I want you to join me in imagining a story to really put yourself in these shoes for it to be most impactful. You're working on an assignment for your job, whatever your job may be. You have an important assignment to complete, and how you do on it matters. If you do well, you might get a raise. If you do poorly, you might not have your job anymore. You’re focused on this task because, in a few days, it’s due and you’ll be judged on it.

Instead of watching your favorite team on TV or hanging out with your friends or partying, you are sitting there working on the paper. You're focused, doing the research, grinding. You wake up early to finish the project.

So, here’s a question: Why are you focusing so much on it? Why not go watch the game or hang out with friends and let things be what they are? The reason is clear—it’s important. This project matters to you. You are laying aside less important things for something really important.

Now, let’s introduce a plot twist. The night before your assignment is due, you get a call from emergency medical personnel. Your spouse is in the hospital in critical condition, diagnosed with a rare disease. The doctors say they don’t expect your spouse to live much longer. There’s no known treatment, but there might be a cure in another country. However, it's still in testing and may not work. You’re told that you’d need to figure out how to get this treatment on your own.

How many of you would stay home and work on your project, ignoring the situation? I didn't think so. Most of us would drop everything and go to the hospital. If it meant losing your job, you'd go to be with your spouse. Why? Because you love them. They are your top priority.

So here’s the real question: Where are your desires? Where are your priorities? How badly do you want something? If there is a cure in another country, would you be willing to travel across the globe to find it? Would you sell your car, mortgage your house, and put in the time and effort to find it, despite the hardships?

Why would you do this? Because you love your spouse. You promised to be with them for better or worse, in sickness and health, until death do you part. They are worth the sacrifice.

So, what’s the lesson here? It’s simple: The value you place on something determines how much effort and sacrifice you’re willing to invest in it. That project was valuable, but your spouse is more valuable. Your priorities are relative, and this lesson is shown in the Bible, particularly in Matthew 13:45-46. It says:

*“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away, sold everything he had, and bought it.”*

Now, that's a huge sacrifice! I don’t know if I’d sell everything I have for a pearl, especially since I’m not that wealthy. But the merchant knew the pearl’s value because he was willing to sacrifice everything for it. Jesus uses this parable to show us how valuable we are to God.

In John 3:16, it says: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* How can we tell that God values us? Because He gave everything for us. He laid down all of heaven to gain us. God’s love is proven by His actions.

This analogy also shows us how we should respond to God. In Luke 14, Jesus tells another parable:

*“A certain man gave a great supper and invited many people. And he sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’”*

But, sadly, they all made excuses. One man said, *“I’ve bought a field and must go see it,”* another said, *“I’ve bought oxen and need to test them,”* and another said, *“I’ve married a wife and can’t come.”* They made excuses because they valued other things more than the invitation. The king had prepared a feast for them, but they didn’t want to sacrifice anything for it.

Then Jesus follows this parable with a tough statement: *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”* (Luke 14:26-27)

Jesus makes it clear: If anything is a higher priority than Him, you cannot be His disciple. He must be what we desire most. There are not different levels of discipleship. No, you **cannot** be a disciple of Jesus if anything else is a higher priority than Him. Those aren’t my words; they’re His. If anything is more important to you than Jesus, you can’t follow Him. To be a disciple of Jesus, He has to be what we desire most and what we value most. So the real question is, how badly do you want Jesus?

The parable we just discussed doesn’t end well for those people—they didn’t want Jesus. It’s a bad example, but I think we see a good example in the life of Paul. Paul is someone we could all learn from because his life was completely consecrated to the work of God and to Jesus.

Paul’s story shows us a radical change. For those who don’t know, Paul was once a high-ranking official in the Jewish religious government, the Sanhedrin. He was zealous for his religion, so much so that he wanted to persecute this new group of Jews who were proclaiming that the man who was crucified on a cross was the Messiah, God Himself. This was radical, and it was contrary to Jewish law. Paul was telling people to break the Sabbath and more. He wanted to silence this movement, thinking he was doing the right thing.

But then, on the road to Damascus, something happened. Jesus Himself confronted Paul and said, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* Paul responded, *“Who are you, Lord?”* and Jesus replied, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* At that moment, Paul was blinded, and everything changed. He was taken to Damascus, where he was healed and converted. His life was completely transformed.

After this encounter, Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, and in Philippians 3:7-9, he says:

*“What things were gained to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Indeed I count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”*

Before this, Paul had listed all the things he had: his lineage, his status as a Pharisee, his zeal for the law. He had it all, but he says, "I count all of it as loss" for Christ. The word Paul uses here for "loss" actually means "rubbish" or "dung"—in Greek, it’s closer to something much more graphic. Paul is saying that all his achievements, his righteousness, his standing—everything he had—was like worthless waste. It’s like saying, *“You think you’re righteous? Here, take some poop and smear it on your face!”* That’s how Paul viewed everything he once held dear compared to knowing Christ.

He goes on to say, *“I count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.”* All of it is rubbish compared to knowing Jesus. And it’s beautiful to see that Paul says he has suffered the loss of everything but counts it as nothing so that he might gain Christ.

Paul also makes it clear that he hasn’t attained perfection. He hasn't already "arrived." But he presses on every day, striving to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of him. Paul paints a beautiful picture of the Christian life: When you find Jesus, you find the pearl of great price, and everything else—no matter what the cost—is rubbish compared to Him. He says in Philippians 3:13-14:

*“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended it; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Paul had a singular focus. The one thing that absorbed his life was to press forward, toward that prize, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing else mattered. The world was behind him, and all that lay before him was the cross. This was Paul’s motto: *“No turning back.”*

If you know the song, *“The world behind me, the cross before me”*, you know exactly how Paul lived. Everything was behind him. The past, his achievements, his old life—he burned the bridges, and all that was before him was the cross. He lived with one purpose: to know Christ and make Him known.

