

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## What's In it For Me?

By Wayne Jacobsen

BodyLife • May 1997

Over the last few years I've shared a meal or two with some incredible brothers and sisters.

All of them had been involved in successful vocations or ministries at one point in their lives, most of them at the head of it, and yet all of them found occasion to walk away. For all of them at the time it had been a very painful decision, and none of them really knew what lie beyond it. Often their friends or families didn't understand what they were doing, and either ridiculed them or withdrew from them.

But they had some wonderful things in common. None of them were bitter, or pined away for their "successful past." They all confessed how deeply their relationship with Jesus had grown and their understanding of the power of God's grace. All of them said they had discovered life and freedom in Jesus they never imagined existed when they made their difficult decision.

People who do not act in their own best interest have always fascinated me. It's easy to understand why people do good things when there is something in it for them. Even our pleas for volunteer help or charitable contributions are almost always linked to tax-deductions, feeling good about yourself and or giving something back, as a way of appealing to people who make choices only because it is in their best interest to do so. That's just the way our world works.

But that's not the way Father's kingdom works. Jesus said so in perhaps the most paradoxical statement of his ministry: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

When we worry about what's in it for us, struggle to do the best we can for ourselves, even in our pursuit of God, we will always find ourselves deeply disappointed. But if we can let go of that which seeks our perception of our own best interest, we will discover the life of God in the fullest measure.

This is an incredible kingdom our Father has crafted. Choosing his way is undoubtedly the best decision we can make for ourselves. However, our knowledge about what is truly best for us is so limited, that decisions we make seeking our own best interest only draw us further from him. That's why Jesus warned anyone who would come after him that he would need to, "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Only where we mistrust our pursuit of happiness on our terms, will we discover that true joy lies only in him. For our joy comes not in attaining anything, but being free from our own selfish passions and

desires.

The problem is that's not how most of us were introduced to the Father's kingdom.

## **Bribed and Threatened**

The two most effective evangelism tools of our century both appeal to people's best interests.

"If you died tonight do you know that you would go to heaven?" Many people come to this kingdom threatened with the fiery stench of hell. It's a terrifying concept, isn't it? Once you convince people that heaven and hell, are both real and God decides who goes where, the work of evangelism is done. What fool would choose hell over heaven if they really believe both existed?

Yet this approach to God leaves us in a horrible dilemma. How do you build a loving relationship with the God who would hurl you into eternal torture if you don't? Is there something so wrong with God that we have to be threatened with torture to come to him?

The second tool, takes the opposite approach to our best interests. "God has a wonderful plan for your life;" and with it we conjure up images of a blissful life with a God who will keep us at peace, happy and free from suffering if we'll just follow him. So, people come to God in hopes of finding in him what they couldn't find for themselves in the world. But self is still at the center-we come to him for ourselves. Joy is still defined in our terms.

This becomes painfully obvious whenever expectations are disappointed or difficulties arise. We begin to doubt God's love if we don't get the job we wanted or if our children battle a serious illness. Most Christians I have dealt with in years of ministry seem to have more stress over the fact that God is allowing them to be in crisis, than the crisis itself would ever produce.

In appealing to people's best interest for themselves, both of these invitations to the kingdom may be counterproductive to the kingdom itself. By getting people to chose the kingdom based on their fear of punishment or their greed for the good life, they are only further ensnared in their bondage to self. Rather than leading them closer to the embrace of a living God, they end up only frustrated that Christianity isn't all it pretends to be.

The relationship that God invites us to share in is the same one that he has enjoyed through all eternity. The Father, Son and Spirit live together in absolute love, sharing together life, glory, and joy. Love in this sense is complete selflessness, each of them giving and serving without any thought for themselves. This kind of love is hard for us to grasp, for what love defines in our age is usually nothing more than mutually-beneficial relationship. People say they love each other when each of them provide some benefit or enjoyment to the other. But as soon as one stops benefiting from the relationship, they usually

withdraw pursuing other more-satisfying relationships.

Such self-based love really isn't love at all. When we approach God in this way we will find ourselves often disappointed when he doesn't do what we expect him to. When Jesus invited us to the depths of relationship with the Father, the Spirit and himself, he knew the only way we could discover the depth of joy is where we abandon the pursuit of our own best interests and completely trust him to provide everything we need. But that runs against everything we've ever known.

## **What Else Do you Do With Flesh?**

Adam and Eve made their choice in the garden, certain they were acting in their own best interest. We will become like God, they thought, never understanding all the ramifications of that choice until it was too late.

I've often wondered why God was not a bit more specific about the trees he'd planted in that garden. About the tree they ate from, he warned them they would die if they did. But why didn't he tell them all of it? Why didn't he tell them that if they ate of it they would subject themselves and thousands of generations to follow to the horrible atrocities of sin, disease, depression, broken relationships, abuse and death? If he had, and told them all they had to do to avoid these things was to go over and eat of the Tree of Life, don't you suppose they would have done it?

Of course they would. But why, because they loved and trusted him? No. They would have done it only because it would have been in their best interest. They would have still chosen control of their own life and by doing so would have missed out on the relationship he wanted them to discover. So they came to know good and evil without any power to choose the good.

But let us not forget, that God knew from the beginning what their choice would be and had already set about to use their failure in the process of redemption. Immediately after their fall, he prescribed conditions in which their bent for choosing in their own best interest would be used to help hold their sin in check until the Savior would come. The curses and eventually the law God used rewards and punishments to make God's ways appeal to our self-interest.

We do the same thing when we discipline our children. Their flesh will not want to do good on their own, but through discipline we seek to make disobedience less attractive. This is how our world conforms behavior. We obey traffic laws, for fear of getting a ticket. The military makes people conform to the standards of conduct they want by an exhaustive set of rewards and punishments, all designed to use self-interest as the motivating force. Grades in school and incentives in business are all meant to appeal to our greed and fear to hold us in check.

