



# IMPOSSIBLE CHRISTIANITY

Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time

**KEVIN DEYOUNG**

“I’ve been reading Kevin DeYoung since we were both young and restless. Over countless articles and books, he’s helped me mature in my view of the world and understanding of God’s word. *Impossible Christianity* challenged some of my assumptions and corrected some of my misconceptions. I know it can help you enjoy the pleasure of God in a quiet and dignified life.”

**Collin Hansen**, Executive Director, The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics

“Read it to the end—where we find a benediction. But from the beginning, this book aims to bless God’s people by sending us out to live in daily obedience to the Lord who has saved us. Kevin DeYoung is not simplistic, but he makes the call of Christ on our lives much simpler (and much more biblical) than the cacophony of voices around us might suggest.”

**Kathleen Nielson**, author, speaker

“*Impossible Christianity* addresses most of the difficult questions about what the Christian life looks like. It tackles objections and difficulties head-on. DeYoung challenges issues most of us would be reluctant to confront. You may not agree with all his conclusions, but you will be forced to come up with biblical arguments to refute them, and that will prove difficult. This is one of those books that will be talked about for some time. Exceptionally clear, forthright, and engaging.”

**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“This book is for the Christian who believes low-level guilt and a slightly disturbed conscience are normal (even right!), and who may rely on that bad feeling as a bit of proof that they are, in fact, virtuous. DeYoung is here to remind you that Jesus set you free so that you really can please your good heavenly Father with a clean conscience. God smiles at the ordinary efforts of his children.”

**Abigail Dodds**, author, *Bread of Life*; *(A) Typical Woman*; and *A Student’s Guide to Womanhood*



*Impossible Christianity*

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*To my parents*

*Thank you for loving Christ, loving the church,  
loving your kids, and loving each other*





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# Introduction

## *Is Christianity Supposed to Feel Impossible?*

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED RUNNING, though running hasn't always liked me back.

It might be hard to tell from my intimidating physical presence today, but I wasn't a great athlete as a kid. I played a lot of right field in baseball and spent most innings putting grass in my hat. I played goalie in soccer and stood so far in the back of the net that every ball I stopped was already a goal. I played one year of football and never once touched anyone (which might have been great, except I was on defense). I fractured both of my wrists playing intramural basketball. I got multiple concussions playing hockey. I think I even struck out in kickball.

But I wasn't terrible at running. Back when I was a kid—when parents and educators were less concerned about young

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people experiencing crushing failure in life—we had to take the annual Presidential Physical Fitness test. The test, at least the one our school conducted, was a combination of push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, a standing broad jump, a rope climb, a flexibility test, and a mile run. Compared to the other boys in my grade, I was average to below average in most events. Rope climb was my particular nemesis. (“Hey kid, climb this rope to the top of your three-story gym. Don’t worry, there is a small, thin mat on the ground in case you fall from 25 feet. And if you make it to the top, you can ring a bell and then burn the inside of your thighs as you slide back down to earth.”) Considering how middling I was overall, and how much I desperately wanted President Reagan to recognize my physical fitness, I was pleasantly surprised when I was one of the first boys to finish the mile run.

I decided that afternoon that running was going to be my thing. Most young men dream of being in the NBA or the NFL. My dream was to come from behind in the anchor leg of the 4 x 400 relay and win the gold medal for Team USA. I always wanted to line up at the start of a race and know that I could run faster than everyone else around me. I never did line up with that feeling because it never was close to the reality. If Eric Liddell felt God’s pleasure when he ran, I often felt God saying to me, “Don’t quit your day job.” But still,

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I will always remember running around the baseball diamond and soccer fields at my elementary school and feeling proud that I beat most of the jocks in my grade.

