

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Commitment - Am I prepared to sacrifice?

“Prince Rabadash’s army lay close behind them, Anvard ahead. If they did not reach Anvard before Rabadash and his horde, their journey – their entire lives – would have been wasted. The horses, Bree and Hwin (both of whom could, of course, talk) galloped. Certainly both horses were doing, if not all they could, all they thought they could do, which is not quite the same thing. But a lion appears out of nowhere and with the spur of terror, Bree now discovered that he had not really been going as fast – not quite as fast – as he could.”

This quotation is, of course, from the beloved Chronicles of Narnia, that fount of a million simple and usually overlooked truths.

“Perhaps of all the temptations we meet in this life – money, power, sex, drink, fame – the subtlest of all is the comfort zone, that invitation to settle for less, to go for content when the stresses and miseries of over-achievement beckon. The way that takes you out of the comfort zone is the path less travelled. Most of us, when we come to that place where the two paths divide, prefer the one that leads to safety, to warmth, to comfort.” So wrote Simon Barnes in the Times earlier this year. The picture he draws is a useful one. The distance between what we can do, and what we think we can do, is called sacrifice. As we learn to go beyond ourselves for the good of others we truly find out what it is to sacrifice, to be committed to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus had some important words to say about commitment, and we should read them together this morning. They are to be found in Mark 8:34-36: “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”

How many people today spend a whole lifetime losing their lives, knowing nothing of commitment to Jesus, and sacrifice for Him. It seems to me that there are three things that characterise a man on the cross:

- He makes no plans for the future
- He is not there of his own choosing
- He can only face forward

If we are to be committed to the Lord Jesus then we do need to have this single-minded focus to our lives. The lack of commitment, or even the sense that it is a good thing, is a common failing in society today. Anyone who is passionately committed to a particular hobby is viewed with a sense of bemused indifference. We have some close friends whose sons sing in a choir. They have found that, despite having to agree to “stick with it” before joining, many drop out because it is inconvenient to attend each week and make the time to practise. Sadly what is common practice amongst non-Christians is finding its way into the culture of Christianity. If God’s word says something that I don’t agree with, then it must be His word that is at fault. It’s just Paul, or it belonged to another culture, or it wasn’t literal. Our ability to sacrifice stems from our appreciation of just how much He has sacrificed for us. If His death really means anything to me, then it must find practical expression in my life. As we consider the matter of commitment to Christ we need just to read together, without comment, several verses from the Bible.

“Reproach has broken My heart, and I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none” (Psalm 69:20).

“Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men” (Isaiah 52:14).

“He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isaiah 53:3).

“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which has been brought on me, which the LORD has inflicted on me in the day of His fierce anger” (Lamentations 1:12).

"I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:30).

"Father, if it is Your will, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done' ... and being in an agony, He prayed more earnestly" (Luke 22:42-44).

"Calvary, there they crucified Him" (Luke 23:33).

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

"The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

If these words remain just words then we shall never leave behind the comfort zone of our Christianity, and learn to sacrifice, joyfully giving to Him more than we think we are able to! It is simply not sufficient to sing a bit louder as we worship later this morning. His immeasurable, unconditional love for us must move us to say "no" to ourselves, "no" to my ambition, "no" to my happiness and ease, "no" to my position and to say "we are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10). No matter how much we give to Him, no matter how much we lose out on now, we can never out-give God. But let us now look at three examples from the Bible as to how we should sacrifice.

Firstly, we have the example of Ittai the Gittite. A Gittite was someone from Gath, a Philistine, from the town of Goliath, whom David had destroyed. The Gittites had no cause, no cause whatsoever to love David. And yet, at the time of Absalom's treason, when David had to flee from Jerusalem to save his life, Ittai comes and joins himself to David. In 2 Samuel 15:19-21 we read: "And the king said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you.' And Ittai answered the king and said, 'As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be.'"

How David must have been encouraged to hear such a statement of unstinting loyalty and commitment. There was no natural reason for Ittai to be so devoted to David. Indeed, David says as much when he encouraged Ittai to turn back, with no hard feelings between them. But how beautiful it is to hear Ittai, having appreciated the cost, to pledge himself wholly to David. At this time David was on the run, an outcast from his own people. To associate himself so closely to David was hardly a wise career move. But the words "whether in death or life" encompass every aspect of our existence. If it meant death to Ittai, well, he would rather die with David, than live without Him. So we can see that the first lesson in sacrifice is that it is to a person. When I, in whatever measure it may be, sacrifice it is to and for the Lord. He is the One who inspires me, although others may be the beneficiaries of my sacrifice. The words of the chorus say it well:

*"Out there amongst the hills, my Saviour died.
Pierced by those cruel nails, was crucified.
Lord Jesus, You have done, all this for me!
Henceforward I would live, only for Thee!"*

Do we in our circumstances and in our lives as believers together have such an overwhelming sense of what He has already done for us, that we are ready to commit ourselves wholly to Him? This is not done by words but by deeds. Ittai didn't make his fine speech, only to go back. He followed David into the wilderness and paid the price in terms of his own comfort and prosperity, simply so that he would remain true to his lord in rejection. Are we?

