

Commitment

Giving assurance to love.

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*Let us hold fast
the confession of our hope
without wavering.*

Hebrews 10:23

Once read the story of some thieves that broke into a store. They did not steal anything, but they did switch the price tags so that a \$500 television was \$20 and imitation jewelry was \$500 and so on throughout the store. It was said that people paid those mistaken prices the next day. In the same way, we can switch the price tags on the things we value in life. Petty things can assume enormous importance and really important things can get little, if any, place in our lives. There is a constant need to check the price tags and make certain that first things are first, and second things are second, and third things are third, and so on. We need to place high price tags on the most important things and the lowest price tags on the least important things. We need to evaluate our lives to re-value our lives.

Placing A True Value On Everything

Jonathan Edwards, who some call America's greatest philosopher and theologian, argues in his book *The Nature of True Virtue* that true virtue is placing a true value on everything. In other words, it is not enough merely to say what our priorities are verbally but we must actually live in that way. It is one thing to use the acrostic JOY — Jesus, Others, Yourself — to indicate the priority that you desire; it is another thing to order your life in that way.

And, it is not just a matter of order but of proportionality. We can say we desire to put our Lord first, but we also need to ask in what degree He deserves to be first. We can decide what is second but we also need to ask to what degree it deserves to be second and so on. In other words, first things need to be first in the degree that they deserve to be first and second things second in the degree to which they deserve to

be second. The nature of our actual values is determined by the degree that we place our Lord in first place and so on down the line. We are always in a situation where we need to re-value what we are committed to.

In the passage Hebrews 10:19-25, the language of commitment is evident. We are to "have confidence to enter" (v. 19) the holy place; we are to "draw near with a sincere heart" (v. 22); we are to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (v. 23). Notice particularly verse 23, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering." The Greek word for "hold fast" is *katecho*, meaning to hold to, keep, detain, retain, contain, occupy, or possess. I suppose the image would be to grasp tightly and not to let go. But what are we to grasp? It is interesting to note that this same word in extra-Biblical sources means to "retain" a body of teaching that might be summed up in the phrase "confession of our hope." The Greek word *akline* translated "without wavering" (or in the NIV "unswerving") means not to bend or that which is straight. So we are to be involved with an unyielding drive to focus our lives on Christ and live on the basis of what He has done for us and taught us in His own teaching or in that of His established agents, the apostles.

A decisive commitment is a precondition for having a clean conscience (v. 22), for stimulating one another to love and good deeds (v. 24), for encouraging one another (v. 25), and for not forsaking the assembly of believers (v. 25). If we are going to grow in the love of Christ, we need to be committed to Him.

Love Is Never Sure Apart From Commitment

Henry Scougal (Puritan writer) once said, "The worth of a soul is determined by the object of its loves." The things we most passionately love shape the way we live and the kind of person we become. Love towards God or another person is never sustained apart from a conscious commitment to do so. Fullness of life comes not through the length of our lives, but through what we give our lives for. A life passionately lived for what is most worthy is the fullest kind of life possible. An anonymous poem states the issue powerfully:

We live in deeds, not years
 In thoughts, not breaths
 In feelings, not on figures on a dial
 He lives most who thinks most, feels most nobly
 and acts the best.

This is especially the case when we think the most about the One who is most worthy, feel a white-hot passion for Him, and act decisively on what He commands.

We can see how commitment makes love sure and stable in a relational context. Particularly within marriages, the degree of commitment is directly related to the longevity of the marriage. All marriages have difficulties. One leading pastor said about his wife, "Sometimes I could eat her up, at others, I wish I had." Another wise counselor was asked if he had ever contemplated divorce. His answer was, "Divorce – NO; murder – YES!" What will enable us to sustain our commitments to love at the altar through times of strain? The answer is commitment. I have often said that my confidence in my wife's love is not rooted in her relationship to me but in her relationship to Christ. At times, my only hope is that she loves Christ more than she loves me. In fact, a passionate love for our Lord is a precondition for sustaining our love for our spouses, friends, or neighbors.

