



WHAT IT MEANS TO CARRY OUR CROSS

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Besides the Constitution of a republic, it's difficult to imagine a more complex and compressed piece of communication than a President's inaugural address. I can still picture Bill Clinton, suppressed thumb and pointed knuckle, directing the nation and controlling perception like he was holding a Nintendo joystick (whatever opinion one may have of him, he was a master of communication).

On the surface, these speeches are visionary and inspirational, never flying below 40,000 feet as to evade obstacles on the political landscape. But put on paper the speech would resemble a Wikipedia page with nearly the entire document dashed with links of web-browser blue: a double click on any word opening up windows of meaning and scroll down bars of implications and entailments. Something to the effect of:

Our country needs to stay strong (I'll be writing a blank check to the Pentagon), boldly looking to the future (NASA gets to do more rock collecting on Mars), while growing the economy (we have no plan for the national debt). We must also stop the flow of drugs into this country (Black Ops are underway in Columbia—consider yourself informed!) and work together (You by paying taxes,

us by spending it] continuing to stay the course (please keep us in office for the next four years). And may God bless America (I'm desperate for the evangelical vote).

This, of course, is grossly exaggerated which I do have a penchant for. By-and-large inaugural speeches are exceedingly forthright as well as exceedingly condensed. They provide a vision for the future; lay out the way forward; declare the administration's values, priorities and objectives; and for those familiar with the issues and terminology, they clearly define the path that will be taken to get there. But for those without "ears to hear" the subtext, the speech is nothing more than flowery prose.

And it is in this sense that Jesus' "carry the cross" discourse is rather similar and could be viewed as Jesus' inaugural address to disciples. It is visionary, metaphoric and abstract, and if you don't listen for the implications and entailments of "bearing the cross" it remains ethereal, meaning anything and therefore nothing, an adage with the practical import of "every cloud has a silver lining."

But densely packed within this address, in seed form, are all of the crucial articles of what it means to be Christ-follower. Crucial being the operative word as it derives from the Latin word for "cross," *crux* or *crucis*, and the cross is the *crux* of discipleship.

The literal meaning of the discipleship address (what the text is saying) functions as the preamble, with at least five articles or entailments jammed into the crevices between words. We'll look first at the text, then at the preamble (what the passage is saying), and then we'll identify the deathly implications of discipleship.



The Discipleship Discourse: Mark 8:27-38

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and 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?”

PREAMBLE TO THE DISCIPLESHIP DISCOURSE

The Realization

In the first four verses we have Peter’s recognition and confession that Jesus is the Christ. This epiphany of insight is foreshadowed by Jesus’ healing of a blind man on the way to Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-25). Upon first touch, the man can see but only with the clarity of someone who forgot to put in their contacts: people appear to him like “trees walking around.”

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the renowned neuroscientist, Oliver Sacks, recounts some of his more memorable patients—those experiencing rather unique symptoms of neurological disorder. The title of the book comes from one of Sack’s patients, whom he identifies by the alias of Doctor P.. Sacks describes him as follows:

“Dr. P. was a musician of distinction, well-known. . . as a teacher. Sometimes a student would present himself, and Dr. P. would not recognize him; or,

specifically, would not recognize his face. The moment the student spoke, he would be recognized by his voice. Such incidents multiplied, causing embarrassment, perplexity, fear—and, sometimes, comedy. For not only did Dr. P. increasingly fail to see faces, but he saw faces where there were no faces to see: genially, Magoo-like, when in the street, he might pat the heads of water-hydrants and parking-meters, taking them to be the heads of children; he would amiably address carved knobs on the furniture, and be astounded when they did not reply . . .”

At one point, Sacks hands Doctor P. a red rose and asks him to describe what he sees. What Doctor P. sees is something “six inches in length; a convoluted red form with a linear green attachment.”

Dr. P. had a condition known as visual agnosia, and as it’s amazingly similar to the blind man in Mark’s gospel, let me describe it to you.

When you look at an object, the visual input provided by your eye enters the brain and the information is instantly parceled out for processing along two separate pathways. One of those pathways is a shortcut directly to the prefrontal cortex and what arrives is an undeveloped image. What it looks like to your brain is a movie streaming over dial-up: a lot of unintelligible, blobs of color—raw, unprocessed, visual data. If you were looking at a group of people it would appear—hmm how would I describe it? — well, like a lot of trees walking around (Mark 8:24).

The visual information traveling along the second, slower pathway arrives about fifty milliseconds later—an eternity in mental processing. But there’s a reason it’s late. The information detoured through the visual cortex where it was analyzed the way airport security scans a suitcase. It then joins up with the other parcel of information in the prefrontal cortex. What’s happening is we’re actually seeing the object twice. The first look provides crude, macro data (through the information of the first pathway) while the second look (information from the second pathway) provides the evaluation and interpretation. First we see, and then our brain tells us what we saw. Perception is always a double take. Seeing an object twice.

