

The Dangerous Beauty of the Soul

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

“Buy this... it might kill you!”

Imagine reading these words in one of the many advertisements flooding your inbox or mailbox this holiday season. Who would buy such a ‘gift’?

Nobody.

“Do this... you might die!”

Imagine hearing these words at a professional conference or from a motivational speaker. How many of us would be willing to sign up for the new program?

Very few – if any.

But what would you say if I told you that words very similar to these lie at the heart of the largest religious movement the world has ever seen?

You might be skeptical. But it’s true.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

According to Mark’s Gospel, these are the words of Jesus Christ. And at first blush, they may seem insane. To “take up one’s cross” means embracing a willingness to suffer the most painful death imaginable. (Notice that our word ‘excruciating’ comes from the word ‘cross’.) From a marketing perspective, this slogan is suicide. What was Jesus thinking? And why would anybody follow him?

The answer lies in what Jesus said next: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark, chap. 8, vss. 34-37).

Take the time to consider what Jesus is actually saying here. He’s not saying that physical life is unimportant. Nor is he saying that suffering is trivial. Rather, he’s challenging our assumptions about what life really is. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

We tend to assume that physical existence is all there is. Because of this assumption, we do everything we can to extend and cling to life in this world. But what if this assumption is wrong? What if it’s not only wrong, but dangerously narrow-minded? What if, by focusing exclusively on the pursuit of physical comfort and security, we critically endanger the true core of who we are?

Jesus says that each and every one of us is far more than a physical body – we also possess souls. Unlike our bodies, our soul does not disintegrate at death. It may be lost. It may be saved. But it does not simply cease to exist.

Maybe you’re skeptical. But haven’t we all felt the tug of eternity? At some moment in our existence, haven’t we all sensed that there must be some part of us that is truly everlasting? Even if we’re not sure what we believe, can’t we all admit that the words of Jesus find some echo in our inner being?

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” In a world where so much is bought, used, and discarded, Jesus is saying something quite profound: there is something in each of us that is utterly irreplaceable.

If Jesus is right, then reality is far more beautiful – and far more dangerous – than we imagine. Our souls make each human life priceless. In the light of every eye there is a beautiful flicker of eternity.

Yet there is also danger, for each soul will ultimately be either lost or saved. In the conduct of every life there is a way that leads to life – and a way that leads to death.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” What if the way of the cross is actually the only way to live forever? What if every other path, however happy they seem for a season, ultimately lead to everlasting death?

These words may seem counter-intuitive. But what if they are true?

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