But see, too, what else happened! Not only did Ittai follow David, so did his men, even the little ones. You see such reality, such commitment does have its positive effect on those around about us. Occasionally my brother and I used to go running together. I hated it – far too painful! But once I ran nearly 3,000 metres not because I felt it was worthwhile, but simply because he was just ahead, and the thought of beating him was sweet indeed. To turn Christianity from a "formal religion" into a vibrant lifestyle would only take a few of us being prepared to get out of the comfort zone, and to dedicate ourselves wholly to serving Him. Sadly, all too often I am not prepared to leave all that matters to me behind and to follow Him.

Secondly, David himself teaches us an important lesson in what it means to sacrifice. Towards the end of his life, David had taken a census of the people. Perhaps he wanted to see how much the people had grown under his care. Perhaps he wanted to see how strong they were militarily. However, what he did was not a part of what God wanted him to do. So Israel is struck with plague that affects the nation, right to the gates of Jerusalem. But God, in his mercy,

sparing Jerusalem. It is enough. David repents. God, a divinely sent messenger came to David with the instruction, "Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite".

David went to Araunah and offered to buy the land so that he could build his altar. However, Araunah was only too willing to give David the ground he desires, free of charge. But, in verse 24 of 2 Samuel 24, David says, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing." David was going to build an altar and was presented with the opportunity of doing so at no cost to himself. Yet, David says to Araunah, the owner of the land where the altar was to be built, that he would have to pay for the land or the altar would be worthless. If we are to sacrifice anything to the Lord, then it will cost us.

To remain in our own comfort zones is so easy. It is perfectly possible to be active in my local church, but does it really cost me anything? Christianity is not a spectator sport: it requires individual commitment. So often these days we hear about how we can make our Christianity more enjoyable, more acceptable. But this goes against the very heart of what He has already done for us. Our salvation is based upon sacrifice, a sacrifice that cost Jesus His life. Our faith must not be seen as a path to self-fulfilment. To be asking "what is in it for me?" is wholly to misunderstand what it is that God requires of me now. In terms of my time, my emotional strength, my energy, and yes, my money, does Jesus have the first place, to my cost? The history of the Church is full of those who gave of themselves beyond what they could afford, even to the point of their health and their life. Sadly, though, for every one of these, there must be a hundred who have shrunk back from going beyond what they thought possible.

Finally, we have the example of the widow woman in Luke 21: "And He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So He said, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty has put in all the livelihood that she had." How much this wordless woman has to say to us today! There is no logic to sacrifice. How stupid to give away everything that she had! How would she eat? How would she live? What about tomorrow? Faith hushed all these questions as she responds to her God. To this widow, God meant everything: she gave Him all that she had. What does God mean to me? An hour or two on Sunday and a few pounds in the collection, less than I spend watching the news each week or getting to work? Those two small coins were the widow's comfort zone, and in appreciation of her God she gave them both away. The half-heartedness of the others must have been such a discouragement to her, and yet she does not let that put her off. She had a job to do, and she did it, regardless of the others. All too often we let the actions of others impair our own response to sacrifice for Him. But there is one other thing here to encourage us. You see, so often we speak about the widow's mite. Scripture never does. There were two. It was the widow's mites. One small coin might not matter much to us. You could hardly buy anything with just one. But Jesus correctly notices everything done for Him. One mite was the difference between something and everything, and that is a distance that I have never trod. Nothing that we sacrifice to Him is ever missed. He knows the true cost of everything that we do for Him. He could say that even a cup of cold water given in His name would not lose its reward. When we sacrifice ourselves for Him, frequently others will not know the cost, but Jesus does. Nothing given for Jesus is ever wasted, even though, at the time, it might seem so.

As we come to an end of our broadcast this morning, we cannot, we must not try to evade the challenge to re-examine our own lives, quietly before Him, to see if there is something more that we could do for Him now. Let us be ready to take the path less frequently followed, to leave behind my personal comfort zone and follow Him wherever He may lead.

But it is necessary to sound a note of caution. You see, sacrifice is a wonderful thing when it is truly for the Lord. But sacrifice can be terribly destructive. Suicide bombers and terrorists make a sacrifice of sorts, even to the point of their own lives. And yet there is absolutely nothing commendable in that. It is self-seeking glorification. Sacrifice without obedience is fanaticism, and God never calls us to that. Let us not go away this morning thinking, "Right, I'm going to give up my job, and leave my family behind to go and be a missionary in some remote place." God never calls us to serve Him in a way that is contrary to what He has said in the Bible. It is perfectly possible for the flesh in me, or even the Devil, to prompt me to sacrifice and commitment in religious things, but if it contradicts His word, then it is not profitable, not worthy of the name sacrifice. Samuel had some very telling words to say to King Saul, in 1 Samuel 15:22: "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams." What does God desire of me first and foremost? Obedience, obedience, obedience. Could it be that perhaps the greatest sacrifice that 21st century Christians could make is simply to obey what He has written in the New Testament for His people today. May He give us the strength and the wisdom to be committed to Him today, ready to leave behind all that stops me from putting into practice what I read in His precious Word.

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