A person with visual agnosia doesn’t receive that second parcel of information; they don’t get the interpretation of what they are seeing. In fact if you want to know what it looks like to see the world in this



condition look at a painting by Cezanne. In *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, author Jonah Lehrer suggests that Cezanne painted without imprinting his colors and shapes with a cognitive interpretation. He attempted to show only raw visual data, exactly, says Lehrer, like someone with visual agnosia.

If the blind man in Mark's gospel does have this condition, then at the neurological level he can see, but he lacks the ability to interpret what he's seeing. Could there, I wonder, be a better metaphor for the disciples at this point in Jesus ministry? They see Jesus . . . but not really. They cannot make sense of him: his meaning, his significance, his mission, his identity—they lack the synopsis.

With his second touch, Jesus imparts visual clarity to the blind man and we rightly anticipate that something quite similar is about to happen to the disciples—that their perception of Jesus is about to elucidate.

To the knowing reader, Jesus' true identity has been about as disguised as Clark Kent, who is Superman ingeniously cloaked by . . . reading glasses. But for the disciples this is the moment of discovery, the turning point. It is also the turning point of Jesus' ministry (as well as the hinge of Mark's gospel) opening up to the second and final phase: Jesus' preparation and progression toward the Cross.

The Explanation

Before this point in his ministry, for Jesus to have spoken of his suffering and death would only have served to convince his disciples he was merely a prophet, as such treatment was standard etiquette in Israel for how to treat a messenger of the Lord. Only now, having understood his true identity, can Jesus begin to explain why he must suffer and die:

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31)

If we read Mark's gospel through to its end, the full answer Jesus provides is something to the effect of: “I am the messianic King, but the kingdom will be ushered in, not through power and glory, but through my suffering, rejection and death. It is when the Son of Man returns that he will come in power and glory: two portraits, two comings, same Messiah.”

The Temptation

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” (Mark 8:32,33)

Peter is incapable of seeing how Jesus could be the Messiah and yet still need to suffer and die and, frankly, that's pretty understandable isn't it? What is more difficult to understand is why Jesus does not simply correct him, but instead rebukes him and accuses him of being a mouthpiece for Satan. It seems harsh—over the top—like killing a mosquito with a hand grenade. Unless of course it's just plain true and at that moment Peter really was being used by Satan; then it's not an insult but an observational fact: “Peter, Satan, is speaking through you.” I think there's good reason to believe that that's what was going on.

If you go back to the accounts in the Gospels of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the common thread in Satan's attacks is this same appeal: to bypass the cross—to drink of the glory and majesty of Messiah and spit out its bitter aftertaste. Satan never wastes effort or goes through the motions, punches the clock or keeps up appearances. If this is how he tempted Jesus then this is what Jesus found tempting: to declare himself to be Israel's true Messiah in all of his rightful glory, majesty and power, and detour the shame and suffering of the Cross This is exactly what Peter was suggesting, ergo “get behind me Satan.”

And it's surely more than a literary conclusion when Luke tells us at the end of Jesus' wilderness temptation that, “when the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). As the revelation of Jesus' identity to his disciples is the pivotal point of Jesus ministry, this would certainly seem to be an “opportune time.”

The Implication

At this point the disciples are probably ashen, horrified, and in utter shock. Unfortunately, what they've heard is actually the good news. The bad news is that everybody gets a cross: every friend and follower gets to experience similar rejection and humiliation, every leader get's to wash the feet of others, and everyone gets to give their lives away—it's the democratization of the cross, the pyramid scheme of suffering. Discipleship is cross-bearing.

Jesus, quite unapologetically, tells his followers, “not



only will I have to suffer and die, but—guess what—so will you.” The glory of the kingdom will be ushered in through the brokenness and suffering of the Messiah . . . and his disciples. This is one hell of an ampersand. They too will have to embrace a double identity: children of the Most High God—orphans, rejects and miscreants of the world. The glory of God will be revealed in their life, not through strength, power or position but through humility, sacrifice and servitude.

As it would have been natural for the twelve disciples to think the cross was only for Jesus, it’s natural for us to think the cross was only for the twelve disciples. But there’s no “I” in “team,” and there’s no “other guy” in discipleship. “That guy” with the speck in his eye, “that guy” carrying the cross: he does not exist. We are “that guy.”

The Application

“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.” (Mark 8:34,35)

Here then is the essence or soul of discipleship. For any disciple of Jesus, life is to be found through death: that is, as we give our life (hopes, dreams, goals, all that we are) for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, paradoxically we gain or find it. Life is acquired through giving it away, and as we’ll see, there are any number of ways to give it, but for now it’s sufficient to purse our lips and simply nod knowingly at the concept.

Now, it could be that this is simply an important tenet of discipleship, but in light of the structure of his gospel, it seems that Mark is trying to tell us that this is not just central to discipleship but that this is discipleship: giving life away defines precisely what it means to follow Christ.

