

Practical Crucifixion: Notes on Spiritual Formation

Growing up in church, I heard calls to take up my cross.

I also heard those puzzling words about crucifying my flesh, about putting to death the “old man,” about dying to self.

These are strange terms. What do they mean? The words come from the Bible. That didn’t mean I knew what the words meant—either in the Bible or in the mouths of preachers.

I continue to ponder those words. Reading Scripture has helped. The dictums of my teachers have helped. Scholars and writers have helped. But the journey to understanding these things is inescapably personal. A Christian must live a life and die many deaths. We can only understand so much in advance. Much must be learned by experience as we seek to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to crucify what is earthly in us.

I offer my notes. These notes come from personal experience and from my reflections on Scripture, books, and what others have told me. I hope these notes can help some other person who is willing to walk his or her own journey of following Jesus.

Cross-bearing involves witness, accepting shame and suffering for speaking truth, doing good, and confessing that Jesus is Lord. But the aspect of cross-bearing I focus on here is attacking sin within in my own life and surrendering my desires.

In biblical theology we can say that we have been born anew and that we have been crucified with Christ. At the same time, the seed of the Word must grow, and war must be waged against the habits of our old humanity.

Attempting to crucify the flesh without putting on Jesus’ new humanity is misguided. For that reason, when I talk about practical crucifixion, I must also talk about God’s intent for humanity, how sin mars that intent, and how to attune ourselves to God’s vision. Money, sexuality, and power are often listed as arenas where sin wreaks havoc. Let’s explore the pursuit of

transformation in regard to the last two of those arenas.

Killing “Sexual Immorality” (*porneia*)

The sad reality of sin is that we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator. Romans 1 indicates that *porneia* (sexual immorality) follows rather directly from failing to acknowledge and give glory to God. *Porneia* hijacks creation. For human beings, God intends the biological phenomenon of sexual reproduction, as well as the associated psychological realities, to be subsumed under the covenantal union of marriage. At an even deeper level, the Christian’s sexuality belongs to the Lord. The body is the Lord’s and only celibacy and marriage honor that fact. (The celibate life most fully expresses the reality that the body is the Lord’s, while marriage is meant to depict the relationship of Messiah to his people.)

Porneia occurs when we allow our desire to induce us to pursue intimacy or pleasure without the corresponding covenantal responsibility or when this dimension of our person is used to violate rather than honor the distinctive grace that is each human being. Clear thinking about sin and righteousness regarding sexuality requires attention to our own inner life, our stance toward God, and our relationships with others. Sinful sexuality manifests both in the ordering of our thoughts, desires, and actions, and in the ways we dishonor or mistreat other people.

James describes the process of temptation and sin so well. Every good gift indeed comes from the Father. But desire easily lures and entices us such that it “conceives” and gives birth to sin. Sin eventually gives birth to death. James is speaking of temptation more broadly, but the imagery is apropos for thinking about *porneia*.

It is worth pausing on this term “desire” (*epithumia*). The New Testament generally uses *epithumia* with a negative connotation. (It is sometimes translated “lust.”) But James does not say desire is sin. Rather, when desire lures and entices a person, then desire becomes pregnant with sin. We must not blame God’s good gifts for our sin; rather, the source lies in how we relate to desire.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of desiring in relation to sexual sin. Whoever *looks at a woman for the purpose of desiring her*, has committed adultery with her already in his heart. Jesus does not say desire is sin. He does say looking in order to desire is sin. We must be precise and careful here. Desires for inappropriate intimacy or (often objectifying)

pleasure must not be fed. But when we speak as if the mere fact that desire is attempting to lure or entice us is itself a sin, then we open the door to some damaging interpretations of this passage. This passage is sometimes read in a defeatist manner where desire or physical attraction themselves are understood to be equivalent to adultery. I call this a defeatist reading, because if attraction is sin, then sin is inevitable. If we believe this, then we will have a much harder time taking decisive action where we are actually able to. We can choose not to feed desires for illicit things. Some seem to read this passage as if it said, “everyone who sees a woman and senses a stirring of desire has committed adultery with her in his heart.” Such a reading not only reinforces the defeatist mentality but also opens the door wide for another bad interpretation.

