

Chapter 21

Am I whole-hearted or half-hearted?

The British healthcare service (among others) regularly undertakes cost-benefit exercises to decide whether the usefulness of a new therapy, for example, outweighs the expense of providing it. In the same way, sensible people who are about to build a house, buy a car or perhaps take a holiday, have to decide first whether the price involved will be greater than they are able or willing to pay.

A few years ago a group of doctors travelled from overseas to offer a few days' biblical and medical teaching to students in a largely non-Christian country. They used the New Testament letter by James as the basis for thinking about how belief should affect behaviour and pointed out the difference between reality and pretence. For example, counterfeit coins often look like the genuine thing but are exposed as imitations when they fail to pass certain tests, such as being much softer than the authentic coinage. After one of our studies a group member said, 'If I become a Christian I would want to be real, not counterfeit.' He meant that he would not simply apply the Christian label to his life, but would want to be authentic.

A trend is developing for putting a misleading label onto a very poor quality garment or accessory, making it look as though it has come from a famous and expensive fashion house. Some shoppers will be deceived, or want to deceive others, glad not to have paid more for what they see as a status symbol. Others will realise that the item is counterfeit and will soon wear out, belying the name on the label. There are many people in the world who are labelled as Christians but do not behave in a Christ-like way. They do not wear well under pressure for they have never invited Christ into their lives to reign there as Lord, changing their lifestyle and strengthening them under trial. The difference is made clear with the onset of testing.

There are also those who deliberately pretend to be Christians in order to deceive others. In one police state today, true followers of Christ are

sometimes invited to a prayer meeting, but should they innocently attend they find it to be a fake. Those who should be welcoming them into fellowship turn out to be counterfeit, using the name of Christ but acting well below his standards and ready to betray them. We need to pray for those who face such deceptions, that they will be wise enough to avoid them. At such times the Holy Spirit sometimes gives an uneasy sense of danger ahead, warning his own and keeping them safe. Some who do suffer for their faith often show remarkable endurance and courage under testing. They are real and not counterfeit so they wear well, and the name that they bear rings true.

Counting the cost

It is possible to accept the Lord Jesus' offer of forgiveness and the promise of new life, even to know something of the presence of his Spirit and enjoy being with other believers, and yet to hold back from full commitment. When Jesus was here in person some of those he invited to follow him began to make excuses when they saw that going further would cost more than they wanted to pay. He had resolutely set out for Jerusalem, knowing what awaited him there, but these half-hearted followers drew back, claiming other priorities.¹ There is a difference between being a believer and becoming a whole-hearted disciple.

Not all called Christian are genuine disciples

We have already started to think about the great spiritual benefits and blessings to be found in trusting the Lord Jesus to change us from being self-centred to Christ-centred, and to enjoy the new life he gives. Yet when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover some presumably Jewish Greeks, there for that feast, asked to see him. Some years later we learn that although some Grecian Jews had evidently joined the young church in Jerusalem, others tried to kill the newly converted Paul.² Perhaps those wanting to see Jesus had mixed motives. He would know whether they were spies, genuine seekers or just curious but still gave them no encouragement to join him. Instead he immediately spoke of the need to die to self, as was his own set purpose and clearly one that called on all his resolve. In this he was

greatly encouraged by his Father.³ To follow him would not be all miracles and Hosannas, but could cost true disciples their lives and for many today this is still so. To accept the lordship of Christ needs more than recital of a creed or an impulsive emotional response. It involves complete commitment for life, come what may.

Putting theory into practice

We are all aware that there is a difference between knowing the value of a healthy diet and having the determination to keep to a stricter regime. More seriously, when deciding whether or not to take a stand as a believer in Jesus as Lord, there will be some kind of cost to face. The new life is freely offered because our Lord Jesus paid the price for us to have it and what wonderful consequences follow when we trust him to deal with our old lives and give us new ones. Yet unless he is allowed to be lord of all he is still less than 'Lord'. It has been said that the entrance fee into his kingdom is nothing, for he has already paid it for us, but the annual (daily) subscription is everything. We need not be afraid to hand ourselves over to him for he loves us and is able to meet *all* our needs. The benefits far outweigh the cost.^{4,5}

Early attempts at a power cut

The Bible gives many examples of the opposition that arises when believers act in new and challenging ways that upset unbelievers. Some will only be teased or laughed at while others experience more severe attempts to suppress them without their opponents knowing that the power within them is from God and can never be cut off. This was made clear in the events recorded in the first few chapters of the book of Acts. The wonderful power newly given to the apostles convinced thousands of people about the truth of their challenging message. The Holy Spirit also helped them to bring healing to the sick and suffering, as their Lord had done before them. You would not think that anyone could object to that, but they ended up in court for it.

