

The fork in the road

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[0 : 00] And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it. But whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

It is important to note the emphases which preachers make. Every preacher has his own particular emphasis.

That of John the Baptist was on the necessity of repentance and baptism in water as a sign of repentance.

One of the great emphases of the Lord Jesus Christ is the need for a radical break with the past life and a radical change of direction before you and I can call ourselves real disciples.

[1 : 32] Time and again Christ challenges his hearers and he says to them the most blunt things concerning their need to change in order to be right with God.

this of course is why he had continually a running conflict with the Pharisees because they had ever so much religion that it was worthless religion.

Ever so much nominalism that they had none of the power of religion in their hearts. But not only to them he does this in his parable the parable of the sower for instance where he speaks about the four grounds into which the seed fell it did not all bring forth fruit to the glory of God.

Some of it came to nothing even though there was a promising start. And what was wrong of course was that there was no true foundation.

There was no root in that person's life. Or again in the famous Sermon on the Mount as he is winding up Christ says to those to whom he is speaking that many people will say to him in the last day Lord, Lord we have done many great works in thy name and cast out demons.

[3 : 02] And he will say to them I never knew you. And what was wrong is the same thing again that there was a great deal of knowledge there was a certain amount of endeavor but there was no radical change in their own hearts.

They had many external advantages as a consequence of their Christian education and what they had heard and their upbringing that the thing that was missing was something fundamental to their own lives.

Now that is a continual emphasis of Christ. I'm not going to go on giving illustrations of this. You've got enough already from what I've just said. But Nicodemus again is another case in point.

We must be born again. But here on this occasion our Lord issues one of these almost defiant challenges to those who would be his disciples.

He turns round to them indeed you could say he turns on them and he throws down this tremendous challenge which comes into the text.

[4 : 20] Whosoever will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. He that would save his life must lose it.

He that would keep his life shall lose it and he that would lose his life shall find it. I am paraphrasing the thought. But there it is. Clearly this is a challenge and it is so striking that it's almost paradoxical. I can remember as a young boy about the age of 18 when I first read these words what a tremendous effect they had on my mind.

Now I want to take these words up today and look at them. And I do so conscious that there are some amongst us here and that there is a missing piece in your life.

The jigsaw misses a piece here and there. You have so much and you know so much and yet when you're honest with yourself as I believe you want to be you have to admit that there is a piece that is just not there.

[5 : 51] And I'm sure that in your heart of hearts you pray to God that you may find the missing piece. Well here it is. It's right here. This is the missing piece.

This is the thing which if a man doesn't have it he lacks the main thing. But if he does have this he has everything. this is the sum total if you like of all that is necessary to real discipleship. It begins with this very challenge of Christ. I would compare this to walking along the road. Perhaps you're on holiday you don't know the road you don't know the lane and you wander and you travel to a certain point let us say and then you come to a fork in the road part to the right and part to the left and you do not know which of these two to take.

The fork in the road. That's what we have here. It is the challenge of Christ and it determines in the lives of all men the journey that they will take to the end of life indeed beyond the end of life whether they will become his true disciples or not.

If a man will become my disciples as Christ he must deny himself he must take of his cross he must follow me. Now there are many people and they follow Christ so long as there is no real challenge.

[7 : 39] As long as all is smooth going and the way is easy they are prepared to say that they will follow Christ. But you let a person come to the challenge you let them come to this fork in the road and then it will become plain what they are made of.

Then you will see how great are the demands of Christ upon a person's life and the way they answer that decision will determine not only the whole course of their life upon earth it will determine their everlasting destiny.

Now this is relevant to you and particularly to many of you and exceptionally relevant to some of you who have been as it were juggling with the things of Jesus Christ as it were playing about with the things of Christ or with others of you who have been searching and longing and desiring with a great deal of honesty and sincerity to know the secret of the Lord.

So let's open up this a little and have a look at it this morning. Clearly we must say to ourselves we cannot make the challenge of the gospel any easier than Christ makes it.

Now there is a tendency in us all to make the gospel easier and easier for people to believe. There is that tendency. There is that tendency in pulpits and in ministers but it is in us all a desire if you like to make the gospel as accommodating as we can in order to catch as many as we can.