In context, Mark is saying that the new exodus that Jesus leads us on, the path to freedom, the Kingdom and eternal life, is one long trip to the cross. Discipleship is tracing Jesus steps “on his way” to the cross: nothing more and absolutely nothing less.

CROSS-BEARING DISCIPLESHIP

As Jesus calls us to bear a cross like his, his cross becomes the template for our discipleship; his cup our cup. From our understanding of his cross, we can

derive five irreducible principles of what it means for each of us to “carry his cross.”

- We live though we die: paradox and tensions
- We die that others may live
- We are tempted to live when we need to die
- We die when we ought to live
- We die to reveal the life of Christ

But before we look at each we need to put ourselves in the right mood. And oddly enough that mood is joy. As it says in Hebrew’s “who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” Our Cross, is also our joy, because the Cross is not a means by which we die, but live. As John Piper would say, we avoid the death of discipleship not because we value our life too much, but because we value it too little. Life is Christ. We die to our self in order to experience more of Jesus. We pour out ourselves in order to be filled with him, empowered by him, worship him, commune with him, and overflow with him. More of Jesus is the reward, the benefit, and the motivation of “bearing our cross.” We are the beneficiaries of our dying and we die for our own benefit, for the sake of our own joy.

Now we can get on with dying.

WE LIVE THOUGH WE DIE: PARADOX AND TENSIONS

Jesus has taken the two opposing messianic portraits found in the Old Testament (suffering servant vs. reigning king) and explained to his disciples that they are not only both true of the Messiah, but that he shall embody both roles, more or less, at the very same time. He is the messianic king but his kingdom will unfurl through rejection, suffering and death.

This of course is a paradox and what makes it so is that both roles are simultaneously true. If, for example, Jesus was only king on weekends and holidays but Monday through Friday he worked as a suffering servant, we’d call it a dichotomy. The crazy maker is that they’re both true at the very same time—a paradox.

Well that’s fine for Jesus, he’s already a crowded elevator of paradoxes (God/man; eternal/temporal, Lion/Lamb etc. etc.) what’s one more? But it’s not that simple. This particular paradox has two enormous implications for those who would be disciples of Jesus.

The first is this: if the King is a paradox then so is his kingdom. And so King Jesus reigns and his kingdom is



over all the earth but only kinda-sorta. The Kingdom has the same paradoxical qualities: while a dictator may control the country, Christ at the same moment reigns in the hearts of its Christian citizens. Evil is given free reign . . . to accomplish God's purposes. God is pouring out his judgment on the wicked . . . by leaving them alone (Romans 1). We are ruled by Christ . . . when our flesh isn't controlling us. Welcome to Crazyworld, and the common theological phrase for Crazyworld is "The Kingdom already but not yet:" the term commonly employed to describe the partially realized, partially inaugurated, messianic kingdom. This is, indeed, a peculiar terrarium we find ourselves in.

So Jesus is in paradox and the world is in paradox. Our king sits enthroned upon an electric chair or cross, and the Kingdom of God is a refugee camp of Believers within a hostile warzone. Which brings us to us: the citizens of this paradoxical kingdom and king. In his discipleship discourse, when Jesus informs us that we too must "take up the cross," he is telling us that we will need to embrace these same paradoxes. While we will be "sons of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:38) we will at the same time be "the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world" (1Cor. 4:11-13). Like Jesus, the kingdom of God will be manifest in our life, not through majesty, strength and honor but through weakness, humility, rejection and death.

Dynamic Tensions

There are some pretty big implications of living out this paradox, which we'll look at, but here we just want to understand it at its most practical level. It seems confusing as Hell— how does one live out such a paradox without going stark-raving mad? The answer is by embracing a mindset of "dynamic tensions."

Let's be clear: no one can simultaneously live out two identities. Even if you were schizoid with your consciousness fractured into multiple personalities, you still could only look out onto the world from a single pane of glass at a time. Very weird but very true. As Christians, we believe that Jesus had two natures. But that's Jesus. As for us, we are incapable of envisioning such a state any more than we can envision eternity, a fourth dimension, or invent a new color—it's beyond the pail of our finite minds.

So, since we can't be two people at once we live out these paradoxes, polarities and incongruities by stringing them together like a tennis racket, keeping both concepts in our mind—balanced—with a taut

line between them: that is, we hold clashing concepts in dynamic tension. The life of discipleship is a life of dynamic tension. As we mature, we grow in our ability to keep the paradoxes of the Christian life in balance, and we grow in our capacity to handle more and more of these tensions.

If, for example, I'm too focused on the Kingdom to come, I become apocalyptic or fatalistic; if I focus too much on the kingdom now, I become utopian or naive. If the line between faith and stewardship grows slack, my life can either ebb toward faith-filled irresponsibility or toward control-driven bureaucracy. If I believe the salvation of my neighbor rests wholly on free will, I might knock on her door every hour: if I believe it rests wholly on God's sovereignty I might never knock at all. Grace without truth may appear to be a license to sin but truth without grace can make me a legalist. We must care for a person's body as well as their soul, listen to both thoughts and feelings, lead by serving, couple prayer with action, plan our future while remaining open to God's leadings: tension after tension after twanging tension, always trying to find the sweet-spot.

