

A Wise and Winning Loss

I was once asked if it was the Christian thing to do for a team to deliberately lose a game for the sake of the other team. I answered, "If the goal is to have fun and enjoy the challenge of the sport, winning or losing is irrelevant. Our team, by playing our very best, forces the other team to have to play their best too. So both teams come out ahead." Lawyers know only winning. Politicians know only winning. Professional athletes know only winning. But in life, whenever there's a conflict between what we desire and what God desires, we always – *always* – are to lose. We should . . . no, we *must* always want God to win. That's because God is wise, good, and just, and we are not. Unfortunately, this conflict occurs almost daily in the lives of every one of us.

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it'" (Matthew 16:24-25). These are two of the most ignored verses in the Bible. We've all heard them or read them many times, but we don't know what they mean so we ignore them. Preachers call these two of the "hard sayings of Christ," so they ignore them too. Actually, these aren't so much "hard" sayings as absolutely essential ones. They're central to our salvation, at the very core of God's will for us. The verses appear also in Mark's (8:34-35) and Luke's Gospel (9:23-24), except in Luke the word "daily" appears ("take up his cross daily") and instead of "find it" Mark and Luke record Jesus as saying "save it." Matthew's verse 25 appears also in John's Gospel (12:25), but worded slightly differently. We need to understand what Jesus here is requiring of us, *and then do it*. Why? Because Jesus went further and said, **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate . . . even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,"** and **"Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple"** (Luke 14:26-27, 33). *"Cannot be my disciple"*? What does it mean to deny oneself, take up a cross, and follow Jesus?

We need first to grasp what the Son of God did. We may be so sated with evangelical Bible preaching that we aren't moved by what Jesus did for us. The Son came to earth deliberately to die. More precisely: He purposely left the glory, peace and joy of heaven, taking on humanity with a physical body, in order to be mocked and scorned, rejected by His own people, humiliated, flogged until His skin was in bloody shreds, and then hung on a cross to die a shameful and agonizing death. This was the will of His Father in heaven, and the Son humbly, obediently and lovingly carried it out – suffering and pain notwithstanding. Doing this, He willingly took on Himself the wrath of God for sin, *all* sin, making atonement possible for everyone. Of even greater significance, Jesus' self-sacrifice was the act that was needed to defeat Satan. Except for the atoning work, which only He could do (and it's already done), Jesus tells us here that we're to offer God the same kind of self-sacrifice.

The Incarnation was to fully reveal the Father and His transcending love for us. The Son had to take upon himself humanity, he had to have a physical body in order to bear human sin and to take upon Himself the punishment that sin deserves. He had to have a physical body that He could offer sacrificially to God (Hebrews 10:5-10). Sin, after all, doesn't exist in the abstract; sin is what we embodied creatures actually do in this life. We have in our bodies a sin nature, and only by dying do we cease to sin. Although He didn't have a sin nature, Christ had to have a body that could die in order to put an end to sin. In His resurrection, Christ has a new, unique and glorious body, one that's eternally alive and that (somehow) also can be imparted to us in our resurrection.

When spoken, these words are essentially a reformulation of Deuteronomy Chapter 6 for Israelites confused as to who Jesus was. He was their Lord God, but His identity was veiled having taken on human nature with a physical body. For centuries, the rabbis had interpreted (probably correctly) the command to love God "with all one's soul" as meaning with one's very life, and to love God "with all one's might" as meaning with all one's possessions and assets. These "hard sayings" therefore are really an *interpreted* restatement of the first and greatest commandment (e.g., Mttw 22:36-38). In other words, by these verses in the 4 Gospels, Jesus was demanding the very same personal commitment that the ancient Nation owed to their God who delivered them from Egypt. Matthew recorded these verses for the Church, which owes vastly more to Jesus than Israel ever did.

We are expected to deny the pleasures, peace and comforts of life and be willing instead to go to our death – even a shameful and agonizing death. We're to follow Him (that's what "come after Me" means). That means do what He did, be like Him. The attitude we're continually to have is, we must go to our death. We are to be so intent on faithfully doing God's will that it may require that, in weakness and humility, we must give up our life. It may mean suffering, it may mean losing our property or prestige or family and friends, but that's what "denying oneself" means. Our commitment to Jesus is to be so deep and so tight that we are willing to sacrifice everything to be like Him and do what He wills.