When I lived in Uganda many years ago, beggars would sometimes gather hopefully outside a church door on Sundays and on the steps of a hotel during the week. Some were badly disabled, perhaps from birth

trauma or damage later in life. One was a polio victim who could only crawl to the hotel steps, although he had refused the offer of a wheelchair made by the hospital's orthopaedic department. He thought that he would receive more money by appealing as a disabled beggar. We never saw one of these crippled people miraculously get up and walk, but that is what happened to a man lame from birth who met Peter and John as they went into the temple. Like the Ugandan beggars, he clearly hoped that supposedly religious people would give him money.

Instead Peter said, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk' – and he did! A cripple all his life, at the age of 40 this man walked, jumped and praised God, and to everyone's amazement hurried along with Peter and John into the temple courts. Jesus might well have passed the man many times as he entered the temple, but in his name and the power of his Spirit the apostles had the joy of bringing about complete healing.

Like so many of Jesus' own recorded miracles, the healing very obviously dealt with the needs of body, mind and spirit. A thoughtful reading of the story makes it clear how downcast and weary the man must have been after a lifetime of being able to do nothing but beg, and that with mixed success. No wheelchair was on offer for him – but after his healing, what a transformation! His whole being was at once made whole. Others who knew him before and after the miracle were amazed that two such ordinary men had been given such extraordinary power. Only the religious authorities objected and, still denying the power of the risen Jesus, they arrested the two apostles. Yet in the end they could not very well punish such an effective act of kindness, warned Peter and John to stop such activities, and let them go.⁶

Free will or God's will?

Many would have thought it wiser for these followers of Jesus to have obeyed the authorities and kept quiet but instead they went out to speak even more boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit. In our own lives there may be times when we fail to respond to the urging of the Holy Spirit, whether because it is inconvenient, embarrassing, or even

dangerous. We are still given freedom to choose between his will and self-will, to respond or to turn a deaf ear.

There is a smoke sensor in my home that makes a piercing noise if something is burning. If it goes off, I neither sit back, hoping for a fire engine to appear, nor do I switch it off and go back to my book. I search for the source of the smoke and deal with it. The Holy Spirit acts as a sensor, warning us to pay attention and not just turn away. Better than that, he comes to our aid as we identify whatever he is warning us about and helps us to put it right.

Unlike my smoke alarm, the Spirit of God sometimes uses a ‘still, small voice’ to alert us. We need to stay tuned, and then rely on him to help. This was Elijah’s experience in 1 Kings 18 and 19, when after a spiritual ‘high’ came fear, flight and depression before God lovingly gave him comfort – and correction. In contrast, Peter and John, so recently filled with the Holy Spirit, had no doubt about what he wanted them to do, and that he would deal with the consequences of their obedience to bring praise to his name and, in the troubles that followed, all necessary courage to his servants.

Unstoppable power

Following their reaction to the miracle that had made the lame man whole the authorities made other attempts to cut off the power that had healed him and stop the preaching that still went on. Open followers of Jesus were badly beaten and imprisoned, and it was not long before one was stoned to death.⁷ Yet despite such growing persecution, the wonderful new power was not cut off and the church continued to grow even when forced to scatter.⁸ Believers were finding that the benefits of faith in Christ outweighed any cost men might make them pay. The eventual dispersion of many of them to other regions meant that in time many millions (including us!) would hear about the love of Jesus for the first time.

The missionary traveller Paul gave a catalogue of the sufferings he had endured on his travels.⁹ How he was helped to bear them without complaint would show that the power to do so came from God.