While our minds are capable of living with considerable complexity, it's always nice to have broader folders to organize loose or divergent thoughts. By and large the many paradoxes we experience in being a disciple of Jesus fall under "The Kingdom already but not yet" tension. This massive cable stretching from the Kingdom as it is here and now, to the fully realized Kingdom to come is the tightrope of discipleship. It defines, describes and makes sense out of what we experience as believers and the paradoxical life of discipleship described throughout the New Testament.

WE DIE THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE

When Jesus bends to the ground to pick up the cross he could look at any one of us and ask, "Did you drop this?" What is fundamental about Jesus' cross is that it does not belong to him, but us. The Cross is an other-centered missionary enterprise: Jesus didn't just die, he died for us, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). An implication, then, of bearing Jesus' cross means embracing Jesus' redemptive mission, and doing so at any cost to us.

While this may have appeared hidden in the fine print to some believers, it does not come as a total surprise



to evangelicals, for embracing Jesus' redemptive mission has always been a dominant characteristic of the evangelical church. When Billy Graham pitched a tent in our city, we knew what he was trying to do, we thought of unbelieving friends we could take to hear him, we supported his campaigns to preach the gospel in other countries, and we rejoiced when people came forward as a ginormous choir sang Just as I am. We are not the bastards people think we are, but the living relatives of the Reformers, the Moravians, and Revivalists.

But without the Spirit's transforming power dynamically at work in our life: heritage and culture are nothing but baggage we carry instead of the cross. As long as our hearts remain weak and deceitful (which is always), we will want to distance ourselves from the cross's scandal, and our evangelical commitments and convictions will only ensure that such efforts are justified, unconscious, and disguised from everyone including ourselves. You cannot be too suspicious of the heart's promiscuity; it will always find ways to cheat on the cross's redemptive burden.

For several years following Hurricane Katrina, Campus Crusade for Christ, the ministry I work with, sent students to New Orleans for their Spring Break. Thousands of students came by the busload to help with the rebuilding and in the process, engage in spiritual outreach wherever God opened doors for the gospel. The compassion displayed by these Christian college students was so overwhelming it gained national media attention, drawing CNN's Anderson Cooper to New Orleans for a live two-hour special. Cooper interviewed many of the students, asking why they were there and what motivated them to spend their Spring Break mopping up New Orleans. The show was live, so students were able to answer and explain with unedited and uninterrupted freedom. I mention this because in the course of two hours not one student mentioned God, Jesus Christ, prayer—heck, by the end of two hours I would have taken a “we are all God's children”—something . . . anything. Such testimony didn't have to be contrived, just honest: almost without exception God was the reason they were there.

I share this not to point fingers—I'm sure I would have been slack-jawed in the presence of Anderson Cooper myself—but to point out the obvious. The redemptive and saving aspect of the cross can be a source of embarrassment to us (though it is always a choice of the will whether we will act ashamed).

A demonstration of Christ's love was clearly not lacking in New Orleans, and, given the questions, it was certainly not socially inappropriate to confess a Christian motivation. Yet all of the students reflexively distanced themselves from the message of redemption or even the mention of a redeemer.

Why? We know why, because we've all sensed that invisible barrier and with it the fear of rejection, loss of reputation and social standing, fear of what others will think of us, fear of not knowing what to say or sounding stupid when we say it. This redemptive stench is integral to the death of the cross and unless we stop ourselves, we will instinctively put distance between us and it, not wanting to appear the source of the fragrance.

Glory and honor will always await those who serve the body of humanity, while rejection and humiliation await those who serve its soul: and because of this we will always be drawn to the one and away from the other. Our evangelical convictions just mean that it will happen more subtly and unwittingly.

Excuses will be veiled in concerns for effectiveness and methodology, and diversions will consist of other highly significant spiritual endeavors—church work, ministry, family, etc.—making our drift from missions and evangelism as imperceptible as global warming.

WE ARE TEMPTED TO LIVE WHEN WE NEED TO DIE

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”
(Mark 8:32,33)

In Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and through the words of Peter, Jesus is attracted (tempted) by the thought of bypassing the cross. That's as refreshing as cold water and as sobering as having it poured down your back. Remember, we too share the same calling to the cross. And like Jesus, the ruling king [slash] suffering servant, we also share a double identity: royal members of the kingdom/refuse of the world, objects of God's grace and mercy/objects of the world's contempt. I'm just saying, that if it was a temptation for Jesus to hold the King of Hearts and discard the Joker, how much more so will it be for us to cling to life and glory rather than giving ourselves up to the cross.

