

Wouldn't you know it: Peter's in trouble with Jesus again this week. But thank you, Peter: as a result of his *faux pas* we all hear a decisive word from the living Word, Jesus. He eliminates the gray area for us, the middle ground where so many of us would like to be left alone to live our lives in contentment, having it both ways. But Jesus lays out for Peter and for all His followers how to make good our mistakes up until now; how to live beyond the ceiling—of ambition, of fulfillment, of fear, of loneliness, of death—to name a few—we all bump up against in this lifetime. (The sad thing is that few can hear what Jesus says, and fewer still can live it. So many people keep painfully bumping up against the invisible ceiling of life in this world, wondering why God doesn't seem to help them.)

Did you notice what Peter said this time to merit Jesus telling him off so vigorously? Jesus has just spelled out the endgame, the culmination to His earthly career: it is absolutely necessary for Him to go on to Jerusalem, to suffer at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes (think lay leaders, pastors, and Bible teachers of His culture), to suffer greatly, and to be executed—then to be raised up on the third day. Peter doesn't think that's such a good plan, so he shows Jesus a little love, a little compassion, a little positive thinking: "Hey Jesus, by God's mercy, that cannot happen to You!"

Jesus' eyes flash; He wheels on Peter: "Get behind Me, Satan!"

(Peter has his partisans in every generation, in every church. He means well: "Oh, Jesus, such a bad thing shouldn't happen to You. You're a winner, not a loser. Peter would make a good American, wouldn't he? Who wants the cross, who wants to maybe suffer? We want a pain-free gospel. Peter comes from common sense, the gospel of happy endings, of success, of celebrity. We all love a winner. Consumer is king; people shop for a different church if it gets a little too "hot in the kitchen." Much of the popular gospel today serves to make us lords: the gospel of self-actualization, how to live our best life now, how to get the prosperity we deserve and God wants for us. How to put God to work for us. (Strange how Jesus was a slow learner and missed out on all this religious wisdom and prosperity.)

Jesus is saying "there may be benefits to all that, but it's not My gospel. Here's My formula: 1) renounce your own life; throw it away—your map for navigating life, your common sense, your ambition for success, those things you keep clutching onto; 2) pick up your cross each day (a chosen, public cross, for My sake; 3) keep on following Me always, as a disciple does his or her guru, or teacher: you move in with Me, school with Me—drop your former life and abide with Me."

And the American church calls back, "But Jesus: we're sensible, well-adjusted, fairly successful (if we may say so), normal people. We just want a nice church, a nice gospel, some encouragement to help get us thru the week to be good citizens." Much of the current American way seems to be to want to keep hanging onto all our goodies, then add Jesus into the mix also. Perfect: I get everything I want plus Jesus.

"Oh, I understand, my dear ones. But if you claiming to listen to Me want to become My followers, here's how it works. I understand how the treasures, the trophies, the triumphs of this lifetime are pleasant. I don't begrudge you what you have gained; I will not zap you. But I'm here to tell you you must choose. If you will open your hands

to Me to grasp You and raise you up into the next dimension, My kind of Life, you've got to let go your own personal dreams and ambitions, your personal titles and treasures and trophies. You're welcome to keep hanging on to the ways you have always defined yourselves and "gotten ahead"—but you will always bump your career, your head, your heart, your human life into the ceiling of this world, the ceiling of your fears and limitations. Your trophies will always turn to ashes. I am so eager to bring you into My kind of Life, eternal life, into life no longer circumscribed—but you've got to choose. My way of Life leads thru Good Friday before Easter Sunday; My kind of life leads thru the cross before the crown."

The world hears this gospel and thinks you'd have to be crazy to sign on. Some of you are married to such people, successful people, winners in this world who simply do not begin to "get it." And let's be honest: we are such people. At times many of us still think you'd have to be crazy to literally give it all up, as necessary, to allow Jesus to have us totally. It might be easier if we hadn't been so successful, didn't have such nice possessions, didn't have so much to lose. Many of you around here have done quite well playing by the rules of this world—have come out on top of the heap. The better the prizes we have won, the more appealing the trophies, the harder it is to relax our grip, to let go, to trust.

You would have to be crazy to risk all you have gained, to refocus, *unless...* unless the One promising to lead you into this new Life is trustworthy; unless He had already safely navigated the life into which He invites you.

This is something like what Peter has just recognized, just confessed in the first part of our lesson. Jesus, the end looming closer, asks them all, "Who are folks thinking I really am?" Several tentative responses. Then the zinger, the question Jesus asks and asks and keeps asking each one of us: "And *you*, who do you say that I am?"