[9 : 35] It is not always perhaps with such a bad motive as that. After all in love we wish to spare people the pain of hearing the worst and out of love for them we tend to cushion them do we not?

From the most shocking demands that God makes upon people's lives. Even our Lord himself said you cannot bear certain things now but you shall get to know them hereafter.

And there is a certain wisdom in not confronting people with all the demands of the gospel at once. There is some wisdom in them. But my point now is that we cannot go beyond a certain point in simplifying the gospel.

We cannot take away the sting of the challenge that either you turn to the right or you turn to the left when you come to the fork in the road.

So let's see Christ's terms to be like this. They are always demanding. They require a great deal of a man. They require everything of you.

[10 : 50] If you are to become a real disciple of Christ then he demands that you attend to what he says here.

What does he say? Well first of all you must deny yourself. A man must deny himself or as some people would translate it you must say no to self.

That of course cuts deep into the nerves of our very nature. We all of us love our own pleasure and it is natural for us to wish to hold on to our own style of life.

We love our own honour and we would feel it would be a very dreadful thing to lose the good will of others and their friendship and the popularity of other people and their praise.

It seems so absurd to give up this life to become devoted to Jesus Christ. It seems to be fanatical. it seems to be extreme.

[12 : 13] But this is the demand clearly that he makes. Is it not? A man must say no to himself. And this is the most practical thing.

There is nothing theoretical here or merely theoretical I mean this is most practical when it comes to choosing between the will of God and our own will.

There is a most practical decision to be made. To put the spiritual before the natural it is most difficult.

Our Lord remember puts it another way around when he is making the same general point on another occasion. And he says unless you hate your father and your mother brother and sister wife and children yea and your own life also.

you cannot be my disciple. Now he means by hate that we put these things in a secondary position. [13:23] It means that we put them in the back seat but we put the spiritual things first and in the front seat. Other things are alright in their way but they are not alright if they interfere with the first claims of God upon our life.

So a man he says must deny himself. And I want to ask you my dear friend today you in whose life there is this missing piece.

Come let us reason together. Is it not this which you really fail to do? Is it not at this very point my beloved friend that you are so weak in your life that you choose first of all so often those things which please yourself and you go after those things which belong to your own will and your own desire rather than putting first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

It happens in so many ways. Let me tell you of a young man who a hundred years ago was very famous and very brilliant as a sportsman in England.

His name was C.T. Studd. He came from a very rich family a great mansion house a billions cricketer Cambridge University honour was heaped upon him from every side.

[15:09] The day came when C.T. Studd helped the claims of Jesus Christ upon his life. What would he do? What would he choose? He came you see to the fork in the road.

He came to choose either the right or the left and he had to face it. How can I give up my cricket? How can I give up my fortune? How can I give up my popularity?

The whole world knows my name. How can I become a nothing now? And a nobody now? It was a terrible decision which he wrestled with.

But he found the grace of God to deny himself. Have you denied yourself?

Have you said no to your own will and yes to Christ's claim upon your life? Now you can't have it both ways.

[16:05] You can't ride two horses at one time. cross. And then he says secondly we are to take up our cross. That's an amazing prophecy really.

When you stop to think of it let's not overlook the fact that Jesus Christ had not yet died and that the manner of his death had not yet become public knowledge as it has with us.

but of course he knew full well the cross that was coming and so he uses this as a sort of illustration of what needs to happen in our life. To take up our cross.

A reference once to that dreadful experience which criminals and others had in the ancient Roman world of having to carry this heavy wooden bar to the place of execution.

And there they were nailed on it. So it is his way of explaining to us that we are to become dead if you like to all our love of the things of this world wherein they interfere in which they interfere with the prior claims of God.

[17:17] We are to treat ourselves as men who have no desire for anything but only first of all to do the will of God. Now you will agree with me that these claims are very very strict.

And there are some people who would say that this is far too strict. And they would object to this free church of Scotland we belong to and are attached to saying things like this to people.

They would say this is shocking. Why not let the people enjoy themselves? well the fact of the matter is that this is the way to enjoy yourself.