Nothing illustrates this struggle better than childhood



stars. As a kid my absolute favorite TV shows were the Brady Bunch and the Partridge Family, and yes, I saw them in Prime Time and not reruns if that helps to carbon date me. I loved Danny Partridge (Danny Bonaduce), I loved Peter Brady (Christopher Knight), and I wanted to have children with Marsha Brady like every 12-year old boy. Unfortunately, Peter and Danny have refused to stay in the recesses of people's memories and in reruns where they are treasured and beloved, and have instead clung, clawed, scraped and groveled their way back to prominence—back into the spotlight.

Grasping for the life and fame they once had, the once adorable child-stars now humiliate themselves on reality TV, no longer caring about the difference between fame and notoriety. They become the kid who eats bugs to be a part of the in-crowd. I feel bad for them. I think we all feel bad for them. Having had fame, popularity and the world at their feet it must be painful to turn a blind eye to all of it.

Spiritually speaking, it's a struggle to pick up the cross and die to self, and just as difficult to roll over and stay dead: our flesh seems to always be planning its next big comeback. And while we desire, with the best of intentions, for the kingdom of God to be proclaimed in and through our life, the temptation remains to broadcast it from the tower of strength and prominence. In the end we all want to be Mother Teresa: we want to love and serve Christ and become famous for it.

As embarrassing as this may be, perhaps it would be of encouragement—or entertainment—for me to share my favorite Christian fantasy that recurs every football season. After I finish watching a game and turn the TV off, I begin to imagine myself making some spectacular play or miraculous catch—some feat only the Lord or Tom Brady could perform. But, as I said, this is a Christian fantasy and so I begin to imagine what I would say when interviewed for my heroics. I mentally craft the perfect sound bite that conveys strength, confidence and a clear gospel message. Funny, for some reason as I picture this scene I'm taller, 20 pounds lighter and with the vascularity of a man with no body fat—funny... Anyway, as a believer, my fantasy (or substitute the word “temptation”) is to proclaim and advance God's kingdom: I'd just like to do so through success, talent, intelligence, strength, confidence and—if it's not too much to ask—the rugged good looks of Tom Brady.

This is also, roughly speaking, the fantasy of the disciples: the fantasy Jesus deflates.

See, the real danger of sin is this: we don't know what we don't know. Concealed in the language of a “strong” or “powerful Christian witness,” and with good evangelistic intentions, ego-centric thinking can easily pass through the baggage scan of self-reflection without setting off an alarm. And while it's not unthinkable that my conscience could delude me, the believing community usually stands as my safeguard, providing correction when my own mirror is lying to me. But in this case, when I look around me all I see is this same promotion of success in the believing community: platformed testimonies of actors and CEO's and politicians and athletes—even pastors, large churches, and Christian leaders can be shrouded in celebrity. I'll tell you this: none of this makes me want to be a nobody.

To my inner Danny Bonaduce, this creates quite a temptation and appeals to my desire to have the kingdom proclaimed through my strength not my weakness: my success and not brokenness. What I want is for people to say, “Wow, you're so successful, I want to follow Christ;” “Wow, your family has no problems, I want to be a Christian;” “If I become a Christian can I have a perfect marriage just like yours?”

What I'm saying is that temptation is a lot harder to detect when it's not just hidden, but concealed under a Christian mask. In this case I'm not even aware it's a temptation because I'm not even aware it's wrong. I hope you can see this.

Jesus is not calling us to relinquish life, power or influence. He is, however, redefining them in spiritual terms: “He who would be first must . . .”; “whoever wants to save his life must . . .” But, even though this is spiritual power and spiritual life, it is accessed through physical weakness: brokenness, humility, human limitations, suffering and death. While, Conversely, the pursuit of physical wealth, fame, greatness and life leads to spiritual bankruptcy and impotence. This is because the spiritual world of God's Kingdom is a mirrored image: the inverse of physical reality, backwards, reading right to left.

WE DIE IN ORDER TO LIVE

“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.” (Mark 8:34,35)

In the parlance of science what we have here is the Unified Theory—at least in terms of spiritual reality. The Unified Theory, a term coined by Albert Einstein, is the Holy Grail of physics: one grand coherent theory that explains all of the physical laws of nature. Physicists often work in specialized fields of study and so they may come up with a series of equations that describes the properties of, say, electromagnetism. And while these equations may well describe the physics of electromagnetism, when they’re applied to another force—like gravity for instance—they yield only incoherence. Einstein thought he had discovered a theory that would apply to all physics. He hadn’t, no one has.

Like physics, there are all manner of theories concerning the nature of spiritual reality. For example, some people believe that the spiritual goal of life is to have your good works outweigh your bad works. Others think that the unified theory of the spiritual world is that all paths lead to God and you simply need to be faithful to the path you’re on. They are all theories seeking to unify truth and they are all wrong. Eternal life is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Here, in his cross-bearing discourse, Jesus is describing the formula for discipleship and spiritual growth, and it is the only formula that can ever work: the one, the only, unified theory.

