

Loving God 3b – The Method

Matthew 16:24-26 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Loving God is not complicated. It is fairly simple. However, that does not mean it is easy. God Himself is lovely. Behold Him as He is in the Word, and love will spring up from a new heart. The hard part is, how does a heart committed to loving itself, ever take its eyes off the mirror, so to speak, to see God?

Up to now, we have explained what we must do from a negative point of view – deny yourself. Say no to the flesh which wants to be a god. Say no to every part of you, every ambition, relationship or desire which seeks to be an end in itself and be loved for itself.

Now Jesus moves to the action we are to take towards Him, if we are to truly see His glory and know Him and love Him. The handbrake of self is removed, here comes first gear.

2) Live As Dead To A Selfish Life

Jesus says if you want to love Me, then it is going to mean taking up a cross. Now that means very little to our ears. What it does mean we read backwards and think it has something to do with the fact that Jesus died on a cross. But remember, when Jesus spoke these words, he had not been to the cross. The disciples did not understand that He was going to be stretched out on a cross. He was not referring to His own death for us. He was using an image which would have been understood by those who heard him.

In Christ's day, people didn't carry these balsa wood mini-crucifixes and tour the streets like madmen. If you saw someone carrying a cross, he was usually carrying the main crossbar, and he was not alone. He was accompanied by Roman soldiers. Where was he going? To his own death. As Tozer said, there was one thing you knew about a man carrying a cross, and that was that he wasn't coming back again.

So when Jesus says to His disciples that following Him means carrying a cross, what do you think it meant to them? It would have meant the same as if we had heard, take up your electric chair and follow me. Take up your lethal injection and follow me. Take up your gallows and follow me. Take up the instrument of your death, and come and die.

Now what does that mean? Does that mean that Jesus is calling for a mass-suicide? Is He asking His disciples to literally seek execution? No, He didn't mean that. Read the book of Acts, and see the disciples. You've never seen a bunch of people so full of life, so zealous for every moment. Christ's disciples do not give up on life and pine for their own execution.

Here is one way of thinking about it. Let's imagine you see a man in Jerusalem slowly making his way to the place of crucifixion. Suddenly, he stops. He drops the cross. The Romans ask him what he thinks he's doing. He replies, "I left the water boiling on the fire, and didn't take it off. Dinner will be ruined. I need to go back and take it off!" Why doesn't that sound right? Do you think men carrying crosses worry about how supper will turn out tonight? Do you think they would be checking stock-market figures on the way to the cross? Do you think they would be paging through

time-share brochures on the way to the cross? Why not? Because people about to die have given up their lives, and are completely resigned to death. A cross-bearer is not trying to organise life for himself, make things better for himself, or act like he is going to have any way out of the cross. His life is over, and he knows it

When Jesus says this, what He means is, to love God is to surrender your life to God entirely. You come to God like one who has no life left to be lived for self. A man carrying a cross has only that time between now and death. He's not trying to get as much fun as he can between now and death. A Christian realises that since conversion, he or she has no life of his or her own. There is only a period of time now between now and death or rapture. And that time is not my own.

God could take you in the next minute, hour, day, week, month, or year, so live like someone who is no longer living for self. Though God may yet give you decades of life; and you may indeed go on holidays and invest and take out insurance and do other things that are part of life and not necessarily outside of Christian experience, you do so all in the attitude and spirit of one who no longer claims his or her life as her own.

I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. It's as if you have nothing else to live for except the love of God. That's a cross-carrying Christian. If you have back-up plans, if you have other things you could lean on, then God is just one of many gods to you.

Now you might be asking things like, "Aren't we supposed to enjoy life? Aren't we supposed to enjoy God's gifts? Aren't we supposed to be joyful, and not morose people dragging their feet to execution?" The simple answer would be yes. But the whole truth is this: you are not your own. You have been bought with a price. You have died with Christ. His life is now your life. All that you do, all that you enjoy, all that you participate in, must be lived like a man with only one thing left to live for - loving God. So much so, that all your other plans and activities and projects would make no sense if you removed loving God. If you could remove the love of God from your life, and everything would continue on as normal without much of a bump, ask yourself, have I really died to self? Am I really living like one who is completely yielded up to God's control?

God is the only God. He is the worthy God. He died and rose to free us from our self-centredness. He does not save us to help us to continue to live a self-centred, hedonistic, worldly lifestyle. He saves us from ourselves so we can live entirely for Him.

3) Use Up Your Life To Seek Him

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Deny every selfish impulse that wants to be god; live as if you have no other purpose in life but to love God, and then thirdly, lose your life for Christ.

Now once again, Jesus is using life and death terms, but it is clear He doesn't mean that we must end our physical lives for His sake. How do we know? Because He promises that the one who loses His life for Christ's sake actually gains it or finds it, while the one hoarding his or her life, loses it.