We Easily Get Committed To The Wrong Things

At the root of our problems relationally and spiritually is a lack of commitment. It is so easy for our commitments to become altered and distorted. Romans 1:25 asserts that people have a tendency "to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator." Any time we make something or someone in God's creation an object of ultimate concern, we give that person or thing the place that only God should have. In the case of a person, we give to them the position of ultimate worth in our lives. We worship them. That person becomes like an idol to us. In the case of things, money, sex, and power often dominate people's values, but even concerns that seem more innocuous can take the place of worship. For instance, we can pursue the god of self-image, attempting to feel good about ourselves even when pursuing ungodly patterns of life. Often people seek artificial means to feel better about themselves (drugs, alcohol, sex, etc.) when their other strategy fails. Another oft-worshipped idol is the god of conformity. It is easy to be afraid of being different, out of the mainstream, not in accordance with the mood of the community, nation, or age where we live. In Washington, D. C., the value often upheld is power. In Hollywood, the value, all too often, is fame. On New York's Wall Street, money rules in many people's lives. In other areas of the country, complacency,

relativism and an all-inclusive tolerance is a powerful force. To go against the reigning value in these areas is to risk rejection. Some people pursue the god of affect, attempting to feel great all the time and disappointed when they feel low or in between. Again, artificial means can be used to attempt to attain the high we do not feel otherwise. Another god people worship is the extraordinary, being easily bored by the ordinariness of much of our lives. It is easy to forget that heroism in significant moments is forged in the little everyday choices we make. These idols need to be smashed and God placed again at the center of life. But this recovery is not always easy.

The widespread relativism in our culture undermines any clarity about what to be committed to. This is because it leaves us unsure as to what, if anything, is most worthy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain loving relationships without a clear idea of what you are committing to and why you are doing it. And without commitment, love becomes unsure. This is also true on a national level. The culture wars show that people are committed to radically different views of life and what this nation should be. Let the debate continue! However, to the degree that people are dispensing with fixed moral norms, to that degree our personal, corporate and national commitments become unsure and unclear. Recovering our commitment to our Lord involves regaining a vision not only of the truth about God, but also a sense of His goodness and beauty. When we grasp the winsome attractiveness of our God, then we can rekindle a white-hot passion for the incomparable beauty of our Lord. How can we gain or regain such a commitment and sustain it?

Watch The Why

We need a sufficient reason why. In order to restore commitment, we must watch the "Why?" Unless you have a sufficient reason "why" you ought to do something difficult, the cost will always be too great. If you do not know why you want to get in shape, the pain will be too great. If you do not know why you want to lose weight, then saying "no" will be too difficult. The "why" needs to be sufficiently motivating to sustain your commitment. It is not enough to have a reason why; it has got to be a compelling reason why. In Mark 8:34-38, Jesus does not merely command commitment, but He also gives you compelling reasons why you ought to act accordingly. Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." If you claim to be a disciple, a follower of Christ, "to come after me," then that requires self-denial – saying "no" to yourself. This self-denial is not saying "no" to your being a "self," an individual person (as in the New Age spirituality). This self-denial

is not saying “no” to the new self being created in the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10). The self-denial that Christ calls us to is saying no to our sinful desires – what the Bible sometimes calls the “old self.” That is a tall order. How can we renounce our old self in such a decisive way?

One author says:

To deny oneself means in every moment of life to say no to self and yes to God. To deny oneself means once and for all to dethrone self and to enthrone God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle of life and to make God the ruling principle, more the passion of life. The life of constant self-denial is a life of constant assent to God.

The word for “deny” in the Greek text is *aparneomai*, which means completely disown. It is the same word used with respect to Peter’s denials of Christ. (Matt. 26:34, 70, 72, 74) Another commentator says:

That’s exactly the kind of denial a believer is to make in regard to *himself*. He has either to disown himself or refuse to acknowledge the self of the old man. Jesus’ words could be paraphrased, “Let him refuse to have any association or companionship with himself.” Self denial not only characterizes a person when he comes in saving faith to Christ but also as he lives as a faithful disciple of Christ.

The metaphor that Christ uses next makes the difficulty even more overwhelming. We are called to “pick up our cross.” In our day, a cross is often seen as a symbol. As you drive through any major city, look for how many times you see the shape of the cross. Sometimes the cross is a mere ornament worn on a necklace. But the cross, in Jesus’ day, meant one of the most horrible forms of torture used exclusively by the Romans on foreigners. This form of speech would be shocking to those living at that time. It would be as if you were to say – in today’s parlance – unless you pick up your electric chair or carry the rifle to be used in your firing squad or bring the noose to be used at your hanging, you cannot be my disciple. The only difference is that death on a cross took much longer and was more excruciating (a word drawn from crucifixion) than any of these other forms of execution.