This second bad interpretation amounts to changing the subject and blaming the person who is the object of improper desire (such as blaming a woman for a man’s sin because she is allegedly immodest). Jesus addresses the person who is improperly relating to desire. This passage does not address the person who is improperly desired. Flirtation, seduction, and titillation are certainly serious wrongs, but that is not what is being addressed here. Jesus speaks of the person who actively cultivates desire for inappropriate interaction. It is preposterous to think that “looking to lust” only happens when the person looked at is doing something wrong.

The realities of attraction do not mean we cannot choose the way of honor toward someone rather than the way of sinful thoughts. And in reality, once we have differentiated desire from sin and chosen a proper response, this breaks the power of desire. While desire and physical attraction are not sin, we do not wish to be preoccupied with desire and resisting its temptations. The recognition that we can respond with honor and respect and that there is nothing inevitable about a sinful response, paves the way for a positive response that relates to others holistically as persons. This takes us beyond killing sinful deeds to the putting on of the new human in Christ. (This is not the elimination of desire and attraction, but it can be a massive reprogramming of how we see and relate to other people.)

So, what do we do with attractions, either physical or emotional, that would lure us toward violation? First, we refuse to dwell in the desire and choose to engage our attention in something more productive. We must be emphatic that we are not going down that road. However, there must be more. We must refer these things to God. For the married, we must explicitly recognize that this sort of energy and capacity is to be devoted to our spouses and

that we should work hard to please them (which means a sexuality of love, not one of self-centeredness). For the single (and all of us) it is essential to explicitly recognize that “the body is the Lord’s.” We belong to God, and we must devote ourselves to him through worship, prayer, and service.

For situations of pornography and other deliberate provocations, there is a rather straightforward response: Flee. Our hearts may well need deep work to deal with the things that make us vulnerable to sin, but there are some clearly actionable externals. Get rid of the materials and leave the situation.

But we don’t flee the situation and relationships of normal life. We must learn the proper ways of relating to others. When we are dead and risen with Christ, we appreciate the unique gift that is each human being without indulging any desire to trespass in improper intimacy and without failing in proper respect for that person. Douglas McKelvey included in *Every Moment Holy* a fitting liturgy called “Upon Seeing a Beautiful Person.” This prayer praises God for the divine beauty reflected in the person and asks God to train our hearts that a response to beauty “would not be twisted downwards in envy or desire.”

We resist inappropriate thoughts as best we can, but direct resistance is not enough. We must change how we see people. A prayer of blessing for someone who we are tempted to desire can do wonders to reorient our souls. A proper human-to-human interchange is also powerful. I remember a time in another city when my walk took me through a park. A lady was doing a workout routine there. It was taking a bit of deliberate choice for me to think appropriately, but that changed the moment I walked past her on the trail and she greeted me. Anything inappropriate was gone as we exchanged a few words of conversation.

More generally, protocols of courtesy, social interactions, and conviviality matter for developing healthy relationships and healthy views of people.

Thank the Lord for his gift of people, male and female.

Killing “Selfish Ambition” (*eritheia*)

“Selfish ambition” refers to our grasping for position. *Eritheia* is used repeatedly in the New Testament letters to contrast fallen human behavior with the fruit of the Spirit. It is linked

with pride, envy, spite, and strife and seems to indicate a desire to be the one who comes out on top with the honors of prominence and power. (See the entry in Vines for “faction” g2052.) The term carries ideas of electioneering and seeking to be the leader of a party, but this vice also manifests in smaller ways. We want to think ourselves superior to others and to have them think well of us. We want to be the one who solves the problems. We feel good about ourselves when we see others’ faults, or we are happy that they are not suited for a role that we get to play. We take pleasure in the weaknesses of others if it makes us look good.

Selfish ambition is a distorted reflection of God’s purposes for us. God did indeed create us for significance. We are to reign with Christ and exercise dominion over creation. God wants us to have an impact on other people, and he has apportioned his gifts to different people so that each of us has something special to give to other people. It is good for us to reign, and it is good for us to realize that we are a source of distinctive good for other people and our communities. It is even good for us to be appreciated by other people. But sin, as always, lies close at hand. Our desires lure us to seek to be *the* person. We don’t just want to be significant; we want to be more significant than others.