Let's think. Who are the "overcomers" in the Book of Revelation? **"They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death"** (Rev 12:11). God does not demand everyone of His children to die a martyr's death. Even in the early church, not everyone was martyred. But He does expect us to have the very same mindset as the three friends of Daniel (Dan 3:16-18) that we're so fiercely faithful to God and to His will that death can have us. And if we're willing to die for Christ, the most extreme sacrifice we could make, surely we should be more than willing to sacrifice whatever is less, such as our time, our money, our energy, our reputation, etc. **"I count all things as loss for the excellency [or, the surpassing greatness] of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ . . ."** (Phil 3:7-8). Paul willfully gave up his (actually quite realistic) ambition of being one of the great rabbis of the time after he experienced the living Christ. We can't have Paul's experience, but we have Paul's repeated testimony and so can know that what was true for Paul is just as true for us. Christ is the greatest reality there is. May we also live as Paul did.

Denying oneself may include what's called in theology, mortification. We need to put to death our sin nature. If we understand what sin is and how odious it is to a holy God, then to the extent we're able to exert self-control, we refuse to practice it. If we understand our sin nature and how easily and often we can yield to it, we will hate ourselves and realize how tightly we must cling to Jesus and what He obtained for us at the cross. We know experientially that in our flesh dwelleth no good thing. If we're in Christ, we live our lives before God's face. He's watching us, looking to see if we're revealing the beauty and the perfections of the Son. The Son, and only the Son, is the beloved of God. Only Jesus' indwelling Spirit pleases God. So we must deny ourselves and be as Jesus is. And do as Jesus did, viz., bring people into the Kingdom.

Let's think further about these verses. A person carrying a cross is going to be dead in just a matter of hours. He's not thinking about sports or his work. Nor is he thinking about his hobbies or politics or his vacation or what's going on in the world. He's thinking about exactly one thing: Standing before God and having to give an account of his life. He's possibly remembering with deep sorrow the sins he's committed. Or maybe he's thinking about the glory that's awaiting him. In other words, his thoughts are transcendent, not earthly; they are spiritual thoughts. That's the kind of thinking we're to harbor *all the time!* Paul picked up on this: **"Offer your bodies as living sacrifices to God . . . be transformed by the renewing of your mind"** (Romans 12:1-2).

We're not here to enjoy life. Nor are we here to pursue what interests us. We're here to enjoy God, to serve God, and to please Him. In other words, all our life is to be lived out as an expression of the deep, loving, intimate relationship that should exist between us and the living Creator God. Since Christ has come, He is to be our life. The living, risen Christ is the greatest reality there is. **"For to me, to live is Christ"** (Phil 1:21). That's to be our testimony, our mindset, our purpose and goal in life too. But as I and many others have observed, it isn't.

The American obsession with self-esteem of 20 years ago has turned into today's narcissism. It's really self-idolatry. The purposelessness, the indifference to accountability, the unconcern about fruit-bearing, the absence of any sense of intimate relationship with Christ – all these flow from our shameless self-absorption. I suspect that our rejection of Jesus' "deny yourself" demands in the Gospels goes to the very heart of what's missing in today's American Christianity. Years ago, people would put phony bananas and apples out on a table for show. The fruit really looked like the real thing, but it wasn't. They were just hollow pieces of plastic, painted to look real. The Church in America is just like that. Smugness regarding sin, indifference to God's Word and to theology, and near universal lack of concern for the lost are but a few indicators that we Americans hold to an empty, syncretistic religion we rather loosely call Christianity.

Some commentaries tendentiously assert that one's eternal salvation isn't the issue in these verses, only "discipleship," and that not all believers necessarily are disciples. Not so! "To come to Jesus" means to enter into a relationship with Him. That's salvation! Faith does not stop with a decision; the decision is merely the entry point into an on-going relationship that we express by a life of repentance, sanctification, fruit-bearing, etc. (See Colossians 2:6-8.) The essence of faith (or believing), after all, is trusting God, not self. Salvation is always on God's terms, not ours. We depend on God for justification and forgiveness, for life and for blessing. So Jesus is referring these verses to *believers*. A believer is a follower is a disciple is a Christian.

