

8. THE WAY OF THE CROSS = THE WAY OF JOY

I'd been brooding all morning. I'd rehearsed what I would say over and over again. And each time, the justice of my position seemed more and more evident! It was a small thing, I knew, but it was really bugging me, wrecking any sense of inner peace. Why was that? I tried to analyse what was going on in my heart. Was I in the wrong? Right was on my side, I concluded. So why couldn't I let it go? And then it hit me. I was acting as if *I* was what mattered in the world. So what if I'd been mistreated? It wasn't about me. It was about God and his glory. Suddenly any slight done to me seemed small and insignificant. My knotted, brooding heart was set free. I could laugh it off and rejoice in my beautiful God.

The way of the cross is the way of joy

The way of the cross is a tough ask. It's the way of self-denial. It is, says Jesus, like losing yourself. Yet Christians can accept the way of the cross with great joy. We should embrace it,

welcome it, delight in it. Is that because we're masochists? Because we feel the need to suffer for our guilt? Are we trying to self-atone? By no means.

We gladly accept the way of the cross because it's the way of joy. After washing the feet of his disciples and commending his humble service as a model for all believers, Jesus says: 'Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them' (John 13:17). This is the way of blessing. And when he first called his disciples to the way of the cross he said:

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 and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

(Mark 8:34–38)

In losing ourselves, we gain ourselves. In losing life, we gain life. If we share in Christ's suffering, we will also share in his eternal glory. But even in this life, we find ourselves as we deny ourselves.

I was watching football one night on television when I got a phone call. It was Aram, an asylum seeker who for a couple of years had become very much part of our lives. Then he moved to Holland in search of refugee status. From time to time he would phone, usually when he was bored and wanted to kill time. I was annoyed to hear his voice. It meant interrupting my football.

But Aram cut straight to the chase. He'd been reading, in his native language, a Christian book that someone had sent



him (my friend Samuel as it turned out) and he couldn't put it down. He was even reluctant to stop in order to eat. He wasn't sure what the book was, but after reading and translating some of the opening lines to me, it became clear it was the New Testament.

Then he asked me if I could interpret dreams. So, with a quick prayer to God, I invited him to tell me his dream. It involved his (deceased) father trying to kill him. It was a recurrent dream that was clearly disturbing him. 'Your dream', I suggested to him, 'represents the opposition you will receive from your family if you become a Christian.' So we read from Matthew 10:26–39 together. I read a verse in English, he read it in his native language, and then he translated it into English. In this passage Jesus says:

But don't be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear!

Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell. What is the price of two sparrows – one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.

Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven.

Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword.



I have come to set a man against his father,
 a daughter against her mother,
 and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

Your enemies will be right in your own household!’

If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.

(Matthew 10:26–39 NLT)

Despite its challenging message, Aram found it ‘beautiful’. He began translating the final verse and then asked, ‘So even if I’m a loser, I’m really a winner?’ I was about to say, that’s not quite the right translation, when I thought, ‘No, that’s a pretty good paraphrase.’

Self-fulfilment versus self-denial

The way of the cross is the way of blessing because human beings were made to love God and love others. It’s our self-centredness that leads to so many of our emotional problems. We find wholeness in being God-centred rather than self-centred. When I’m grumpy it’s because I want this world to be my world. I want events to go my way. Of course things don’t go my way and so I feel despondent or bitter. But when I take up my cross, I deny myself, I crucify myself. I say, ‘This is God’s world, not mine. Things are not under my control, they’re under God’s control. And he has loved me and died for me.’ I say with Jesus: ‘Not my will, but yours be done.’

David Wells argues that, by removing God from public life, we’ve also removed what it means to be truly human.²³ The ‘death’ of God in our culture has led to the death of the



human being. That's because, without God, we're left with no basis for moral judgments. Judgments can only be reflections of our own feelings. This in turn has shifted us from talking about 'character' to talking about 'personality'. The old moral concern with personal restraint and sacrifice has given way to a new concern for self-realization and self-expression. Everyone 'must' be themselves, express themselves, realize themselves. We must be self-made people, buying whatever we need to this end. Self-denial is no longer a virtue, but a sin against the self. It's seen as dangerously repressive, threatening a person's self-realization. What should the man who's tempted to have an affair do? We used to say he should deny himself for the sake of his marriage and family. Now our culture says his first duty is to find himself by expressing his desires. What should the woman who feels worthless do? We used to say she would find her worth in serving others. Now our culture encourages her to buy new clothes to make her feel good about herself – even if that means racking up credit card debt. What should someone do when looking for employment? We used to value serving the community, but now our culture encourages us to find self-fulfilment through our work. And so it goes on.