Others would be inspired to thank and praise him while Paul himself was renewed day by day as he thought of his final arrival in the very presence of his Lord. That would make up for any trials he had met on the way¹⁰ and by then he would have been transformed into being more like Jesus.¹¹ Meanwhile the grace of God was helping him to stay strong enough to serve and to suffer faithfully.¹² All who have served and possibly risked their lives for the Lord Jesus Christ can trust him to keep his promises. With him, this present life is richer than without him and his never ending life starts here and now, to continue beyond physical death.¹³

Looking to Jesus

Despite the persecution endured by members of the early church they did not sit down feeling sorry for themselves, but even rejoiced 'because they had been found worthy of suffering disgrace for his name.'¹⁴ Their focus was on their Lord, who had gone through so much for them and called them to be his witnesses. In this they encouraged each other, and we, too, can find strength when with fellow-believers we share the word of God and pray together. The Scriptures are so precious that there are still those ready to risk their lives to own and share a hard-won copy as a source of strength and encouragement to keep on keeping on.

A good passage to read when hard pressed is in the practical section of the book of Hebrews:

*'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.'*¹⁵

This tells us that when we are committed to following Jesus he gives strength, courage and endurance for whatever may be thrown at us. To keep looking to him will remind us of his amazing love, and the

grace that strengthens perseverance for this life and gives hope for the next. When we consider his costly love for us our problems will seem proportionately smaller. Peter assures us that after suffering a while we shall enter into his glory, renewed and made strong again.¹⁶

A young woman once shared her experience of running the London marathon. After she had run for a few miles, despite her deliberately light clothing she had ‘hit the wall’, the point when runners feel like giving up. Then she heard her trainer’s feet close beside her and was helped to keep running. Friends lining the route cheered her along until finally she saw what marked the final goal, the clock face of Big Ben, and she ran triumphantly to the finish. She used this as a perfect illustration of the above passage from the letter to the Hebrews. By fixing our eyes on the crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus as our example and goal, we put aside whatever would hinder our progress as we run our race. Our trainer, the Holy Spirit, is always there to help and encourage us, while seen and unseen witnesses cheer us on our way, through their presence or by their prayers.

A dying Christian doctor friend said to his wife, ‘I want to run the last lap well’. He had been well known as a greatly respected senior physician and in much demand as a faithful teacher of the Bible. Now he was dying of leukaemia with only limited time left to live. This was his ‘last lap’ as he compared his life to a race that he wanted to complete, as he had lived, to the glory of God. This is what happened as his Lord and his friends helped him to keep going, faithful to the end.

Perseverance in spite of many trials

Other problems beside tiredness or illness can act as a runner’s ‘wall’. Various difficulties may arise that tempt us to take our eyes off the goal and give up. It has to be faced that to be known as a Christian disciple can result in mild or major hostility, ranging from loss of friends to loss of life, just as it did for the incarnate Christ. This is particularly so in cultures where other gods (or none) are revered and feared.

Elsewhere instead of dangerous opposition we may feel tempted to keep quiet by simply going along with other people’s opinions, moral

standards or doubtful ethics even when contrary to what we have learned to be God's mind on such matters. Our loyalty to him can be tested when tempted to complain or doubt God's plans, another form of attack on our faith. In any and all opposing circumstances, 'You need to persevere'.¹⁷

Just as in the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord struggled to line up his will to his Father's, so we too will sometimes need courage to face up to and decide to do the will of God even when we find it hard. Yet we are strengthened daily by his Spirit and sometimes by the great comfort and encouragement of other understanding believers. It is easy enough to sit in safety and write such thoughts, but the reality can be very testing. In many parts of the world, violent crowds hostile to Christian teaching have recently killed both adults and children and wrecked their property, including church buildings.

Western believers sometimes think such opposition is confined to Christians living somewhere else, and much of it is, but whether it is small or great there will be a cost to true discipleship. A number of British health professionals have been in trouble for sharing their faith and although such sharing should only be done sensitively and with consent it could contribute to the well-being of the whole person without the abuse of professional relationships that is sometimes claimed.

Wherever in the world they are, those with open Christian commitment are likely to experience some form of opposition whether by simple 'leg-pulling' or much more serious, even lethal, hostility. When writing to Timothy from his prison cell, Paul warned that anyone who wants to lead a life devoted to the Lord Jesus will suffer persecution.¹⁸ As far as possible we need to be sure that none of it is because of our own unworthy speech or action.¹⁹

Has all this made you worried?