That was over thirty-five years ago, and since then I've worked hard at running, with only the mildest of success. I ran through the cold Michigan winter as a junior high school student in order to get ready for my first season of real running. I notched a 2:35 in the 800 meter as an eighth grader. I looked at our high school record—an impressive 1:55 at the big public school I attended—and set my four-year goal. All I had to do was drop 10 seconds a year, and I'd have the school record as a senior. I met that goal my freshman year and my sophomore year. And that was about it. Turns out the last 20 seconds are a lot harder to trim than the first 20 seconds.

With discipline and hard work and a naturally skinny (I prefer “athletic”) frame, I have managed, at times, to be the best of the second-tier runners, or, on occasion, the worst of the pretty good runners. I was all-county JV in cross-country as a sophomore in high school, before injuries derailed my final two years. In track, I was so “good” that I think I tried every event at least once. I eventually settled in to the 110-meter high hurdles, where long legs and decent form could make up for a natural lack of speed. I won a couple races and competed one year in college. Sure, the school was NCAA

Division III, but I am an NCAA letter winner, a fact I have mentioned to my uninterested family many times. I made the conference finals in the hurdles and finished last. Like I said, the worst of the pretty good.

Now firmly ensconced in middle age, I continue to run and exercise regularly. I've read dozens of books about running. I've watched scores of YouTube videos and more track-and-field meets on TV than literally anyone I know. I've purchased lots of good running gear—from shoes to hats to singlets to special socks to short shorts (too short, my wife says). I've done road races and triathlons of various distances. Sometimes I finish near the top of my age group. Sometimes I barely finish. If you compare me to someone getting off the couch to run a Thanksgiving turkey trot, I'm pretty good. If you compare me to serious runners, I am, well, not a serious runner. I'm doing the best I can with my limited time, my limited ability, and my limited opportunities. The good news is, if my 5K time doesn't get any slower over the next thirty years, I'll be world class.

### **Christianity Possible**

At this point, some of you are thinking, “More running stories, please!” while the other 99 percent are wishing I would have sprained my ankle and never finished that elementary

school mile (don't worry, I've sprained my ankle plenty of times). But believe it or not, my experience with running has everything to do with the title of this book. Many Christians have come to expect (and accept) that being a disciple of Jesus is a lot like my thirty-five-year journey with running. You read the books. You watch the videos. You get the right equipment. You try to be disciplined. You try to improve. But with only the mildest of success.

Maybe you have been following Jesus for many years, maybe since you were a little kid. Sometimes you feel like a winner, but mostly you feel like you are an average to below-average believer. You aren't ready to quit being a Christian. You know that being a Christian is important. In fact, it's the most important thing in your life. You like being a Christian and are willing to work hard at it. The only trouble is, Christianity seems impossible.

I should hasten to add an important clarification, lest you misunderstand what this book is about. You may think, "Ah, so this is another book about how justification is by faith alone, another book about how the gospel is good news for exhausted people, another book about how God loves us even though we are spiritual failures." Not exactly. I *do* believe in justification by faith alone—with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I *do* believe that the gospel is good news for



exhausted people—and many of us are dog-tired. But that’s not what this book is about, at least not directly. This book is about the last line of that sentence above, the line about “how God loves us even though we are spiritual failures.” This book is about how that line, however well intentioned, is unbiblical, inaccurate, and unhelpful.

You and I are sometimes confused about what it means to follow Jesus. To be sure, we do not earn merit with God. As fallen creatures, we will never be good enough to make it to heaven. Salvation is all of grace from start to finish. But reveling in God’s grace does not mean we should revel in being spiritual failures. He does not mean for us to feel bad all the time. He does not mean for us to be lackluster disciples. He does not mean for us to be constantly overwhelmed. He does not mean for us to feel guilty all the time. God does not mean for Christianity to be impossible.