Good old Peter. He puts it out there: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (That is, the God who is alive; the present, active God of the universe. Being His Son there is something divine, one way or another, about Jesus. And being the "Christ"—we've heard that so often maybe we've forgotten what it means. "The Anointed One" promised by God. Jesus is His name, "Christ" is His office, His title. But God does the anointing of the kings of Israel; *Jesus is God's choice to be King*. God's choice to lead us Home. Peter names all this.)

"Blessed are you, Peter: flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but rather My Father in heaven has." This is a Holy Spirit insight. Old fashioned human nature does not fully trust the spiritual, the eternal, the unseen realm. Peter is no more intelligent, no more holy, no more insightful than the other eleven—but God has revealed to Peter first the identity of Jesus. The ears to hear, the eyes to see, the heart to love Jesus back come as a gift from God, from the Holy Spirit. Our human logic will not get us all the way into new Life in Him. It can remove intellectual obstacles, sure, so we might come closer to trust, but will never get us into the Kingdom. That remains a choice and a commitment, responding to the free grace of God. (Christianity is a revealed religion; we would never figure it out or reason our way into it: the Person Jesus has revealed the nature of God and the Holy Spirit brings us into living relationship with the living God. I think this is what drives our cultured despisers crazy: how can we offer our allegiance to

One who does not answer to the wisdom of this world, to the God-anointed One so far above the self-anointed powers and leaders and experts of this realm?)

Apart from the Holy Spirit, the gospel must always appear more loss than gain: why would you lose what you've got to gain what you can't see and can't trust? On the other hand, guided by the Holy Spirit, we give up what we know we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose, according to the promise of One more trustworthy than we ourselves.

[Jesus lived His life toward the cross. Back at the beginning of His public ministry, you remember, the enemy tried to ensnare Jesus with the three temptations: turn the stones into bread; throw Yourself off the topmost pinnacle of the Temple; receive the glory from all the kingdoms of the world—if You are indeed the Son of God, Mr Big Shot.

Three different challenges to become a “winner,” and in very public ways the crowds would surely appreciate and respond to. Turn the rocks into bread; feed the hungry—that's what Jesus wanted to do anyway, right? Everyone would know how generous He was and how capable He was to wield the power of God for dramatic good. But no.

Jump off the Temple top onto the courtyard below, right during the peak Passover crowds? Tens of thousands would be within a few blocks; they would witness this miracle and the word would soon spread throughout the Jewish Diaspora: surely the Messiah, borne up uninjured by the angels of God, has come! We must worship and obey Him for sure! But no.

Finally, the enemy takes Jesus to a high mountain to try to seduce Him with power and adulation. (Interesting, Jesus does not contest the authority or the power of the enemy to make good this offer.) “I'll give You back all the lands and peoples of the world—all You have to do is worship me.” But no: hell no! No prize is worth blaspheming and disobeying the living God.

But you've noticed this third vista is exactly what Jesus ended up gaining eventually, anyway. It's just that Satan wanted to take Jesus high, wanted to seduce Jesus to gain it all fast and on the cheap; Jesus chose to go low; to earn it back by the way of the cross and by being raised from the dead in order forever to defeat the power of death, of evil, of Satan. The slow, gradual, undramatic, painful way. Jesus Himself knew what it was to deny His own ambition, His own comfort—in order to make the way of the cross into the Way of Life.]

This is the obedient Jesus, the patient Jesus, the Jesus who loves us at great cost: this is the Jesus who promises “I will make good your losses, whatever you let go in order to grab hold of Me and my cross-directed life. If you'll let go of your own agenda, your self-sufficiency, your trophies, I will bring you along with Me thru the way of the cross into My way of Life.

As we get serious with this challenge, this promise of Jesus, we probably need to get serious about our accomplishments, our ambitions, our trophies. What have they brought you? What have they cost you? Where have they failed you?

I do know something about trophies—literal ones, anyway. Some of you already know my brother and I used to be hot stuff in junior age group tennis. Along the way, we accumulated trophies. Dozens of them, hundreds. We slept in bunkbeds in the same

shared little bedroom (Rick was older, so he got the top) so Dad would have to add on shelves to the walls periodically to hold these trophies.

But then I grew up and moved away. Mom was patient. But once I moved away with my possessions, her warnings took on a new tone. “I’d like you to do something with your trophies. If you don’t, I will.” I didn’t know what to do with them; I was on the East Coast. But sure enough, one Christmas vacation I came home and our bedroom had been redone and turned into a guestroom. Not a trophy in sight. (Being very sensible, my mom had donated them to an inner city tennis program and I’m glad. A better solution than mine would have been—I confess I would probably have thrown them into a dumpster.)