We can easily do a 'Christian' version of this in which Christianity becomes a means of self-realization. My personal growth or experience is what counts. My first responsibility is to myself – to develop my spiritual side – not to serve others in humility. People are encouraged to identify their spiritual gifts and serve through activities they find fulfilling. In fact, in the New Testament, Christians are never encouraged to identify their gifts. The teaching on gifts is always addressed to the community as a whole, to encourage us to celebrate the differences among us. Christians are instead encouraged to deny themselves and serve others. David Henderson comments:



Because God no longer occupies centre stage, terms like self-love, self-expression, self-confidence, and self-fulfilment, none of which graces the pages of the Scriptures, begin to dominate the church's conversation. Meanwhile other 'self' words straight from the Bible like self-surrender, self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-control slip into disuse . . . When this happens, we may be preaching, we may be sharing faith, but what we are communicating is not genuine Christianity. In Christianity, the one place the self cannot be is at the centre. That is the rightful place of God alone.²⁴

Has our culture's obsession with self made us any happier? Of course not. We're wired by God to love him and love others: to find ourselves in losing ourselves. Meic Pearse, Professor of History at Houghton College, New York, writes:

The possession of things is what gives us a self-made identity ('I'm a Goth'; 'I'm a bookish person'; 'I'm a sophisticate – just look at my clothes!') . . . But, since such identities are so clearly malleable and vulnerable to the ravages of age, the vagaries of relative economic status, and the whims of fashion, we are left vulnerable . . . We want a stable family, of course . . . but not if it stands in the way of my right to do what I want . . . We value community, we say .. but the last thing we want is to be required to live in one place, alongside the same people, for the course of our entire lives. In other words, we really and truly want none of these things . . . But if there's one thing all that psychology could have taught us, it's that the self-directed person remains, in most respects, an infant. Growing up consists in becoming other-centred. That is why Jesus was the most grown-up person who ever lived.²⁵

Our self-love makes our relationships brittle. Cross-centred love, in contrast, is 'in it for the long haul'. Such love 'is not

surprised by difficulty or even rejection but finds joy in the challenge of lasting through difficult circumstances'.²⁶

In the face of these deep cultural shifts, we need to say: A life of self-denial really is the good life. You really will experience more of God washing dishes than meditating on retreat. The thought-provoking film, *Bruce Almighty*, gets a lot wrong about God, but this it gets right: if you want to draw near to God, then clean floors with him.

Living in a small, lonely kingdom

If our lives are focused on ourselves rather than God, if we're not denying ourselves, then our lives will shrink to the size of our petty concerns. We will become self-obsessed, living with small horizons.

If you're anxious about how others perceive you, if you're angry when others slight you, if you're focused on a pay rise or a new gadget, then you live in a very small world – a world that can never satisfy. You were made for something much bigger. 'When God enters our lives by his grace, he isn't working to make our kingdom work so much as he is calling us to an excitement with, and dedication to, a much greater kingdom.'²⁷ When we choose to be god of our own lives, we choose a small kingdom of one, lonely person. The person who gets angry in the supermarket queue is a small person living in a small world.

I've made getting off a train an art form. I leave my seat shortly before the train arrives in the station, then stand in the centre of the aisle until I know on which side of the train the platform will be. I don't want to stand by one door and have the person behind me exit first when the platform appears on the other side. As the train slows down, I need to work out where the exit is, so I can be marching up the platform before other people get into their stride. What's the point?

The point, of course, is to get out of the station ten seconds before anyone else. To be ahead. To be first.

We go through life wanting to be first. To be one step ahead. As children, we fight over toys and argue about the last sweet. As we grow up, we learn to be polite, which just means that our jockeying for position becomes more sophisticated. But still we strive to be the first, the centre, the most, the best. It's hard work. It wears us down. But our very self is at stake. And so we grind on, even as we are ground down. We're all 'glory junkies', explains Paul Tripp. That's why we relish a great goal, a beautiful dress, a dramatic sunset, a delicious cake. We work hard for these moments. But these are 'just the shadow glories of the created world. We were made for the one glory that is transcendent – the glory of God. When you grasp this, your life begins to make a difference'.²⁸

Dave's parents were disappointed in their son. He'd turned his back on a career in order to work with refugees. It seemed such a waste. He was approaching thirty with no discernable prospects, no place on the property ladder, no standing in society. As his pastor, I was under suspicion, partly to blame for his reckless choices. That was a few years ago. Today the attitude of Dave's father is totally different. He sees the impact Dave is having, the eternal fruit from his life. He realizes that, were Dave to die, he would leave a big hole in many people's lives. Dave's father has started asking himself what he's done with his own life. He's built up a successful business and made money, but realizes he's leaving no lasting legacy.

