

Week Three

Reading

WHAT ABOUT ME?



REALITY

That's nice.

It's good to know.

I appreciate knowing that God is up to something.

The Garden of Eden is behind us. The New Jerusalem is before us. We're somewhere between the two. It's good to know that the kingdom is coming, that despite the "weeds," the "wheat" is growing. It's good to know God cares for the hurting of this world—the pain and suffering—that he's doing something about it and calls his people to *"look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"* (James 1:27).

That's all good, but I can see where this is going, and I can't do it.

I can't give more.

I can't give more time.

I can't give more energy.

I can't give more money.

Could I make changes, live a more organized life, waste less energy, and live by a stricter budget? Yes, I could do all those things, and probably should, but let me be dangerously honest. It's going to sound shallow and rude, and it's going to sound like the kind of thing that really shouldn't be said, but I'm going to say it anyway. Yes, I could sacrifice and give more, but here's my honest confession...

I don't want to.

Maybe that's selfishness. I don't know, but I can't deny it. I have desires. I have dreams. I have things I want to accomplish and experience. Yes, I could sneak through this conversation by sharing my very real desire to make a difference in the lives of others because I do want to make a difference in the lives of others, but I get it. This isn't just about adding a little volunteerism to my life. This is all out. This is living my life for God and people. Maybe I should do that. It sounds good and noble, but in my heart is a list of what I want out of this life, and it's not just about God and others. There's a great deal on that list that has to do with me.

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HONEST QUESTION

Let's ask a question. It's a question that sounds selfish, but that's not the intent. It's an honest question. Stuff this question and it will inevitably rise to the surface. Address this question boldly, and maybe we'll gain insight. The question...

What about me?

Yes, let's look after the vulnerable in this world—modern day widows and orphans—but who among us doesn't feel vulnerable ourselves? Who among us isn't longing? Who among us doesn't have wishes and wants that have to do with very real desires for life? It sounds good and noble to say, "I'll respond; I'll make a difference; God can count on me." But then there's reality. To truly make a difference takes an investment of time and energy. Time and energy are precious commodities in this always-moving and fast-paced world.

So let's do something interesting. Let's ask a question to our question.

We asked: *What about me?*

In response, let's ask...

Why?

Why ask, "*What about me?*" What's our interest? Why do we respond that way? We don't typically verbalize the "*What about me?*" question, but it influences us greatly. Why do we ask it? We can say, "I shouldn't be so concerned for myself. To be concerned for myself is selfish." But we are concerned for ourselves. We are intensely interested in our own well-being. When asked to participate in making a difference in the lives of others, consciously or subconsciously we weigh this against our own interests. What's that about?

LOVE OF SELF

Consider, for a moment, the way Scripture positions love for others.

Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

Christ highlighted this command from Leviticus as the second greatest command in all of Scripture. Consider it carefully. Isn't it interesting that love of others is put against the backdrop of "love yourself"? Many read this as a command of its own, as if we are commanded to love ourselves. The construction of the sentence, though, is actually stronger than a command. It's a statement of something that is self-evident, something that is assumed. Scripture isn't so much commanding that we love ourselves but acknowledging that we love ourselves. We are interested in our own well-being. Yes, we can at times be self-loathing, but we instinctively look out for ourselves. Scripture uses this self-evident reality as a standard for our love of others.

With that in mind, consider carefully a previously noted statement of Christ's:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25)

At first glance, this sounds contradictory to the backdrop of the second greatest command. We're not to "love others as we love ourselves"; we're to "deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow Christ." The first glance can be a bit misleading though. Careful reading reveals a different picture. The person who fails to deny his or her life "*will lose it,*" but the person who loses his or her life "*will find it.*" That's fascinating. Even self-denial is positioned against the backdrop of our desire for life.

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That to say, asking “*What about me?*” isn’t just honest; it’s inevitable. What’s needed then is not a stuffing of this question, but increased insight on what this all really means and increased clarity on how this all really works.

To increase our insight, we need clarity on reality. What exactly must we sacrifice to participate in the kingdom of God? Is it a small sacrifice or a great sacrifice? Do we sacrifice a lot or a little? We might sacrifice some of our hopes and dreams, but to sacrifice them all, that’s asking a lot. As previously noted, Jesus used parables to clarify kingdom realities. Let’s consider another.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

It’s brief but profound...