He lived as a servant of Jesus, a sacrificial minister for Christ. We see this in 1 Corinthians, where he beautifully expresses how he views himself. He says, *"Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."* It's in this context of sacrificial service, where Paul is focused on saving souls, that he writes some famous verses.

He reminds us, *“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?”* We’re familiar with athletes training for the Olympics. One study I heard about showed that people often start running from a very young age, at six or seven, and train every day. They carefully regulate their diet, exercise, and sleep—all in pursuit of a single goal. Paul compares this rigorous discipline to the Christian life.

He continues, *“Everyone who competes for this prize is tempered in all things. They live a rigorous lifestyle, and they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.”* So, the question is: How badly do you want it? Paul says, *“Therefore, I run thus, not with uncertainty.”* We don’t have to run aimlessly, trying to figure out where we’re going. Our goal is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. At the foot of the cross is the highest place that any man can attain.

He further adds, *“Not as one who beats the air, but I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.”* It’s a battle, and every day we fight. This is why it’s said that the battle against self is the greatest battle ever fought. Every day, we must discipline ourselves, and this is a good fight.

Paul urges us, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.”* I remember thinking about going backpacking and researching the best equipment. Some people will spend $100 to $200 extra just for a lighter titanium mess kit. Why? Because, when you're hiking long distances, even a pound can make a huge difference. Similarly, Paul is advising us to lay aside any weight, anything that might hinder us. If watching TV adds an extra burden to your life, lay it aside. If certain people drag you down, cut ties. Do whatever it takes.

He reminds us, *“Lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”* Isn’t that a beautiful picture of the life Paul led?

So why did Paul live like this? Why was he willing to travel from place to place, being beaten, whipped, stoned, thrown in jail, and mocked? Why did he give his life as a sacrifice? The answer comes in 2 Corinthians: *“The love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: If one died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves but for Him who died for them and rose again.”*

Paul lived for Jesus because Jesus lived and died for him first. If you were the only person to have ever sinned, Jesus would have still died for you. That's love.

So, the question is: Will you live for Jesus? He already died for you. You might be asking, *“How do I live for Jesus? What do I do?”* It’s simple: We live for Jesus by living a life of love. Jesus summed up the commandments: love God supremely, and love your neighbor unselfishly.

This is what consecration looks like—giving all that you have and are to Him and loving others by pouring yourself out for them. Love is the fulfilling of the law. A life of love is possible only through Jesus Christ.

We live for Jesus by abiding in Him, letting His love flow through us. And as we start this new year, consider this: you have all the past behind you. You may have made mistakes in 2024, but you can lay them at the cross and leave them there.

Now, you have this year to say, *“Jesus, I want to follow You. I want You to be the pearl of great price in my life. I want You to be what I seek with all my heart.”*

How badly do you want it? How badly do you want a deeper relationship with God? How badly do you want to know Him in the power of His resurrection? How badly do you want to serve Him and commune with Him? That’s love for God. And toward others, how badly do you want to see your loved ones in heaven? How badly do you want your neighbor to know Jesus? How badly do you want to relieve the suffering of those in need?

We will know by our actions. Would you stop watching your favorite team if it meant you could spend more time with Jesus? Would you stop hanging out with people who are leading you away from Him? How far would you go to spread His message? How much money would you invest in His cause? Would you be willing to sell the car or mortgage your house if it meant saving souls for Jesus? How much time would you be willing to put in? Would you stay up late, get up early, and put in the time for God, despite the hardships, despite the sleepless nights, despite the persecution?

Would you be willing to live for Him?

And we need to be honest with ourselves. Sometimes the answer is no—we wouldn’t be willing. And that’s okay. That’s why He says, *“You cannot change your heart on your own. Give me your affections.”* Your promises are like ropes of sand. But you can give Him your will.

If you’re not putting in the effort, that’s an indicator that it’s not your priority. But that doesn’t mean you should condemn yourself. The secret is abiding in Him. The fruit will come naturally.

I want to leave you with this statement from Ellen White. *“It is not a belief in the theory of the atonement that will save the soul. It is faith in the fact that Jesus died for our transgressions, that melts and subdues the heart. When we believe that Christ is our personal Savior, we realize that His love has a constraining power over us. It is when we behold a dying Redeemer that we can say, ‘He is my trust, my sanctification, my righteousness.’”*

So I want to encourage you this year: Live for Jesus. Don’t let anything else get in the way. Live for Him—whatever it takes, whatever the cost, whatever the hardship.

And if you don’t want it badly enough right now, that’s okay. We all struggle with this. But the key is to behold Him more deeply. As you behold Him on the cross, your heart will be melted and subdued. You’ll see that at the cross, everything you need for salvation is provided.

If you’re willing today to say, *“I will live for Jesus this year, this week,”* then I invite you to make that commitment with me as we pray.

Father, thank You so much for Your great love. We don’t deserve it. We’re so ungrateful and selfish. But God, soften our hearts. Help us look to Jesus. There, at the cross, we see that all of heaven was poured out for us. You love us with a love stronger than death. Nothing can separate us from that love. Melt us by Your love and fill us with Your love so that we can reciprocate that love with supreme love for You and a selfless love for others. Like Paul, may we say, *“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”*

Lord, You hear the desires of our hearts and the consecrations in our minds. We ask that You accept them. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight. May we live for You this year—not because we have to, not as a prerequisite to heaven, but because we love You and we love Your children lost in this world. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.