

# secular Christianity of Eric Liddell

*The Olympic runner and missionary on discipleship.*

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ERIC LIDDELL

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**W**ithin a year of his 1924 Olympic success (dramatized in the award-winning film, *Chariots of Fire*), Eric Liddell—the gold medalist who wouldn't run on Sunday—went to China as a missionary with the London Missionary Society. There, he taught science at the Anglo-Chinese College in Tientsin and later decided to tackle the more arduous task of rural evangelism, traveling many miles in rugged conditions by foot and bicycle.

Following the Japanese invasion of China and the consequent outbreak of World War II, Liddell was classified as an "enemy national" and sent to the prison camp at Weishien in August of 1943. As one of 1,800 prisoners packed into a facility measuring only 150 by 200 yards, the former national hero played a pivotal role in meeting the camp's physical and spiritual needs. He organized athletic meets, taught hymns, and ministered from the Word. David J. Michell, who was a child in the Weishien camp, writes: "None of us will ever forget this man who was totally committed to putting God first, a man whose humble life combined muscular Christianity with radiant godliness."

Just months before liberation, Liddell died of a brain tumor on February 21, 1945.

The following is taken from *A Manual of Christian Discipleship*, a directive on spiritual living written by Liddell. It is being published for the first time this month—exactly sixty years since Liddell first went to China—by Abingdon Press, under the title *The Disciplines of the Christian Life* (1985).

## The key to knowing God

A disciple is a person who knows God personally and learns from Jesus Christ, who most perfectly revealed God. Obe-

dience is the key to knowing God. Obedience to God's will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not willingness to know, but to *do* God's will that brings enlightenment and certainty regarding spiritual truth (see John 7:17).

Ask yourself: If I know something to be true, am I prepared to follow it, even though it is contrary to what I want, to what I have previously held to be true? Will I follow it if it means being laughed at, if it means personal financial loss or some kind of hardship?

Obedience is the secret of being conscious that God guides you personally. If you feel in your heart that you should do something, consider whether it is in line with the character and teaching of Jesus. If it is, obey the impulse; in doing so you will find it was God guiding you.

If you are not guided by God, you will be guided by someone or something else. The Christian who hasn't the sense of guidance in life is missing something vital. To obey God's will was like food to Jesus, refreshing his mind, body, and spirit. "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me" (John 4:34). We can have the same experience if we make God's will the dominant purpose in our lives.

God speaks to people through the moral law. If we break these laws, and excuse ourselves for doing so, the presence and guidance of God lose their reality in our lives; the freedom and radiance of the Christian life depart. Here are four tests of the moral law by which to measure ourselves:

*Am I truthful?* Are there any conditions under which I will tell a lie? Can I be depended on to tell the truth no matter what the cost?

*Am I honest?* Can I be trusted in money matters? In my work, even when no one is looking? With other people's reputations? With myself—or do I rationalize and become self-defensive?

*Am I pure?* In my habits? In my thought life? In my motives? In my relations with the opposite sex?

*Am I selfish?* In the demands I make on my family, spouse, or associates? Am I badly balanced, full of moods—cold today and warm tomorrow?

Do I indulge in nerves that spoil my happiness and that of those around me? Am I unrestrained in my pleasures, the kind I enjoy without considering the effect they have on my soul? Am I unrestrained in my work, refusing to take reasonable rest and exercise? Am I unrestrained in small self-indulgences, letting myself become the slave of habits, however harmless they may appear to me?

Let us put ourselves before ourselves and look at ourselves. The bravest moment of a person's life is the moment when he looks at himself objectively without wincing, without complaining. Self-examination that does not result in action is dangerous. *What am I going to do about what I see?* The action called for is surrender—of ourselves to God.

## What do I surrender?

*The Negatives.* I become convinced that up to the present, with myself in control of my life, I haven't got anywhere. I see that the life that is joyous, rich, and has a worthwhile goal is the life with Jesus in control. God asks me to surrender my control.

I become convinced that my life is not really controlled by myself but by sin. Its power dominates my life. I do what I loathe afterwards. God asks me to surrender myself to him.

I become conscious that the dominant factor in my life, that by which I make decisions, is not God but something or someone else. It might, for instance, be laziness. God asks surrender of that first place to him so that in the future I will base my actions and

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reactions on what he desires.

Habits, attitudes, moods, self-indulgences of any kind, which I know are not the best, not in line with the life and teaching of Jesus, are constantly cropping up and causing inhibitions or conflicts in my life. God asks the surrender of these.