The cross was reserved by Romans as a form of punishment for foreigners in occupied territories. Cicero said that the cross should not even be named by a Roman citizen. It was a graphic deterrent to rebellion against Rome.

Crucifixions were not uncommon in Jesus’ day. Not many years before Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi – where He would say, “...deny yourself and take up your cross...” – one hundred men were crucified in that

very area. About 100 B.C., 800 Jewish rebels were crucified in Jerusalem. After the revolt which followed the death of Herod the Great, 2,000 were crucified under the Roman proconsul Varas. There were many crucifixions on a smaller scale; some estimate that there were 30,000 crucifixions under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ. So to take up the cross meant to be willing to start on a death march, to be willing to suffer the indignities, the pain, and even the death of a condemned criminal. How and why can we accept such a radical call to discipleship? Knowing all this, why would any disciple choose to answer Jesus’ call, “Follow me”?

Jesus Gives A Sufficient Reason

Jesus gives us a sufficient reason why we ought to say “no” to self and endure the cross. He says “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s shall save it.” (Mark 8:35) If you try to be your own savior, to pursue your own pleasure to do things your way, to pursue any of the “gods” mentioned earlier, you will lose your life. You will lose your life not only eternally, but lose the satisfaction of life here and now. Perhaps from Jesus’ teaching, we are aware of the specter of eternal judgment that hangs over us, but we are less aware that choosing the way of self-salvation means losing life’s fullness in the present. John Piper, in his writings, argues that “God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.” God’s glory and our own self-satisfaction meet in exactly the same place. Following God’s glory is the way to eternal joy and present joy. You might argue (with Augustine, Pascal, Edwards, C. S. Lewis, and others) that all sin is exchanging a higher satisfaction for a lesser one. For instance, pride is saying “no” to God’s joy in order to say “yes” to taking pleasure in yourself. Covetousness is saying “no” to God’s joy, in order to take pleasure in things, and so on. There certainly is pleasure to be found in pursuing lesser things, but sooner or later that pleasure will be diminished and then lost. My favorite quote from C. S. Lewis says:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink, sex, and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child, content to play with mud pies in a slum because he does not know what it means to have a holiday at the sea.

The problem with our desires is not that they are too strong, but that they are too weak. We do not even desire our own greatest happiness. Giving your all for second things such as “drink, sex, and ambition” is saying “no” to “infinite joy.” On the other hand, by saying

“yes” to first things like “the infinite joy offered us,” we can rightly enjoy the second things in a way God has intended. You do not have to settle for mud pies rather than the holiday. You can be far too easily pleased. As we have seen, pursuing your own selfish ways can lead to pleasure, along with the law of diminishing returns, ultimately leading to despair, decay, and addiction.

Self-Denial Is In Your Self-Interest

On the other hand, if you “lose” your life for Christ’s sake and the gospel’s, you will save your life eternally and gain abundant life now. To put it in another way, self-denial is in your self-interest. Saying “yes” to Christ and the gospel is in your self-interest. But self-interest is not the same as selfishness, because the central choice is for Christ and the gospel, and we benefit as an effect. We are lost in wonder, awe, and praise as we behold Christ, yet we are assuredly happy. Beholding the awesome sight of the Grand Canyon and experiencing awe is not selfish. Enjoying a valued friendship, losing yourself in the conversation, yet being filled with joy is not selfish. When you are unselfconscious, you can be very joyful. You are not selfish or self-oriented, yet these experiences are in your self-interest.

Faith In Christ Leads To Life

Jesus says that “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Faith in Christ is not in opposition to life but to sin. Faith in Christ is not opposed to the Creation but the Fall. Our faith is life-affirming and creation affirming. Following Christ is the way to the fullness of life and rejecting Christ is to lose life in its fullness. All sin is life-taking in the sense that it drains life from us. To be sure, some Christians are so focused on the Fall or on the possibility of sin that they seem both life-denying and Creation-ignoring. The great task for the next generation is to show a kind of faith that is both life-affirming and Creation-enjoying without minimizing the Fall or the possibility of sin.

The Best Investment Is Christ

Jesus goes on to say, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul, for what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36-37). Jesus calls you to weigh your values. What kind of investment in life do you want to make? What if you gain everything — money, fame, power, sex — and lose your soul? Missionary martyr Jim Eliot put it this way: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” Who would not make that kind of investment? Giving up everything temporal for that which is eternal; giving your time, money, and life for something of infinite value that you cannot lose. It

would be foolish to choose otherwise.

