

The Joy of Christian Discipleship

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[0 : 0 0] remain standing, I'll pray. Open our eyes, Father, that we might behold wonderful things from your word. Soften our hearts that we might receive that word. Transform our wills that we might be doers of it and loose our tongues that we might proclaim it. And we ask this for the glory of your Son in whose name we pray. Amen. Please sit down. As you know, my usual habit is to work systematically through a passage of scripture for our Bible talks. However, today I'm going to go through a number of passages of scripture in order to get a big picture of one particular idea. And I want to start by talking to you. By the way, you'll see an outline of the Bible talk if you want to follow in your newsletters. I want to start by introducing you to a particular man. His name was Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant lived from 1724 to 1804. He was a philosopher. In fact, many philosophers would class him as the greatest philosopher of modern times. He was famous for his simple, regular life. He enjoyed books on travel, but he never traveled. He enjoyed company, but he never married. His neighborhoods set their clocks by his perpetual afternoon walks. Kant's philosophy is captured in a number of works. The critique of pure reason, the critique of practical reason, the critique of judgment. His thoughts on Christianity are captured in his work, which is called Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. Kant maintained that it was impossible to think coherently about God. His argument, greatly simplified, goes something like this.

We all have a sense of moral duty. The idea of moral duty makes sense only if there is a God who can reward our moral duty with the reward of happiness. That is of a judgment in favor of us in the afterlife or a condemnation if we've fallen short. I wonder if you notice what Kant is saying. The highest good he's saying is to act morally. That is to do your moral duty. This good is the sort of good that God rewards. Now let me say that Kant's talk of duty, I think, has far-reaching effect on Christian thought. For example, I want you to ask yourself these questions.

[2 : 2 7] Why should you obey the Ten Commandments? Why should we do that? Why should you or I not worship false gods? Why should we not commit adultery? Why should we not lie? Why should we go to church?

Why should we take up our cross and follow Jesus? Why should we be involved in Christian ministry here at church or elsewhere? Why should people consider going to the mission field or entering into public ministry or whatever? And I guess many of us in our minds will answer that we should do these things because they are right, because they are our duty. Or we shouldn't do these things because they are wrong. That is, God would consider them to be wrong things to do. That is, we should act in such and such a way because there are inherent rights and wrongs and there is a God who will reward or punish us for the way we act. And it's here that I want to drop my first little bomb for today.

I am not sure how Christian such thinking is. You see, I'm not sure that our primary motivation for Christian activity is duty. My view is that we have been significantly influenced by Kant and by his Greek predecessors, the Stoics. And if I can put it this way, I think there is more Kant than Christianity in us. Our motivation for Christian action, I think, often knows more to Kant than it does to Jesus. Or if you want to put it another way, our motivation for Christian ministry and discipleship often owes more to Immanuel Kant than it does to the real Immanuel, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me give you an example to think about. I want you to remember the last time that a preacher told you that there was a cost involved in the discipleship of Jesus. They told you that Jesus demanded that we give away all that stood in the way of being disciples. And perhaps you might remember that you were really struck by this and you felt guilty. Now, what I want to ask you this morning is why? Why did you feel guilty? Did you feel guilty because you heard someone say that God had this great big ought that you ought to do? And that ought demanded a response from you.

That response was going to be costly and the response was going to hurt you. But you knew it was an ought from God because it was in the Bible and you'd been convinced about this and therefore you ought to do it.

It was your duty to give of yourself like this. Friends, can you see what I mean? I think our lives are often determined by oughts. Now, in itself, there is nothing wrong with that.

[5 : 10] There's nothing wrong with having actions that are determined by duty in one sense. But I think so often we act in particular ways because it is simply the right thing to do.

And our motivation for action is often, and for Christian action, is often duty. And my contention is that while those things aren't in and of themselves wrong, they are more Kantian than Christian. So having said that challenge, let's see if I can support it from the scriptures. I want you to follow with me as we have a look at some passages from the Bible together. And the first one is John 3, which we read earlier on. So please pick up your Bibles and have a look at it with me. John chapter 3. Now, it's easy to find. You know, you start at the New Testament, you get John 3, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and then you can find chapter 3 verses 22 to 30.

