THE PARADOXES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Single Message

“I 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.”
John 12:24

When people come to Christ, they are looking for fulfillment, for new life, power, strength and provision. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). That’s the invitation, but Jesus also says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). How are we to interpret these two statements that appear to be on opposite ends of the spectrum? This week, Author and Bible teacher, Charles Price, explains what seems to be a paradox of the Christian life, not as a contradiction of two conflicting ideas, but as a means to an end.

In John 12:25 Jesus goes on to say, “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Here’s the irony – the means to life is through death. What does that mean? The end is wholeness, but the means to wholeness is brokenness. The end is victory, but the means is suffering. The end is resurrection but the means is through crucifixion. The symbol of Christianity is a cross; an extremely brutal and cruel form of dying. In Psalm 51:17, David writes, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” A broken spirit is one that despairs of itself and knows its own barrenness and weaknesses.

There are those, however, who believe there is some kind of virtue in self-denial. They’re aware of their brokenness, or need for penance or as a way of honouring God they do unusual things like going without socks in winter or sleeping on a park bench, or giving up ice cream for a month. That may ease their consciences, but does nothing to win the favour of God. What Jesus meant by denying oneself is that unless everything in our lives is subject to the role of Jesus Christ as Lord, we cannot be His disciple. We may call ourselves a Christian, and know we’re going to heaven, but know nothing of the life Christ offers.

When Jesus says, “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,” He is talking about a particular issue as well as a general principle. The particular issue is found in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Jesus said this a few days before His crucifixion. Several times the Gospels speak of the “hour that has come”, or “the hour which had not yet come.” That’s about the particular issue of Christ’s crucifixion, but then Jesus moves on to a general principle. “Whoever loves his life will lose it; whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” In other words, not only is He willing to die and go into the ground in order to produce fruit, but so must we be willing to die.

This is not a physical death Jesus is speaking of. It is about dying to our own agendas, our own wants and desires, and living for the agenda of Jesus Christ. There are many who want what Christ offers; salvation, fullness of life, but are not willing to pay the price of becoming His disciple. That’s why the Christian life doesn’t work for a lot of people. They want their name on the ticket that will take them to heaven, but don’t want to live under the authority in which the ticket was given. They remain a single seed that doesn’t germinate, spring to life or bear fruit.
Abundant life comes out of a resurrection life, and that means we die to ourselves in order to live for Christ. As is often the case today, that teaching didn’t come across very favourably in Jesus’ day. After three years of ministry, there were only 120 disciples present on the Day of Pentecost, which is a poor percentage compared to the multitudes who heard Him. It’s because Jesus told them the truth, and they didn’t like what He required of them. It wasn’t about having a little addition to their lives to make it easier and more comfortable, but about giving their lives over fully to Him.

As a man on earth, Jesus had given His life completely over to His Father. “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus had no agenda of His own, only that of His Father’s. He first died personally to Himself before He died a physical death. He lived in total submission to His Father, and if we are to be true disciples of Christ, we are to live in total submission to Him. “If anyone serves me he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also” (John 12:26).

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:10, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our bodies. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal bodies.” Paul’s agenda was far bigger than himself and the life within Him far greater than his. The life of Christ within him was his empowering and sustenance in every situation. For that to be released in us, we have to come to the point of saying, “I die to my own interests and live for the interests of Jesus Christ.” Paul sums up this general principle when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20-21).

If a grain of wheat is ever going to reproduce itself, it first has to go into the ground and die. It isn’t about living in a dark hole, but the extreme opposite. It’s about living in the fullness of Christ, where we die to our own agendas in order to release something far richer, better and fuller than we could ever achieve for ourselves. Just as the seed in the ground germinates, comes to life and produces fruit, the seed of the Gospel planted deeply in our hearts comes to life in the power of the resurrected life of Christ. The natural consequence of the love, joy and peace of Christ indwelling our hearts is that it overflows in blessings to others, thereby planting more seed in the hearts of others. When we’re on Christ’s agenda there is nothing that gives more joy and satisfaction then to plant a seed that the Holy Spirit will spring to life, and make more disciples for Him.