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ARE YOU LOOKING FOR JOY OR ENJOYMENT?

Today's Text: Mark 8: 34-38

Extracts:

When [Jesus] had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, “*Whoever desires to come after Me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me... For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ... For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed, when He comes in the glory of His Father, with the holy angels*” [Mk 8: 34, 36, 38]

*Jim Dancy is the co-founder and CEO of a biological research company in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA. On March 11, 2009, he won \$10,000 in the Michigan Lottery's Club Keno game, and gave everything to charity.¹ He said that his decision was influenced by a close friend who taught him to think of others first, and to think of **what life was really about**. Soon after giving away the money, Dancy said, “I (felt) very good today, knowing I could help a little — probably **my 'best day' in a long time**.” He did something that made him happy, something that gave him joy.*

Many of us are frantically looking for happiness and peace of mind from what we say, do or have. We love to enjoy ourselves by using our blessings and opportunities in life to indulge our fancies. We love to take the short cuts to victory and success (enjoyment), not the hard road paved with pains of toil, trials and tribulations or self-denial that ultimately produce happiness (joy). Even when we ultimately have the material means to enjoy any pleasures of our dreams, joy still eludes us.

In this week's study, Jesus Christ, a friend closer to us than Dancy's was to him, has taught that those who desire to follow Him must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. That is hardly what most of us want to hear or do. So, exactly what is the problem? What are you looking for in life? Are you looking for joy or enjoyment?

This week's study will enable you to make a decision!

¹ .”Lottery winner gives prize to charity,” <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30266953/>

1. Background: Jesus defines the high road to true discipleship

On the way to the towns of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus called the people and His disciples together and said to them, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” [Mk 8: 34]. That is a loaded statement. Let us take it bit by bit as follows:

a) *Whoever desires to come after Me*

Christ’s invitation is open to all and yet it is not by force. In other words, if you do not desire to follow, you are free to stay away. You have to be personally convinced that that is what you have chosen to do. Therefore, do not come because you want to do what is popular or politically correct. Do not come because coming is a sure road to economic or political gains. When multitudes came looking for Jesus on one occasion, for example, He said to them, “You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” [Jn 6: 24-26]. Do not come because you want to make Jesus your meal ticket. Do not come because you have been forced by family tradition to come. Come to Him because you are convinced that it is ***the right thing to do***.

b) *Let him deny himself*

To deny yourself is to ***do it His own way, not your way***. You must follow both the bold and fine prints of the instruction manual. You cannot pick and choose! It is not a user-friendly option but a God-fearing choice. Nobody is forcing you to accept Jesus but once you do so, you have to come as He wants it. You have to be ready to obey Him. It could mean alienating your family members or setting aside your own personal ambitions and goals [Lk 14: 26]. While questioning the sincerity of the scribes and Pharisees, for example, Jesus quoted the prophesy of Isaiah, which says, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth; and honour Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me; and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the commandment of men” [Matt. 13: 7-9]. If you cannot come wholeheartedly, do not even try!

c) *And take up his cross and follow Me*

Jesus took His own cross all the way to Calvary and died on it for our salvation. He says you must also carry your own cross in order to follow Him. What cross is He talking about? It is ***to faithfully follow Him for the rest of your life until the day that God calls you home by death or by rapture, whichever comes first***. That suggests that following Christ is not a part-time or temporary job! It has no vacation. Whether the road is smooth or rough, short or long, you must be prepared to stay the course to

the very end. That is why Paul says, “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” **[Phil. 3:14]**.

Some of us may not yet have accepted the above call to discipleship. Some of us have and it has been a struggle. How do we know that we are doing the right thing? The African tortoise says, “It is a good thing that I walk slowly because I could be going in the wrong direction!” So, we need to know where we are going and whether we are on the right road.

2. On what kind of road are you carrying your cross?

Look at how hard it was for Jesus to bring His own cross to Calvary. First, they had beaten Him so badly that He lost so much blood and became very weak. Then, the road was rough and hilly and lined by detractors who mocked and jeered Him all the way. He fell several times but each time He got up. At one stage, they had to get Simon of Cyrene to help Him to carry the cross **[Matt. 27: 32]**. In spite of all the odds, Jesus went all the way and achieved salvation for all of humanity. Having failed to stop Him, Satan is now making war on those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” **[Rev. 12: 17]**. So, why do you think your road will be easy? That is why you need to know early enough on what kind of road you are carrying your cross. Let us examine a few cases, as follows:

a) *You are on ‘Easy Ride Highway’!*

Psychologists say that human beings are hedonists, that is, they love pleasure and avoid pain. That is why we want more pay for less or no work. We would rather eat than do the cooking. We want freedom if it means we can do what our hearts please. In our search for fame, fortune or popularity, the end justifies the means. In sum, we want an easy ride all the way on “Easy Ride Highway!”

Such a highway is full of distractions. Satan will tempt us with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life **[1 Jn 2: 16]**. For example, a rich young man once came to Jesus to find out what he should do to gain eternal life. Jesus told him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me.” The young man went away sorrowful because he could not give up his great possessions **[Matt. 19: 18-22]**. He could not get out of his zone of comfort. But I doubt if he was satisfied with all the pleasures that money could buy him; otherwise, he did not need to come to Jesus to ask for the road to salvation! In the words of Solomon, “the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep” **[Eccl. 5: 12]**, and “all the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied” **[Eccl. 6: 7]**.