This chapter has contained some challenges and may have given you second thoughts about being a genuine disciple after all. Take heart! Paul, who suffered far more for his discipleship than most of us will ever be called to experience, wrote to warn the Corinthians against

over-confidence coming before a fall. Self-reliance will not be enough to keep us steady or hold us from the temptation of putting something or someone else (including oneself) before obedience to God. He likens that to idolatry and heading for serious consequences, but he went on to say that to stand firm we do not trust to our own strength of mind but depend on God for, 'God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.'²⁰

Paul knew what he was talking about because after he had faced his first trial in a Roman court he wrote that no one at all had come to his support but, 'the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength'. He gave Paul words to use in his defence that effectively proclaimed the gospel to a new audience. He was also 'delivered from the lion's mouth', his possible fate if he had been found guilty. This gave him confidence to trust all future troubles to the Lord until he went to be with him. We have notable models for our learning.²¹

It would be through such experiences that Paul was enabled to say that he had learned in all things and situations to be content because he would be given strength to cope.²² Perhaps he recalled the assurance of Jesus that preoccupation with troubles of any kind is unnecessary when we are in his Father's care. Jesus had said, 'Do not worry' – a command as well as an encouragement. Like Paul, our prime focus should be the promotion of God's kingdom by the way that we live and he will see to the rest.²³

In many of Paul's trials and temptations, including specified and unspecified physical problems, he had repeatedly prayed for release. Instead he was given a promise that cheered and sustained him and has strengthened many others since: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'²⁴ News from thousands in today's persecuted church still bears witness to this truth and how the grace and joy of the Lord is strengthening their endurance. In spite of the hardships, new followers are being drawn in by their witness. Two of my imprisoned Christian friends enduring unfair sentences have each had this joy – just as Paul did, in spite of his chains.²⁵

Still wearing L-plates

Those wanting to be true disciples should know that the word has its origin in the Latin word for the follower of a teacher or leader – that is, a learner. We are still wearing L-plates! As we go on in the Christian life, following Jesus, our greatest leader and example, we keep learning more from past experiences and how we are to face those still to come. Whenever we fail to act on past lessons or falter in the face of tougher ones, all is not lost – it simply means that we need a refresher course in repentant confession, forgiveness and fresh enabling. We should never give up.

Faith strengthened through adversity

Years ago I met someone who had known many trials, the last and longest affecting her youngest son, Sam. When in his twenties Sam's car was hit by the van of a sleeping driver and he became so seriously mentally and physically disabled that he would need lifelong care. He and his mother were greatly loved by our church family, Sam radiating noisy but mostly wordless joy and at least one of his attendant carers has found faith in Christ. Unwittingly, by means of his wheelchair, he acts as a missionary. Not all missionaries go overseas.

Then Sam's mother developed cancer and after a relatively short illness, died. Yet in her last illness she remained uncomplaining and other-centred, quietly trusting her Lord with the tasks she could no longer finish. Towards the end she said, 'You know, it does strengthen your faith not to be worrying about anything.' Her serenity matched her words and showed her faith to be genuine, not counterfeit. The love she inspired lives on and we still see (and hear) Sam when his latest carers bring him to church. Let us thank God – and take courage. His strength is perfected in our weakness.

For further thought

- Had you realised that commitment to Jesus may involve problems and pains?
- Can you give examples of these, either from your own or other people's experience? What good things can outweigh the difficulties?

Further resources

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References

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| 1. Luke 9:51, 57-62 | 14. Acts 5:40-41 |
| 2. Acts 6:1; 9: 29 | 15. Hebrews 12:1-4 |
| 3. John 12:20-33 | 16. 1 Peter 5:4, 10 |
| 4. Philippians 4:19 | 17. Hebrews 10:36 |
| 5. Romans 8:18 | 18. 2 Timothy 3:12 |
| 6. Acts 3:1-10; 4: 1-22 | 19. 1 Peter 4:14-16 |
| 7. Acts 6:12; 7:54-60 | 20. 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 |
| 8. Acts 8:1, 4 | 21. 2 Timothy 4:16-18 |
| 9. 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 | 22. Philippians 4:10- 13 |
| 10. 2 Corinthians 4:7-16 | 23. Matthew 6:31-34 |
| 11. 2 Corinthians 3:18 | 24. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 |
| 12. Acts 16:22-34 | 25. Philippians 1:12-14 |
| 13. John 17:3, 24 | |