So it is natural for us to assume then that God would use hell and the promise of the abundant life to

conform our behavior in the kingdom. That's why so much fear and guilt or promise of God's blessing or leadership positions are used to get believers to do what's right.

## **The Problem with Self-Interest**

But anyone who has ever used self-interest as a motivating tool, knows it ultimately doesn't work. God never expected his own law to work, because our flesh was just too weak. While it can be successful in conforming external behaviors (there's a lot less adultery around if people get stoned for it), it ultimately cannot transform people.

That's why children who have only been motivated by fear will end up in rebellion in the teen-age years. Fear never endures. Having been taught all their lives to respond to self-interest what do parents do when that self-interest is served more by going along with their crowd instead of following the desires of their parents?

Even Paul blamed the same process that made him a Pharisee and faultless in legalistic righteousness, as that which made him the chiefest of sinners. Outside his life conformed to God's law, even though inside hate raged against people he considered a threat to the God he thought he knew. So he murdered in God's name, and only by God's mercy found the light of God.

That ought to give us pause, because much of our orientation to the Christian life today is incredibly similar to the Pharisees. We might call them 'New Testament principles' instead of law but they still are a set of dos and don'ts that we try to package to appeal to people's self interest. Regrettably the results are the same. Externally we may look like good Christians and might even take great pride in that; while the most despicable of sins devours us from within. Scripture and history show us that even the most religious of us, will only end up using our traditions and principles to maximize our own best interests, like tax-lawyers groping for loopholes.

It's no wonder that this process cannot draw us any closer to him, and why God had a better plan in mind.

## **Serving God Without Preference**

God's ultimate plan to deal with self-interest was not going to come through law or obligation. He knew our flesh was too weak for that. The only way to life was for self to be swallowed up in the immensity of Father's love.

So Jesus came to die, not because God needed a victim on which to expend his wrath, but that we needed a demonstration of love so powerful, that we could abandon all trust in living to our own best interests and come to participate in the community of God. Because we would trust his love and care for our lives, we would no longer have to look out for ourselves, but follow him freely all of our days.

That's what Paul taught regarding the cross. "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Cor 5:15) That became incredibly practical for me recently. I was reminded about a near accident I had while driving a car when I was eighteen. I was speeding down a dark country road with five passengers aboard. All of a sudden I was overwhelmed with an urge to slam on my brakes and did so without even consciously choosing to. As the car skidded to a stop a diamond-shaped reflector sign came into view. The road was coming to a dead-end into a cement ditch. My tires stopped within a foot of that sign.

I haven't thought about that for a long time, until a time of prayer when I was complaining to God about some difficult things that were going in my life. "Why can't I get away with doing what seems to work for everyone else?"

At that moment I thought of my near accident and heard that still, small voice: "Ever since that night I've considered you mine. You deserved to die in a tragedy that would have taken five other lives, but I saved you. I own you."

What captured my heart in that moment was the overwhelming love of God. Being owned by him was not bondage. What he was doing in my life was not punishment I needed to fear, but his grace that was showing me the depth of his love. He was inviting me to a relationship with him that acting in my best interest would never approach.

"But perfect love drives out fear," John wrote, "because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

What a gift! Abandoning our best-interest is a no-brainer decision in the face of the cross. Our agenda is exposed clearly for what it is, a march for self-destruction. Now, we can face every situation without the horrible bondage of figuring out how to make it work best for me. We can simply yield ourselves to God and watch him work out his purposes.

Obedience is no longer the onerous task of trying to keep God appeased, but the simple result of living in trust. After all, isn't sin only the result of trying to provide for ourselves what God said he would provide for us? If so, then when we are confident that God will have his way, we no longer have to push for our own agendas. In the cross Wayne's best interest has ceased to exist and no longer needs to be served. That's not just true of sinful acts but even visions of ministry. He is at work in me for his pleasure. I don't have to scheme or manipulate people anymore.

### **The One Who Is Truly Free**

What has touched me most about the people I mentioned at the beginning of this article is that they are the most liberated people I've ever known. They had uncovered a greater depth of relationship, not

because Father rewarded their efforts, but because they had discovered a life in God beyond self. They had seen God take care of them and were learning to enjoy his presence because they were no longer blowing by him in the night continuing to pursue their own agendas.

We understand people who serve their self-interest. In fact it is easy to manipulate people with threats and bribery. But when someone ceases to be motivated by such things, they themselves become a threat to the self-interest system. Others will call them rebels and accuse them of being unsubmitted.

The free person in Christ and the rebellious will always look the same to those who labor under religious obligation, because both ignore the conventions that govern men. But there is a major difference between the two. The rebel does it to serve himself and his passions, always harming others in the process and leaving a wake of anarchy behind him.

The free person in Christ, however, does so because they no longer have a need to serve themselves. They have embraced God's love at a far deeper level than any method of behavioral conformity will touch, and they will guard that freedom even if it means others will misunderstand them. They reject the conventions not to please themselves, but Father, and because they want others to find that same joy in the hands of a loving Father.

This is the parent, co-worker, brother, sister, son or daughter that God wants to scatter over the whole earth, and by liberating us from self-interest based, legalistic righteousness, allows us to taste the majesty and depth of all that waits for us in God.

This is the purpose of God in bringing his children into his glory. As long as you seek your own best interest in the circumstances you face, you will never find the life of God. Learn to let go of your agenda and trust Father's immense love, and you will discover what true freedom and joy really are.

---

© Copyright 2009 Lifestream Ministries

*Permission is hereby granted to anyone wishing to make copies for free distribution.*