*Completeness.* The more complete that first surrender, the greater the chance of quick and continuous growth in the Christian life. This is not the New Birth. The New Birth should be simultaneous with, or closely following, the act of surrender, but it is not identical with it. The New Birth is the great work God does in us in renewing our natures. Surrender is our part.

Then, we begin to realize there is much more we never dreamed of that needs surrendering. New situations arise, new problems face us, new sacrifices are asked, and we find they are not faced without a struggle. For a time we may hardly be aware of them. Slowly, the conscience detects the leading of God. We do not fully face it because it is inconvenient or uncomfortable. God leads on till we know it means surrender and going forward in the Christian life, or avoidance and finding his guidance less distinct and our Christian life less victorious.

It is helpful to start each day by asking: "Have I surrendered this new day to God, and will I seek and obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout its hours?" Wait until, with the full consent of your will, you can say, "I have; I will."

## How do I surrender?

Here it is that we meet difficulties. It is best to discuss this with a minister or friend who is living the kind of Christian life you admire. Here are some suggestions:

1. *On your own.* Ideally, take what you feel should be surrendered and, in prayer before God, tell him all. Hide nothing; be honest toward it and toward God. Wait on your knees till you know you have God's forgiveness and your surrender has been accepted.

It is difficult to be honest with yourself, to be sure that you really want to forsake the thing on your mind and conscience. Besides, that might just be a symptom, not the root sin, in which case it often means surrender and fall.

2. *With the help of a friend.* Many find surrender more satisfactory and complete by first sharing it—talking it over with a friend who understands. This is hard. It strikes at our pride, which is what makes it so difficult. It seems harder to tell someone else than to tell God. Yet it shouldn't. We often take things to God in such a way that it costs us very little—more in the attitude of justifying our failure than confessing our guilt. Here a true friend can be helpful, bringing up points that need to be surrendered.

3. *Focus on forgiveness.* When surrender is being made, alone or with another person, the mind should not be focused only on our act, but also on God's forgiveness. The Cross, and what has been done for us by God, is far greater than anything we are doing. Surrender means the end of the great rebellion of our wills. We capitulate; God can act.

Do not limit God to the smallness of your prejudices. God honors many ways of surrendering. Do not avoid one method because it hurts your pride. You may have to come back to the very method you have been trying to avoid.

## Characteristics of a disciple

Righteousness and love are the two central pillars of religion, the two attributes of God that are inseparable. They are the two characteristics that God longs to see harmoniously united in every individual. The third indispensable characteristic of a disciple is humility.

• **Righteousness.** Righteousness includes honesty. It always tells the truth. It prefers to tell the truth and suffer than lie and escape punishment. If telling the truth brings another into trouble, it usually prefers to be silent and suffer.

It is honest with money. Small as well as large amounts are safe in its hands. It is especially careful with other people's or public money.

It is honest with other people's things. Articles borrowed are returned; money loaned is repaid.

It is honest in business. Full weight is given in selling; goods are not adulterated; the truth about the articles is told.

It is honest in speech. Its "yes" means "yes," its "no" means "no." It is honest in work; it works as well whether on its

own or supervised.

Righteousness includes justice. It is always just in its dealings with others. The rich and poor, the strong and weak, the powerful and powerless are all treated alike. It never takes advantage of its position but judges according to right and wrong. It never accepts bribes. It never lends money at high interest; it seeks a just price.

Righteousness seeks to be right with God. It reverences God but has no need to fear him, for it is willing to bring all its actions and motives into the light of God's presence. It seeks first of all to please not people but God.

Righteousness seeks to be right with people. It desires to put aside everything that causes barriers between people. Side [pretension], snobbishness, rudeness, dislikes, revenge, and attitudes that can be put right we are to seek, with all our heart, to put right.

Righteousness seeks to put aside all known sin, failings, weaknesses. It desires, with the whole heart, to put aside all that might hinder its growth in the Christian life; all that limits its usefulness—laziness, anger; all that blurs its vision—pride, jealousy, envy, carelessness of other people's needs, selfishness; all that weakens its will—wrong habits, decisions made through fear. Do I want righteousness of this kind?

• **Love.** Love is patient with all. It suffers all the weakness, ignorance, errors, and pettiness of the children of God. It suffers all the malice and wickedness of the world—not just for a short time, but to the end.