Enjoyment cannot produce joy. Money cannot buy love. So, if you find yourself on the road of sexual immorality, corruption or idolatry (worship of material wealth), you are going in the opposite direction and driving at top speed to hell!

b) *You are on 'Squandered Opportunities Slope'!*

Some people have been richly blessed by God. They have position, power and prestige. They are materially rich. However, instead of using such blessings to glorify God, they squander them on things that will give them pleasure. For example, priests have sexually abused altar boys and girls. Top sports stars have cheated on their spouses. Top politicians and public servants have corruptly enriched themselves to the detriment of national programmes for the poor and the needy. Such people, when exposed, have brought shame to themselves, their congregations, their families and, of course, God. They have driven their crosses into a ditch on "Squandered Opportunities Slope"!

Take the case of King Solomon. He had asked God only for wisdom but God added riches and honour, such that there were no other kings like him in his days [1 Kgs 3: 13]. With his wisdom, Solomon "spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five," and "men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear (his) wisdom" [1 Kgs 5: 32,34]. He built a temple paved with gold and God was so pleased with him that He promised that His ears and eyes would be perpetually attentive to the prayers offered there [2 Chron. 7: 12-18]. However, his material affluence soon intoxicated him. He married seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines who turned away his heart from God [1 Kgs 11: 1-3]. Solomon realized too late that enjoyment cannot give happiness and he wrote, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" [Eccl. 1: 2].

You may be the sharpest prophet or speak the most in tongues in your congregation. You may have the largest congregation on television. Miracles may pour out during your crusades. But if you squander the opportunities God has made available to you to win souls for His kingdom, and refuse to repent and change your ways, you are carrying the cross of the thief on the left of Jesus at Calvary. He squandered a rare opportunity to get saved and, instead, joined others to revile Jesus [Lk 23: 39]. On the day of judgment, Jesus will ask you to get out of His sight because He does not know those who work wickedness [Matt. 7: 21-23].

c) *You are on 'Self-Restraint Pass'!*

You know from the words of Jesus that narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to salvation and only a few can find it [**Matt. 7: 14**]. You choose to be one of the few. You are ready to apply self-restraint and to fight off temptations along the way. You are encouraged by heroes like Joseph who overcame Mrs. Potiphar's immoral overtures and endured imprisonment for an offense he did not commit. For his self-control and fear of God, he wound up as the governor of Egypt [**Gen. 41:40**]. Each time you sin, you confess it and believe God's promise that He will forgive you [**1 Jn 1: 7-9**]. You pay heed to Paul's words to meditate on whatever things are pure, lovely and of good report, and to imitate good conduct. The result is the peace of God which will be with you. As you dwell in His peace, you will learn to be content no matter the state in which you find yourself because you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you [**Phil. 4: 8-13**]. If you can do all that, you are carrying your cross through "Self-Restraint Pass!"

However, you must guard against temptations. Unless your self-restraint is anchored on Jesus, not yoga or esoteric wisdom, it will not last because "bodily exercise profits a little but godliness is profitable for all things" [**1 Tim. 4: 8**]. In pursuing godliness, envy will be your greatest threat, especially when you see your colleagues and competitors operating on "Easy Ride Highway" flashing past you! Like Jeremiah, you could find yourself questioning God why the way of the wicked seems to prosper. God's response may not immediately help! He will say that if you are tired of running with the footmen, you cannot run against horses [**Jer. 12: 1-5**]. Happily, the Psalmist gives you a simpler answer: the people you envy are operating on slippery slope and their end is disastrous [**Ps. 73: 1-1-18**]. So, hang in there and take your cross to the finishing line.

d) *You are at 'Persecution Square'!*

Sometimes, your "Self-Restraint Pass" may open into "Persecution Square" because all those "who desire to live godly in Christ will suffer persecution" [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]. It can be violent (life-threatening) or subtle, such as the benign snub from family and friends or colleagues. Persecution should not bother you because you are a winner, no matter what they throw at you. For example, Stephen saw Jesus in heaven awaiting his arrival there as he was being stoned to death [**Acts 7: 55-58**]. They put Paul and Silas in jail but at midnight, as they prayed and sang hymns to God, there was a great earthquake. The prison was shaken and the chains on all the prisoners were

loosed! In the end, the jailer and his household gave their lives to Christ [Acts 16: 23-34]. Blessed in deed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [Matt. 7: 10].

From the forgoing, we can conclude that *joy* (happiness or enduring satisfaction) *comes only to those who do God's will, no matter the odds they face*. Their destination is eternal life with Christ. Therefore, they are not distracted by transient pleasures called enjoyment. That was why Jesus asked His listeners, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" [Mk 8: 36].

3. Conclusion: The joy of the Lord is your strength!

A simple rule to follow is *to ask yourself what you are looking for in life. Are you looking for enjoyment or joy? The likelihood is that only joy can help you to carry your own cross to the end*. Your ability for joy, however, depends on the road on which you are travelling.

Enjoyment is short-sighted and ephemeral Choose joy, especially as the joy of the Lord is your strength [Neh. 8: 10]. I wish you safe journey as you carry your cross to eternity with Jesus.