

Who said being a Christian is easy!

Clearly our Christian life is always a work in progress. That is, unlike our salvation that is always complete and entirely God's gift, our Christian life from day to day is lived out under the cross. Jesus defines our life under the cross especially in the verses of Mark 8:34-38. There Jesus tells each and every one of His followers that just as He carried a cross of pain and of struggle and ultimately of death, so too will we. The essence of that cross is a life in which each of us strives to deny self out of love for Jesus, strives against "I want" and "I think" in favour of "What does God want?" and "What does His Word say?" It is a life devoted to the kind of loving service that Jesus lived for me - a life that puts Him and His Word first, everyone else next, and me last.

That such a life is a struggle, difficult, and often painful should be immediately obvious. In our fallen nature each says, "Me first!" We manage to suppress that impulse to an exclusive self-service (which is really self-worship) only with difficulty. We still have our sinful nature inherited from Adam and Eve. That nature is never converted and only dies when we go from earth to heaven at the moment of death. For every impulse of the Christian nature created at conversion, that sinful nature has an opposing response.

We note that response in just about every good impulse that we have to live a life devoted to Christ. The Christian in me delights to hear God's Word and is eager to follow it. The sinful nature replies, "*Not now; not so much; don't take it all that seriously!*" The Christian in me is eager to serve and to help anyone and everyone I am able to help solely because it is pleasing to God and beneficial to those I serve. The sinful nature protests, "*I help my neighbour in the expectation that he will help me.*" The Christian in me strives to live an outwardly and inwardly chaste and decent life simply because it wants to reflect gratitude for the purity God gives in Baptism. But the sinful nature is willing to behave decently - at least in public - only because it craves respect from those around me, especially those who can be useful to me or only because it does not want the painful consequences of getting caught in outward shame and disgrace. And as for those who do me wrong, the Christian in me is eager to forgive, just as God has so freely and willingly forgiven me. But the sinful nature says, "*They had best watch out for the day when I shall repay them with interest! At the very least they should expect nothing good from me.*" Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 are in sharp contrast to what our sinful nature has in mind. Read those chapters with care and see if you can find a single verse that is easy, that doesn't go against the grain of our fallen nature! Being a Christian in head and heart requires a miracle that only God can perform through the gospel. Being a Christian in life is no easier; it too requires a miracle inspired by the totally self-giving love of Christ for us, as St. John sums it up so well: "*We love because He first loved us.*"²⁰ *If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar. For no one who fails to love his brother, whom he has seen, can love God, whom he has not seen.*"²¹ *This is also the Commandment that we have from Him, that he who loves God should also love his brother*" (1 John 4:19-21).

The word brother here, as so often in the Bible, refers to all those near or far who I can see are in need of help that I am able to provide. And the Greek word for love is that kind of love that seeks the ultimate good of those who are loved. It is not mere affection or liking; Greek has a different word for that. Love in this verse (as in that great love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13) is a love that is a choice made to seek the best interest of the one loved; it is a choice to serve, whether or not the service can be repaid or is even appreciated.

Paul puts the sharpest possible point on that kind of love. He tells us, as Jesus does in the aforementioned Sermon on the Mount and as Solomon said as well (Proverbs 25:21), that such a love is to be active in service to all; it is to be active even in service to those who without cause from us are our enemies. He sums it all up so completely and so perfectly: "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:21). Again, let the one who thinks the Christian life is an easy one read the whole of Romans 12 and see if there is anything in it that comes naturally or easily!