First, we deny ourselves by giving up our sinful source of life. Addictions, idols, etc.: the reason they have so much power in our lives is because we derive life from them. We become connected to sin like a tumor, feeding and growing them with our own lifeblood all the while depleting ourselves of spiritual life.

The second constant of the formula is that we are to pick up our cross and embrace death. Our umbilical cords have been tied into these sources of life and unplugging them is tantamount to a suicide.

And third, we come to Christ and make him our source of life, choosing to plug our umbilical cord into him.

See, the formula for “morality” or “religiosity” is very similar but takes only the first components of the equation and ignores the most vital. Religion involves sacrifice and self-denial but without an incoming life

source. But no one can divest themselves of life for any sustained period of time. Nature abhors a vacuum as does our soul; the void must be—has to be—filled. The self-denying religious person will ultimately go searching for life in some other tainted water supply, perhaps through outright hypocrisy or more subtly, through self-righteousness or pride—most assuredly they’ll dig a well somewhere.

I think most Christians basically trust in Jesus’ formula, I just don’t think it’s apparent how our daily lives should be governed by it. Therefore, the equation remains on the chalkboard, abstract and theoretical. Perhaps this case study will help.

Let’s say I worked in an office and like most employees I liked to be liked around the office. But I’m also a Christian.

I find myself in a conversation with my boss. He’s a great guy, funny, charismatic and his talking to me is the source of good feelings on a lot of levels. First of all he likes me, and who doesn’t like to be liked. And then there’s the fact that he’s my boss so I’m getting positive reinforcement and just a little light headed with “upward mobility” intoxication. Now he begins to gossip about someone else in the office. This provides the sensation of being brought into his confidence, the inner circle of relationships in his life. And as it’s about someone else in the office, there’s the added emotional “yummy” of feeling better or superior to a coworker

Now, from an emotional, social and spiritual perspective what’s been happening is I’ve been plugging my umbilical cord into my boss and this conversation. It’s feeding life to my soul, like sipping Red Bull through a straw.

But, as a Believer I want to please Christ and I realize I need to try to stop or detour the conversation. But it’s not just halting a conversation is it? No, it’s become more than that. It’s become a source of life. To stop is to rip out my umbilical cord, to experience a small death. But then I’m going to plug that cord into Jesus, “Oh, Lord I want to be pleasing to you, empower me and strengthen me. Thank you for this opportunity to love you in this way.” And in turning to Christ for my approval and acceptance I find true life.

When we begin to see death at such a practical and such a daily level, we begin to realize just how many ways there are to die. Jesus’ death was not for the sake of death but for the sake of life. Likewise we die that we



might live, finding our life in Christ.

WE DIE WHEN WE OUGHT TO LIVE

Let's start with this snippet from the trial transcript of Jesus found in Mark:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus . . .

The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?"

The answer to the high priest's question, "Why do we need any more witnesses?" is "You don't." There was never a need for more testimony: such a claim by Jesus automatically carried a death sentence.

The only reason that "many testified falsely against him" (Mark 14:58) and that we need to read of those testimonies is that a significant component of Christ's suffering—his cross—was injustice and false accusation.

Another aspect of that suffering was betrayal. Jesus had no shortage of enemies and anyone could have turned him in. But "anyone" didn't. It was in fact Judas, a friend, one of the trusted twelve who twisted the knife in Jesus' back.

The hallmarks of Christ's suffering were the betrayal, the false accusations, the slander, the unjustness. Jesus could have gone to the cross and died for our sins through any number of other God-orchestrated narratives, ones that didn't involve being given-up by a friend or false witness and perjury. But this was the carefully selected template of death that was bequeathed to him and when Jesus declares that we too must carry a cross, he means this template. He means that a part of being a disciple is to endure slander, being misunderstood, betrayal, false accusations and unjust suffering. For in them we must endure the death of our reputation.

I'm not sure we always see this. In fact, I'm sure we don't. For there is little else that causes the same degree of shock, horror and outrage, than when we're slandered or accused of something we didn't do, or corrupt motives are attributed to us, or an apparent friend turns and attacks us, or when we are treated in any way unfairly.

When I was a Campus Minister at Rutgers University

in northern New Jersey there was a very strong and very vocal gay and lesbian community. At the time they boasted the only openly gay dormitory in academia and nothing would have made them happier than to see all of the campus ministries pull up their tent pegs and take their circus elsewhere. Not because we were condemning or attacking them, but because they were intelligent. They knew that behind any care or compassion breathed an ideology which believed and taught homosexuality to be immoral. All of the good intentions in the world cannot remove that unassailable fact. If I were them I wouldn't want us around either.

That being as it may, believe me when I tell you that we did everything in our power to reach out to them in love. We would invite their group to socials and events and some of our students would accompany their gay friends to their gatherings: whatever was in our power to do, we did.

