fully decorated Christmas tree knitted right in.

CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE?

I don’t like sugar substitutes. Even if I don’t take into account the constant debate that occurs over their health benefits vs. their health risks, I still won’t use them. I just don’t like the aftertaste.

I know most folks say you get used to it and will eventually be unable to tell the difference between the substitute and the real deal. I still say, “No, thank you.” In fact, I’m glad I can tell the difference.

One taste tells me what I’ve got and helps me make the choice that is best for me.

I haven’t always so easily detected those substitutions that I have made in my life, especially in my spiritual life. Sometimes it has taken me awhile to notice the bitter taste that has developed in my heart because I have left a substitution unnoticed and unattended for too long. I’ve treaded the dangerous waters of getting accustomed to the presence of the spiritual substitution, believing it to be just as good for me as the real thing.

Thankfully the Holy Spirit is our built-in spiritual taste-tester, and He can alert us to the hazardous switches that take place in our lives.

He is good to tell us, “There are no substitutions,” and here is why.

- ***IF YOU WANT TO KNOW YOUR VALUE, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR JESUS.***

Ask the religious leaders of Jesus' day about this one. Jesus got under their skin more times than not because He got in their faces about substitution.

They wanted to substitute their rules for His relationship.

One time in particular, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues. The synagogue ruler could have easily picked up on the substitution he was making, but he blew it. Big time.

We pick up the story in Luke 13, starting in verse 10.

“On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, ‘There are six days for work. *So come and be healed* on those days, not on the Sabbath’” (vs. 10-14, emphasis mine).

Did you notice how close the synagogue ruler got to having the real thing? He actually acknowledged that Jesus was healing!

But, he completely missed what Jesus had to offer – and how Jesus was changing absolutely everything – because he was more concerned with keeping his rules.

Jesus made it a habit, this healing on the Sabbath thing. But, it wasn't just to prove that He could. It was as if He was saying, “You cannot keep enough rules to please my Father. It didn't work when your forefathers were in the desert, and it doesn't work now.

You need *Me*. All your righteousness is still no better than dirty rags,² so why do you keep relying on your rules and your rituals? You need *Me*. You need My forgiveness. You need My healing, every single day, including the Sabbath! **Your value doesn't come from keeping your rules. Your value comes from Me. Don't miss Me.**

But, they did. And we sometimes do, too.

What does it look like today, to make this substitution and get off-kilter with where our value comes from?

It looks much the same as it did then, **with our spiritually starved selves concerned more with the recording of the points than the safekeeping of the heart.**

There is a place for doing right, but it comes from the time that we have spent just sitting at Jesus' feet. It comes from gratitude, not attitude. Even the disciples didn't get it at first, and they walked beside Him every day! How much more careful should we be to know Him and love Him?

Working for Him, or even working in His name is not a substitute for really knowing Him and accepting what He did to buy the pardon of any who would believe. "Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3, emphasis mine).

And once we have settled our value, we can begin to live with purpose.

- ***IF YOU WANT TO LIVE WITH PURPOSE, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR GOD'S WORD.***

How many self-help books, articles, or helpful hints would you say you have read over the last month? What about the last year?

Even if you haven't read them personally, how many thousands of self-help books would you say there are? I haven't counted them, but let's just say there are lots and lots. And lots.

Now, how many of them would you suppose don't have a single scripture in them?

The writer of Psalm 119 took one hundred seventy-six verses to expound on how important God's Word was to him. It ended up being the longest Psalm in the Bible, and all it talks about is one thing. But that one thing – God's Word – was all he needed.

- When his heart was tired, he penned, "My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word" (vs. 28).
- When people were being mean to him, he wrote, "Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart" (vs. 69).
- When he knew he would need to speak to important people, he resolved, "I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame for I delight in your commands because I love them" (vs. 46-47).
- When he needed guidance, "Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me" (vs. 98).
- When he needed protection, "You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word" (vs. 114).

He knew there was no *self-help* book that would be of any help at all. He needed God's Word to guide him, to strengthen him, and to preserve him.

And he needed God's Word to know his purpose. "Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path" (vs. 128).

Have you ever felt like you were on the wrong path? You didn't know quite which path you were supposed to be on, but you knew that it must have been the *other* path at some fork in the road way back there, somewhere.

Where did you turn to make things right?

Did you try to click your heels together and think happy thoughts and hope that your purpose would be clearer when you opened your eyes? Did you grab one of those self-help books?

Or did you reach for your Bible?

When we don't think the Bible will give a relevant answer to our question, it's easy to make the substitution for something we feel is more timely and fitting. The Bible is an old book, after all. It was written before the internet was even thought of. How can it be useful today?

It is God's communication to us. So, how can it *not* be useful?