Do you know why? What have you done with your trophies—literal or figurative? Your accomplishments, your victories—have they brought you peace? Have they gotten you where you’ve wanted to be, your heart unhurt, your integrity intact, your relationships unbroken? Or have your trophies, like mine had, turned to ashes? No, we had no house fire but the time came, sadly, when those trophies represented more hurt to me than joy. I had worked hard, had won fair and square—but the time came when I quit winning so much, and my own ambitions and hopes came grinding to a halt, and all that hardware became a shrine to what might have been, what used to be—but what had let me down, and caused great turmoil and heartsickness—symbols of my own ambition, my own striving, my own way, which had turned to ashes. (There were three of some value; my mom kept those. Small silver tennis balls. National championships. But all the trophies of our own efforts, our own planning, apart from the will of God end up the same, over time. Moth and thief break in; rust comes to eat them away. We think some are more valuable than others...they all turn to ashes.)

Trophies come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, don’t they? Silver bowls and serving platters—we’ve got a few of those around, still. The little marble pillars with tiny statues on top of them—come to think of it, not so different from wedding cakes. Now there’s a trophy which has different value for different people. Trophies can come in titles, in positions, in salary, in commissions, in spouses, in all sorts of ways.

Maybe you have never learned the value of Christ’s offer: to exchange our former life, our plans, our hopes, our trophies for His promise of new life. Maybe your scorecard reads just as you would have it: you’ve never bumped your ambition or broken your heart or your dreams on the ceiling of this earthly realm. Maybe your hands are already full of very good things. God bless you. Only it’s going to be very hard for you to hear and accept the gospel, the eternal offer Jesus holds out to you. (“Harder for a camel to go thru the eye of the needle than a rich one to enter into the Kingdom.”)

If you’re here worshipping God this morning, on the other hand, you’re probably familiar with some of those various types of ashes, and the offer of our Lord Jesus is one you have already “jumped on:” throw away your former, self-directed life; let go whatever treasures we have grasped along the way apart from His will, pick up your cross (obey His direction each day); keep on following Him, wherever He leads you. It will probably be gradual, slow, and building from the inside out.

But it’s important we understand clearly what Jesus means and does not mean when He speaks of denying or renouncing our own life in order to gain our life. What this is not saying is that His followers are to be mediocre, unsuccessful, unambitious,

cautious. We have no business resigning ourselves to a false modesty and becoming dispirited doormats. (Of all people His followers ought to be the hardest and most persevering workers; the best students; the sharpest lawyers, the most conscientious office workers and CEOs, the most creative artists and the most healing physicians: the most excellent in each field. We have the highest motivation in the world—to live our lives in gratitude to One whom we love and to whom we know we owe everything—and we enjoy the power of the Holy Spirit in and thru us if we will, and as we live our lives in obedience to God’s calling.)

I’m afraid people sometime confuse “renounce our selves” for pretending we have no great passions or talents or dreams left anymore. This command of Jesus is not an excuse for giving up on who God created us to be: on the contrary! (One trick to avoid the pain of ashes in our lives is to throttle back our expectations and hopes; like the turtle who pulls back within its shell.) But this strategy has nothing to do with Jesus; it’s a strategy for gradually dieing, not living the new Life He brings.

Jesus is calling His people to risk it all, all over again. But to follow the pain, follow the brokenness, follow the ashes all the way Home. Behind every broken heart is the God-given desire to love and connect; the problem is not the desire but how I tried to manage it. Behind every broken dream is the God-dream to transcend. It doesn’t pay to quit dreaming and quit venturing—how dreary that would be—but instead to offer our dreams back to the Spirit of God who will give wings under the right ones. Ambition is not the problem; we have been created to excel. It’s ambition which is not harnessed to serve and bring glory to God, which fuels my ego or uses others or cuts corners which gets me into trouble.

Our capacities and yearnings and careers are not the enemy; the problem comes when we set our own agenda; when we expect our own best efforts will transcend the ceiling of life on this earth and usher us into the heavenly dimension. But that we cannot pull off; only Jesus can bring us into Life, into eternal Life.

[In *The Screwtape Letters* CS Lewis discusses the matter of losing our life and gaining our life. (Screwtape, the senior devil, is mentoring a junior devil, whose job is to lead astray all us people whom God so loves.) Screwtape reminds the lesser devil, “Remember, always, that He really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctiveness of every one of them. When he talks of their losing their selves, he means only abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts that when they are [entirely] His they will be more themselves than ever.”]

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life...” [Mt 19:29]

Matthew 16: 13-27

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.