

A couple and their 5 year old son were driving up the coast of Florida on vacation. They noticed a sign saying Naturist Camp and assumed that was the same as a naturalist camp. (Some of you are getting ahead of me!). They drove in, parked their car, and headed toward the beach. They quickly realized that this naturist camp was actually a nudist camp, when they came upon a group of people, all stark naked, cycling along the beach. Their 5-year-old son stopped and stared in amazement. Pointing at the cyclists he said "Look, they're not wearing helmets!"

This is a tough gospel text. Matthew puts together 6 sayings of Jesus, because they are all about the costs and rewards of being a Christian.

The most radical saying is that "whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." Once again, we know we are close to the heart of faith when we are dealing with paradox. With everything else, losing and finding are opposites: when we find something, it stops being lost, and when we lose something, it stops being found. But when we freely lose our life to God, when we give our whole self to God, paradoxically that's when we get our real life. The self was made to give itself away. But that means that our big fat ego has to get off the throne and let God get on.

The paradox is that egotism does not fulfill the ego but destroys it. Playing God gets rid of God, but it also gets rid of ourself. And giving our whole self to God gets not only God but also ourself.

T.S. Eliot described Christianity as "a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything." Both the cost and the benefit are total. God cannot be just one of many good things in our life; He is either everything or nothing. Christ tells us, as He tells Martha, who was busily worrying about many things, that "there is need of only one thing." (Lk 10:42). That's Christ. He demands our whole life not because He's our tyrant but because He's our lover. He wants to save and perfect our whole life, not just part of it. We have to give Him everything so that He can give us everything. We have to open our hands to let Him put His gifts, His grace, in them. We have to open our hearts to let Him into our hearts.

That means that we have to die to our grasping, untrusting ego. We have to accept that death. Physical martyrdom is an expression of that interior, spiritual death to the ego. Literal martyrdom is rare in our culture, but it's the expression of something that's required of all Christians, something that is the rule, not the exception.

But the profit infinitely outweighs the loss. When we give ourselves, we gain ourselves. When we give no less than everything, we gain no less than everything. In fact, we gain MORE than everything. We gain God. And thus, and only thus, we gain ourselves, our life, our true life, our eternal life, our heart's deepest desire. For God has made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.

There is simply no workable alternative. For "what profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit their very life?" (Mk 8:36).

Every religion in the world shares some version of this paradoxical vision, that the true self is found only by the gift of self, that the great task of the ego is to die to egotism, that we must abdicate the throne of our own life and stop playing God.

Circling around this central idea, like planets circling around the sun, are other sayings of Jesus, such as “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” That is not demeaning love to parents or love to children. In fact, it assumes both: it assumes that those loves are the highest and holiest of all other loves. In cultures where the family is NOT revered, that saying of Jesus would not be shocking. In the culture of Judaism, based on divine revelation of the holiness of the family, it is the most shocking thing Jesus could say. Even the second greatest thing in the world is not the first. The first is our heavenly Father. Our earthly parents are not our creators, only our procreators. And our children are not our ultimate end – God is. They are only second. Idolize them, worship them, and you will break them; you will corrupt them. All idols break. Even your spouse, the other half of yourself, the other half of the ‘one flesh’ that you 2 have become, the other half of ‘the image of God’ according to Genesis 1:27, is not your God. Please do not break the back of the one thing you love most intimately by putting on that back a burden and expectation that only God can fulfill.

Another saying follows: we must ‘take up our cross’ daily and follow Jesus. We must be like Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry His cross. And our cross will turn into a crown, and our wounds into beauty marks, just as they did for Jesus. (adapted from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 544-546)

OK, so how do we deal with this in the concrete? My second point. The ever present issue here is idolatry. Forget carved golden calves or pagan shrines. The real gods in our time involve what we actually bow down to: drugs and alcohol, success in business, accumulation of money and stuff, comfort, sex, work, collecting toys, luxury travel, whatever. We all have conflicted loyalties, and yet each one of us is called to give our ultimate allegiance to the God who is beyond our imaginings. This is hard. It’s much easier to put our trust in our bank accounts. But money can’t be taken with us. Sex isn’t forever. Work can’t buy us meaning for all time. Everyone has to retire. We set up all kinds of idols in our hearts. But as St. Teresa of Avila said, “Only God is enough.”