It seems that people are making that kind of choice all the time and are over and over finding that the things they desire are not adequate to satisfy them. So they get a new car, a new house, a new vacation, a new wife. Sooner or later, the newness wears off and they go from thing to thing, marriage to marriage, always seeking but never finding ultimate satisfaction. They want more from life but do not know where to find it. C. S. Lewis puts this powerfully.

This principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and the death of your whole body in the end; submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

In his classic book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah interviews people throughout the United States on their commitments to friendship, marriage, community life, and political life. The striking conclusion is that though people remain committed to people, community, and political life outside themselves, it is difficult for them to articulate why they should remain committed except in terms of their own (selfish) benefit. It is a haunting book and although written in 1985 it still deserves attention. The situation has hardly changed since then. John Kennedy made the famous speech in which he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” We could similarly say, “Ask not what your spouse can do for you, ask what you can do for your spouse” or “Ask not what another can do for you, but ask what you can do for another.” This last phrase is close to the Golden Rule “Do unto others what you would have them do for you” (Matthew 7:12). Where can we find an adequate basis for this kind of other-centered commitment except in Christ? We need to be called out of our self-orientation to love Christ and love others as ourselves.

No Reason To Be Ashamed

Jesus concludes His call to commitment by saying “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). There is no need to be ashamed of the gospel; it is the “power of God for

salvation" (Romans 11:16). Moreover, God is not ashamed to be called our God (Hebrews 11:16), so how can we be ashamed to be identified with Him? Jesus says that if we are ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of us.

We don't need to be ashamed of the Gospel intellectually. If believers cannot answer the hardest questions the culture can ask, it will be the first time in 2,000 years. Many of the foremost thinkers of all time (then and now) have been believers. People such as the apostle Paul, Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, C. S. Lewis, and others come to mind. We could add many others to this list. In-depth answers to all the classic objections have been given by the best minds the world has known. The Lord has given us enough of the top minds that we might not despair, but not so many that we might presume. The cross is still a stumbling block to our pride, and that humbling of ourselves is the hardest thing for many intellectuals to do. Many more believers need to be made aware of the solid intellectual foundations for their faith. Some are in the state of doubt, fearing that the next question might be an end to their faith. Many half-baked arguments floating around are used by non-believers to confuse believers. A little emphasis on the subject of apologetics by churches could go a long way towards strengthening and stabilizing believers' discipleship. Apologetics is needed as much for believers as for non-believers. It is hard for the heart to passionately embrace what the mind doubts.

Enough evidence can be found to make our commitment beyond a reasonable doubt. Only the Holy Spirit can give us absolute certainty. However, while apologetics cannot provide absolute certainty, it can make our commitment a leap into the direction set by the light rather than a leap into the dark.

Even if you establish a strong intellectual framework, this will not make you immune from doubt. Anything worthy of being wholeheartedly believed can and will be doubted. But how we deal with our doubts and those of others is important. It is said that 16-year old Bertrand Russell asked some hard questions and was told, "Don't doubt, just believe." That was the end of his professed faith. Intellectual doubts and questions need to be faced and given clear answers. If you do not know the answer, find someone who does. There are many Christian organizations devoted to giving such answers. Some provide phone counseling so you can ask a live person the question and get an answer plus written information that can help.

Our goal is not merely intellectual respectability but to find out what is true. In this relativistic culture, the widely held view of truth can be an obstacle to commitment. If whatever is true for you is true for you and whatever is true for me is true for me, then everybody's right. But

nobody's really right. Does what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth" (truth that is true independent of your attitude towards it) exist? Today's relativistic culture says "no," and to the degree that we are infected by this view, it tends to lead to half-hearted commitment. Why should I be passionately committed to what is only my private view? Or why should I give my whole life in the way Christ asks if this is only my community's perspective? Am I going to lose my life if I fail to make this commitment or not? Does someone who attempts to save his/her life in a way other than through Christ succeed in saving it or not? Unless we are clear on the issue of truth, it is not clear who we are calling people to be committed to.