And so it came as a horrible shock when one morning I opened up the campus newspaper and began reading how Rick James (that's me), the Director of the Campus Ministry, had railed against homosexuals in a talk given the previous evening. It wouldn't have been shocking to see a sermon taken out of context by the radical paper. It's just that I hadn't even given one. There was actually a photo of another man, with my name and the name of our ministry in the caption. As I read through the slander and false accusations, I could see our ministry efforts and reputation going down the sewer, which—it is no exaggeration—is the native smell of northern Jersey.

I was outraged. I couldn't wait to sit down and write a response. I wanted to hold court, extract my pound of flesh, demand satisfaction, have someone's head on a platter. Where was the retraction, reparation, redress: where was the remorse?

The college campus can be a police state withholding rights and privileges from dissenters. But my time ministering in The People's Republic of Rutgers made me aware of how much my Christianity is affected by my American, "right to bear arms and hold public assembly," worldview: and how much that worldview leads me to repudiate this fundamental prerequisite of Christ's suffering.

How much we've been affected is proportional to the degree of outrage we experience when our character, rights, and reputation are assaulted. Outrage is when



every fiber in our body screams of injustice and then turns in rage toward the perpetrator. But the problem is not what we do with the outrage, it's that we experience it at all. Christians ought to experience unjust suffering, therefore outrage (this feeling of un-oughtness) has no place in the Christian life.

In one sense I think we experience more of this type of suffering than we realize. I know so many Christians who have been hated, shunned, and ridiculed without reason by neighbors, bosses, co-workers, even family. I've seen so many instances of believers who have been misunderstood, betrayed, and had evil motives ascribed to them. I just don't think it registers as one of the unjust implications of cross-bearing discipleship.

Tragic, because that's the only joy there is in it. But while we might experience more unjust suffering than we realize, we do not suffer nearly as much as believers at other times and other places. You could say it's because of God's incalculable grace. And that it may be. But you could also say it's God's discipline. There are worse things than being turned over to unjust suffering, like being turned over to privilege and pampering. Zeal is baked in the furnace of unjust suffering, I'm not sure what bakes in the oven of prosperity, perhaps canoles or butter cookies or something.

Now one could say, with just a slight air of belligerence, "What are we doormats?" To which I think I would say "Yes, that's exactly what we are" and the church has always grown when we've allowed unbelievers to wipe their feet on us. It's only in America where believers stand on their rights, retaliate against injustice and are concerned with being doormats and, well, where has that gotten us exactly?

There is a time and place to engage in image management, something the apostle Paul demonstrates in his letter to the Corinthians.

We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. (2Cor. 5:12,13)

The time to defend ourselves is when it would be hurtful, destructive or a stumbling block to others to believe something falsely about us, impacting the

way they see Christ. Beyond this exception, unjust suffering is to be embraced as an entailment of the cross.

WE DIE TO REVEAL THE LIFE OF CHRIST

As believers, the resurrected Christ lives in us, and it is through our deaths and dying that Christ's life is powerfully revealed. It is the apostle Paul who makes this observation, and he does so through a Crayola box of metaphors:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2Cor. 4:6,7)

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2Cor. 4:10)

Paul's analogy of a "clay jar" is particularly graphic. If you picture an old clay pot and imagine turning on a 1,000-watt light bulb inside it, what would you expect to see? Every possible crack, fracture and imperfection. You would also see a gloriously blinding light—but only through the cracks and imperfections in the jar. That's how Paul sees it: God's power manifested and made visible in and through our weakness, frailty and brokenness.

Someone recently showed me an old magazine interview with (now fallen) Christian leader, Ted Haggard. Of course his answers to certain question were ironic in light of what the future would reveal, and there were serious issues to be sure, but the article captured a deeper problem that had nothing to do with Ted Haggard: a hidden sin affecting all of us— more deceptive and far more systemic.

Alongside the article was a typical photojournal image of Haggard, only it looked like it had been taken in the Oval Office. The light was streaming through the windows creating a backlit halo. He was laughing, an apparently approachable potentate, with just a touch of graying wisdom at his temples, a handsome suit, and a power tie with the gravitas to bring warring nations together. Had Mitt Romney been standing beside him he would have appeared a vagrant by contrast. The heavy mahogany desk that he presided over bore several books and the weight of the free world. The



magazine was Christian: the image, not so much. It embodied regality, dignity, power, wealth, intelligence, confidence and strength: everything my flesh could have hoped for.

Now, I've exaggerated the photo a bit—just a bit—but not the problem it represents. See, the image was taken and placed in the article quite unconscious of intending meaning, which is what makes it such an accurate portrait of our worldview. This is how we see the successful Christian life; this is what we think it should look like. The picture oozes of success, power, strength, confidence, invulnerability, wealth and control. Unless there was a crucifix on the wall, the cross is not visible anywhere in this picture. And we can safely assume the power of Christ is not manifest in situations where we are either drawn to asking for someone's autograph or drawn to signing one.

Stories and images are powerful and we're all affected by this distinctly American narrative of the abundant Christian life, one that's told to us over and over in similar conscious and unconscious ways.