Third, it all comes down to having our priorities in order. Jesuit Peter van Breeman wrote “For as soon as God is no longer the all-important one, He becomes unimportant.” If our seed of faith is planted directly in the center of our lives, it will grow without a doubt. But if we plant it on the margins, in a pigeonhole marked Religion—Sundays only – or even in second place in our lives, we have already established a rival god in whatever holds the place of primacy. That rival will eventually crowd out all pretense of serving the one true God. A second-place God, by definition, is no God at all. A quick look at our check books and our tithing will tell us what our idols are, and only honest tithing will help us to get our priorities straight. If we are frequently flying and cruising to exotic destinations and giving \$5 or \$10 a week – we have our answer about how we are doing with our priorities. Clueless.

A speaker stood in front of a large group of people with a roll of stickers in his hand. Behind him on the platform were tables filled with props that represented the stuff of our lives – a Matchbox car, a dollhouse, a tiny desk that stood for our jobs.

The speaker roamed the stage and placed a red sticker on each item. He explained to the crowd that they may not be able to see it from where they were sitting, but each sticker contained the same word: TEMPORARY. He said, “Everything that I’m putting a sticker on is temporary. It will not last. It will fade away. We invest our emotions in them because when we acquire it, it gives us a little thrill. And we think the thrill will last. But it does not. It fades. And eventually, so will what we acquire. If you are living for what you see up here, then you are living for what is temporary. Temporary satisfaction, temporary fulfillment, temporary meaning. It will come to an end – but you never will. It will leave you with a terrible emptiness.”

The speaker plastered red stickers on everything sitting on the stage. He walked before the now silent room, pronouncing with his hands the ultimate fate of the greatest goods this world has to offer. It's the word that never appears in ads on TV or the temptations that play out in our soul. It's the word that might have saved the rich fool in Jesus' story, if only he had plastered it on his barns and crops. TEMPORARY. TEMPORARY. TEMPORARY. TEMPORARY.

"There is only ONE thing in this room that is not temporary," he went on. "There is only one item that you will be allowed to take with you from this life into the next." He had a little girl join him on stage, and he put a blue sticker on the collar of her dress. "When you get to the end of your life and take in your last breath, what do you want your life to have been about? What will make it rich in the eyes of God?" PEOPLE.

Wise people build their lives around what is eternal and squeeze in what is temporary. Not the other way around. So let's try an exercise in understanding what is at stake. Think for a few moments about 2 categories: "forever" and "temporary." What in your life is going to last forever and what is going to fade away?

Then take it a step further. In your imagination, take a pad of self-adhesive notes and write TEMPORARY on each one. Walk around and distribute them everywhere you need to be reminded. Put one on your car. Put one on the front door of your house. Put TEMPORARY stickers on each piece of furniture. Put one on the front of your checkbook. Stick them on the clothes in your closet. Put them on your iPad and on the TV and the treadmill and your safety deposit box and all of your savings and retirement accounts.

Then take another set of self-adhesive notes and write ETERNAL. Put them on your family. Put them on your friends. Put them on your boss. Put one on the stranger behind the counter. Put one on the person you most dislike in the world. Don't forget to put one on your forehead as well.

For the stuff in our lives is only temporary. The day is coming when all our 401k's and our bank statements will be irrelevant. The titles on our resumes will no longer impress anyone. GPA's and scores and college acceptances will be long-forgotten. No one will know what clothes hung in our closets or what cars sat in our garages. The photos from all those trips will turn to dust.

All that will be left is love. That which was done out of love for God will last. Every human being we see is a cleverly disguised receptacle of eternity. We can take the love with us. The object of life is to be rich toward God. Amen. (adapted from John Ortberg, WHEN THE GAME IS OVER, IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX, pages not cited)