

Hearts That Can Hear: Grieving & Glory

Christianity has wrestled with the idea of a consecrated life for thousands of years. In ancient times, ascetics might sit on the top of a pole, elevated above the world for decades at a time, while people gathered at the base of the pole hoping to hear words of wisdom from these holy men. Many of these men wouldn't kill the vermin that lived on their bodies because they had renounced violence of any kind, and it was not unusual for them to struggle with disease. A little later in history, it wasn't unusual for monks to intentionally wound themselves, hoping to mortify the flesh and participate in the suffering of Christ. Through most of Christian history, joining a religious order was the primary way of living a consecrated life, often taking vows of poverty or silence. Is this what scripture has in mind when it counsels us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, to live a holy life? Let's spend some time this week thinking about consecration.

Day One

Food

One aspect of life that was often transformed by consecration was food and eating. Fasting was a significant part of the life of most consecrated people throughout church history, and these fasts usually were quite regimented and would often include eating as little food as possible. Why would people do this in order to draw near to God? When we look at the first sin, it involves food for a number of reasons. First, food is life. We cannot live without it, and yet we also know that God is life, so we have instincts that food might be important in our relationship with God. Food, therefore, must be seen as a mediator of life that God gives, and should not become a source of life outside of God. Those looking to live a consecrated life were keen to avoid having the source of life become something that was divorced from God, so they attempted to regiment it so as to be as free from dependence upon it as much as possible. Is this the route we should take in relationship to food? Perhaps, though I think other approaches may be more fruitful. What is important, it seems, is whether you eat or drink, or whether you abstain from eating and drinking, you do so to the glory of God. God gave us food as a gift, and as long as that gift draws us closer to God, not further from him, we should find food helping us spiritually rather than hindering us. Do you eat in such a way as to glorify God? What is involved in this? Does the kind, amount, and cost of your food matter? What about your table manners? What about your hospitality and sharing of food with others? What about gratitude? Spend some time today thinking about how you might consecrate your life to God in the area of food.

Verses: Romans 12:1-2, Isaiah 1:16-20, 1 Corinthians 10:31

Prayer Topics: Health, Incorporation, Generosity

Day Two

The Body

One major aspect of consecration for Christians historically was the body, and how it should be viewed and treated. Most of the early Christians who desired to live a consecrated life had a pretty dim view of the body in general, treating it as a sort of impediment to the spiritual life, and it's not hard to see why. Our bodies often lead us into sin through our desires and weaknesses, so the idea was to strengthen the will to have as much control over the body as possible. Ancient monks lived very regimented lives, having every part of their day scheduled, living off little sleep, little food, and much work. They would often whip or in other ways punish their bodies, sometimes inflicting grievous wounds to themselves in their desire to draw closer to God. Obviously, some of this was very unhealthy and speaks to possible psychological issues. It must be said, however, that when viewed against our culture's indulgence of everything physical, it might have some merits. How do we consecrate our bodies to God in a healthy way that avoids the extremes? If you were taking care of someone that you truly cared about, what would you have them do? Would you want them to beat and abuse themselves? Would you want them to indulge their every whim and desire? Since God cares about us, what does he want us to do? What draws us closer to him and loosens the grip of the flesh in our lives? When does sleep turn from rest into laziness? When does exercise become unhealthy? What amount of hardship is invigorating to the spirit, while not destroying the body? Spend some time today creating a schedule that brings glory to God through your body.

Verses: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 1 Corinthians 9:27, 1 Corinthians 15:44

Prayer Topics: Vitality, Energy, Hospitality

Day 3

Work

In the past, those that desired to live a consecrated life would be very productive in their work, fulfilling the call to work or pray. Although we have a vision of a monk's life in a monastery that includes little more than chanting or praying, most monastic orders had rules that kept the monks in productive work throughout the day, as they saw idleness as the enemy of the soul. What kind of work did monks do? They farmed land, brewed beer, made wine, built furniture and crafts, made textiles, herded animals, and

did just about every economic activity you could imagine. Because the monks spent little and worked hard, their religious orders often became very wealthy over time. This wealth often led to a falling away from their original calling as the monastery would fall into idleness, bringing about the reformation of old orders and the beginning of new ones that would get back to the goal of making the world fruitful. If the monks had taken vows of poverty, what was the use of economic activity and creating wealth? If the monks couldn't spend the money individually, but all the resources went to the monastery, what would the motivation be to work hard? Is there a motivation for work outside of personal gain and the ability to spend money? What is that motivation, and why was it so hard for the monks to keep that motivation after becoming wealthy? Should our motivations be different than the monks? Are we wealthy, and do we suffer from the same problems the religious orders that become wealthy suffered from? What is the place of work in the optimal Christian life? If you had all of your financial needs met, would you still work? What work would you do, and what would motivate it? What is the benefit of work for the soul, if there is one? How do you make your work more beneficial to your soul?

Verses: Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, Proverbs 12:24, John 6:27

Prayer Topics: Motivation, Purpose, Endurance

Day 4

Relationships

Most monastic orders in the west followed a rule that governed the relationships between members of the order. In most cases, members were forbidden to speak to one another during certain times of the day, and when they did speak there were strong rules against gossip and idle speech. Contrary to many people's beliefs today, this was not about creating an intolerably dull life, but about creating harmony within the order and a peaceful and serene life that glorified God. It did not elude the leaders of the orders that most of the time, we are using our speech to gossip about others or complain. Even when we are not doing one of those things, we very often fail to use our speech in a way that glorifies God or edifies others. Because of the propensity of these uses of speech which are common to us to create division and unhappiness among people who live in proximity to one another, times of silence were a reminder of the power of our speech and the need to be wise in our use of speech. How much of our own speech is used for gossip, complaint, or managing our image to others? How much of it is used to glorify God and edify others? What things could we do to remind ourselves of the power of our speech and the need to use it wisely and responsibly? Has this gotten easier with modern technology or harder? Does social media encourage wise and judicious speech or irresponsible speech? How can you change that in your own life? What would happen to the relationships around you if you used your speech wisely?

Verses: Colossians 4:6, Ephesians 4:29-30, 1 John 4:5-6

Prayer Topics: Thoughts, Words, Intentions

Day 5

Worship

The life of those in religious orders who had consecrated their lives to God revolved around worship. There were times of prayer and worship 8 times per day, from 5 in the morning to midnight, and a final time of prayer at 3am. While waking up at 3am to prayer sounds like torture to us, in the medieval world, sleeping was normally done in two shifts, as bedtime came early because artificial light was expensive. The life of the monk was arranged around these 8 times of prayer and worship to remind him that all his life was devoted to the glory of God, and that whether he worked in the field farming or the kitchen preparing food, everything he did was to be oriented around God and his glory. While I do not advocate becoming a monk, it is interesting to think about the reasoning behind the schedule that the monks kept and whether it provides any insight for the modern Christian trying to live a life that glorifies God. I think that it is easy throughout our day to get caught up in the practical aspects of our life and to forget about the ultimate goal. How could you arrange your life to remind yourself what your life is really about? What kinds of activities or practices could be useful in re-orienting your life toward the glory of God throughout the day? What would the obstacles be to implementing these practices? Could technology be helpful? What if you used your phone to set alarms to remind you to spend a short time in prayer throughout the day? What do you think would change? Will you give it a try?

Verses: Romans 8:26, Philippians 4:6, Matthew 6:6

Prayer Topics: Routine, Orientation, Dedication