

BEYOND THE BEATINGS

2 Corinthians 11:23-27; Luke 14:25-33; Phil 3:8-10 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

5 June 2005

All Rights Reserved

Some years ago my father bought a weed whacker to trim the edges of his lawn. It sat in the box for a few years, so I took it out and assembled it for him. It looks like a pipe with an engine on one end and a rotating head on the other. You hold the engine in one hand and the pipe in the other, and you go around cutting down weeds and errant blades of grass with a spinning string.

My dad tried it a few times and hurt his back every time. The motor was just too heavy. It was a beast to handle. Ladies, you know how we men love our motors. My dad had succumbed to the "bigger is better" theory. But he wisely chose not to hurt his back and gave it to me.

I was thrilled. Since then, I have become addicted to edging. Sure, mowing is good, but have you edged? And if you have used a string trimmer, you know that the string is always breaking off. You bounce the head on the ground and out spins some more string. I thought I would be clever and installed the heaviest string that would fit. No more of this wimpy green--I put in the heavy-duty orange.

Recently my wife and I were going out of town and I wanted to get the lawn mowed. I was in the process of edging the back garden, which is one of the last things I do. I was getting a little tired, and as I drew the head of the trimmer down the last foot of garden I stood my ground, pulled the trigger all the way, and edged my left leg at full speed.

When you do something like that to yourself it often takes a few moments to realize what you have done. I stood there stupidly in excruciating pain for a bit, and then I took a look down. *Huh!* I thought. *My favorite mowing pants not even ripped. How bad could it be?* I pulled up the pant leg and there was nine square inches of bloody mess. So, being a manly man, I finished edging.

When I was done I had another look. The extra-sturdy orange trim line had smacked the skin so hard that it blew it apart and damaged tissue deep underneath. I nursed this injury for weeks, alternately covering it and letting it breathe, trying to keep it from oozing on my sock, pants, furniture, and bedclothes.

The reason I am telling you this is that as I looked at my little patch of flogged, beaten flesh I had a piercing realization: *This is what it is like to be whipped. This is what Jesus went through at the hands of Pontius Pilate. This is what Paul the Apostle went through repeatedly at the hands of persecutors--only for them, it covered most of their bodies.* It was a moment of personal revelation. This experience, only hundreds of times worse, has been a normal part of life for Christ and his people.

1. THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS CHRIST

Paul encountered so many such sufferings he must have had long periods of time when his whole body was a bloody mess. Between beatings he must have been a mass of scar tissue. He gave a summary of his experience to the church at Corinth: **"Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure"** (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

The reason the Jews stopped whipping at thirty-nine lashes is that they thought forty would kill the average man. When we were kids we would sometimes say that our parents had given us a whipping, but nobody got beaten this badly. The Gentiles liked to beat with rods, and the Jews also sometimes employed stoning. I am thankful that I was able to use different antibiotics on my puny wound, but there were no such medicines in the first century. Serious infections must have been the norm.

How many times do you think Paul wondered if it was worth it? If he did so, we have no record of it in the Bible. We need to realize something of great importance about the sheer number of times Paul was beaten. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that those beatings were a normal part of the cost of following Christ. He could have turned back after the first few floggings--after his back and legs and head were bloodied beyond recognition. He could have seen the stoning as the last straw. But the only record we have of him was that after each of these beatings he turned immediately back to the work of Christ. He obviously thought: *If this is what it costs to follow Christ, this is what I will do.*

Jean Giacofei, whom some of us know, has recently returned from a missions trip to the Philippines with her church, Calvary Chapel. It is fascinating to watch the Calvary Chapel movement enter the work of missions. They do many short term missions and also have placed career missionaries in some very difficult places. They call them "lifers," meaning people who have adopted the Coast Guard motto: "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back." One specific work in which Jean participated was in a rural area which was lacking in sanitation and clean water. It was simply not possible to pack in enough bottled water for their team, so they drank the local water with efforts at filtering. Eventually, most of them got sick.

But this was not a surprise! They knew that the trip would be challenging. They had to answer the question up front: If this is what it costs to minister the love and truth of Christ, are we still willing to do it? They said yes. Paul said yes. What do we say?

If we could play a recording of our discussions about ministry in our church--and most churches--we would often hear remarks about what people find inconvenient or uncomfortable. Sometimes entire ministries fail among us because the servants of Christ find them inconvenient

or uncomfortable. These are ministries which don't even threaten real suffering! I often wonder how we can get ourselves to be made of sterner stuff in Christ--stuff more like Paul.

2. ONE RADICAL STANDARD

One thing which keeps us from becoming stronger in Christ is a false belief that there are different levels of calling. It is very seductive to imagine that the sacrificial Christians you have known have had some special revelation to endure sufferings to which you are not called. If you want to do a very confrontational and annoying Bible study, read all the verses with the word "calling." Almost all of them refer not to the commissioning of men and women for full-time ministry, but to the time when each of us came to Christ. The high calling of discipleship attaches to every one of us the moment we are saved!