Now, I want you to notice the context of this verse, these verses. John the Baptist has been preaching the gospel for some time now, and he's been telling people about Jesus. And when Jesus begins preaching, Jesus begins to more bring more disciples to himself than John has. And the disciples of John begin to get a bit worried, you know, thinking that their master is going to lose out somehow in all of this. And they come and talk to John about it. And John replies, the bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. This joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater and I must become less. Now, I want you to hear this language. John knows he is the servant of Jesus. He is the forerunner of Jesus. He knows that Jesus must grow in reputation and stature. He knows that he, John, must decrease in reputation and importance. Now, how does he act in the face of these truths? Does he reluctantly say, oh, well, I've had my time. These are the sacrifices that one must make. Never mind. It's my job. It was someone's got to do it.

[7 : 21] I was ordained for this. No, he doesn't, does he? You see, John is the friend of the bridegroom. He is not interested in the bride for himself. No, he just wants the best for his friend, the bridegroom for whom he's the forerunner. He loves this friend. His whole life has been oriented around this one's coming. He wants this friend to increase and grow in influence.

And his friend is, is the benefit of his, and his friends are the benefit of his joy. Notice what is being said. John is saying, I get my kicks in life out of seeing my friend get the best. And so I am excited when the bride hears the bridegroom's voice. I am full of joy.

When Jesus has pride of place for, I love Jesus and I want the best for him. And when he gets the best, I am filled with joy. Now, let me say, John is not into some sort of strange sort of masochistic sacrifice. He is not denying himself. He is not stirring himself into action by hanging a great ought over his, his head. Rather, he's doing the very thing that gives him the greatest joy in life.

The greatest joy you see is found in bringing honor and glory to his master and friends and friend. So I want to urge you to do some rethinking. Which do you think is a better motivation for Christian ministry? A series of oughts hanging over your head, a weird sort of masochistic sense of duty, or a knowledge that the greatest joy to be found in life is found in bringing people to know Jesus. That the greatest excitement and exhilaration is linking lost people to the saviour of the world. Now, let me let you into a little secret about our married life.

My wife, Heather, is a great evangelist. She loves introducing people to Jesus. And at times, though she has a duty to be at home with me, she will stay introducing people to Jesus.

[9 : 50] And she will come home as though there has been nothing else to do in this world. And no greater excitement to do in this world than that.

You see, she's got this right, hasn't she? You see, that is incredibly right. And that is what John the Baptist is saying. He's saying, that one Jesus must grow in the part he has in people's lives.

And I will do anything for that to happen. Let's go to another text, friends. If you're in John, just flip back to Matthew chapter 13. Matthew chapter 13, verse 44.

In this parable, Jesus is explaining what the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven is like. And he says, look, the kingdom of heaven, this is verse 44, is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found and they covered up.

Then in their joy for over what they found, they go and they sell all that they have and they buy the field. You see, the parable is a parable of a person being brought into the kingdom. And why do they sell everything?

[11:01] Do they sell it? Do they do it because it's the only way they can get the field in the treasure and the treasure? No, I think they sell everything because they have discovered a treasure that is beyond comprehension.

They don't even consider the amount that you might spend for it. They are excited. They are filled with joy. They don't even think of the word sacrifice. No, out of sheer joy.

Sheer joy. They sell everything and they rush out and they buy the field and the treasure. Can you see what's being said? At one point in our life, friend, Jesus was totally unimportant for us.

He was just a vague historical figure who was talked about a couple of times a year. The things we enjoyed most were food, friendship, productivity, investments, vacations, hobbies, games, reading, sex, sports, art, television, travel and the rest.

And Jesus was merely an idea that we entertained every now and then. And then one day we discovered him. Somehow, someone or something lifted the lid and we stood before Jesus and we saw him for the first time.