Commitment Distorted

Sometimes the commitment to which Christ calls us is distorted such that it becomes fanaticism. There are some kinds of zeal that the Bible commends and others that it condemns. There is a zeal that is "not in accordance with knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). There is also a call for zeal or commitment that some cultic groups use to strip their members of all their time, money, previous relationships, family, and identity. Often the language of commitment to Christ is used, but its meaning is shifted subtly to total submission to the authorities in the cult and utter willingness to give up themselves for the goals of the group. This kind of authoritarianism is not encouraged by the Bible (1 Peter 5:1-7). Faith in Christ does not require (as some cults do) isolation from family and friends, a refusal to allow hard questions to be asked, hostility toward groups that have a different viewpoint, and a crushing of individual differences and personalities. Commitment to Christ encourages relationships to family, demonstrates a willingness to acknowledge truth wherever it is found, and cultivates honesty as to what commitment means. For a great study of these themes, see Chapter 9 of Ron Enroth's book, *Youth Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults*, entitled "The Characteristics of Cultic Commitment." Also see an excellent study by sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community*, which focuses on comparing contemporary communes and the more successful utopian communities of the nineteenth century. [For eleven questions that can be asked to distinguish between a cultic and legitimate group, see the chapter entitled "Evaluating Cults and New Religions" by LeVonne Neff in *A Guide to Cults and New Religions* by Ron Enroth and Others (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), pp. 196-197.] It is important to note that fanatical zeal "without knowledge" should not prevent zeal in accordance with knowledge. *An argument against abuse is not an argument against use.*

What Can We Do?

We can commit ourselves to the Lord. Even though we are believers, we need to often restore the commitment we once had. In Revelation 2, the Ephesian church is called to repent and recapture their “first love.” We need to go back to where we once were, confess our sin, and refocus on Jesus again. In a marriage ceremony there is a great commitment made. In the older version of the Book of Common Prayer it says:

With my body I thee worship,
With all my worldly goods I thee endow,
For richer or for poorer,
For better or worse,
In sickness or in health,
Till death do us part.

Notice the degree of commitment made. The man (and later the woman) gives away their body and their money. What do you have left? Note, too, the terms of the commitment. “For better or for worse” – not knowing what that person would be like five, ten, twenty, or fifty years from then. “For richer or for poorer” – not knowing what their financial position would be. “In sickness or in health” – again, not knowing what physical illnesses they might have to face together. Yet many men and women are eager to make that kind of total commitment to another human being. But how many have made that kind of commitment to our Lord saying:

Lord, with my body I thee worship,
With all my worldly goods I thee endow,
For better or for worse,
For richer or poorer,
In sickness or in health,
I offer my body as a living sacrifice to You;
You alone are worthy to receive my worship;
You are the One before whom the angels bow (Is. 6:1ff)
and say, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts,
heaven and earth are full of your glory;”
You are the One before whom the elders fall (Rev. 5:12)
and say, “Worthy is the Lamb...to receive honor,
dominion, power, and glory.”

It is because we too often lack this kind of commitment that we lack leadership in the church and the world today.

I heard a story about Bill Pannell, a teacher at Fuller Theological Seminary. One time in the ‘70s he was talking to fellow African American students. At that time some were contemplating a violent revolution. One of them said to Bill, “When’s the revolution going to be?”

Bill said, “There’s not going to be any revolution.”
They asked, “Why not?”

Bill replied, “Because of the weekend.”

I had to think about that story a little while before I understood the point. For five days a week they were energetically for their cause. But when it came to Friday and Saturday night, they went out and partied. The problem was that they got so wiped out on the weekend that it took until Wednesday to get the revolution going again. You can’t accomplish a large goal unless you are totally committed to it. When we take “weekends” from our faith, we lose the momentum that we had and it’s difficult to get up to speed again.

I recently watched the Tour de France and noticed that at the beginning of the individual time trials, the competitors begin on a downward ramp to get up to speed quickly. When riders fell during the race, someone often helped them up and gave them an initial push to get going again. When our spiritual momentum has stopped, we similarly need a boost. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit’s help is what we need most, but it doesn’t hurt to have brothers and sisters praying for us and pushing us to get going again.

We need to determine what is most worthy – our Lord – and with passion commit ourselves to Him again and again. We need to say “no” to selfishness and say “yes” to our own best “self-interest” and the One who is alone worthy of worship. We need to “ask not what our Lord can do for us, but what we can do for our Lord.” There are many issues that we have to face in this nation and throughout the world, and we need passionately committed believers who have the courage to follow the divine call and utilize God-given gifts to build up the kingdom and love people in the name of Christ.

Lord give us a white hot passion to commit ourselves to the immense attractiveness of our Lord. Amen.



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