Many Christians have resigned themselves to the fact—or at least it seems like a fact—that they will be failures as followers of Jesus. Forgiven, yes. Justified, yes. On their way to heaven, yes. But as disciples and Christians, nothing special. Just like my running career, we will work hard and enjoy a few modest accomplishments. We will do the best we can with our limited time, our limited ability, and our limited opportunities. And yet we will never have the requisite gifts

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to be truly successful. We will not perfectly keep the Ten Commandments. We will not fully live out the Sermon on the Mount. We will never pray enough. We will never give enough. We will never share our faith enough. We will not renew our city. We will not repair all that ails our nation. We will not change the world.

I once heard a well-known Christian writer claim that every author really has only one book. I hope that's not exactly true, but he was certainly correct to suggest that most authors have one big idea that finds its way into almost everything they write. As I think about the other books I've written, it occurs to me that the explicit theme of this book has been an implicit theme in many of my other books; namely, that following Christ is never easy, but it does not have to be impenetrably mysterious, exceedingly complex, and relentlessly guilt-producing. Normal people can walk in God's will (*Just Do Something*) and live a holy life (*The Hole in Our Holiness*) without being frantic all the time (*Crazy Busy*). Normal churches are worth celebrating (*Why We Love the Church*), and the mission of the church is not everything under the sun (*What Is the Mission of the Church?*). Ordinary Christians and ordinary churches can be faithful, fruitful, and pleasing to God. In short, Christianity doesn't have to be impossible.

## The Race We All Must Run

Recently, my ten-year-old daughter ran a local 5K race with her good friend of the same age. They were extremely excited and nervous for their first race. Before my daughter left for the race, I looked her in the eye and said to her, with feigned intensity so she knew I was kind of serious and kind of joking, “I want you to remember three things. Jesus loves you. I love you. And you’re a DeYoung.” It was my over-the-top dad way of letting her know that I was proud of her and that she was going to do a great job. Of course, she didn’t qualify for the Olympics, and she wasn’t the fastest one out there. She stopped to walk once or twice. But she *did* do a great job. She wasn’t a failure. I wasn’t lying when I said I loved her and praised her for running so far and so fast. What dad would tell his little girl anything else?

True, if she keeps running, she’ll try to get better. Maybe she’ll be better than her brothers. Maybe she will be at the back of the pack. Either way, if she runs in the right way and for the right reasons, I’ll be proud. She won’t be a failure in my eyes. And we don’t have to live like we are failures in God’s eyes either. He saves us by his grace, gives us a new name, and then tells us to set aside every weight and run the race set before us, with a great cloud of witnesses cheering us along the way (Heb. 12:1).

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Following Christ entails suffering and endurance. The call of Christian discipleship is a costly (and liberating) summons to die to ourselves. Christianity is neither simple nor pain free. But following Jesus does not mean signing up for the Impossible Missions Force. Humility does not mean we should feel miserable all the time; meekness is not the same as spiritual failurism. The Spirit works within us. The word moves among us. The love of Christ compels us. “Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5).

As Christians, we have a race to be run, *and* it can be run. This is a recurring theme in Paul’s letters (so if you don’t like running analogies, blame him). Paul ran purposefully, with discipline and self-control. He knew the race could be run poorly, but he also knew how to keep from being disqualified (1 Cor. 9:26–27). As he came to the end of his life—an imperfect life filled with sin and struggle—Paul did not hesitate to conclude that he had fought the good fight, he had finished the race, and he had kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). This “chief of sinners” understood that there was laid up for him the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, would award to him on that day, and not only to him but also to all who loved the Lord’s appearing (4:8). Paul did not consider the Christian race a hopeless

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labyrinth or an ultramarathon that only the few and the fittest could survive. He believed the race he was on—the race he completed—to be a privilege. He also believed it was possible.

# How (Not) to Make Christianity Possible

YES, *CHARIOTS OF FIRE* is my favorite movie. With running and missions and Scottish accents, how could it not be? But if *Chariots of Fire* is my all-time favorite, the movie *Babe* is definitely in my top ten.