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. (Matthew 13:44)

Participation in the kingdom, joining with God today and eternally, is likened to this man who found buried treasure in a field he did not own. This man couldn’t take the treasure because to do so would be stealing from the field’s true owner. So what did he do? He sold everything he had, purchased the field, and consequently owned the buried treasure. It was, no doubt, a shrewd move.

The point? For starters, the man sacrificed everything.

To get the field, he couldn’t sell a portion of his possessions; he had to sell it all. He sold his house, his camel, the wooden chair his mother had rocked him in. He sold it all. If he really wanted that treasure, then he had to get that field. If he really wanted that field, it would take an exchange of his entirety, everything he owned. All his hopes, all his dreams, all his wishes and wants would be wrapped up in that field.

Let’s be bold and forthright.

To fully engage the body of Christ, to truly participate in the kingdom of God, doesn’t take minor sacrifice. It takes an exchange of everything. There is no hope, no dream, no wish, and no want that can be held back. It all goes up for sale, every last item. “*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for [Christ] will find it*” (Matthew 16:25). Practically speaking, this will mean different things for different people. But make no mistake, there will be very practical implications. Time and energy directed toward a personal dream might now be directed elsewhere. Money saved to fund a personal passion might now be used to fund a critical initiative. For some, personal well-being will be risked; for others, their lives will take a completely different direction. To sugarcoat this, or minimize this, is deceptive and will only cause some to think they’re participating in the kingdom of God, when in fact, they are still building their own little kingdoms. If we want to participate in the kingdom of God, it takes sacrifice—total sacrifice—and at times, that sacrifice will be painful.

But there is something in this brief but bold parable of Christ’s that can’t be missed. There are three words easily passed over that point to the full purpose of the parable. Yes, the man sold everything he had in exchange for the field, but hear carefully how he did so. He did so...

...with great joy. (Matthew 13:44)

That’s fascinating.

Yes, he sold it all, but he didn’t do so reluctantly. He did so passionately. He sold it all because he had found a treasure that vastly eclipsed the assessed value of his current estate. Sure, there were items he might miss, but to cling to those items would have been foolishness; it would have led to loss. When talking about the life he sacrificed to gain Christ, Paul wrote,

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But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Philippians 3:7-9)

To follow Christ, to experience his grace and participate in this re-creation, is not done by those who want to add new treasure to the existing treasures of their lives. They must exchange all that they are for all that is possible. The reality of this sacrifice cannot be minimized, but this is not sacrifice for sacrifice's sake. It is sacrifice coupled with *great joy* because it is coupled with inestimable gain. Paul considered his previous gain, the things he sacrificed, as rubbish. Anything that would keep him from Christ, keep him from gaining that field, was trash because it was keeping him from the one thing that would truly and deeply satisfy him.

This takes us back to the depths of our hearts. If we're going to truly do this, if we're going to sacrifice, we need clarity, or at least a reminder, of the gain. What is gained that is worth sacrificing everything?

THE LOVE COMMAND

Throughout this *Morph* experience, we have considered Scripture's two greatest commands.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40)

Commands and instructions are interesting. Yes, we don't particularly like commands; but that aside, there's something highly instructive embedded in a command. Not only do commands tell us what to do, but they inform us. For example, read the "command" in the lawn mower's manual that tells the user to mix oil into every gallon of gas, and those who know motors are able to safely deduce a few facts about the engine. Or consider the "command" in a recipe for larger amounts of sugar and butter. Even without the recipe's title, those who know cooking are able to safely deduce the dish is likely a dessert.

In our case, the "manual" states that the two most important things a person can do are to love God and love people. Which leads to a question: *What do these commands tell us about humanity?* Much could be said to this, and much has been said. If you sense this going in a familiar direction, that's anticipated. If our hearts were made to love God, this tells us our hearts were not made for little things. Our hearts were made for *The Infinite, The Grand, The Eternal*.

Which is underscored throughout Scripture. Remember this?