[12:17] We saw his beauty. We saw what he'd accomplished. We stood before the blinding light of his countenance. We heard his message of salvation and the shock hit us.

For the joy of food and friendship and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and sex and sports and art and television and travel suddenly faded into insignificance for us.

And we decided that they were all worth giving up for the sake of gaining the joy of knowing Jesus. A passion for this world was replaced by a passion for God.

By a lust for the joy of knowing and being with him. Now in your Bibles, you're in Matthew. Keep working toward the back towards Paul's epistles and find Philippians chapter 3.

This is our third passage, Philippians 3. Now I need to explain, Paul is talking about his heritage and he had much to boast in. He is talking about what he was before he became a Christian.

[13:24] And he says by Jewish standards he had everything. He belonged to God's own people. That made him a very select group.

He belonged to one of the two elite tribes among God's people. A very elite group amongst Israel. He had kept all of God's laws.

He was educated by the best Jewish educators in his religion. He was a Jew among Jews. By human standards, according to the way he'd measured life up until this point, he had it all.

And then he met Jesus. And it blew him apart. Or Jesus blew him apart. And everything else somehow faded into insignificance.

Listen to what he has to say. Verse 7 of Philippians 3. But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

[14:27] What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I lost all things. And I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ. That righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

You see, I want to know Christ. Yes, I want to know the power of his resurrection, the participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Now friends, this is incredible stuff, isn't it? You see, this man is addicted to Jesus. He wants to know Jesus more. He wants to be where Jesus is, to do what Jesus does, to experience what Jesus experiences.

He wants to know Jesus. And why is he willing to suffer? Is he masochistic? Is he under some great ought in life that he's got a soldier on and say, I ought to be dying for Jesus?

[15:42] Is he struggling to fulfill some huge duty that's beyond all the rest of us and that none of us can accomplish? No, friends, he simply wants to be where God is.

That joy is to be where Jesus is. And if that is so, then he will follow Jesus wherever he goes for the sheer thrill of being in his presence.

Possessions are nothing compared to Jesus. Heritage is nothing compared to Jesus. Suffering is okay when it's done with Jesus.

That is why Paul can sing in prison. Do you remember the first time he met the Philippians? And he was locked up for preaching the gospel. He was put in a jail at night and he's found with the chains on his legs singing.

It is why he does this because he can burst into praise for suffering for the gospel, not because he likes the pain, but because he loves the one in whose favour that pain is served.

[16:55] Is he just stealing himself? Is he just a masochist? No. He is in fellowship with his master. He is joining his Lord.

He has his eye fixed on a glorious future where lost people will join with angelic throngs in praise for the crucified and risen Messiah.

And the very next day, in the story of the Philippian jailer, in fact, that very night, the Philippian jailer rushes in as the chains are burst open on Paul's arms and legs and he stays in prison.

And the jailer says, what must I do to become Christian? Friends, he has his eyes set on this, where there will be hordes in heaven who rejoice that the gospel came to them.

And he knows suffering is negligible beside that. Now, I could go on with many more verses to support my general point, but one more will do.

[18:02] So if you're in Philippians, now go back to Mark. So Matthew, beginning of the New Testament, then Mark. Look at Mark 10, verse 17 to 31. And I want you to look at the context.

In verse 17, an eager man runs up enthusiastically to Jesus as Jesus is ministering. And he says, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus says, well, keep the commandments. The man, this man declares, I've done so since I was a boy. And in verse 21, Jesus looks at him and loves him.

It's a very poignant moment. He urges him to go, sell everything he has and give to the poor. Do you know what he's saying? He's saying, will you give up everything for me?

And the man's face falls. And he goes away. After all, he had great wealth. Jesus then turns and he tells his disciples, it's going to be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

[19:05] And Peter responds by telling Jesus that he and the other disciples have left everything to follow him. And Jesus responds with the words in verse 29 to 31. See them there?

