

So You Want to Be Christlike?

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We who try to follow Jesus Christ, often say that we want to be like him. Well, the Holy Spirit will help you do that . . . by binding you to the cross of Christ.

*** The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard used to pray for the ability to will one thing. It was for him the mark of spiritual maturity. People who will one thing know who they are, they are no longer distracted, but are focused and clear about their mission.

Wouldn't it be good to have a ready answer if someone asked you what is the one thing you want in life? How would you respond to that? Would you say you want to be healthy, or to have happy children, or to be no longer afraid, or to succeed in your work? What is the one thing that you are after? The problem most of us have with that question is that we want many things. Thus, when one of our goals comes in conflict with another, like having good relationships and succeeding at work, we feel conflicted and are frustrated that we are not doing a very good job in any of the competing areas of life.

The one thing that the Apostle Paul wanted was to know Christ Jesus his Lord. "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Philippians 3:8). Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul traveled from one city to the next, proclaiming the power of Christ to forgive our sins and restore our lives to us. This is life as we were created to live it, filled with passion, joy, and hope. Only when our lives are centered in Christ, he claimed, can all the other things hold together. That is why Paul wants this, above all else, and why he wants you to will it above all else. So that from your head to your toes, you are filled with the sacred gift of life. All your relationships, work, dreams, and all your days are then filled with the glorious doxological praise of being fully alive in Christ.

But today, when we have come to the end of Paul's missionary journeys, we discover that the purpose of being made fully alive in Christ is not because it feels so good, and not because it is so wonderful to receive the many gifts from him. No, the purpose of being made fully alive is to return to God a life that is now valued.

Most of us did not come to God because we were intellectually convinced of his existence. Most of us came to God in need. Our lives were not working out so well. Some of us were addicted to drugs, alcohol, and sex. Many of us were addicted to hurt, and all of us were addicted to sin. We had broken relationships, broken bodies, and broken hearts. We were at the bottom of our yearnings, and finally realized that the yearning was for God.

Just as Jesus healed the many he encountered on the roads of life, so has he healed us and restored the gift of life of us. But now, if we stay with Jesus, as Paul did, we realize that a time has come when Jesus asks for us to give this new life back to him. That was Paul's discovery when he finally arrived in Jerusalem.

Upon Paul's arrival, James, the bishop of the church, warned him that there were many, even in the church, who thought he was defying the Jewish traditions. So Paul submitted to the Nazarite rite of purification. He shaved his head and spent seven days completing the rituals for purifying himself before entering the temple. Now, Paul did not think he had done anything wrong before God. Nor did he think these rites of purification were necessary. In Christ, he was freed from this. But as F.F. Bruce has written, "A truly emancipated spirit, such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own emancipation." Nothing is more enslaving than those who pursue their freedoms just because they are free. The purpose of freedom is not to be "free from," but to be free for serving Christ - - the one thing. Sometimes, the most free act we do is to give our lives to the rituals of serving others.

But when some of the Jews who had seen Paul during his missionary journeys spotted him in the great temple in Jerusalem, they became enraged. They told the congregation that Paul had been teaching against their people, the law, and the temple. They also claimed that he had even brought a Gentile into the temple. None of this was true. But it doesn't take much to turn a congregation into a mob, so the people seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple.

Paul knew that this was going to happen. For the last two weeks we have been watching as the elders in Ephesus, Tyre, and Caesarea futilely tried to talk Paul out of this trip to Jerusalem. But he had to go. Because the Holy Spirit had called him to this moment where he would face the cross of Jesus.

As the mob dragged Paul out of the temple, we are told that, "immediately the doors to the temple were shut." With that, the break with the temple was now complete because they had shut their doors to the gospel Paul was proclaiming. I am struck by this image of a temple with shut doors, and a veil inside that had been sewn back together trying to contain the holiness that rushed out of the Holy of Holies when Jesus was crucified. Now, the place of righteousness is no longer in the temple. Now it is out in the ordinary places where we live and work, and out in the streets where a man is about to lose his life trying to proclaim good news.

When a Roman tribune heard the riot that was starting, he gathered some soldiers and came to break up the mob. The only way to save Paul's life was to arrest him. But we are told that the violence of the mob was so great the soldiers had to literally carry Paul back to their barracks. Still, the crowd kept following, shouting, "Away with him!" That's a familiar scene, isn't it?

Luke could not have made the parallels more clear. Both Jesus and Paul were rejected by their own people, arrested and imprisoned on false accusations in Jerusalem, faced a series of trials, and were pronounced innocent by the Romans who ended up executing them. The point, according to Luke, was that as Paul had lived in Christ, so was he about to die in Christ. Their physical deaths provide a metaphor for our need to die to the life we thought we were going to get to keep. The cross is not just something that Jesus

died on two thousand years ago. It is also the place where we continue to meet him in our own lives.

When we in the church talk about cross bearing, we are not telling you that just as Jesus died on a cross, so must you go out and find a cross to die on. Jesus has already atoned for your sins, and you can't pay for them yourself. What we are saying when we call you to the cross is that the Holy Spirit will invite you back to Jesus' own cross. And we are saying the time will come when you find yourself giving up the life you have received.

Maybe it will happen at work. You are thankful you have this job, and you have enjoyed it a great deal, but one day you face a great crisis of conscience. You are asked to do something that is wrong. If you refuse, it will be vocational suicide. If you don't refuse, it will be spiritual suicide. Or you are called away from a job that you love, to go to a place you would rather not go. Or you are called to stay in a job you hate, and it feels like you are losing your life in this job.

Maybe the cross will come in a relationship that has hit the rocks. You had such high hopes for this relationship when it began, but the romance dried up long ago, and now you don't even know if you can survive beside this person. Maybe the cross will appear in a lab report that announces the cancer is growing, or in a lawsuit that threatens to take everything away, or in a divorce that leaves you shamed, broken, hurt to the bone.

On your way to the cross, you remember what Paul said, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things," and you tell yourself, "I didn't think he meant that literally." He does. As Paul's own life makes clear, the point of being fully alive in Christ, is to fully give ourselves back to Christ. The cost eventually is everything. Even the wonderful joys you have discovered along the way as gifts from Christ have to be given back eventually.

This is the hardest part of following Christ. We didn't mind giving him our lives when they were needy, broken, and addicted. But now that we have something going, and are valuing our lives, we want to keep them. That is the precise moment that the Holy Spirit leads us to the cross.

Why would we go there? Why doesn't Paul run from Jerusalem? Why did he willingly accept the cross of Christ? As he explained in his great testimony to the Philippians, a letter written during his imprisonment, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may obtain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10). The resurrection doesn't take care of any of your felt needs. It doesn't give you better lovers, better jobs, or better health. What it gives you is a new life.

So the journey with Christ is always the journey from a needy life to a valued life, and from a valued life to a sacrificed life, and from sacrifice to a resurrected life. You are ready for that resurrected life at the point when you most value the life you are sacrificing. But at that point on your journey with Christ you have discovered that you love him more than the gifts he has given you. Now what you want is to be with him, even on his cross, in order to be risen out of this fearful world to a new life that simply belongs to God.

It is by living in Christ that you become yourself. It is by dying with Christ that you become God's. Then the one thing that you want is just him.

O God of risen hope, give us the vision of your Spirit to take up our crosses as the cross of Jesus Christ, a cross that invites us to abundant new life with you. Amen.