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Radical discipleship - risky living for Christ

Mark Barrell (2011)

What is risky living for Christ? What things do we hold dear that we might be prepared to forego to follow in the footsteps of Christ?

I had cause myself to ponder what this meant when nearly five years ago four men entered our home, put a gun to my head and bound me to my wife. The demand made by our intruders was for money, whilst they also ransacked our home, taking what they fancied. When we had given up all that we had, this didn't satisfy, and so they lined up our children and said that they would kill them one by one until we met their demands. Whilst in God's providence we were all spared (and so were many of our possessions) such an incident does make you think more closely about what is most precious to you.

So, if asked "what is your most treasured possession", how would you reply? Family is often the most quoted, and whilst there are clearly "things" that we possess (such as photos of our family, heirlooms, or sentimental items) in reality, whilst we probably wouldn't admit it, the thing we often treasure the most, even above our family, is our own life.

Please be aware that I am not and would not criticise anyone for thinking this. Your life is precious and I don't for one moment want to suggest that I have got all of this sorted – I haven't – but the challenge to all of us today is that whilst we very often might think, say or sing that we are willing to sacrifice all for Jesus, are we really prepared to do this?

Having declared that "All authority had been given to him" Christ told his followers that as they went about their business that they should make disciples of all nations spreading the whole good news of the Gospel¹ – so that people of every tongue, tribe and nation would be drawn to himself as Lord.

We are, some 2,000 years on, called to follow that same path and it is, as a Christian, difficult to disagree with this injunction. It is a command from Christ and the mission statement given to the church. As believers we are, therefore, very happy to be associated with the term Christian Discipleship – it speaks of maturity, faithfulness and commitment, showing that we are keen to live under the guidance and discipline of the person we follow – namely Christ.

So we are happy with Discipleship - but when the word radical or sacrificial is added we become more sceptical and even dismissive. Is this just going too far? Is the word radical just a bad label?

In the sports world "radical" is often seen as a badge of honour. I have to admit a sneaking admiration for those who do sports such as free climbing, parachuting, wave riding and off piste skiing. In some ways their lives seem to be a little freer - living on the edge, defying the norms and pushing their sport to the limits. The trouble is that the rush is in the risk. Living on the edge is where they most feel alive, but in the end it serves no purpose other than to provide a thrill for the time the experience lasts.

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I recently read *Being Extreme*, a book about these sports, partly in preparation for this article and partly because I was intrigued. In amongst many revelations about this world I was struck by this phrase quoted of a big wave surfer – Mike Parsons

“The ocean for me is a totally spiritual thing. It doesn’t matter if it’s a small surf or big surf, just being in it is the important thing. It’s my place. You can have all kinds of things going on in your life, all kinds of problems and worries, and the second I begin surfing I’m completely focused on that and the rest of the world is on hold. It’s almost like someone going to church. Without a doubt, the ocean is my church”ⁱⁱ

I found this a very interesting concept that the worries of life were superseded by the risk of living on the edge. Whilst as Christians we would say that the reasoning is misplaced, we may have to ask ourselves whether we need to think more clearly about whether we could say the same about our Christian lives. Would we say that we are living in total dependence on God, leaving our worries to Him by being totally focused on Him, and committed to Him?

In addition to extreme sports, in recent times the word “Radical” has been used in way that it causes anxiety and even fear.

Most people who are described in the media as being radical are those who hold or follow strong convictions or extreme principles often advocating fundamental political, economic, and social reforms by direct and often uncompromising methods.

Is it right or wise therefore to even consider the use of the word radical within the context of a Christian life and commitment.

I think it does – let’s go back to the great commission – when the Apostles were told by Jesus to make disciples it was with these words “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”ⁱⁱⁱ. Now I would say that this the radical part of discipleship, being willing to obey the commands of Jesus and teach others to do the same.

If we are to obey everything that Jesus commanded then it will mean a radical lifestyle – one which is radically different to the world – a world that we are told we are in but not of^{iv}.

Read a few things Jesus said:-

John 12

²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

Or Matthew 16

²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Or Luke 14

²⁵Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

These are powerful, radical and extreme words- so powerful that Jesus had to remind people of exactly what they were getting into, continuing in Luke 14,

³¹"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

When we are asked to give up everything that means everything because in doing that you lose your life and gain a new one – one which is in full submission to God.

In legal terms our "rights" become Gods "rights". We have the freedom to either choose our own way or Gods way, but if we choose God he seeks full obedience.

Think of the man of wealth who came to Jesus asking about eternal life. Jesus loved him but didn't compromise on the message

"One thing you lack – Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"^v

The man's rights to chose for himself remained - but if he was to follow Christ he had to be willing to give up that right to choose, the right to have, the right to own, the right to gain for himself – His rights were to become subservient to God.

