

A Chance to Die: The Relentless and Risky Love of Amy Carmichael **John 12:23-26**

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23 And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him (John 12:23-26).

Next weekend we start our Missions Conference, a time where we shift the spotlight on College Park's global influence. George Verwer from Operation Mobilization will be here to challenge our hearts starting Friday evening, and our goal for the conference is for each family to pick one of our nine strategic partners to engage with in a personal way. Saturday evening and Sunday morning we are hosting a missions festival in individual classrooms and you will have a great opportunity to get a sense of what God is doing in each area of the world.

This is an exciting and important time for our church, and I wanted to begin to direct your attention toward the theme of missions this Sunday through a biographical sermon on the life of Amy Carmichael. The reason for this kind of sermon today is three fold:

1. to remind us that mission work is simply an extension of following Jesus
2. to give us a specific application through the life of a real missionary
3. to make missions personal

And so we are going to depart from our study of Colossians today because Missions is that important, and Amy Carmichael is that inspiring.

The call to follow Jesus is filled with great and compelling contrasts:

- "the first shall be last" (Mark 10:44)
- "the least shall be the greatest" (Luke 9:48)
- "the poor inherit the kingdom" (Luke 6:20)
- "be careful when people speak well of you" (Luke 6:26)

Paul picked up the same theme in his ministry:

- For me to live is Christ, to die is gain (Phil 3:21)
- I take pleasure in infirmities...for when I am weak then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10)
- The more I love you, the less I am loved (2 Cor 12:15)
- Death is working us, but life in you (2 Cor 4:12)

So you see how different it is to be a follower of Jesus? To follow Jesus means that we embrace a call that makes no sense to the world, but it makes total sense to those who know

him. Those who know Jesus want to live like Jesus. And that includes some pretty tough things – like dying.

A young woman in the United States was considering becoming a missionary so she wrote the well-known missionary Amy Carmichael. The young woman's question was very simple: "What is it like to be a missionary?" Amy Carmichael's response was classic, powerful, biblical, and right: "Missionary life is simply a chance to die."

A chance to die. Think about that with me. Think about how radical that view of life really is. Following Jesus doesn't mean you **have** to die. It means you **get** to. Following Jesus is simply a chance to die – every day and in so many ways. So as we consider a focus on missions for the next two weeks, I would like to call you today to consider in what ways does Jesus bid you to come and die. **God is glorified in the self-sacrificing, daily death of his servants.**

That may look like determining that you are going to become a missionary; it may be deciding to be a part of one of our vision trips; it could be to double your giving to missions; or, it could be to invest your life in the mission field that lives next door. It could be just about any level of self-sacrifice.

Following Jesus is simply a chance to die.

What's Wrong with Jesus?

Now isn't that what Jesus says in John 12? Jesus is less than a week away from the crucifixion. He spends some time at Mary and Martha's house along with Lazarus, who he had raised from the dead. During the dinner, Mary anoints Jesus' feet, to which Judas makes some wise-guy comment about how the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

The next day Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Pharisees are panicking because so many people are following Jesus. So Jesus is at the pinnacle of his career: raised a man from the dead, people are coming en mass, and they are proclaiming "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

So in the midst of the swirl of success and momentum – Jesus says something which seems to be really contradictory for where his ministry is. And the reason that he says what he does is because Jesus knows something that no one else knows – he's going to be given the chance to die. So listen to what he says:

- 1) **God's purposes are always good (v 23).** Jesus says "the time has come for the Son of man to be glorified." Glorified? He was going to be executed! Jesus knew both. He knew that the way to honor is the path of humility. God honors people who we might look at and say, "Well that didn't work!" Jesus knew that the cross was a path of glorification.
- 2) **Dying leads to life (v 24).** Jesus talks about himself with a seed metaphor. Unless the seemingly dead seed is placed in the ground, it cannot grow into something more and bear fruit. He tells us death is essential. Otherwise you will be unfruitful and alone.

- 3) **Live by a different value-set (v 25).** Here is where we come back to the life of contrast. People who work hard to protect themselves, never get hurt, never take any risks for God - safe, safe, safe is their theme - they do nothing for God. Jesus invites us to look at life through a totally different lens: you waste your life if you focus on life; you gain everything if you focus on self-sacrifice.
- 4) **People who know Jesus, follow Jesus— even to death(v 26).** It is very simple. If you serve Jesus, then you must follow him. If you love Jesus, then you need to become like him. You've got to think like him, talk like him, live like him, and die like him. If you know Jesus, you've got to follow Jesus.

So much of this is just backwards from how we would normally view life and live, isn't it? We self-protect, manage risks, weigh the options, and set boundaries – and it is not that I'm against any of those – but here is the problem: sometimes self-protection becomes the end-game. And the real reason is because we are more concerned about our glory than we are God's. We want people to follow us, rather than being known as a follower of Jesus.