Babe is a farm pig who wants to be a sheepdog. Although the other animals look down on Babe, and the people in the sheepdog world find him an embarrassment, Babe's boss, Farmer Hoggett, believes in him. At the movie's climax, Farmer Hoggett signs Babe up for a national sheepdog competition. Everything is stacked against Babe. The farmer's wife is mortified, the crowds laugh in derision, and the sheepdog judges only begrudgingly accept Babe into the competition

based on a technicality. The poor pig struggles until Rex the dog races home and back again to give Babe the secret password for talking to the sheep (okay, so it may not be based on real-life events).

The ending of the movie is just perfect. With great patience and kindness, Babe speaks to the sheep, and the sheep obey his voice. The gruff sheep execute the instructions flawlessly. And as they return to the sheep pen, and the gate clicks behind them, the crowd erupts in acclamation and applause. The final shot shows Babe sitting next to Farmer Hoggett—the pig looking up at him, and the farmer looking down at his special sheepdog. Then Hoggett, with a satisfied grin, closes the movie with these words: “That’ll do, Pig. That’ll do.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant**

This book is about whether it is possible to live our lives as Christians such that God the Father looks down on us, smiles, and says, “That’ll do, my child. That’ll do.”

We know that God accepts us in Christ, that we can be justified by faith, that we can be forgiven because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. But this book is not about getting to heaven. This book is about whether on our way to heaven

1 *Babe*, directed by Chris Noonan (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1995).

we are doomed to a life of guilt, impossible standards, and failure. Is it possible for the Christian not only to be forgiven of his sins but to live a faithful and forgiven life so that when he reaches heaven's shore, God will greet him there with the words "Well done!"?

We know this is possible because the Bible tells us so. In the parable of the talents, Jesus tells the story of a man who goes on a journey and entrusts his servants with his property (Matt. 25:14–30). The master gave to one servant five talents, to another, two talents, and to the third, one talent (and remember, a talent is not an ability, like we use the word, but a monetary unit). After a long time, the master returned and settled accounts with his servants. The first servant made five talents in addition to the five he had been given. Likewise, the second servant made two more talents. But the third servant, fearing that his master was overdemanding and hard-charging, buried his talent in the ground so that at least he wouldn't lose what he had been given. To the first two servants, the master proclaims, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (25:21, 23), but the third man is called a "wicked and slothful servant" (25:26).

Notice three things about this parable.

First, this is not a story (just) for pastors and missionaries or world-famous Christians. This is about life in the kingdom



(Matt. 25:1) and how God will assess us at the end of the age (25:13). “Well done” is what ordinary Christians will hear, not a select few superradical believers.

Second, the two good servants were commended for being faithful with what they had been given. The first servant produced five talents, and the second servant produced two talents, but they were both given the same commendation. They weren’t expected to do what they couldn’t do. The master didn’t demand any more, or expect any less, than faithfulness with the opportunities they had.

Third, the last servant went off track because he thought he served an impossible master. We might think that the servant would work extra hard because he considered his master difficult and unfair. But the servant’s fear made him lazy. He didn’t work hard. He didn’t think creatively. He didn’t do the best he could with what he had been given. Instead, he played it safe. He knew he was likely to fail, so he didn’t even try.

Surely these are important lessons for us. Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy, but when we think Christianity is impossible, we normally don’t do more for Christ; we do less. We give up without much of a fight, figuring that even if God acquits us as Judge, he can never be pleased with us as Father. True, the master in the parable owned his hard reputation, but this was to shame the servant for not investing his money with

the bankers—the least he should have done if his view of the master was accurate. The first two servants didn't encounter a hard and unreasonable master, and there is no indication they expected him to be so. They experienced the master as generous, encouraging, and rewarding. They didn't live in dreaded fear of the master. They were faithful servants who, like us, knew that it was possible for the master to smile down on them and say, "That'll do, friends. That'll do."

