

What Did Jesus Say?

“Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

I used to think that Christianity was an altogether passive faith: for me, being Christian meant confessing something about Christ and then trying to live a moral life, nothing more. Like many people in America today, I considered traditions, rituals, and rules to be the core of my faith. Do this, don't do that. I went to church, I prayed, I attended retreats, but there was a definite divide between “faith stuff” and the rest of my life.

Towards the end of high school, I realized that my faith – although very important to me – was basically powerless. I said the same prayers every night. I struggled with questions such as, “How is my faith different from other belief systems?” and “What does a relationship with Jesus look like in my day to day life?” Although I read the Bible, I understood very little about its implications for my life.

The kind of feeble faith I had is unfortunately, I think, all too common. America is widely considered the most Christian developed nation in the world, and yet much of our culture seems very far from vibrant Christian faith; for instance, three-quarters of Americans believe that the expression “God helps those who help themselves” – basically the antithesis of the Gospel message – is a biblical teaching.

As I prepared for my time at Princeton four years ago, I sensed that – like the culture around me – I swore by a faith that did not affect my actions to the extent that it should. I realized that there was something missing in my life.

I now realize I was searching for a truth that Jesus lays out in the Gospel of Luke: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”* (Luke 9:23-24)

Four years later, I find these verses to be both demanding and refreshing, as they express a truth that has injected incredible power and meaning into my faith in Jesus Christ. I have realized that *denying myself* means not only denying indulgence in immoral desires, but also surrendering complete control of my life's direction to God.

In a nutshell, God led me to understand the paradox of the Gospel: that to truly find life as I was meant to live, I needed to die to my own selfish desires. To have the relationship with God and the deep satisfaction in faith that I had been seeking, I needed to let go of my death grip on my own life and instead *follow Jesus*. In the last few years I have appreciated again and again what I did not fully grasp in high school: that Jesus is incredibly worthy of whatever sacrifices I have to make to be his follower. Whether that sacrifice, that *cross* that I take up, is my reputation, or my job, or my friends, or my life itself, I know that the reward of following Jesus is unquestionably worth the cost of discipleship.

I have come to love the Jesus who is not a powerless pacifist, but a man of action, filled with both tender compassion and unflinching justice. I follow the Jesus who ministers to the crowds and then whips the money-changers who are defiling his father's temple. The Jesus who forgives the sins of a prostitute and then upbraids the Pharisees for their self-righteousness. The Jesus who is both meek and fierce, humble and outspoken, peaceful and divisive.

This Jesus whom I know abounds in love but also forces us to make a choice: to take up our cross and follow him, or to reject him entirely. Jesus, himself a paradox as God incarnate, does not leave any middle ground for lukewarm Christians. The Bible tells us that many start to follow him and fall away, *“but the one who endures to the end will be saved”* (Matthew 24:13). Some hardship is sure to come to those who endure, but relatively speaking this hardship is just a *“light momentary affliction”* that prepares us for *“an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Since I came to Princeton and decided to go all in as a follower of Jesus, I have indeed experienced some trials as a result. However, I cannot overstate that my very modest suffering has been immensely overshadowed by not only the Bible's promise of future glory, but also by the tremendous joy and contentment that I find in Christ here and now. I find that I want to follow God's instructions and direction as a response to the grace and love I feel in his presence. I can honestly say that I have – paradoxically – saved my life by giving it up to Christ.

I want to leave you with a challenge: think about your life. Reflect. The things you prioritize right now in your life, the things that you invest time and energy and money into – do they truly satisfy you at the deepest level? Or do you find that you are, by default, holding onto this life and its ephemeral pleasures? Have you ever seriously considered that there could be an eternity ahead of you, an eternity of either great delight or great suffering in which King Jesus will reign forever? Whatever your answer, I encourage you to ruminate on the unequivocal, paradoxical call of Jesus Christ.

-Dave Kurz '12