Jesus' plan for life doesn't always fit within our boxes. Peter learned that the hard way didn't he? It was the day that he got called Satan. In Matthew 16:21, Jesus told the disciples about the master plan: suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter says, "Never, Lord!" And that is when Jesus says, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Did you get that? "You are not thinking (mindful) about the things of God, but the things of men."

That's our problem! And that is why Jesus' words in John 12 are revolutionary. Following Jesus is simply a chance to die.

What Amy Carmichael Teaches Us

Amy Carmichael was a Christian missionary to the people of Japan and India. She was born in December 1867, and she served as a missionary for 55 years – without a furlough!

She is best known for two things: (1) The Dohnavur Fellowship, a ministry to children and young women in India, (2) Writing over 35 books.

Amy was born in Northern Ireland to David and Catherine Carmichael, who were deeply committed Presbyterians. She was the oldest of seven children. Her father tragically died in her late teenage years, and she was unofficially adopted by Robert Wilson who was a cofounder of the Keswick Convention.

Early Lessons

Two early things shaped Amy's missionary life. First, the Keswick Convention meetings ignited a deep passion for Christlikeness. The Keswick Convention was a sweeping religious movement in England, emphasizing the "deeper life" – a belief that one could enter a spiritual realm of existence where one would no longer sin. The conferences were marked by solid Bible teaching and, apart from an extreme view of sanctification, were generally helpful. "Like a River Glorious

is God's Perfect Peace" is Keswick hymn. Besides the spiritual value of the Keswick Convention, it exposed her to people like Hudson Taylor.

Secondly, she had a passion for disenfranchised children even before she became a missionary. In her late teenage years, Amy developed a burden for children who were called "shawlies." They were factory girls who were so poor that they couldn't afford to wear hats to church, so they wore shawls over their heads instead. Thus the name. And like what happens so often, the "respectable" church people wanted nothing to do with these ragamuffin children. Amy was burdened for them, and she began holding classes for them in their local church. She was opposed nearly every step along the way. The people in Amy's church resisted the work because the children were crude, unorthodox, and sometimes even prayed simultaneously. Amy must have died every time she brought needy children into church only to see church people with arms folded and brows furrowed, watching every move she and the children made. Eventually, the ministry grew to over 300 children – a huge number in Amy's day – and she had to secure her own building for the ministry.

This ministry and the Keswick Convention merged into a definite call of God to foreign missions. But her sense of calling was not initially embraced by family or friends. In the midst of a season of fear, rejection, and great pain she wrote:

*He who had led will lead
All through the wilderness
He who hath fed will surely feed...
He who had heard thy cry
Will never close His ear,
He who hath marked thy faintest sigh
Will not forget they tear
He loveth always, faileth never,
So rest on Him Today—forever.*

To The Field

On March 3, 1893, she set sail for the Far East, thinking at first that God was calling her to Japan. The departure was very painful. She wrote, "My life, on the human side, was broken, and it never was mended again. But He has been enough."

Amy's first overseas ministry was in Japan. She ministered in the country for 15 months, struggling to learn the language and the customs of the Japanese people. It was in Japan that Amy learned a lesson that would mark her ministry for years to come.

When she arrived in Japan she refused to fully adapt the Japanese culture, insisting that she maintain her Western appearance and dress. However, one day she was attempting to share Christ with a Japanese woman. Just as Amy was about to ask the woman if she would like to receive Christ, the Japanese woman became fascinated with Amy's clothing, changed the subject, and the opportunity was lost. Amy left the home in tears. She was risking so much (the gospel) for so little (her appearance). And from that day forward, Amy made the decision to dress like the people she served. This specific death to self became a hallmark of her ministry.

Unfortunately, Amy could not remain in Japan because of a serious health issue, which was exacerbated by the climate.

Passion

God providentially sent her the country of India where here most long-lasting work would take root. In the early 1900's India was still under British authority, and it was inundated with a repressive caste system that determined your future and your faith. You could not marry outside of caste, nor could you have any belief outside of your family's faith. So to come to Christ meant the rejection of both your family's Hindu faith and a break from the caste. Both proved very costly to anyone who Amy met.

Yet, Amy was undaunted and she passionately pursued God's call upon her life despite the difficult odds and oppressive culture. It would not be uncommon for someone to come to faith in Christ only to be severely pressured by the family to return. Some did and others remained true to their calling.