### **Guardrails for the Journey**

No one devised a plan to conceive of Christian discipleship in such a way that most disciples would feel like perpetual *D-* followers of Jesus who get most things wrong and never do the right things as well as they should. And yet many Christians have accepted their fate as that's just what Christianity is like. We have commandments to obey, but we will never obey them. We have more spiritual tasks than we have time. We struggle to read our Bible every day, and we are even worse at prayer. We don't evangelize enough, and we don't give enough money away. We carry around the guilt of our fathers, and we can't do anything to get rid of it. God justifies sinners like us—that's good. But all we'll ever do in this life is sin. God may forgive us, but he doesn't like us. Beatific vision later, blessed failurism now.

How did we get here?

One of the reasons we think this way about Christianity is that there are other truths we want to make sure we *don't* think. That is to say, Christianity became impossible, in large part, because of our good intentions to emphasize a host of truths that, taken together, make it *seem* like devout piety requires an impossible Christianity. And it's true: there are wrong ways to make Christianity "possible." If we are not careful, we will end up conceiving of Christian faith and Christian obedience and Christian salvation in ways that are sub-Christian. So before I go any further in arguing against impossible Christianity, I need to put some guardrails in place—not walls that prevent us from seeing the truth, but guardrails that keep us on the narrow path that leads to truth.

With that in mind, here are seven things I am *not* saying in this book.

*Mistake #1: We Can Be Good Enough to Get into Heaven*

The Bible is crystal clear on this point: apart from Christ, there is no one righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23). Consequently, "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (3:28). As George Whitefield put it, we could sooner climb to the moon by a rope of sand as we could be justified

by our works. We are all born into this world with inherited guilt and inherited depravity (Rom. 5:12–21). We must be born again by God’s sovereign and unilateral initiative (John 1:12–13; 3:5; 6:44). In saying Christianity is possible I am not saying—and may I be accursed if I were ever to say—that we can merit eternal life or that we can add anything to the finished work of Christ on our behalf (Gal. 1:8). We are saved by grace through faith. This is not our own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8–9).

*Mistake #2: Christians Can Be Perfect*

When I was in college, my fellow students and I were sometimes accosted on our way to class by a street preacher telling us to repent and believe in Christ. I wanted to appreciate the man. He wasn’t a jerk, and much of what he said was true. He took sin seriously and called students to turn from sin and put their faith in Jesus. But he also preached a message of perfectionism. He was adamant that true Christians could be, and should be, free from conscious sin. This is positively *not* what this book is about. If personal experience weren’t enough to convince of indwelling sin, the Bible tells us that “there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Eccl. 7:20). Quite the contrary. “If

we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). While we can do that which is *truly* good, we will never (on earth) be fully and perfectly good. In fact, the closer we get to Jesus, the more obvious our sins will become.

*Mistake #3: Sin Is Not a Big Deal*

Once the first two mistakes are ruled out, some Christians assume (or implicitly teach) that sin is nothing to worry about. Obviously, God doesn't like sin, and, all else being equal, he'd rather we didn't sin. But when we do sin, he tussles our hair and gives us a wry grin as if to say, “Silly boy, be more careful next time.” This impulse has long been a danger in the church. It's often called “antinomianism,” which means “against law.” Historically, almost no antinomians have actually taught that God's commands can be ignored and that sin is okay. Antinomianism is more of an attitude that minimizes the need for (and possibility of) obedience and the seriousness of sin even for justified believers. But God is not blind to our disobedience. He does not offer us three free sins. The letters of Paul and Peter and John, not to mention Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Revelation, are filled with exhortations—to Christians and to churches—to repent and warnings for those who do not.

*Mistake #4: Being a Christian Is Trouble-Free*

If we think following Jesus involves no fight and no struggle, we haven't read our Bible carefully (or at all!). Being a Christian means entering by the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13); it means striving to enter the narrow door (Luke 13:24); it means putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13); it means wrestling against cosmic powers and demonic principalities (Eph. 6:12); it means fighting the good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12); it means making every effort to supplement our faith with virtue and godliness and all the qualities of holiness (2 Pet. 1:5–7). Possible Christianity is not passive Christianity.

