

What academic, career, or political ambitions do you harbor? What specifically might it look like to die to those, and instead to live for Christ? Granted that fully applying this verse is a giant step for most of us, what specific baby steps of moderate inconvenience might you take for the sake of the kingdom, and for your eternity?

***Day Four: Exalting Christ in Life or Death Phil 1:20-26***

As an itinerant evangelist, Paul had opportunity to apply Jesus' words literally. In prison, awaiting sentencing – and possibly execution – Paul writes: “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20). Once again, the two extremes (‘life or death’) is a way of saying, ‘and everything in between.’ In your present circumstance, what could be a terrible thing to befall you: failure, loss of job, serious illness, etc. Even if was just a routine part of life, rather than specifically because of your service to Christ, how might you exalt Christ in it? In your present circumstance, what annoyances or difficulties do you actually face? How might you honor God in them?

***Day Five: Sharing in Christ's Sufferings Phil 3:10-15***

Paul goes even further, two chapters later. He indicates that suffering in the cause of Christ is a normal step on the path toward eternal life. And he sets this as a pattern for all believers who want to be mature. In our context, it is unlikely that we will ever really suffer for the cause of Christ. Even in our circumstances, though, how might we approximate suffering for the cause of Christ?

***Day Six: Another Way of Dying Col 3:5-10***

While the actual meaning is somewhat different, the metaphor is similar: self-execution. In this context, however, it is not the courageous embrace of suffering in the cause of Christ, but the putting to death of sin and flesh. Still, while this does not correspond precisely to Jesus' point regarding taking up our cross, it does at least indicate another legitimate area in which we can renounce self-centeredness and develop God-centeredness. Do you currently struggle with any of the sins on this list? Share with a member of your small group, so that they can encourage you to holiness, and hold you accountable for any lapses into sin.

## Core Values

A business model of vision-setting recommends seven questions to identify our core values, the fundamentals which should focus and drive all our activities (<http://www.jimcollins.com/tools/vision-framework.pdf>). With only a little adaptation, these same questions can be posed of Scripture, to identify what God call us to be, as a church and as individuals.

- 1) Does Scripture call us to prioritize this value, regardless of our particular location or other distinctives?
- 2) Does Scripture call all churches, past, present, or future, to prioritize this value?
- 3) Does Scripture call us to prioritize this value even when it proves to be a disadvantage to our growth and influence?
- 4) Does Scripture call those who reject this value to repent?
- 5) Does Scripture call us to prioritize this value even when our society opposes it?
- 6) Does Scripture raise question about any church or professing Christian that does not hold this value?
- 7) Does Scripture call us to prioritize this value at every stage of organizational and personal life?

## Core Value #1: God-Centered, Not Self-Centered

In his book *Soul Searching*, sociologist Christian Smith issues a scathing indictment of American culture (or, perhaps, of human nature) for its self-centered, individualistic, and narcissistic approach to God. “Most [people] instinctively suppose that religion exists to help individuals be and do what they want, and not as an external ... authority or divinity that makes compelling claims and demands on their lives, especially to change or grow in ways they may not immediately want to” (pp 147-48).

Faith, he continues, “makes one feel good and resolves one's problems.... [It is] not an entire way of life or a disciplined practice that makes hard demands or changes people.... God is treated as something like a cosmic therapist or counselor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble but who does

not particularly ask for devotion or obedience” (p 148). Few seem to believe that “religion is about orienting people to the authoritative will and purposes of God or about serious, life-changing participation in the practices of the community;” instead, “religion is about God responding to the authoritative desires and feelings of people.” “In simple terms, religion is essentially a tool for people to use to get what they want, as determined not by their religion but by their individual feelings and desires” (p 149).

Biblically, this is no God, but an idol. Still, we do not want to overreact, and push to the opposite extreme, creating a harsh deity who demands worship and obedience in exchange for tiny morsels of attention or help. Remarkably, in Scripture, God is creator, sovereign, majestic, and fearsome: in this light, narcissism is contemptible. At the same time, in Christ, God stoops down to our level, enters our life, speaks to our needs, and dies for our sin: in this light, narcissism is a pale reflection of reality, chasing worthless baubles, when God offers valuable life-transformation.

This week we reflect on two sorts of passages. One sort highlights the irony of the omnipotent, universal God caring for us: it is truly all about him; yet he makes it about us. The other sort calls us who are naturally inclined to make it about us, instead to renounce ourselves and make it about God. The former calls us to worship the God great above all things who nonetheless cares for us. The latter calls us to reciprocate in small measure, putting God above ourselves.

***Day One: God, our origin and destiny 1 Corinthians 8:6***

*There is “one God the father, the origin of all things, and our destiny; and there is one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things (were created) and through him we (were redeemed).”*

God is our origin and our destiny; our first and our last; our beginning and our end. He gave our first breath; he receives us at death. This is an ancient way of saying: ‘and everything in-between’. There is no piece of the universe, and no time of our lives – from birth to death – which is beyond his oversight, his power, his kindness. And Jesus is his agent in all

means by which God saved us.

This text establishes our fundamental identity as twice children of God: once in creation; a second time in salvation. This text also supplies our calling in life: to worship and to serve our creator and our redeemer. Take time today to reflect on the marvel that the creator of the universe would care about you; that he who created the world pristine would rescue those who corrupted it with sin. And give some thought to what response such grace and love might call forth from you.

***Day Two: Christ, ruler of the universe, and our redeemer  
Colossians 1:15-23***

The entire universe serves Christ, its creator, its ruler, its beneficiary (1:17). He is head of the church, and supreme above all (1:18). Yet, despite divine status (1:19), he submitted to crucifixion (1:20), reconciling us to God (1:22).

In these few verses, Paul provides at least four reasons that a narcissistic faith beggars belief. First, all creation serves Christ: shall we expect him to serve us? Second, the entire church is subordinate to him: shall we ask him to subordinate himself to us? Third, he has already stooped from divine status to human, and from innocent to executed felon; do we ask him to stoop further in our service? He has already reconciled us to God; do we ask for yet more from him?

Reflect on some specific ways that narcissism – rather than grateful service – manifests in your life and walk with God.

***Day Three: Self-Denial, Self-Execution, Self-Renunciation  
Matt 16:24-27***

Jesus’ death for us is not simply a sacrifice to atone for our sins; it is a pattern for us to follow. We are to deny ourselves, take up our own cross, and lose our lives for his sake. Jesus offers two motivations: for one, our eternity is at stake; for the other, that eternity is affected by whether or not we actually deny ourselves, take up our cross, lose our lives, and live for him.