Carey Nieuwhof describes a time when he “wanted to be *that guy* who spoke at conferences and was well respected as a leader in ministry.” God helped him see the true forces in his soul leading to that desire. After a “wrestling match” with God, Carey was able to embrace the reality that success in God’s eyes might mean being an “effective pastor in the middle of nowhere without ever anyone knowing who I was.” For others this wrestling match might mean accepting the reality that they might never be an ordained pastor—even in the middle of nowhere. The details of our lives vary, but we all need our souls oriented to serve God and not self.

Selfish ambition seeks goods at the expense of others. When we seek prominence or position, we are looking at ways to exalt ourselves compared to others. This is the opposite of God’s abundant kingdom which bestows great responsibility on every faithful person and makes glory and honor available to all. The kingdom way of pursuing glory and honor (and immortality) is “patient continuance in well doing;” whereas the glory, honor, and position sought by *eritheia* is a self-exaltation that is proud against God and proud against others. James 3:16 says that where there is envy and selfish ambition, we find rebellious disorder and every foul affair. This earthly, soulish, and demonic wisdom is the opposite of the wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, and easy to be entreated.

When the Lord exposes selfish ambition in our hearts we must combat it directly. We can tell God we repent and surrender our desires. Sometimes there may be a single big test where we can make a conscious decision not to grasp after a specific position or opportunity. Sometimes we don't get what we want, and our disappointment reveals our hearts. We can choose to release our wrong feelings to God and graciously accept where he has us.

But the old human is not put off without putting on the new one. Fortunately, we have practical instructions that counter *eritheia* with concrete practices. "Associate with the lowly:" we need to spend time and friendship with people who do not help us up the social ladder. Others may even assign us a lower status because of who we hang out with. "Rejoice with those who rejoice:" we celebrate, congratulate, and thank God when we see a brother or sister receive honor or do something well. Few things stick a pin to our flatulent envy like a genuine congratulations and expression of joy for someone who has received an honor or position that we had craved. "Genuine" does not necessarily mean emotionally spontaneous; rejoicing with others can be genuine even when it is emotionally difficult for us to do: it is after all part of *crucifixion*.

We esteem others more important than ourselves and outdo one another in showing honor. The King James rendering of this first command caused me confusion as a teenager. I remember slouching lower in my chair at a small group meeting trying to psychologize myself into thinking the young man in another chair "better" than me. That was less than helpful. Later I learned to read the Elizabethan English and concepts. To esteem others better than ourselves meant to treat them as social "betters," to give the honor and service toward them that some societies expect those of lower social status to show to those of higher social status. They get better seats. We are happy to wash the dishes while they show the guests around, etc.

The rituals of the church also rebuke *eritheia*, and, if we will but embrace them, they can help us to lay aside the old human and put on the new. Communion seems to have been originally embedded within a meal—the Love Feast. Paul told the Corinthians that when they privatized the meal, rather than waiting for all to share the food together, they dishonored the Lord to such an extent that it could hardly be called the *Lord's* Supper. Most churches make a distinction between communion proper and shared meals. Still, sharing food, whether from house to house, going out to eat, or in the church potluck is very important for the Christian life. And this sharing of food is to be done as between equals. Sharing food is supposed to rebuke any selfish ambition in my heart vis-à-vis my brother.

The church has historically seen Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet as more than a one-time object lesson. Amish and many Mennonites associate foot washing with communion. Other traditions have put it in various places in the liturgy, often on Maundy Thursday. Washing others' feet conveys willingness to do lowly work for other people. This could not contrast more sharply with *eritheia*.

Concluding Notes

Practical crucifixion is not separate from practically putting on Christ. Within the larger context of beholding Christ and the work of the Spirit our actions help orient us to what is true and good. Sometimes these take the form of direct resistance to evil. Other times they function more indirectly to align us with what is good and turn us away from sinful patterns. Giving thanks to God, showing honor to people, and the practices of love feast and foot washing are all practical ways of orienting ourselves toward goodness. The New Testament overflows with similar practices. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Give aid. Share things. Weep with those who weep. Show hospitality. Sing praises. These are concrete acts. They may not come naturally or feel natural to us, but if we will pursue them honestly while gazing at Christ, they will help orient our hearts and lives to what is good.