It unfolds Jesus' purpose – and therefore *our* purpose – so clearly and so beautifully that we can't afford to believe that it is outdated and useless. It is sometimes hard to understand, but God will show us what He means and what He intends if we will only ask Him to.

When I have least expected it, when I thought that a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” book was what I needed to open instead, I have received unmistakable direction from God's Word.

I have been directed toward passages that showed me the mistakes of others, preventing me from learning the same lesson from personal experience.

I have been guided to take notes on faith and triumph, and then put them into practice.

I have been challenged to give up pride and unforgiveness, and to ask myself, *How would Jesus have handled this?*

Be careful not to misunderstand; there is room in our lives for the wisdom of God's servants of today who have written down words of action and encouragement for us to follow. I try to be one of them.

God still speaks through His people, just like He did when He directed the likes of David and Paul to give us the words of the Bible we read today.

Like them, some folks write down what He said and what they did so they can share it with others. Taking to heart the admonition in Hebrews 10:24 to "...spur one another on to love and good deeds," they share their triumphs and they share how they survived tragedies. They walk the road and show others how.

We read in 2 Corinthians 1:4 that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." The important phrase is "from God." **All we have comes from Him, so as we seek to live with purpose, we only need to be careful that all roads still lead to His Word, each and every time.**

- ***IF YOU WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUE FOR OBEDIENCE.***

We have taken note of two very harmful substitutions that we can be guilty of making in our spiritual lives. We have seen how important it is to keep Jesus first, and to keep God's Word close.

Now, the very important third point on the triangle is to do what God has told us to do.

Did you know that Israel's first king was dethroned because of his disobedience?

You were a bad boy, Saul.

This part of his story is in 1 Samuel 15.

King Saul had been told to completely destroy the Amalekites when he went to war against them, but he didn't. He left the Amalekite king alive, and only destroyed what he considered weak and despised. Then when Samuel confronted him about it, Saul lied. He blamed the soldiers, but he still tried to make it look like they did it all for God.

Samuel's reply to Saul's failure would become some very well-known verses about obedience: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offering and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22).

On top of it all, Saul made God sad. "Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: 'I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions'" (1 Samuel 15:10-11a).

Did you know that disobedience grieves God? It makes God sad, and it makes us miss the mark.

Like Saul, our disobedience is often wrapped up in the "almost, but not quite" trap. We think, *Well, I know the tithe is supposed to be this much this week, but if I give something, that's better than nothing.* Or we think, *I really feel like I'm supposed to help that family, but if I wait long enough, someone else will do it.*

Every time we try to disguise our disobedience, however, we chip away at our ability to make a difference.

We might be guilty of letting fear rob us of moving forward. Or maybe feelings of inadequacy keep us from stepping out. But, if we will take care to keep the other points of our triangle in check – keeping close to Jesus and reading God’s Word – we will be less likely to miss the mark.

We will know our value. We will know our purpose. And we will want nothing more than to be obedient and to make a difference in the lives of others.

The technical term for that is being smack-dab in the middle of God’s will.

It is the safest place, the most fulfilling place, the most beautiful place to be.

If you want to know your value, live with purpose, and make a difference, there are no substitutes for a personal walk with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. The world tries to offer many substitutions, some of which look very good. But we are told to beware, “(and) no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

A heart surrendered to Jesus and a life guided by His Word will recognize the substitutions, and will quickly render the response, “No, thank you!” Because when you’ve got the real thing, nothing else will do.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Which substitutions would you say you have been guilty of making in your spiritual life? Have you traded rules for relationship, trying to gain your value through accumulating points? Have you traded self-help for God's Word, trying to live with purpose without first seeking His guidance? Have you traded obedience for excuses, grieving God and missing out on His best?

- If you would consider yourself to be off-track, there remains an open invitation to be made right with God. No matter the substitutions you have made, you can approach the throne of grace with a humble heart, and receive God's direction once again. Take a moment now to consider what you need to lay at His feet, and do so.

- We don't often notice one or two small steps away from God, but it's because we're not paying attention. Then we finally look up one day and realize we are far from home. Resolve today to never get far away again. Stay close to Jesus. Don't let your Bible gather dust. Don't let partial obedience rob you of God's best. Commit to remembering the three Bible stories we talked about, and the lessons we can learn from them. Then, as you remain in His Word, you will add to them,

and you will notice very quickly when you're about to make a harmful substitution. Take a moment to pray.

*Father, I pray today for the wisdom to know that Your way is the best way.
Help me to remember that my value lies in accepting the sacrifice of Your Son.
Help me remember that my purpose will be made clearer with every moment
that I am reading Your Word. Help me remember that my obedience will make
all the difference. You are good. You are worthy. And I love You.*

Amen

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NOTES

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substitute>

² Isaiah 64:6

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

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