



TAKING

HARRY LOUIS WILLIAMS II

IT TO THE

**LESSONS FROM A LIFE
OF URBAN MINISTRY**

STREETS



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STEP FOOT IN THE RESISTANCE

Where do you come in? When you decided to follow Jesus, you exited from the freshly paved freeway that led to comfort and safety. You are now on the narrow road with the signposts above that read “Do or Die” and “Pick Up Your Cross Here.” This new life demands all. Daily it calls for commitment. Daily it calls for sacrifice. Daily it calls out from Scriptures to put God first, others second. This hierarchy is at the center of the resistance.

Jesus died an enemy of the state, crucified between two thieves and with a sign over his head that read “King of the Jews.” Jesus lived a radical life, and the call to follow him has never been one of ease and tranquility. The question is, are you going to follow this radical Jesus? I mean really follow him? Are you prepared to go all the way, or is your faith just another box to check off like membership to your lodge, your Greek fraternal organization, or your favorite sports team?

Pastor, are you seeking to be a righteous revolutionary, or are you willing to settle for the role of religious cruise-ship director? Churches are dying all over America’s inner cities because they no longer point to the commitment that life in Christ demands. They

host weekly services. Some still draw large numbers. However, they are no longer lighthouses for those in darkness. Inside, they are empty husks and pretty corpses. There is no passion left to compel the lost to life and no power left to fight the darkness. The members are merely going through the motions of some sort of socioemotional catharsis. It's no longer real, if ever it was. Let me tell you about what it means to be real in these streets.

REAL IN THE FIELD

When a gangster nods in your direction and says, "Oh, he's solid!" you have arrived. If your ambition is to achieve royalty in the criminal underworld, at that moment you can consider yourself good to go. To have the right person say, "She's about that life" or to use words like *reputable* or *real* in connection to your name is the equivalent of having the late Stephen Hawking proclaim you an astrophysics visionary. In a world where all you have is your name, authenticity is priceless. To be called any of those names is to say that you're not an internet banger or studio gangster. Both feet are firmly planted in the lifestyle of the block, no looking back. People in the 'hood measure faith and faith institutions by the same yard stick. How committed are you to ministry in the killing fields?

Sure, you'll hear a lot of singing when you enter most churches located in the inner city. Hands will clap in rhythm to choruses like "This Little Light of Mine." You may feel like marching as great anthems of the church like "Onward Christian Soldiers" are lifted up. The pastor may even preach a rousing sermon exhorting his members to love your neighbor as yourself. But how will any of that translate into the church body's relationship with the most

impoverished members of the community around the church building or across town? How will the light that was sung about illuminate the courtyard of the trailer park or the housing projects? Will the Christian soldiers be marching into the gang war to assure the besieged and beleaguered that God is concerned for them? And that message about loving one's neighbor as oneself . . .

And yet it is real. I have seen the dazzling light twinkle in the eyes of men and women of God who wander the killing fields seeking someone to accept their prayer. I'll never be too spiritual to ask for that prayer. I want to hear them read the Scriptures underlined in their well-worn Bibles. I tap my feet to the acapella style. They have come here to meet us, the weary and the hard pressed, saints and sinners.

THE HARVEST

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). Here's what I found interesting as I recently considered that Scripture. Jesus lived in a world populated with Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes. In his sojourn through the dusty streets of ancient Galilee, Jesus is constantly running into these religious figures. Time after time, he argues with them in the synagogue or the temple; occasionally he finds himself reclined across from them at a dinner table. There seems to be no shortage of high priests or Levites in Jesus' world. How then, could he possibly say that the laborers are few? The answer is quite simple: they did not routinely perform activities in the redemptive and healing works of almighty God.

Ministry has not changed much over the years. Religion is often an elaborate masquerade, and not everybody wearing a uniform

or a name badge is necessarily going to work in the harvest field. Just like in ancient Israel, the harvest fields of inner-city America are brimming over and crying out for authentic believers who are committed to bringing the message and touch of Jesus Christ to the masses. People lost in the streets are searching not so much for orthodox church members as members of the resistance—Jesus-followers who are not going to trip when people come into the church with their pants sagging or the scent of marijuana emanating from their clothes. They are looking for believers who aren't afraid to greet them on the avenue, and ask how they are doing and mean it.

WHERE DO YOU START?

Matthew 20:29-34 recounts the story of two men on the side of a dusty road in ancient Palestine. Though sightless, they can hear the excitement as the great teacher and healer who has become rather famous in their world draws close. They call out to Jesus. The crowd, thinking Jesus is too important to take up time with these men, tells the men to quiet down. Undaunted, they cry out all the louder. Finally, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do?" They answer, "We want our sight."

Jesus touches the men and heals their vision. However, before this great miracle is performed, we find one of the most poignant phrases in the Scriptures: "Jesus had compassion on them."

I urge you to look up the word *compassion* in the Gospels. You will find that every time Jesus is moved with compassion, a miracle occurs. Compassion is more than someone looking at tragedy and saying, "Aw, isn't that too bad?" Jesus had unspeakable empathy. When Jesus experienced compassion, he

was moved in his guts, in the very core of his being, by the plight of the person in front of him. When Jesus was filled with compassion, he responded with all of his power to meet the need.

Compassion is the opposite of apathy. Compassion is the fuel of the resistance. It is the heart that beats for the other. Compassion compels us to the streets.

Be filled with compassion. Let it envelop you. Let it encircle you. Let it surround you. Let it pour through the membranes of your skin. Let it glow in the pupils of your eyes. Be like Jesus. Let compassion be the prevailing force behind your motives and movements.

Compassion will press you to find answers that must be searched through late-night study. It will force you to go beyond what some might think reasonable. Compassion is the godly grace that will press like the hands of God on your back when you are tired and the situation appears hopeless.

If you want to be successful in urban mission, godly compassion is not the only tool you'll need, but it well may be the essential one. If you possess it, you won't have to tell anyone. Everyone will see it. Compassion will help you to make sense of what you're about to read. You need it. If you don't possess it in measure, you must crave it. Pray for it.

In the coming pages, I will take you face to face with some deep problems that confront people in the inner cities. Some of you will be startled to find out that people in the United States live in such squalor, deprivation, and hunger. You may even be tempted to put this book down and stick your head back in the sand. I want to encourage you to resist that urge and keep reading. However,

instead of reading this book like a theologian or a sociologist, I want you to put on what I call your “Jesus glasses.” Look at the world I’m laying out for you through the lenses of Christ’s compassion. Pray that God will peel away the layers of unseen apathy that might hinder you from seeing his children as Jesus sees them.

Remember apathy is the great enemy of our cause. It must be resisted. We need to strip it off like grave clothing. Have you chosen to do so? Then welcome to the underground network of believers called the “resistance.” Let’s take it to the streets.

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