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Ask the bigger questions

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Losing your life to save it

A cost benefit analysis of following Jesus:

What does Jesus require of me? Is it worth it?

- Session 1

Considering what Jesus' words about losing your life for him actually means, and whether this is worth it – from Luke 9:18-24

The words of Jesus

Luke 9:18-24

18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" 19 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

20 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

21 Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. 22 And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? 26 Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

Q1. "Messiah" is the Hebrew word for God's promised king. What will being God's messiah mean for Jesus and what will it mean for those who want to follow him¹?

- For Jesus, it will mean to suffer, die and rise to life. The Messiah needed to act this way in order that there would be subjects in his kingdom (see Colossians 1:13-14 in the footnote). Redemption and forgiveness of sin is the way into the kingdom – and the king himself is the one who provides this.

- For those who want to follow Jesus it will mean they need to: "deny themselves". "Deny" just means to turn down or forego something. Given the context of the conversation – especially comments about losing and gaining life –

¹ The following verse might be helpful in answering the first part of this question, especially around why the Messiah had to act in a certain way. "13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Colossians 1:13-14

Jesus is talking about more than just for example denying yourself an extra helping of dessert. Denying yourself needs to be character of your life. And given that as human beings we are instinctively self-interested, denying yourself means saying no to your own self-interest (some people might argue that they aren't motivated so much by self-interest because their interest is focused on their family – but it is still their family, rather than someone else's!)

- Taking up their cross means that denying themselves could imply suffering. In those days, those who were to be executed by crucifixion carried the cross beam to the execution site, as part of the humiliation.

- Note the “daily”. Denying themselves is an ongoing and difficult process. Each day there will be new challenges and choices to make.

Q2. When Jesus says lose your life for me and you will save it, is he saying that you need to take a bullet for him?

- Not necessarily! Losing your life is all about denying yourselves. If your life is no longer about pursuing your own self-interest, then in a sense your life is lost to you (because it's no longer all about you). So someone can deny themselves, and lose their life, and not be killed for being a follower of Jesus.

- Living this way means you'll gain life – and given Jesus' comment about being killed and rising to life (Luke 9:22) then gaining life is about gaining eternal life.

Q3. What's the alternative and how does Jesus rate this alternative?

- The alternative is to live for self – and you can even be successful at it. But from where Jesus is standing, even if you “gain the whole world” / get everything that you desire in this life, there is still the issue of what happens after death. You can be a winner in this life but lose out eternally. Even if you get everything in this life, it still doesn't measure up when compared to eternity.

Q4. Does being ashamed of Jesus mean that if someone asks if you're a follower of Jesus (and let's just assume that you are) that you're too embarrassed to say “yes”?

- It's important to look at the context here. Jesus is saying there's only one way to be a follower – living for Jesus and not for your own self-interest. So someone can't say “I'm happy to put Jesus first in these areas of my life, but not these areas” or “I'm happy to live for Jesus interests and my interests”. So someone who is ashamed of Jesus thinks that Jesus is not really worth living for (which is why they only allow Jesus to have influence in some areas of life, or hedge their bets by pursuing their own interests as well). Being a half-hearted follower Jesus is saying is no follower at all.

Q5. Why is living this way hard?

- Because we naturally pursue our own self interest. That's easier and more comfortable than denying ourselves (for example, it is easier to yell or be passive aggressive to someone who has hurt you, rather than forgiving them (which is what Jesus would want)).

- Because it's hard to trust that losing out in this world will be worth it, when compared with eternity. Eternity is abstract, feels a long way away, and unknown.
- Because our motives for doing things are often pretty mixed. For example, we can act in someone else's interests but it will also benefit us too (you may advise a difficult work colleague to join another department, which will suit them better, but it will also suit you too not having them around).
- Because we're not sure if Jesus can really be trusted. There's security in pursuing our own interests. There's vulnerability in not putting our own interests first.

Q6. Where is it hard for you personally?

- It might be feeling dogged by failure – knowing that you've acted out of self-interest. In this case it's comforting to know that Jesus offers forgiveness.
- It might be because you're not quite sure what denying yourself looks like in the daily circumstances of life. In this case we can always ask God for help (he will point things out through our conscience) and read the Bible (which has everything we need for learning how God wants us to live).
- It might be because you're not quite convinced giving up pursuing our own self-interest in this world will be worth it. But if Jesus was willing to die for us, then that's the ultimate example of him looking after our interests. And Jesus' insights about life – he knows what's best and is looking out for us. Denying ourselves according to Jesus is actually the best way for us to live, because where we spend eternity is much more important than our time on earth.

Caroline Spencer is a staff member at City Bible Forum ...

I made the decision to follow Jesus 22 years ago now. If you ask me has it been worth it (in terms of following Jesus) then I would have to be honest and say there's been times when I've thought it would be heaps easier just to live for my own self-interest. I distinctly remember a time when I looked at the lives of some close friends who weren't followers of Jesus and thought their lives looked easier, more comfortable, more prosperous and more enjoyable than mine. It took me a few years to realise that while I knew intellectually what Jesus required of me, I wasn't convinced in my heart that it was worth it. So I went through the motions of trying to put Jesus first in my life - because I knew that was expected of me – but there wasn't any joy in it. It was only as I learned to trust that Jesus had my best interests at heart (the evidence being that he was prepared to die for me) that my experience of following Jesus changed. Yes it's hard work at times putting him first, but I know in my head and in my heart that I'm not missing out. In life it's not about what you have and don't have. It's about your attitude. And I'm not missing out if I'm convinced that Jesus has my best interests at heart in whatever happens (or doesn't happen) to me.

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