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Will You Lay Down Your Life for Me?

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John 13:31-38

This question is asked in the Upper Room, the night Jesus was betrayed, the day before he was killed. It was just to His close followers. Jesus had just washed the disciple's feet. "When Judas was gone, Jesus said, *"Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. 32 If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. 33 "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. 34 "A new command I give you: **Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** 36 Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." 37 Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." 38 Then Jesus answered, **"Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!"***

I had a new experience 2 weeks ago. I was flying back from leading worship and a workshop at a World Methodist Evangelism conference. In the Atlanta Airport I grabbed some Chinese while I waited for the plane to Detroit. It was really crowded, so I sat on the low bench in front of the windows. There were a lot of people by the windows, but the first thing I noticed was a young flight attendant taking a picture out the window. I thought "Maybe this is her first official flight" but I didn't think it was a very good angle for a photo of the plane. And it was then I saw the military personnel at either side of the unloading conveyor belt, and the casket coming down to the transport waiting. The body of an American soldier returning home. Did it make me want to give of myself more? To be a better American? I think so. But watching down on the tarmac felt removed. And I was on the plane again, back into my own world.

These days, whenever you hear the words "Lay down your life," you think of a young soldier giving his or her life for their country. Since the birth of our country, over one million, one hundred thousand soldiers have made that ultimate sacrifice for our country. I for one, am truly humbled by that. But of these million plus soldiers who made that ultimate sacrifice, a certain percentage died in a way that distinguishes them further. These are the soldiers who made a voluntary decision to lay down their lives, in order to spare the lives of their fellow soldiers. Is Jesus really asking us that question?

In my view, this is a whole new level of laying down your life: sacrifice. Imagine in that split second on the battlefield, having to make the decision to save your own life or to save the life of a friend.

Milton Olive III is on the Vietnam Wall. He went straight to the frontlines in Vietnam, friends with 4 other guys, who decided to get through it alive. An enemy grenade was lobbed onto the path where they were walking. Everyone but Milton froze. Milton grabbed the grenade, he tucked it into his midsection. In my view, this is more than the ultimate sacrifice. This is voluntary self-sacrifice for people you love. This is choosing to lay down your one and only life for others. It redefines ultimate sacrifice, or at least brings it to a whole other level. Milton's 4 buddies are still all living today. They were interviewed, saying "I feel like I'm living for 2 people. I will never forget him." Could you forget someone who voluntarily absorbed a grenade blast to spare your life?

The bible says “*Greater love has no man than this. That a man lay down his life for his friends.*” Next Sunday begins holy week. Christ-followers all over the world are going to spend considerable amounts of time reflecting on the One who absorbed the grenade blast of crucifixion on our behalf. Like Milton Olive’s friends, we will say throughout the course of the week, “I will never forget him.” In order to get God’s perspective, we need to say it throughout the course of our lifetimes.

Jesus’ question today is part of the private teaching Jesus gave His disciples, in the peaceful part of the evening just before His arrest and crucifixion. They left the crowds and the craziness and the debates with the religious people. And it’s like Jesus says “Welcome to your new life as a follower of mine. This is what it’s going to be like. And Jesus begins with a new command: “*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Everybody will know you are my disciples if you love one another.*” Familiar words. After all, love was nothing new. The Old Testament says throughout “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But it’s different now. Jesus says “*Love one another.*” There’s a whole other level you enter in Christ: a new, intimate relationship with other believers. And there’s something else new: a new standard. It used to be “*Love your neighbor as you love yourself.*” But here He tells us to love each other “*as I have loved you.*” Whoa. Love with a love that gives up everything? All the way to the point of death for the other? I’d say that’s new. My brother and sister in Christ becomes more important to me than I am!

And then there’s a new outcome: This Christ-like love between brothers and sisters is now a witness that Jesus is the real thing. Do you live and love in such a way that there is simply no earthly explanation in the minds of other people? Other than “God is crazy about people, and that guy is too? ... He’s a little crazy.” And God gets people curious. And people go “huh.” (For the right reasons!) ☺ And in can be contagious. And it can be scary. Because Jesus asks one more thing: “**Would you give up your life for Me?**”

It’s not just your intentions. “Oh, Jesus, I’d live and give my life for you...” Your life is what you *do*, when people are looking, and when they aren’t. Your life is who you spend time with. Your life is what you spend your time *on*. What you choose to think about. But our lives? It’s like Jesus is saying “Would you just lose for me?” (Hard to conceive during March Madness). Give up/lay down my life for You?!!!

Could there be a tougher question than this one? Yet Jesus gave it all up for us. And when He gave it up, what did He take on? **A cross**. Not a pretty little piece of jewelry. But an instrument of torture, shame, and suffering. Bizarre! And a towel and basin and stinking feet, like a **servant**. He took on **death**. This is totally relevant today, because there are more reasons than ever before not to lay down your life for Jesus. But what if life, real life, deep life, the adventure-make-a-difference-for-eternity-kind is only found when we give up on our own lives enough to be able to grab hold of God’s design life?

BUT THAT’S SO SCARY. Lay down my life? What about my old life? What about all those years I was working toward my own goal and my own life the way I’d always pictured it? Lay down my life? I thought this Christian-gig had *promise* and *hope* and *future*. Not scary unknown futile sacrifice stuff. And what about my family? (Let me tell you about what it can look like. My life was changed when I was trying to figure out how to serve God with my wife Leigh, I said “What if God called us to a 3rd world country? Or inner city Detroit?” She said “If God calls you there, we’ll all go. God can take care of us anywhere.” Her openness of trusting the reality of God changed me. I was ready to do it when I was by myself. But married, or with kids, we often hang on to our old life as though moving to the Philippines as missionaries wouldn’t be “good for the children.” Even *if* something happens, do you, or don’t you trust God with your family? Paul wrote “*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. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*” Philippians 1:20.

Here’s the problem: **Somehow we’ve come to believe that FAITH removes ambiguity rather than calls us to live in it.** The church erupted out of an act of love, laying down of life. We only move toward God when we are fueled by love. Faith is the muscle by which *we* get there too.

And please hear me clearly. Jesus talking about laying down your life is very different from what the world has experienced in recent years through terrorist activities. Because Jesus laid down his life not just for His cause, but for His enemies as well, and the laying down took the form of a servant.

This is one of the amazing things about God: God loves to serve. It sounds sacrilegious to say God is a servant, but that's only because our value systems are so corrupt and distorted. We're fine with God being all-powerful and all-knowing. We value that. But if we were all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present, how many of us would choose to let *servicing others* be our expression of all that potential?

Jesus said the greatest expression of love is to lay down our lives for someone else. Until then, it's called servanthood. Maybe today is your day when you first cross the threshold of intimate discipleship with Jesus. Will it be painful? Maybe. Will it be worth it? Definitely. This week, seek to serve. During tough times, the world needs more servants. Give up your life to serve others in His name. Imagine how God could change the world if a few more of us lived out that kind of love? Jesus says, you do this, and they'll know you're mine. My disciples...

You don't drift into this, friends. You don't wind up laying down your life because you came to this church or any church. You don't wind up laying down your life because your parents did this thing, or because you think you're a pretty nice guy or maybe laying down your life isn't going to be a very big deal when you face Jesus one day. In other words, what I'm driving at here is there comes a moment in time when this deal has to get done. This transaction has to take place. This prayer has to be prayed.

One of Milton Olive's friends said "I feel like I'm living for two people. And I will never ever forget him." That's how Christians feel when they take for themselves Christ laying down His life of us. There's this sense of wonder, a sense of awe, really, that God's Son would declare us free. And that He would invite us to lay our lives down, just like Him.