**LAY DOWN YOUR LIVES**

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“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11-18)

As the good shepherd, Christ fights the wolf for us. As the bread of life, he feeds us. As the vine, he nourishes us. He’s the cornerstone of our life; the light of the world, and the new wine. As the Savior and Messiah, Jesus secures our salvation and place in heaven. He laid down his life for us.

And as his followers, Christ asks us to lay down our life for him. How? By living for others, not just self; by sacrificing something in our multiple lives to help others. Our multiple lives you ask? Yes, we have more than one life we can lay down for Christ—nine that I can think of. After all, if cats can have nine lives, why can’t we? Let’s do a little exploring—what are these nine lives, and how can we use them to serve Christ?

Life number one for many of us is our professional life. Jesus said of his work life: “I am the good shepherd who lays down my life for my sheep. I must do the work of the one who sent me.” And so can we if we’re willing to, say, lay down our professional life for a moment to assist a colleague or client struggling with a personal problem. Surely business could wait long enough for us to do that. Maybe we can even climb down off our ladder of success long enough to rescue someone who just fell off their ladder.

We have a second life with our families. Jesus certainly went way beyond his biological family to minister on behalf of others. When told that members of his family were waiting for him, Jesus replied: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” He also said, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

We can lay down our family life for Christ by extending our family to include outsiders who are hurting: maybe sharing a meal with a shut-in or homeless person; visiting someone alone in the hospital, nursing home, or hospice--maybe even someone in jail. And what about laying down part of your family life for someone in your neighborhood: the shy child from the dysfunctional family down the block or the troubled teen next door looking for a role model of unconditional acceptance.

There’s a third life we can chose to lay down for Christ: our cultural life. Jesus made room for unclean gentiles in his life, as well as half-breed Samaritans, imperialistic Romans, and even contentious Hebrew Pharisees. He told his closest followers to “go and make disciples of all nations and (all) cultures.”

Maybe we can occasionally lay down a small part of our cultural life as proud Americans to offer water to a thirsty Mexican illegal working in our well-watered yards. Or maybe we can lay down our denominational culture once in a while to break bread with a Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal or, heaven forbid, someone who doesn’t even go to church!

Our fourth life, dealing with politics, could also be laid down for our Lord--that’s right, we Republicans, Democrats, and tea partiers can all serve Christ’s cause, and do it working together no less. To start with, we can overlook the political ideologies of others as our Lord did with the tough Roman centurion, quarreling Sadducees, and even the imperious Pontius Pilot. We could do what’s best for our community or nation instead of what’s best for our political party or favorite talk show host. God has often used political compromise to help invisible people in invisible places. And remember the political advice Jesus gave Peter about paying taxes: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Our social life, the fifth of our nine lives, seems easy to lay down when we recall the humble circumstances that brought Jesus into this world: “And Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger (used to feed animals), because there was no guest room available for them.”

In contrast, most of us have a respectable life of social status, far loftier than Jesus’ working class low status background. Much of our social standing comes from shiny things, like our car, jewelry, IPod, whitened teeth; our house on the hill. We snag still more status by joining clubs and volunteering for the chic community projects. Every year I receive an invitation from my employer to attend a Christmas party at the country club no less to celebrate the humble birth of our savior. Now there’s some social irony for you!

Compare our stock in life to the social status of our Lord as he hung on the cross: “When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining.”

Jesus had no possessions except for what he was wearing. He died an ignominious criminal spit on by his countrymen. In his gracious generosity, God showers us with material blessings, as well as the social success we enjoy and benefit from. One way we can thank him for this bounty is by sharing it with others low on the social totem pole.

Life number six is our leisure life: the sports; hobbies; trips; eating out; movies and television; video games; parties; Twittering, Facebooking, and Internet surfing, not to mention Christmas shopping!

Sometimes we’re so caught up in leisure, we forget relaxing and having fun aren’t supposed to be the purpose of our life. Jesus certainly realized this every day: “Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’”

Why was Jesus able to serve so many people day-in and day-out? Simple--he laid down his leisure life to serve them, just as we can occasionally do to serve him. We certainly have the time!

Now we come to the last three of the nine lives to talk about. For life number seven, let’s consider the life of Peter, the disciple. How do you think Peter felt when Jesus informed him: “When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

Whoa! Better not tell us Americans to lay down our precious lives of independence. We want to run our own lives, making our own decisions, choices, and plans. We want to go where we want, when we want; and spend how much we want on what we want. And we always want more than we have.

Are we really willing to lay down our freedom and independence for those who are trapped in lives of dependency and despondency? Well, Jesus certainly was: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Who knows, maybe even we could be one of the workers. We could sacrifice a small slice of our independence to labor in these overlooked fields, which are so fertile that even thirty minutes of work, say at the county jail, just might produce a bumper crop of spiritual food.

God has graciously given us an eighth life to do with as we please. But he hopes we will use it to please him. That’s our life of C-O-M-F-O-R-T. You know, our comfortable LazyBoy recliners. luxury cars; hot tubs; TV remotes; elevator music; aspirin; sun tan lotion; fast food; microwave ovens; even Alka Seltzer, oh what a relief!

Christ invites us to lay down some of our comfort in life to build up his Kingdom. After all, he’s busy building comfortable mansions for us in heaven. I wish I could somehow email Peter the blueprint I have for my mansion--nothing fancy you understand. I’m using both Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Solomon as my interior decorators! OK, in this earthly life, maybe we could settle for a house instead of a mansion. Maybe the down and out feel more comfortable in a humble abode.

It’s the ninth of our lives that we cherish most: the glittering American dream, no less: life, liberty and the pursuit of what? Yep, happiness. But surely God wouldn’t have us lay down our happiness. We live to be happy, don’t we? Happiness is the purpose of life, isn’t it?

God does want us to be happy, but not by chasing the American dream of consumerism, materialism, and secularism. God wants our happiness to come from a relationship with him. He hopes we will find happiness in the same things that made his son happy: serving others; forgiving others; loving others unconditionally.

While eating with his disciples for the last time, Jesus spoke of true happiness: “I say these things while I am still in the world, so that my followers may have the full measure of my joy within them. Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. May the love you have for me be in them.”

Jesus laid down his life so we can have life more abundantly and look forward to the bliss of our eternal life in unity with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Let’s be grateful for this cornucopia of lives God has given us: professional, family, cultural, political, social, leisure, independence, comfort, and happiness. We have so many lives to serve him; so many lives to serve others with. It’s time to lay down our lives, just as our Lord did for us.