In the end the man chose his way rather than to follow Jesus. It is a choice that we must understand because Christian discipleship means total surrender – it means placing God on the throne and not ourselves. We replace self and acknowledge that everything must be subject to the will of God.

This then leads us to wonder if these principles have any place for us as Christian Lawyers – what does it mean to submit everything to God?

Can this really mean that all of our time, all that we own, all that we desire and all that we are should be placed into Gods hands if so it follows that we have to accept that

- Our time is Gods not ours
- Our possessions and wealth are His not mine
- Our dreams, plans and ambitions are His
- Our emotions, health, activities and thinking are His

In reality how far are we prepared to accept that this is true as we take up our cross daily and follow Him for Him and His glory alone?

John Piper writes that "the Bible is crystal clear. God created us for his glory...[and] life is wasted when we do not live for the glory of God. **And I mean ALL of life.** It is all for his glory."^{vi}

For many that could seem as though by becoming disciples of God and subjecting everything we do to Him as being the end to happiness, joy and a life worth living. But we know that this cannot be true, because Jesus said that he came to give life in all its abundance.^{vii}

The point is that if we are prepared to offer absolutely everything to Him, and seek to live, pray, think, play, work and dream in such a way that it is wholly and fully given over to God and his glory, then we start to live the lives that God has ultimately purposed for us and do what is best for us.

Piper puts it a bluntly as this

“The opposite of wasting your life is to live by a single, soul satisfying passion for the supremacy of God in all things”^{viii} and later on “The world is no longer our treasure. It’s not the source of our life or our satisfaction or our joy. Christ is”^{ix}

Paul said it in Philippians in a slightly different way

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, I count them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ”^x

Losing everything – counting them as rubbish – is this our attitude?

In the world of the legal profession these are not easy concepts to handle – especially when money, power, status and adulation are never really counted as rubbish – more like Gold. It is no wonder that the central focus – the cross of Christ - is foolishness to so many.

The joy of surrender and sacrifice to Jesus is that life takes on an entirely new meaning, our focus and treasure is found in Him.

Most reading this have been called into the law – God has provided us with a vocation – and as much as we can, we should encourage and support one another to be a radical witness in the legal world, to be in the world but not of it. As much as it might sound a tough call we need to be counter cultural in the profession that God has called us into.

Practically what might that mean?

- it may mean speaking out about the way things are done in the office, or within the partnership – as little as asking that meetings don’t happen on a Sunday right through to wholesale choices on how the partnership views work and business.
- or speaking out about how people are treated – are staff seen as members of a community or merely ways of making money
- or it may mean being seen to be different in terms of what we may understand to be ethical practice.

There are times when we will have to risk the scorn of others to honour the true God that we serve and worship.

It may also hit closer to home in asking what sort of life and lifestyle are we living. Is it one that is committed to Christ and his Kingdom – or one that worries about what I wear or have, or what food you will eat, or what must have you think you “need” to improve your life^{xi}.

Do we spend more time wondering about what our house will look like, what the next gadget will be or which car we will drive than time spent at the foot of the throne?

Do we think about money in a way that means that it is obvious that Christ is our treasure, or in a way that puts possessions on the throne rather than God?

What do we crave most – the adulation and praise of our colleagues, clients and friends – or the desire to make the glory of the true King known?

What are our ambitions, hopes and dreams? Do we surrender these to the will of the Father or do we place them on the altar of self?

Is work a place to gain for self or a place to honour God in all that we do, allowing ourselves to be pointers to the King?

The decision to follow Christ is so radical that it means my having to face these challenges and temptations head on and the best way to do that is at the Cross.

Christ was prepared to die to bring glory to his Father and provide the justice required to allow us access to him. Are we prepared to accept the challenge that the cross provides to us today? The cross is what we have to take up daily.

I believe that today we are men and women in the law, who are called by God to radically change our attitudes and beliefs, and to be salt and light. God calls us to be true disciples committed to serving the will of God in every aspect of our lives, and through us he, by His Spirit, will draw all people to himself.

Are you willing to live as a radical disciple of Christ and follow in his footsteps wherever that may lead you, however counter cultural that may be?

ⁱ Matthew 28 v 18,19

ⁱⁱ Being Extreme – Bill Gutman - p.217

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 28 v 20

^{iv} John 17 v 14

^v Mark 10 v 21

^{vi} Don't waste your life – John Piper p.32(**his emphasis**)

^{vii} John 10 v 10

^{viii} Ibid p.43

^{ix} Ibid p.57

^x Philippians 3 v 8

^{xi} Matthew 6 v 25-27