

Learning costly resistance from Bonhoeffer

Cheap resistance is like cheap grace. It risks very little.

by [Emily C. Heath](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue



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In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer distinguishes between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Cheap grace requires nothing from us. Bonhoeffer describes it as “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” We are not changed by cheap grace, and so it is not really from God. Costly grace, on the other hand, “is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

But costly grace is not just costly; it is also grace. “It is costly because it costs a man his life,” writes Bonhoeffer, “and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.” Bonhoeffer points us to the false dichotomy between preserving our lives and responding to the needs of the world. It is through costly grace that we receive our real lives.

In treacherous times, when powerful people and systems threaten us or others, we have to ask what God wants us to do—and we have to accept that doing it will cost us something. While there is a chance that the choices faith asks us to make will result in physical death, as it did for Bonhoeffer, the cost is likely to stop short of that. Choosing to do the right thing probably won’t make our hearts stop beating.

But what if it did? What would be worth that risk? If you are like most people, your list of people and ideals you’d be willing to die for is a very short one. Yet there’s something else we seem to be willing to risk our lives for: our fears. We allow fear to deprive us not of heartbeats and breaths, but of something even more precious: the fullness and beauty of a life lived well.

For those of us who believe that we rest in the hands of an eternal and ever-loving God, living a life full of fear is worse than dying. The great threat to Christian faith is not that we will not be safe from the world’s dangers but that we will be held captive by our fear of them—that we will have more faith in our fear than we have in Christ. This can be hard for North American Christians to understand, since we have rarely faced persecution. But the mission of the church is not to avoid causing a stir, nor to hold on to things that cannot save us. As Jesus says, to save your life you have to lose it.

Christians are not called to recklessness, but we are called to action. In Christ we are given a new freedom to respond to a world in need. So each time the news informs us of something that’s happening that we know is not right or just, the question to ask is *what response does God want from us in this moment?* When we learn to ask ourselves this, and to truly discern God’s will for us, we begin to find that the greatest risk we can take, the one thing that will make us lose the life we have been given, is to choose not to risk anything at all.

Several years ago, some of the young people in my church’s confirmation class taught me a new word. We were talking about bullying and how to respond to it. They said that instead of being bystanders, they try to be *upstanders*. When they

see someone being hurt or mistreated, they want to be the people who do something about it, not the ones who choose to avert their eyes and keep walking. Upstanding is like standing fast—the literal definition of the word *resist*. To choose to do something, to stand up to what is unjust, is to resist the culture of destruction that surrounds us.

And risk is required if we want our resistance to mean anything. In Maria Schrader's 2016 biopic, Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig argues that "every gesture of resistance which is void of either risk or impact is nothing but a cry for recognition." This is a useful bar to set for ourselves. Do our gestures of resistance accomplish anything other than making ourselves feel better? Do we protest just so that we can have great pictures on our social media feeds, or are we actually willing to risk something for the good of our neighbors?

Cheap resistance, after all, is like cheap grace. It means very little. It might make us feel better, at least for a little while, but it won't do much to help the people who really need it. But if we are willing to risk some of what we have been given for the sake of others, then we are willing to pay a cost. This is costly resistance.

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"Costly grace is the Incarnation of God," writes Bonhoeffer. In the incarnation, God chooses a costly path, a holy risk. If Christ himself was willing to risk the worst that the world could do to him, then we who would follow him must be willing to take risks as well—to become what C. S. Lewis called "little Christs" in this world. And if our job is to be little Christs, then we have a part in Christ's resurrection as well. As Easter morning teaches us, in holy risk there can be great joy.

Thea Racelis, a friend and ministry colleague of mine, has written about her experience as a foster parent. "The worst advice I heard," she writes, "was the warning to be cautious with our love." Well-meaning friends said things like, "You know this is risky. Be careful." They didn't want Thea and her spouse to grow attached to a child who could be taken away and returned to her birth mother.

Racelis responded like this: "When faced with life's many uncertainties, the answer is never going to be 'love less.' If that's the answer you come up with, you are asking the wrong questions. . . . Love is risky." It is indeed. Love makes us risk the best parts of ourselves getting hurt. Yet not to love would be even riskier; it would be to choose death, both for ourselves and for the world.

Racelis writes, "I wouldn't be a Christian if I wanted to stay safe. I will love as much and as hard as I can, for as long as I can." In the end that's all that any of us who try to be Christians can do. We can love God enough to risk loving the world. We can choose love as our way of resistance, believing this holy risk to be worth it. And we can turn away from the bondage of our anxious safety, toward the costly freedom of following Christ.

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