[God] has... set eternity in the human heart. (Ecclesiastes 3:11, TNIV)

We are not satisfied with little things. We are designed to hunger and thirst for the greatest of things, the greatest of goods.

Remember this?

There's something in our wiring, our make-up, our design that longs for *The Infinite, The Grand, The Eternal*.

We look for IT in work.

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What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in pleasure.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in accomplishment.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

But God has set eternity in the human heart. It's our design. It's our make-up. It's our crafting.

We don't just want it. We want IT. ¹

Or put another way, we long for God.

Fair enough, but why bring it up now? We've covered this ground. Why does it matter here?

It matters for many reasons, not the least of which is a reality described by single word...

Freedom

FREEDOM

The question, “*What about me?*” is understandable. It is a good question we all must honestly consider. The only way to quiet the question is not to stuff the question but to recognize a biblical reality. Scripture does not exhort us to neglect ourselves and pretend we don't care about “me.” Rather, we are exhorted to direct ourselves—our hearts—toward that which will truly, and not artificially, satisfy our hearts. The only way to quiet the “*What about me?*” question is to recognize that “me” is taken care of. When “me” struggles with unfulfilled longing and with no sense of where these longings will be fulfilled, of course our hearts will run from thing to thing in this world. What happens, though, when we recognize God's fulfillment, that he is the one for whom our hearts long, and he has made himself available through Christ? Something happens that is both profound and powerful.

Freedom happens.

We are free to turn from self-absorbed living. We are free to give. We are free to love, and yes, free to sacrifice. No longer must this life be consumed with attempts at self-protection or self-gratification through temporal means. Our satisfaction will come, it will come in full, it will come to a degree we cannot fully comprehend because it will come through *The Eternal, The Infinite, The Grand*, the one for whom our hearts were made. We were not designed to obsess over little and passing things. We were designed to love *The Eternal*. Recognizing this, embracing this and living for this, frees us from lives obsessed with the passing. We don't want to live for little things. We don't want to be self-absorbed people. The self-absorbed life is no life at all. We want to be free. Free to give. Free to serve. Free to sacrifice. Free to make a difference in this desperate world in which we currently live. We want to bring hope and healing to the lives of others. Look around the world, and instinctively we sense the plight of today's widows and orphans, the challenges faced by our world's most vulnerable people. We sense the plight of those deceived by the world's enticements, the poverty of those who

¹ From Morphy: Love God, pgs. 104-105

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have gained it all but will ultimately lose it all. Trouble and hardship abound in this world, and we'd like to do something about it. Yes, we can live self-absorbed lives, but instinctively we know something's off in this. Self-absorbed living is no life at all, but especially so when living in a world abounding with hardship. When hardship and hurt abound, we don't want to cry out, "*But what about me?!*" We want to love our neighbors. We want to comfort those in pain. We want to bring hope to the despairing and truth to the deceived. The only way we can fully do this, to give it our all, is when we are set free to meet the needs around us because the deepest need of our own lives is met and will be fully met in Christ.

Which is stunning! We get this, and it touches something deep. We can taste the freedom. We want that, to live like that, to run hard and run free because we ourselves have been free, but we still have reservation. We hesitate to even mention it because to mention it will seem like we're missing the point, and we're not missing the point. We just really want to get this, so we can really and truly live it.

The reservation?

Not all our hopes and dreams are little things. There are some things on that list in our heart, things we want to get out of this life, that are pretty major. And even more, there are other things on that list that might not seem major, but they are very real needs. We can quickly nod and say, "Yes, I'll do that. I'll sell it all to buy that field." But then we wonder: *Will I be lonely? Will I have what I need? Will I be able to make ends meet?*

These are important questions. So important, that Jesus answered them directly.

A HUNDRED TIMES

In conversation with Jesus, Peter, with what sounds like fear or frustration, expressed his honest thoughts: "*We have left everything to follow you!*" (Mark 10:28). Christ's response was forthright.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first." (Mark 10:29-31)

That's interesting. Christ responds to Peter's noted sacrifice by stating that those who make these sacrifices will receive back a hundred times as much "*in this present age.*" He makes this promise not without the honest acknowledgment of persecutions, but the promise is bold nonetheless. It's as if Christ promises a kind of heaven on earth. How are we to read this?