If your brain is saying, "Pastor, you must be kidding!" listen to the words of our Lord Jesus: **"Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions"** (Luke 14:25-34).

The first thing to notice is that this teaching about the radical standard of discipleship is being directed to a large crowd. Jesus explicitly says that this is the standard for anyone who comes to him. And what are the elements of this standard? They are easy to list and hard to process: love and honor for Christ even above every family member; total commitment to Christ even to death; and the abandonment of every possession to Christ, not just the material things.

This sounds like what we have always mapped onto people going into so-called full-time ministry, hoping that it did not apply to us. We were hoping for a quiet, untroubled life which would usher us into heaven in the afterlife. This is the very attitude Christ was seeking to confront in this teaching. The thing which explains it is found by placing the emphasis on the pronouns referring to Christ. When he says "anyone who comes to me," what is the definition of the word "me?" When he says "my disciple" what is the meaning of the word "my"?

Paul wrote: **"For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him..."** (Colossians 1:16-19). When we

come to Jesus we are coming to the Creator of All, Unassailable Ruler of visible and invisible realms, Sovereign Lord above every authority, Unavoidable Source of everything that is, the One who dwells above all and holds it all together. He is the Supreme Head of the church, the Resurrected One who has life in himself and who gives it to whomever he chooses. He is the One who has first place in everything by right, and in whose human body dwells all of God with no part left out.

That's why there is only one radical standard for following Christ--because it's him! The meaning of discipleship cannot be discovered until the identity of Christ is clarified. That's why Jesus insisted that we count the cost. He insists on being the sole reference point for every decision of discipleship. He is supreme, so every word he has spoken must have supreme authority in our lives and ministries.

He does not care what the color of the paint in our building is, he does not care what the style of music is, he does not care about the type of clothing or hair, and he does not care about the details of our programs. He cares about whether you and I know that he is Lord of All, whether we love him with our whole beings, and whether we love his other children of the faith the same way he does.

3. BEYOND THE BEATINGS

I am convinced that the only way Paul took the beatings he did was by looking beyond them. As hard as it is to believe, there are many things in Christ which dwarf the significance of even a terrible beating. Listen to the heart song of a man who knows who Christ is: **"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death"** (Philippians 3:8-10). Paul is saying that the inevitable sufferings of discipleship are more than compensated by "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus." Beyond the beatings is the worth of Christ himself.

Beyond the beatings is also the great commission of Christ. One of the most intractable facts of the universe is that the whole world is going to hell unless they hear of Christ and believe in him. The Apostle Peter concluded a defense of his ministry by explaining why the disciples would not stop preaching Christ no matter when was done to them: **"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12).

Because he would not stop saying "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" Peter was persecuted heavily and, it is said, got crucified upside down. But what could he say? That God doesn't love you and does not have a wonderful plan for your life? No, Jesus Christ is our only hope for salvation. He is the Supreme Ruler of the Universe and brooks no competitors. The logic which leads one to accept beatings and even crucifixion is simple. Everyone is going to hell without Christ, the only one we must ultimately please is the Lord Christ himself, so we

must tell everyone what he commanded us to say. There is nothing wrong with avoiding beatings whenever we can, but we must never flinch from pleasing the Lord in all respects.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I am certain that every one of those early disciples who was flogged within an inch of his or her life thought: "My Jesus was willing to do this for me. I may be a mass of welts, scars, and blood, but there are more important things than this old body."

Now for some hard questions. Will you give Christ supremacy over your pet sins? These are the ones we do not because we are in bondage but simply because we like them. Ninety percent of teens surveyed say they view hard core pornography at least once a week. Forty percent of pastors from all denominations say the same thing. What shall be supreme in our lives, the lordship of Christ or a fleeting set of good feelings?

Only ten percent of Christians share their faith on a regular basis. Where is Christ's supremacy in that statistic? Will you give Christ supremacy by submitting to the leaders he has placed over you? Most Western Christians think that the Master of the Universe wants them to vote on everything and thus miss his blessing.

The industrialized world is addicted to amusement. Must the stereo, television, computer, or video game always be on? Rarely they may encourage discipleship but most often they short-circuit the work of Christ's supremacy in forging our discipleship. Are you addicted to possessions? Are you addicted to your opinions?

I wrote this sentence during a recent devotional time: Will the historians of the future say of the church leaders of our day that we failed to manage well enough or that we failed to comprehend and paint for God's people a compelling vision of the majesty and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ for them to follow?

May the Holy Spirit convict us! We have not fully appreciated that the Jesus who was whipped and crucified for us is the King of kings. Every question we have about discipleship must be answered by asking: Who is my Lord, and what has he told me to do? If you must, repent of believing the deception that there are multiple levels of discipleship and that you signed up for the easy one. Repent of honoring your opinions and comforts over Christ.

Yes, beatings are a normal part of true discipleship, but beyond the beatings is the intense joy of knowing and serving our supreme Lord. From what possible ministry have you shrunk back out of fear? Let us recalculate our discipleship. There are dramatic, beautiful things just beyond the horizon.

[clip: flogging scene from the *Jesus* film, about 2 min.]