*Mistake #5: We Should Stop So Being Hard on Ourselves*

This can be good advice. Some Christians experience misplaced shame. Some Christians have consciences that are too tender. Some Christians have never given themselves permission to succeed with God-pleasing obedience. But as automatic counsel for everyone in every situation, this advice is unhelpful, if not downright heretical. There are plenty of books and blogs out there basically telling us, "You're awesome. You're beautiful. You may be a screwup, but so what? We all are. And if people don't love you just the way you are, that's their problem. Don't let anyone tell you that your desires are wrong, or your family

is dysfunctional, or your divorce is unbiblical, or your eating habits are unhealthy, or your beliefs are unorthodox, or your behavior is unChristian.” That message sells—big time. But it’s not the message that tells us to put off the old self with its practices (Col. 3:9) or to pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). It’s not the message Jesus preached when he said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

*Mistake #6: There Is No Cost to Following Jesus*

The fact that we serve a crucified Savior should put an end to this misconception straightaway. Since the world hated Jesus, we should expect that it will hate us too (John 15:18–19). We should not be surprised at the fiery trial that comes to test (1 Pet. 4:12). After all, everyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). To say that Christianity is possible is not to suggest that we float to heaven on flowery beds of ease. Like the man who desires to build a tower has to first check his materials, or like a king on his way to battle must first check the readiness of his troops, we must count the cost before signing up as for Team Jesus (Luke 14:25–33). “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus told his disciples, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

*Mistake #7: God Will Never Call You to Take Any Risks*

One hundred percent safety is not a realistic goal in a fallen world. Every day people get into bad accidents (even with seat belts), they get sick (even with masks), they get burned in a job or a relationship (even though they did due diligence ahead of time). We are finite people who lack knowledge in all sorts of areas. Most notably, we do not know the future. As a result, life is full of risks, even for God's people. Maybe *especially* for God's people. Esther did her part "for such a time as this," even though she knew she might perish in the process (Est. 4:14–16). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's idol, not knowing if God would deliver them from the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:17–18). Being a faithful follower of Jesus is possible but rarely predictable.

**The Road That Lies Between**

It may seem, after all that, that we are back at square one, consigned to live a life of sinful failure where we never do enough and we never measure up. But that is not the road these guardrails are meant to protect.

- True, salvation is all of grace. But the grace that saves in justification will also transform us in sanctification (2 Cor. 3:18).



## HOW (NOT) TO MAKE CHRISTIANITY POSSIBLE

- True, we will never be perfect and sinless here on earth. But we can do that which is genuinely good and pleasing to God (Rom. 12:1–2).
- True, sin is always offensive to a holy God. But we can also repent of sin and know the blessing of a clean conscience and the smile of God (Num. 6:24–26).
- True, being a Christian is hard. But that doesn't mean Christ's yoke can't be easy (Matt. 11:30).
- True, we have to deal honestly with our continuing sin and disobedience. But that doesn't mean we can never do anything that is righteous and obedient (Luke 1:6).
- True, following Jesus means carrying a cross. But it also means finding our life by losing it (Matt. 16:25).
- True, God is going to ask us to do some difficult things. But God is also in the business of doing more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

The Christian life is harder and easier than we think—harder because dying to ourselves, wrestling with the devil,

and being hated by the world do not come to us naturally. But it is also easier, because God doesn't insist that we need multiple degrees, thirty hours a day, and superhuman organizational skills to be Jesus's disciples. In the simplest terms, all Jesus asks is that we trust him enough to walk with him, listen to him, and depend on him for everything. No doubt, that is a narrow path and hard way, which is why few are on it. But true disciples *do* walk that road because they know that it is good, and they know that it leads to life.