There is no other way in which sitters can ever find enjoyment but only this way. And if people think that they can get enjoyment any other way, ultimate enjoyment I mean, ultimate satisfaction, then they are barking literally of the wrong priest.

Who is it that says these things? It's not some little modern creature. It is Christ himself. Now Peter the apostle, he had made a very big mistake, had he not?

[18:39] There's a few verses before this, we were reading it, those of us who were in the room at the time, Jesus had announced to his disciples that were following him that he was about to go to the cross. And Peter turned to him and rebuked him and said, just be far from the master.

And our Lord had to turn on Peter and say to him, get behind me Satan, thou savourest not the things of God, but those things that be of men. You see, you can't take the cross out of Christianity. You cannot. If you take the cross out of Christianity, you end up with something which isn't the real thing. You cannot take it out of the light of the Messiah himself. And Jesus refused any suggestion

that he could save the world without his cross.

He knew the cross was in his path and he would not divert his course to avoid or evade the cross. It's the same with us.

No cross, no crown. No cross, no salvation. no cross, no Christ. No cross, no Christianity. No cross, no blessings.

[19 : 47] No cross, no heaven. We have all of us to get to the place where we are brought to take up our cross, to deny ourselves, to follow Christ.

And then thirdly he goes on like this. He must lose his life. Now of all the things to say, this was what shook me I think most of all just before I became a Christian.

I'm referring of course to verse 35, whosoever will save his life shall lose it. But whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel, the same shall save it.

Now that certainly is a strange thing to say and a difficult thing to hear. Who can hear such a thing as that? That the only way to save your life is to lose it.

That certainly is a paradox of a first order. What does it mean? Well it means that if we cling on to our life, and if we are at all costs determined that our life is going to be our own, and that we're going to please ourselves and go our own way, and choose our own things, leave God to second place.

[21 : 09] Oh I don't say leave him out entirely, but if we put God in second place, and ourselves and our own life in the first place, then as Christ we are not disciples at all.

You know the idea God had a little space in my life, and then I have all the other spaces for my own things. there's a certain famous Bible writer called F.B.

Mayer. He wrote a number of books, they're not I would say of very first order, but there are some useful things in them, and very devout things too, and F.B.

Mayer once tells of this in his writings concerning his own experience. I think it's profitable for us to mention this in connection with this text. F.B.

Mayer said that on one occasion he gave his life to God as a man would give a ring with keys on it to God. He gave this iron ring to God, that was his will in the illustration, and he said to God you can have all the keys on that key ring except one.

[22 : 18] That was what he wanted to keep back for himself. There was a little room in his life. He doesn't as far as I know tell us what it was. Some particular personal thing that he would not give up for God.

He was as good as saying to God you can have everything in my life but you cannot have that. I'll give up everything to become your disciple but that is mine and I shall keep it.

And he got no blessing at all in his life so long as he maintained that attitude. Now he had given everything else to God except this one little thing.

And in talking to a Christian counselor on one occasion the counselor wisely said to him you will get nothing from God until you give up every ring every key on the ring.

And that's what F.B. Mayer came to do. And he said when I gave the whole of life to God and kept nothing back from him then the blessing came.

[23 : 18] Oh the joy love that flooded my life. Oh the fullness of experience of the grace of Christ. And it was out of that fullness that he lived a life of service just indeed as the other man did C.T.

Studd who became a missionary first in China you may know and then in India for six years and then in Africa and then started the great missionary movement called the WECC movement which has had such an influence all over the world.

Now my friends that's the way these people discovered it for themselves. Are you therefore not keeping something back from God?

Oh but you say well I couldn't possibly I couldn't possibly go the whole way. I can go 95% of the way but I've got to stop short there. I couldn't think of giving up that area of my life.

What would my husband say? What would my wife say? What would my friends say? I would lose their good impression. I would lose their popularity. I would lose friends.

[24 : 27] Oh sirs if I were to give up that little area of life. Well beloved that is the cost of discipleship and you won't get the blessing.

I warrant you you won't get the blessing until the whole key ring and all the keys and all the rooms of your house and all the areas of your life are surrendered to God.