Look at them, he says. Then Peter spoke up. We've left everything to follow you. Truly, I tell you, Jesus replied, no one who's left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me in the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age.

Homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields along with persecutions and the age to come. Eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last first.

Now, what do you think Jesus is saying in these verses? What I think he's saying is this. Let me give you a suggestion. Jesus appears to be saying that every sacrifice that he, that one offers in the cause of the gospel will be made up for by him.

If you give up a mother's nearby affection and concern, you will get a hundred times the affection and concern from the ever present Jesus. If you give up the warm comradeship of a brother, you will get back a hundred times the warmth and comradeship in Jesus.

[20:27] If you become homeless for Jesus and the gospel, then you will find one hundred times the comfort and security in the knowledge that Jesus owns every house and land and stream and tree on earth.

Jesus is saying for those who give up all for him. He promises to be at work for them. He promises to be for them so much that they will not be able to speak of having sacrificed anything at all.

Now, friends, there's no self-pity here. There's no masochism. There's no abject poverty. There's only the richness of fullness in Christ.

Let me illustrate it by reading a quote from a great missionary. Many of you will know of him. He was an early missionary to Africa and his name was David Livingstone. Now, he was speaking to a bunch of university students at Cambridge University about what he'd learned on this topic.

And he said, for my part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me for such an office. People talk of sacrifice I've made in spending so much of my life in Africa.

[21:40] Away with the word in such a view. And with such a thought, it was emphatically no sacrifice. In fact, rather, it was a privilege.

Anxiety, sickness, suffering or danger now and then with the foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life may make us pause or cause our spirit to waver and the soul to sink.

But let this be only for a moment. All these are nothing. All these are nothing. When compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us.

I never made a sacrifice. Now, let me urge you to go back to where we started. I want you to think about Kant again.

And I want you to ask yourself where you're standing in all of this. Why are you Christian? Why do you follow Jesus?

[22 : 47] Why do you want to do good? Why are you moral? Why do you want to engage in Christian discipleship? Is it because you have this great ought hanging over your head?

Is it because it is the good and right thing to do? Is it because it just seems appropriate? None of those things are wrong in and of themselves. Please hear me.

But let me do, let me say this. If they are the sole reasons, I think there may be more of Emmanuel Kant in you than the Emmanuel of Scripture.

You are living in something that is but a mere whisper or shadow of reality. Let me urge you to come out of the darkness, friends. Let me urge you to meet the living Lord Jesus.

He is the glory of the absolute and transcendent God. He is all that you have wished for. He is a treasure in a field. A pearl of great value and the delight of all the earth.

[23 : 55] And when you have looked at him in the face, everything else will fade into insignificance. If you truly meet him in the cross, then life will take on new meaning.

Life will be for the purpose of meeting him again and actually seeing him in the face again. Or being with him in the face again. Or being with him in his mission because that's where he is.

That's what he's doing. Or sharing in the immense benefit of working for his glory. All else will fade into insignificance. I want to conclude this morning with some words from C.S. Lewis.

A very famous essay which is called The Weight of Glory. And he says these words in one place. If there lurks in most modern minds, the notion that to desire our own good and to earnestly hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing.

I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and has no part in Christian faith.

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

[25 : 21] We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. Friends, I warrant that many of us are far too easily pleased with notions of duty.

We have forgotten the sheer joy of being with God and doing what God is doing. Friends, there is no greater joy than this.

So let's embrace it again as we enter this new year. That great joy of working with Jesus, alongside Jesus, doing what Jesus is doing. Let me pray. Let me pray. Our Father, we are truly half-hearted creatures often, fooling around with lesser things.

When infinite joy is offered to us, we are far too easily pleased. And Father, this last week, two weeks, three weeks, we have seen our world so easily pleased by lesser things.

[26 : 54] And we too are so easily pleased with notions of duty. And we too have forgotten the sheer joy of being with God and doing what you, God, are doing.

And being where your Son is. Please help us embrace this greater joy, particularly as we enter into this new year in the coming week. Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.