In 1938, De Beers Consolidated, owners of the global diamond monopoly, approached the New York advertising agency of N.W. Ayer and Son. DeBeers was in crisis and if it couldn't open up the American market they'd be in ruin. So N.W. Ayer took them on as a client and produced one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history. We all remember it but not as advertising; the narrative they invented was so deceptive we remember it as history.

See, in America, prior to 1938, people did not generally give diamonds as engagement rings. As Tom Zoellner, author of *The Heartless Stone*, makes clear, the ads were "a brazen denial of three centuries of American cultural history, in which diamond rings were generally regarded as foppish extravagancies." Year after year, ad after ad, we believed the tale that engagements were incomplete without diamonds, that diamonds were an essential part of the history of love, and our history as well. It was all a story, told so well we didn't even realize it was a story. And some seventy plus years later here we are: our perceptions and understanding of love and engagement, deeply, irreparably flawed.

However such wizardry was enacted upon us—perhaps Satan hired N.W. Ayer—we've all been effected by an alternate narrative of victorious Christian living, and the only response is to come back to the words

of Jesus, his narrative of discipleship, his vision of faithfulness, his definition of "normative," his cross. We all need to be reminded of it again and again. Even the apostle Paul needed reminding:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (2Cor. 12:8,9)

This is "the way" of cross-bearing discipleship. If we want Christ's life to shine through us, we must be willing to be humbled, to be vulnerable, broken, incompetent, unsuccessful and weak. And all of these, in one way or another, are a form of dying: the death of ego, reputation, status, control, etc. Of course, no sane person would willingly embrace these things in and of themselves: their value is the open door they provide to experience and manifest the glory of Christ.

I remember delivering a series of talks to Christian Ivy League students some years ago. In the midst of the first evening's talk, I intentionally threw in a specific large and sophisticated word, and I did so, so that they'd think I was smart. I can't remember what the word was—automobile? Anyway, the following morning I was praying about the next talk I was to give to the students that day, and I was I asking God to bless it and use it powerfully in their lives. Then came the answer to my prayer. As clear as a bell—as opposed to a large and sophisticated word—God brought to my mind the spectacle of the previous evening and my blustering use of the afore mentioned polysyllabic word (Maybe the word was polysyllabic?). And it was clear to me what God was asking me to do.

So—I'm cringing just remembering this—I began my talk by telling the students that the previous night I had used a big word and I did so because I wanted them to think I was smart. I even told them the word I used. And there in brokenness and humility, God was able to use me, to shine through my frailty and radiate through my flaws and cracks. His power: my decision not to remain opaque.

This example is rather public and rather embarrassing, but there are abundant daily opportunities to acknowledge our sin, to share our failures, to embrace criticism, to invite criticism, to not defend our reputations, to refuse to manage our image, to apologize, to give thanks to God for our lackings and



inabilities and so on and so on. There are a million ways to die if you look for them.

Humility is addicting and a good thing to be addicted to. Once you begin to experience God's empowerment and the freedom and joy it releases, seeing your extreme and severe finitude staring at you in the mirror is not such an unpleasant sight. You actually start looking for opportunities (or perceive them as such) to humble yourself and make yourself small in your own eyes and in the eyes of others.

The process is both catalytic and cathartic; just as "image management" leads to an ever-shrinking prison cell, humility leads to ever-expanding freedom. Even the first baby steps of humbling oneself are usually sufficient to break the spell of "keeping up appearances." You're a free woman, a free man, just as long as you keep carrying the cross.

A LAST SQUINT

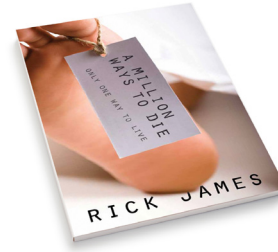
Artists and designers tend to step back and squint at their work because it's easy to get lost in the details. Squinting simplifies our field of vision: seeing less, we actually see more. This portrait of cross-bearing discipleship has been rendered with considerable detail so we should probably step back and squint at it.

While there are certainly other implications of cross-bearing discipleship, these are the predominant principles of the cross: true of Jesus' cross and therefore true of ours. Whatever else cross-bearing discipleship may involve, it will require no less of us than this.

Our life will always straddle two identities: we are God's beloved children and the world's wretched orphans. Living out this paradox will involve managing a string of dynamic tensions created by the fact that the kingdom is "already but not yet." As Jesus was tempted to avoid the cross and manifest the kingdom in power, glory and strength: so will we be.

We embrace the death of the cross in order to gain life: life for ourselves and life for others. As the Son of Man went to the cross in order to seek and save the lost, we embrace his evangelistic mission, and in this we embrace his suffering and rejection in order that God's power might be manifest through our weakness. As Jesus' suffering stung with betrayal and injustice, our discipleship will entail the voluntary surrender of our rights or claims to justice.

As I squint at it, this seems right, some details are missing but I think the proportions are right.



Rick James is Publisher of CruPress. This article is an excerpt from the book "A Million Ways to Die."