

**Torture, Madness, Sickness, and Sadness?**  
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“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.’”  
~ *Gospel of Luke, 9*

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”  
~ *Gospel of John, 3*

When Christ asks us to die to ourselves, this comes across as both puzzling and profound. On the one hand, we might ask what it means to lead a meaningful life if one is dead to oneself? On the other hand, we might be inspired by the idea of losing ourselves to a cause that is bigger than just us.

The idea of denying oneself would have been familiar to the context in which Jesus spoke. Stoicism, an influential Roman philosophy of the time, emphasised the renunciation of pleasure in pursuit of virtue and self-governance. The true self was to be found in devotion to reason and the common good (Cicero, *De Finibus*, III). Self-denial in the service of this end displayed a nobility of spirit and character fitting to those entrusted with governing an empire, as Marcus Aurelius—both emperor and philosopher—came to govern the Roman Empire in the years after Christ's death. Yet the idea of losing one's life for the sake of *Jesus*, who would go on to die on a Roman cross, would no doubt have been puzzling to many who heard these words, whether in the moment they were spoken or the years to follow.

Similarly, if we are attentive, some of us might feel a tension within ourselves as we read these words. It's difficult to let go of certain desires, ambitions, or the way we think things should be, and live for Christ in the competitive environments many of us inhabit. I find this is a tension I have to continually work through in the university environment I work in. Universities are highly competitive settings. I've been trained to think a certain way about what sort of work, institutions, publication venues, and activities are valuable, and I'm incentivised to pursue some things and avoid others.

We should be strategic in our work. Good publication venues are good things. Excellence matters and we should pursue it. But the problem (or moral hazard) here is that these things can come to matter too much. The drive for success and distinction can drive away others; our competitiveness can isolate us from the people around us. For me, that could mean seeing a student who seeks my help as an unnecessary interference with research time, seeing a gifted colleague as an adversary to be overcome, or seeing time with those I love as unimportant in relation to completing a given project. Sometimes we have to make compromises—there is a time for everything, and we bear with one another through moments and seasons that stretch us

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in myriad ways. But the danger is that the values of a competitive environment can come to dominate or eclipse in our life the things that matter most.

In this setting, the self that Christ asks us to die to is the self that seeks dominance and elevation over other selves, often at their expense (whether directly or indirectly). We often tie too much of who we are, our identity, into external markers of status or achievement. But these aren't the things that are most important. What's most important is the people around us and whether they are living well, *flourishing*, to use a popular word. Christ asks us to broaden our view of what matters, to step back and behold the value in others, rather than be fixated on things that matter less.

The second half of Christ's injunction speaks of finding oneself. How then do we find ourselves? When we step back from our own quest for success and comparative elevation, we open up space to *be with* others in friendship, solidarity, or communion. And we open up space for friendship and communion with God. Our highest good involves both these things, communion with God and others.

In the context of my work, I like to view this through the metaphor of sacrament (though I don't believe *the* sacraments are a metaphor). When I cease to view my (competitive) workplace primarily as an arena for personal achievement and instead view it primarily as a place to join with God and others in the work of attaining knowledge and fulfilling education, I feel a greater degree of peace, fulfilment, and joy. My work becomes a channel for God's grace—both a gift and a means of empowerment—as I participate and play a small part in the work of healing and restoring a broken world. Whatever brings truth, goodness, nobility, and beauty to others, and draws these things out of them, is a part of this work and an outworking of God's grace, a space where life can be found.

Not everyone agrees with this idea of relinquishing the self. Nietzsche likened the Christian idea of selflessness to a kind of torture, madness, sickness, and sadness (*Genealogy of Morals*, 2.22). But I think he was wrong. No doubt if we 'lose' ourselves to the wrong person we can become vulnerable to mistreatment and manipulation. But Christ's call to lose ourselves is not a manifestation of cruelty or an endorsement of self-harm. To whom we give ourselves makes all the difference. Giving oneself to Christ is entrusting one's life to someone who thoroughly knows and loves us, one in whom there is "no darkness at all", as John's Gospel says. That is what Christians believe.

From an empirical standpoint, we can judge if this trust is well-placed by observing what happens when we venture out and try it, by looking at what happens in our life and the lives of those immediately around us. Does it increase or detract from things like goodness, nobility, flourishing, beauty (*Letter to the Philippians*, 4)? In my experience it increases these things.

Entrusting oneself to Christ in this way also means receiving his help. I have tremendous respect for Stoic philosophy, but I suspect that on its own it leads to a hard and inflexible character, whereas my experience is that life joined to Christ continually renews and regenerates my understanding of and compassion for others. If we were meant to hold an empire together on our own strength, we would need to be hard, immeasurably tough. But we would be less human as a

result. Thankfully the Christian view of human nature is skeptical enough to see this. We are frail. We are worth it, we are loved, but we are incapable of becoming *thoroughly* good on our own. Thankfully we are not asked to do this alone. God promises his Spirit will work within us and in our midst to enable us to do and become better. It's a wild proposition. At once it puzzles and resonates with me. But the more I lean into it, the more it connects with my experience, just as it challenges my preconceptions of how the world operates and I'm meant to operate in it.

## **Closing**

What have I been asked to let go of lately? Myself. That includes aspects of my work, certain desires, and perhaps more generally what I thought my life would look like. The letting go is ongoing (for all of us). Christ showed us that this is the way of the cross. It's not cheap grace or therapeutic deism. But it is the way of *life*. I find that when I choose to die to self I'm released to become a better, more fulfilled self, and those are the times when God does something new.

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