What does He mean? The word for 'life' here is the word that frequently refers to a quality of life. In other words, not the actual existence, but the components of life – the things you live for, the

things that make life worth living. Jesus is saying, the person who wants to live it up, who want the best in life, who want the kind of life others envy – such people in a way, hoard their lives. They treat their lives the way misers treat their money. They protect it and shelter it and insure it and guard it. They want only the best times and best things and best experiences for their lives. The one thing they hate is that their life is like the sand in one of those sand-timers, slipping away and the more it slips away, the more they grasp for it, wanting more time to do more things. They want more opportunities, but there are less and less opportunities and more and more things to do. In the meantime, there may be less health or less money to do all those things, and a great bitterness sets in. He has been desperately trying to find his life, but he has lost it.

And even if he has gained the whole world, he comes to the end of it and realises Solomon's wisdom – someone else is now going to take it, and I don't know where I am going from here. I may have had everything in this world for a few years, but now I will be utterly poor and barren for an eternity.

Jesus says that's a poor exchange. Idolatry is a poor exchange. It cheats. It betrays. It produces bitter, and tragic disappointment.

The alternative is this: Give your life, spend your life, and use your life as if there were no tomorrow for the love of Christ. Spend your energy, your strength, your zeal and your focus on this one main pursuit – to know Him and to make Him known. I can't see any room for apathy or lukewarmness here. This is someone who gives himself mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually to this task. He is dead to all others, at least for their own sakes. So he is willing to spend and be spent for the cause of knowing Christ.

2 Corinthians 12:15 *And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.*

Philippians 3:7-10 *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,*

Here comes the paradox. The one who spends himself - gives his time, his personal comfort, his appearance, his financial security, his standard of living, his ambitions and dreams and desires and hopes up for Christ, gains it all. You know why? Because that kind of faith-filled abandon towards knowing God is the skeleton key which unlocks a treasure trove of knowing God.

You see, every moment of your life you're spending. Just like when you put those twenty or fifty rand notes down, you are saying, 'This item is worth this much to me'. So what you do with our life is the same. You are spending hours and hours, putting each one towards something which you believe adds up in the end. And Christ says – if you do what you do for yourself, it all turns to nothing in the end. But if you do it all for Me, you find it all. You get it all back.

You might remember the words of Jim Elliot: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose'.

You can see how these three build on each other. Deny every selfish impulse which wants to usurp God's place; live as if you have no life except to love God, then take that life and spend and be

spent for the love of God. This is the kind of heart which means what it says when it prays, 'Please, show me your glory'. No ulterior motives. No back-up plans. Nothing on the side, just God.

My mind runs back to Abraham again. When God came to him and told him to sacrifice Isaac, all three of these things had to happen. Firstly, he had to deny himself. His love for Isaac was immense but to obey God, he had to deny his own protests, his own rationalisations, and his own love for Isaac, to the degree that it was in competition with God.

He had to once again die to all his own ambitions and hopes and dreams and desires that were not under God. He had to be a cross-carrying person that said, who is Abraham outside of God? I live for God, to God, by God. If sacrificing Isaac is part of loving God, then so be it. I have no other reason for living. I can have God without Isaac, but I cannot have Isaac without God. And then he had to lose his own life and give up his life for God. By then, that old man must have had his heart wrapped up in young Isaac. But he knew that God was bringing him to a refiners' fire, where only single-minded and total love for God would survive. So he was willing to spend his own son, give it all to God.

And guess what? God gave it back. God let the suffering old man go through with it up to the point where He knew there would be no retreat, and then forbade him to lay a hand upon the boy. To the wondering patriarch He now says in effect, "It's all right, Abraham. I never intended that you should actually slay the lad. I only wanted to remove him from the temple of your heart that I might reign unchallenged there. I wanted to correct the perversion that existed in your love. Now you may have the boy, sound and well. Take him and go back to your tent..." *"Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me."*... God could have begun out on the margin of Abraham's life and worked inward to the centre. He chose rather to cut quickly to the heart and have it over in one sharp act of separation. In dealing thus, He practiced an economy of means and time. It hurt cruelly, but it was effective. We say, "Why does He have to do this?" Why must He insist upon self-denial, cross-carrying and total spending of the life for Him. Answer: Because it's the only way.

I began by saying you can only provide the diagnosis of you know the disease. You can only and will only apply this kind of radical approach when you realise how radically committed your own heart is to its own worship. Only when you know how deeply you crave your own way, how stubbornly you hold on to power, how earnestly you want glory, how naturally you sit in the place of God – do you recognise that Jesus isn't trying to be severe just for the sake of it. He isn't making some kind of boast like a Marine Corp. sergeant training the rookies and trying to scare them into fitness. Jesus is simply telling you what it's going to take - self-denial, total yieldedness to Him, and the spending of the life on Him.

Jesus is also telling you what kind of approach God will accept. If He is the only God, and the only one worthy of being worshipped, He won't accept double-mindedness. He won't accept a faltering between two masters. He won't accept serving two masters. He is patient and longsuffering, but according to your faith be it unto you. If you come to God tolerating self, maintaining back-up lives, and holding back on what you spend on God, you will receive only as much as the gracious Lord might deem fit. But deny self, be dead to anything but loving God, and pour out what is left of your life on Him, and you will find Him. Moses sought and Moses found, because Moses sought wholeheartedly – single-mindedly. God's promise remains – if you seek me with your whole heart you will find me. What does it mean to seek Him with the whole heart? Deny self, take up your cross and lose your life for the sake of knowing Him.