It's an old saying with a true one. If he's not Lord of all he won't be Lord at all. That is true.

Why should he be so strict you say? Christ is so strict because he cannot ask anything less. He cannot. You cannot become a trial of God if you've got a love for this world secretly. You cannot. It's impossible. No man can love and serve two masters.

[25 : 34] And you see therefore why so many people never reach heaven. So many people never become bright Christians. And some people never enjoy the flooding love of grace into their lives. What's gone wrong?

Is it that God is in some respect partial giving to some Christians this and to other Christians that? Well we mustn't deny God's sovereignty but there is also this responsibility in our lives.

So many people say no to God that they are not prepared to go that little bit further. no no they say I'm going to stop here and never an inch farther. Well now Christ cannot ask any less than that we give everything to him.

Our whole life. Our whole body. Our whole soul. Our whole mind. Like one of the Puritans I had to study not so very long ago.

When he went to the University of Cambridge and heard a great preacher he said to himself if I'm going to become a godly man it will spoil me for becoming a learned one.

[26 : 40] So he said no to God until he heard another preacher and his heart was so touched that he gave the whole lot up. What is learning he said.

What is reputation? What is favor? What is praise? What is anything compared with having Christ as a savior? And when you think of it you know Jesus couldn't ask anything less of you because he asked exactly the same of himself and more.

He asked more of himself than he asks of you. All you have to do is to take up your little cross for a few years in this world to deny yourself and to walk godly with him in this life.

What did he ask of himself? Something immensely more. I lay down my life for the sheep. He had to become a curse for us.

Taking up his cross was a different thing from you taking up yours. And the son of God took up his cross. It meant suffering the damnation of an angry god against the sins which we have committed imputed to him.

[27 : 50] That is what it meant. It meant draining the cup of damnation for the world's sake. He doesn't ask you to do that. Thank God.

You couldn't do it anyway but let us be thankful we're not called upon to do that which he did. But my friend if he did all that for us we can do the lesser thing for him.

As one of the missionaries once said if Jesus Christ is God and died for me no sacrifice of mine could ever be too great to make for him. now meditate on that logic and if you don't like the logic you tell me where it's wrong because I can't see any flaw in that reasoning.

I can't see any weakness in that chain of reasoning. If Jesus Christ is God and died for us no sacrifice of yours or mine could ever be too great to make for him could it?

him could be too good to do. Finally well we must make a decision we can't drift and drift on we have to make a decision and it comes to this that a man has to pray and a man has to pray to God in right earnest and a man has to say to God I give myself to thee O God a man has to get to that point in which he goes on his knees in secret and he says to God all that I have and all that I am O God I give to thee.

[29 : 29] Now when a person does that there is a difference and until a person has done that he is still faced with this fork in the road and there's no saying if you take the wrong turn and go drifting on and on and on there's no saying how you may be lost forever but if you take the right turn and if you see this challenge of Christ whosoever would be my disciple let him deny himself and take at his cross and follow me let him lose his life and he shall find it and it begins with this great choice of God for ourselves and as we choose God we say no no to all the other things that could possibly enter into our minds God first everything second my dear Christian friends those of you who have done these things those of you who have made this great choice let me comfort you with this passing closing thought now that however difficult you may be finding the journey to heaven today and whatever trials and afflictions disappointments frustrations you are encountering you will never have to make this choice all over again you have made your choice you are on the right path you have done the will of God hold fast on your way and you will get safely home at last be of good cheer it is your father's desire and will to give you the kingdom and in a little time we shall be there and our prayer and our desire boys and girls and others today is that every one of you may become this true disciple what a wonderful way to finish the year what a better than Christmas present may I

say that God should be your father oh am I speaking to someone now and your mind is serious about these very things oh ask the Lord that he will give you the grace and the power to say no to yourself and yes to his things

I can promise you you will have great joy and great peace and you will really wonder why people make so much fuss about having to give up these other things because it will seem to you when you have Christ to be so trivial why you would think there's nothing in you but ashes or a handful of worthless sinners that's what Paul discovered when he gave everything up he said I count all this but done that I may gain Christ may God grant the same spirit to you