What happens when a person participates in the body of Christ with great passion? What does that person experience day to day and throughout his or her life? What is that person's relational world like? What does that person experience in relation to "*homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields*"? To be sure, there is no one experience common to all, but there is a vibrant reality that must be carefully considered.

Participation in the body of Christ, true and full participation, is participation in a vast relational world. These relationships are not surface-level relationships. These are the kind of relationships people have when they are united in a common cause, facing common challenges, and are experiencing common struggle and common success. The best of relationships, the richest of relationships, come not from people who simply sip coffee together, but between people who collectively labor and fight for the greatest of good. Proverbs puts it like this:

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There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

Who is this friend? It is the friend with whom we engage life, struggle, and purpose. It is not always an easy relationship—the best relationships are not always easy—but it is a rich relationship. It is the friend with whom we go to the end and back and have walked together through life's many challenges. It's war buddies. Full participation in the body of Christ offers countless opportunities for this kind of relational world.

But Christ didn't just mention relationships; he also mentioned *houses* and *fields*. What does this mean? Should we expect a windfall of cash when we fully participate in the body of Christ? Some have construed Christ's words toward this end, as if following Christ leads to the swelling of our bank accounts, but instinctively, we know something's off in this. These teachings surely miss the true nature of Christ's words.

Consider several statements from Scripture. In one of John's letters, he addresses the hospitality the recipients of his letter showed to a group of people that were "*strangers*" to them (3 John 1:5). These strangers were people who had committed their lives to participating in the body of Christ. They risked everything to travel the known world telling others about Christ. Evidently, the people to whom John was writing treated them not as strangers but as family. They opened their homes and showed rich hospitality. John points to their kindness as a teachable moment saying, "*We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth*" (3 John 1:8, TNIV).

This brief example highlighted by John offers a small glimpse into what happens when a person deeply engages the body of Christ. Yes, there is sacrifice and hardship, but there is also a reciprocal giving that flows throughout those authentically following Christ. Needs get met. Christ spoke boldly to this reality.

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:28-34)

Central to this passage is the statement: "*Your heavenly Father knows that you need them.*" God is a living being well aware of our needs. He will meet our needs, and at times, grant our wishes and wants. He knows our hopes. He knows our preferences. There will be times that we must sacrifice these hopes and preferences, but the call to sacrifice is a call to life. We do not sacrifice because God wants us miserable. We sacrifice because God wants us to truly live.

REAL LIFE

Paul wrote:

For now we really live. (1 Thessalonians 3:8)

How many long to truly say that? They want to lean back, kick up their feet, and say, "This is the life. This is what it's all about. *Now I really live!*" Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians, made such a statement. He was *really living*. What happened in Paul's life so he could say that? What did Paul pack

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around this statement in description of the good life? Before considering what Paul may have packed around it, consider what is commonly packed around it. If writing a letter to a friend, what would commonly be said if someone were to write, “*For now I really live*”?

For some, it would be the realization of relational dreams, such as friends and family. For others, it might be the fulfillment of financial dreams, such as an unexpected windfall or a significant raise. Others would be more experiential in their passions. Maybe they would have accomplished something or experienced something few others have accomplished or experienced. The possibilities are seemingly endless. There is much that is commonly wanted out of this life that could inspire some semblance of fulfillment and real living.

Consider Paul’s full statement:

In all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? (1 Thessalonians 3:7-9)

Paul is alive, *thriving*, because the people he had served, whom he had introduced to the liberating presence of Christ, were enduring in their faith. He was not *alive* because he’d just scored another deal for his tent-making business, or because he was recognized as a good public speaker, or because he would be hailed as a pioneer of the faith. He was *really living* because if it weren’t for impact in this broken world, he would have preferred to have been with Christ. In another place, Paul wrote,

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. (Philippians 1:21-26)

There is nothing in this world that can fully satisfy our truest and deepest longings. The sooner we recognize and embrace this, the sooner we are free to live for that which truly matters. Yes, we have both wants and needs. God knows this and promises to look out for us. But if we want life, true living, then we will not obsess over these matters. We will live freely, generously, and yes, sacrificially, because it no longer needs to be about “me” when “me” is taken care of.

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