Amy was deeply committed. She said, "O to be delivered from half-hearted missionaries! Don't come if you mean to turn aside for anything...Don't come if you haven't made up your mind to live for one thing—the winning of souls." Obedience to Christ meant an utter abandonment everything. Amy was, in a word, radical. She loved this prayer:

"Lord, do Thou turn me all into love,
and all my love into obedience,
and let my obedience be without interruption."

As she wrote to those back home who were interested in joining her effort she would often say two things:

- "Don't come unless you can say to your Lord and to us: The cross is the only attraction."
- "Bring to India a strong sense of humor and no sense of smell."

In fact Amy wrote books on the work in India that were sent home to publishers, who sent them back because they were too depressing and realistic.

After a few years of ministry in India, Amy providentially stumbled across what would become her life's work—the rescuing of abandoned and abused children. She discovered, much to her dismay, that in certain temples there were young women and children who were married to the gods and they were doomed to life horrible abuse. Amy determined that something had to be done.

She founded Dohnavur Fellowship, a group of missionary women whose aim was to rescue the temple children. She discovered that children were brought to the temples for a variety of reasons including: an unwanted baby, poverty, an out-of-caste relationship, or family custom. Amy and her fellow missionaries would quietly search for children who they could rescue, raise, and win to Christ.

Now you need to know that at first Amy could barely stand the thought of being a “mother” to so many children. The reality was that she felt God had called her to missionary work and the simple care of children seemed to compete with that calling. But over time, she began to see that God was directing her to a new arena of ministry. Her ideas of how she would serve God had to die.

You would think that Amy would have received great support from the other missionaries in the rescuing of these children. But that was far from the case. Some missionaries thought she made too much of the blight of the temple children, while others suggested that her efforts to save the temple children were nothing more than a stunt meant to draw attention to herself. Others were hopelessly pessimistic saying that the temple system was centuries old and what did she think that she could do about it?

But Amy would not be stopped. The temple girls were found one at a time. Sometimes people would bring them to their fellowship. Other times they would find a woman walking toward the temple and convince her to give the child to them instead. Years later they would discover that boys were also involved in other temples, and the Fellowship changed its focus to rescue them as well. Over the span of her ministry, Amy and her fellowship would become a sanctuary for over 1,000 children who would have faced a terrible future. Amy became affectionately known as “Amma”—the Indian word for mother.

However, the ministry was not easy. Over the years the Duhnavur Fellowship would face immense financial hardships, poor facilities, outbreaks of deadly disease, internal strife, and the constant threat of government intervention. But through it all, Amy persevered with a relentless and risky love for the temple children.

The Fellowship was able to build dormitories, a place for worship, and a hospital to care for the needs of the children. The ministry was even able to purchase 170 acres.

Tragedy?

But on October 24, 1931, Amy’s life took a very different turn. On a site visit to a place that would house some of their women, she fell into a construction hole, broke her leg, and twisted her spine. The injury was devastating and incurable. Amy’s health would never be the same. She spent the next twenty years with failing health, often being confined to her bed or a wheel chair.

Realize that Amy Carmichael is a complete invalid when she writes:

Before the winds that blow do cease,
Teach me to dwell within thy calm:
Before the pain has passed in peace,
Give me, my God, to sing a psalm.
Let me not lose the chance to prove
The fullness of enabling love.
O Love of God, do this for me:
Maintain a constant victory

And yet it was during this season that Amy was able to write some of her most penetrating and thoughtful books. Her room became a sanctuary of soul-searching and compelling literature that inspired and motivated millions who read her works. Even in her limited physical condition, she found a pathway to impart spiritual life.

On January 18, 1951, Amy Carmichael completed the radical and risky ministry to which God had called her. Her funeral was attended by scores of children – little lives Amy had saved. On the grounds of the Dohnavur Fellowship you will find no grave stones. But you will find one small bird bath, and one word marks the grave of Amy Carmichael – Amma.

God is glorified in the self-sacrificing, daily death of his servants.

Amy Carmichael's life preaches the four truths of John 12:

1. **God's purposes are always good.** Even when God seems to change the mission or send hard circumstances. Does God have permission to change your plans? Can you trust him when life takes a turn that doesn't fit with what you expected?
2. **Dying leads to life.** Amy Carmichael found the paradoxical fruit that when we die—to our plans, wants, and dreams—God is glorified in powerful ways. What is it that God is calling you to die to today? Do you even know what it means to die to self?
3. **Live by a different value set.** She was radical. And thank God that she was because over 1,000 children owe her their lives. Is there anything remotely radical about your walk with Christ? Look around you. See the needs. Live differently.
4. **People who know Jesus, follow Jesus.** Yes, the Christian life is filled with a number of paradoxes, but you could capture everything in the simple summary that Amy Carmichael gave us:

Missionary life is simply a chance to die.

Or perhaps we can think of it this way today: The Christian life is simply a chance to die.

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