Love is kind. It is always ready to go out of its way to help. It longs to reduce people's burdens by willingly and joyfully sharing their sorrows and hardships. It throws out a great offensive of love to break down the barriers that separate people.

Love does not think more highly of itself than it should. It recognizes that every gift and talent comes from God. It boasts of nothing but the goodness of God. Love recognizes the responsibility to use and develop these gifts but not to become proud, arrogant, patronizing, or to give itself airs because of them.

Love is never rude, never willingly offensive. It is polite and courteous.

Love is never irritated. Outward provocations will occur, but love does not yield to these; it triumphs over them. In



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all trials it looks to Jesus and is more than conqueror in his strength.

*Love is never selfish*—for praise, popularity, or pity; in the desire for, or use of, money and possessions; never self-centered in thought life, in planning just for itself, its own comfort or convenience; never self-opinionated, seeking to impose its point of view or its plan on others.

*Love never broods over wrongs.* It does not ponder them so as to magnify them and increase the feeling of revenge. No, it takes them to God in prayer; it surrenders them to him and has the attitude of forgiveness to the person concerned.

*Love thinks no evil.* It casts out all evil surmisings, all readiness to believe evil. It is frank, open, unsuspecting; as it cannot design, neither does it fear evil.

*Love is never glad when others go wrong.* Apply this to the person with whom you are competing, your opponent, your enemy. Never be glad when others make a wrong move, an unwise step that is contrary to God's law and leads to their downfall.

*Love rejoices in the truth,* even if it means owning oneself to be in the wrong.

*Love is always slow to expose;* it knows when to be silent. Merciful people do not willingly mention or expose

the faults or failings of others. They hate and keep away from all gossip, backbiting, and evil speaking. Before passing on evil about others they first ask themselves: Is it true? Is it loving? Is it necessary? They repeat it only if it seems absolutely necessary.

*Love is always eager to believe the best,* to put the best construction on everything. Even when the action, motive, and intention are all shown to be evil, love still hopes that the person will repent and come back to bask in God's loving forgiveness.

*Love never fails*—for God is love.

• **Humility.** Humility is an indispensable virtue in the New Testament, closely connected with the teaching and example of Jesus.

*Humility has no self-conscious pride.* It does not shut its eyes to its faults and limitations. It is prepared to recognize and confess how it has fallen short of God's plan, or disobeyed God's law or its own conscience. It sees itself in the light of a holy God. It does not compare its life with other people's lives.

*Humility is not afraid to learn new lessons and make new beginnings.* It has no mock humility, saying, "I can't do this," when all the time it wants to be pressed to do so. Nor does it say, "I

can't," because it is afraid of loss of face if it fails, or that people will laugh.

*Humility is not out to justify its actions;* it does not have a defensive attitude toward life.

*Humility looks at its sins* (self-examination), *but also beyond them* to the Savior from sin and casts itself upon his mercy. Pride is the great enemy of humility.

*Humility looks at its merits, gifts, and talents, but also beyond them* to God, the Author of every good and perfect gift, and renders all the glory to God.

*Humility is powerful,* for it is based on the sense of being absolutely dependent on the grace of God. That is why a good Christian has such a serene and confident spirit. Good Christians aim high and attempt great things—yet without proud looks or thoughts; they are not thinking of themselves, but of God. They have simple, childlike hearts because they depend so much on their heavenly Father.

*Humility is not worried about "face."* It is prepared to own a fault, a mistake, make an apology, or make restitution if it has wronged anyone.\*

### My Creed

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator, infinitely holy and loving, who has a plan for the world, a plan for my life, and some daily work for me to do.

I believe in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, as Example, Lord, and Savior.

I believe in the Holy Spirit who is able to guide my life so that I may know God's will; and I am prepared to allow him to guide and control my life.

I believe in God's law that I should love the Lord my God with *all* my heart, and with *all* my soul, and with *all* my mind, and with *all* my strength; and my neighbor as myself.

I believe it is God's will that the whole world should be without any barriers of race, color, class, or anything else that breaks the spirit of fellowship.

To *believe* means to believe with the mind and heart, to accept, and to act accordingly on that basis. □

\*Thoughts based on *Christian Faith and Practice* by A. C. Craig, O. B. Milligan, D. M. Baillie. First published 1932 by the Church of Scotland Committee on the Religious Instruction of Youth. Used by permission of Church of Scotland Department of Education.