The thing is this. The way of the cross is a life of sacrifice. But sometimes, after a while, the sacrifices don't feel like sacrifices. They feel like better options. Consider the couple who move from the leafy suburbs to the inner city. Sacrifice?



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Maybe not. Maybe they've realized that the excitement and joy of serving God, of seeing him glorified in the lives of people, of working to plant a church in a difficult area, the eternal 'well done, good and faithful servant' – that these things offer more

than the en-suite bathroom and the second car. Sacrifice? I don't think so.

The way of the cross is the way of my Saviour

John Chapman says: 'We often speak about the cross as if there were no-one on it.' The way of the cross is not an abstract standard or code. It's not like tithing where you can give the standard a numerical value.

Our standard is a person. And our standard is not just a good person; not even *the* good person. Our standard is our Saviour. My Saviour. Your Saviour.

The way of the cross is the way of Jesus. All the love I feel for Jesus attaches itself to the way of the cross. All the beauty I see in Jesus attaches itself to the way of the cross. Why do I want to follow this hard road? Because it represents all that makes my Saviour attractive. I want to be like him. Of course I do. He's so wonderful, so beautiful, so lovely. And to be like him means above all else to walk the way of the cross. 'To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us.'²⁹

Our standard isn't just love. It's not just some great story of love that we can read about. My standard is the love Jesus showed *to me*. It's the cross on which he died *my* death, bore *my* sin, took *my* punishment. It's *my* cross.



The way of the cross is love responding to love. The love of the cross wins the love of our cold hearts.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

(Isaac Watts, 1674–1748)

Back to the pardon of the cross

The way of the cross will crush you if you don't embrace the pardon of the cross. And that's not just valid for back then, when you first went to God for forgiveness. But day by day



by day. Every morning we need to wake up and say, 'There is now no condemnation.' Actually it's easy to do this in the morning. You need to do it in the evening. You need to do it when you sin. When you look with lust. When you lose your temper. When you don't show sacrificial love. You need to say, 'There is now no condemnation.'

Because otherwise the way of the cross will crush you. After all, what a standard it is! The love of Jesus for his enemies!

At one point Jesus sent his disciples out on what proved to be a successful mission. When they returned, they excitedly reported all that had happened. Jesus responded: 'Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20).

Luke then recounts the famous parable of the good Samaritan (25–37). Jesus is telling the story in response to a question from a teacher of the law. The teacher asks, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' He wants to know what he must do to be right with God. Jesus says, in effect, 'It's very simple. Love God. Love your neighbour.' It's not complicated. Now, a moment's thought and I know I'm stuffed, because I haven't loved God and I haven't loved by neighbour. But the lawyer keeps going. He wants to pin it down. Luke says: 'He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"' (29).

He wants to be able to tick off 'Love for neighbour'. Done. Justified. So he needs to know who his neighbour is. Is it my family or my village? Jesus, of course, tells the story of the good Samaritan. His neighbour is anyone in need – even if that person is an enemy.

If you're trying to justify yourself, to prove yourself, to establish your identity, then this blows your plans apart. You can't do it. If your joy and identity are found in ministry, then ministry will crush you.



But if you live within the grace of God, with confidence that there is now no condemnation, then you can embrace this as the good life. This is the way of your Saviour.

Don't think of this lawyer as some legalistic nutcase. The lawyer is you and I. Deep down we want to make it on our own, or at least contribute to the process. We want to prove ourselves. We want to impress. We want to establish our identity. We want to feel good about what we've done. We want others to like or respect us. So we ask, 'What do I need to do? What are my responsibilities? What are your expectations? What do I need to do in this church to be accepted? What do I need to do in mission to be approved? Do I need to come to this meeting? If I do these activities, will that mean I'm okay?'

But I don't want you ticking off some list. I want your love. I'm jealous for God and I want you to love God and love your neighbour.

And you will not love God if you're trying to prove or justify yourself. You'll think of God as a judge or a boss or a superintendent: scoring you, marking you, checking the tick boxes. And all the time, God is saying, 'You can't justify yourself. You don't need to justify yourself. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Jesus has done it all. All I want is your love.' So start each day with a prayer along the following lines: 'Loving Father, I thank you that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Please show me how I can love you today and how I can love my neighbour.'

Don't move on to the next chapter just yet. Put the book down and find someone to serve. Step out on the path of blessing (John 13:17 NLT).