I once heard someone say, "My troublesome arthritis is my cross that I have to bear." No. Cross-bearing describes the process of discipleship, of following Jesus. It is willingness to suffer loss, be humiliated and rejected, and die. We're in the Church Age, which is the age of the rejected Messiah of Israel. So if we're in Christ, we also must live what He

experienced. That's what Jesus meant by "follow me." The essence of Jesus' ministry at His 1st Advent was death, so we too ought to expect, and should be prepared for and willingly embrace, a similar violent death. We distance ourselves from, or repudiate our attachment to things, and from the world and worldly people, and instead attach ourselves tightly to Jesus. We repudiate the goals, values, interests, priorities and loves that we had before we came to Christ, and we learn what His are and adopt them as our own, regardless what the cost may be for doing that. Humiliation, rejection, suffering – these may result, but He is worth it. Love and loyalty to Christ is not only the most important thing in life, it's why we're here!

We're used to hearing these things from Paul, but Jesus is here saying the same things that Paul did, but in a different way. Jesus is not inviting a believer to be some kind of super-believer. There's no distinction between being a disciple and being a believer. A disciple is a learner: he or she is learning how to be and to live from Jesus the Teacher. We imitate Him, and we do as He did. That's what being a Christian means. We in American churches want to do the minimum necessary to get by. Except that Jesus also said, "he *cannot* be my disciple." There's no such thing in Jesus' mind as a casual Christian. Either we're fully in, or we're not at all. Yes, the choice is stark. But we're fools to ignore these demands. Ignoring them means forfeiting . . . everything.

We likely are smugly accepting of a shallow spiritual state because of the noetic effect of sin. Sin clouds our mind, and our heart too. So our thinking is not only distorted but corrupted, and who (or what) we love is misplaced. Because of our sin nature we don't and can't think clearly about spiritual matters. Sin even deceives us into thinking we're not so sinful! So we suppose: "I'm not so odious to God; I certainly am not in rebellion against Him, and He's pleased with my attending church on Sundays and keeping my lawn mowed and not murdering or stealing from people. Sanctification is for real losers, not me! God loves me." That's why we must – MUST – know the Word of God and allow it to totally transform us. Yet even *that* will fail because of sin. Our innate antagonism to God means we don't want to know His revelation, we don't want to know truth. I contend here that only a deliberate or willful commitment to Jesus can change that. The "hard sayings" of Jesus are really the necessary key to biblical salvation.

The issue comes down to this: Who has authority over my life? It will be either me, or it's Christ. The Serpent in the Garden tried to usurp authority from God. In effect though, what happened is we made ourselves our own authorities. We decide for ourselves how to live, what to do, and what kind of person to be. We're our own little gods. In these "hard sayings," Jesus is essentially saying, "I will be your authority." So following Jesus means that we've made Him our authority. And He, and He alone, is worthy to be our authority. He's demanding, yes. But He is good and wise, and He loves us. Before we became a believer, we were in rebellion against God and His Christ. We were obsessed with "saving our life." We conformed to the world, we sought acceptance by the world. But now, if we're believing in the Lord Jesus for salvation, we're in submission to Him. Discipleship describes this submission. We learn what His teachings and His commands are and then obey them. We shift our allegiance from self (and Satan) to Christ. Hey, if our confession in order to be saved is, "Jesus is Lord" (and it is, Romans 10:9; Acts 16:31), what does that *mean*? "Lord" doesn't simply mean "mister," it means "ruler." If we don't submit to His rule over us, then how or in what way is He Lord? Or put it this way: If our life isn't being transformed by obedient submission to Christ, how can we say we've been "born again"?

Or we can put the issue this way: Who will we worship? We all must worship someone! We either worship ourself (or Satan), or we worship God. Only God is worthy of worship. And let's be careful about this: We worship Him by exalting Him with our lives, by being like Christ.

It's easy to waste one's life. Billions of people are doing it. It's especially easy in America, where we have prosperity and comforts and political rights no one in human history even dreamed of. And we have a culture that's saturated with all kinds of distractions for us to pursue. "I'm an American, and I'm free to say what I please and to live as I please. Nobody has the right to tell me how to think, what to say – or not say, or how to live." Yet we harbor religious impulses, or the sense that God exists. So we attend church on Sundays. And maybe even adopt the notion that we're Christians. And maybe even believe that we're saved and on the way to heaven. The spiritual state of Christianity in America is tragic beyond belief. May these "hard sayings" of Jesus jolt us out of what for many of us is pure fantasy. We need to wake up to the reality that God has revealed to us in His Word how things really are. And how we're living our lives, how the values and priorities we hold, how we think, and how we are so thoroughly self-absorbed, don't even come close to conforming to it.