

Kiss It All Goodbye

This past week featured two drafts for professional sports leagues, the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League. Athletes seem to become more and more dedicated to their craft every passing year. If they're truly passionate about reaching their goals, their coaches might say they need to "eat, sleep, and breathe" their sport. How do you eat basketball? This phrase means to completely dedicate yourself to something, so much that when you should be eating or sleeping you're in the gym, you're doing speed trials on skates, you're in a practice room running your song for the 25th time - whatever it is that you're passionate about. To achieve your dreams, you need to be committed.

As Christians, our goal is to live for Christ. As our services center around the broader theme of "Undivided Attention," we want to clear our lives of anything and everything that would distract us from our Savior. Jesus calls us to be committed to him. He wants all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Give it your all. Eat, sleep, and breathe Jesus. And, to add one more idiom to the collection, kiss it all goodbye.

When you think about kissing something goodbye, you might feel a sense of sadness, maybe that you're losing something. A kiss is typically a sign of affection. Parents kiss their children to show them that they're loved and precious. In turn, children kiss their parents on the cheek to reciprocate that love, even as they grow up - you still love your mom even when she's crying as you go off to college. Husbands and wives can express their affection through kisses. But when you kiss something goodbye, does your heart break as you lose that person near and dear? You don't want to be apart from them. The words "kiss it all goodbye" might seem like a harsh punishment, as if something valuable is being taken away from you.

But today, as Christ calls us to be committed to him, we're glad to kiss it all goodbye - work, wealth, even family and friends. Our old way of life becomes worthless when we see the treasures we inherit from following and serving Christ. The new life we receive from Jesus leads us to kiss it all goodbye - and rejoice! In Jesus, our hopes and dreams are set in eternity.

What holds you back from total commitment? Think again of striving to be a top-notch athlete, musician, or performer. At some point in our lives, we all dream of being a star, a hero, and we long for the acclaim that comes

with that position. But what does it take to get there? Did you have those parents who quickly squashed your dreams because it would take too much work? Did you tell your kids how much they'd have to sacrifice? No more video games, no more time with your friends, a strict diet, early bedtimes, early mornings getting up to practice before school, no goofing around if you want to be the best. That's enough to get most people to give up before they even get started.

Maybe you did set out for your goals and, for a while, you remained committed. But years into your endeavor, you suffered setbacks. An injury. Someone more talented came along and stole your spotlight. You lost again and again, and rather than dusting yourself off, staying dedicated, getting back to practice, you gave up. Suffering setbacks derails even more dreams. In order to reach those lofty goals, it takes a certain mental mettle to stay committed. You have to kiss goodbye any false hope of constant comfort and happiness.

Now we're not here today for some pep talk about reaching our earthly goals. We're here because Christ calls us. Christ calls us to be his children, his disciples, his followers. We are so glad to be marked with the name of Jesus our Lord. It's through this call to Christ that we receive life and salvation, true freedom and blessing. What great treasures we receive from our God!

But Jesus doesn't sugar coat things either. He made it very clear to those who want to follow him how much they need to sacrifice. Look at the Gospel lesson from Luke again. One man was ready to immediately go with Jesus, until Jesus told him that his followers didn't have a guaranteed place to lay their heads at night. Jesus asked another man to come with them, but he wanted to bury his father first. That seems like a reasonable request, but Jesus told him that his priority should have been proclaiming the kingdom of God. Yet another person told him, "First, let me go back and say goodbye to my family." He was willing to go; he just needed to kiss his loved ones goodbye first! But Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow" - who gets ready to work - "and who looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." No hesitation. Complete commitment.

Is Jesus saying something different than the first lesson, the text for this sermon? We heard how Elisha was called to service - not with words, but in a way that God made clear to him. When the prophet Elijah threw his cloak around Elisha in the field, he knew he was meant to follow this man and assist him. But when he ran after Elijah, the young Elisha said, "Let me kiss

my father and mother goodbye, and then I'll come with you." It seems almost exactly like what the man said to Jesus. So why isn't Elisha rebuked for "putting his hand to the plow" and looking back?

What did Elisha do when he returned to his home? He kissed it all goodbye. He took the oxen he was plowing with and slaughtered them. He burned them up completely, along with the plowing equipment, and gave a meal to the people around him. At that, he got up and went after Elijah. What does this brief account of Elisha's call mean?

First of all, look at what Elisha sacrificed. His family must have been wealthy. Oxen weren't the most common animal for labor, and they owned twelve pairs. Not only that, but they had enough servants to work the other eleven pairs, and they must have owned enough fields to need that much plowing. Elisha was leaving behind a life of comfort, a reliable income, regular meals. And in order to get rid of any temptation to turn back from Elijah, he completely eliminated his work. Without his oxen and plow, Elisha couldn't give up and run home.

How much did Elisha know about what lay ahead of him? Elijah's attitude in the months before this made it seem like the situation was pretty dire for God's servants. The prophet Elijah had demonstrated his commitment to God at Mt. Carmel, and the LORD showed his power by sending down fire from heaven. He slaughtered all the false prophets of the idol Baal. But just when it seemed like God won, the queen of the land ran Elijah out of the country, threatening to kill him. He was in such despair that he collapsed under a bush and asked God to kill him. Even after God miraculously provided food and water for him, Elijah thought he was the only one left who served God. Did Elisha know that this was the life in store for him? Death-threats, depression, and despair? Is that what it means to serve God?

Is that what it seems like when *we* hear God call us to follow him? You look at the lessons today and you see what people were asked to give up. Elisha left behind mother and father, friends, workers, wealth, even so far as burning up his oxen. The apostle Paul cataloged everything he suffered as a servant of Christ - and it's a long list. Jesus himself reminded his disciples that this earth wasn't their home - they worked for the kingdom of God. And as workers in this kingdom, Jesus tells us to take up our crosses and follow him. We should expect suffering in the name of Christ.

Does that hold you back from being totally committed? Do you try to avoid suffering by living a half-hearted Christianity? You can come to church

where it's safe and everyone agrees with you, but out in public, you stay quiet so no one will ridicule you. You come and present your good, moral life at worship, but when you return home, the real you comes out - the angry, perverted, lying, cheating, lazy bum who no one would mistake for a Christian.

We might even look at the good things in life that make us lukewarm servants. Jesus told people to not worry about burying their families; to give up their regular job of plowing or fishing or collecting taxes; don't let anyone say, "I just got married, I can't come now." Is Jesus telling us, "Don't have a family; don't have a secular job; eat, sleep, and breathe Jesus"? God does say love the LORD your God with all that you have and all that you are. And God knows our hearts, that each of us has something that steals us away, that compromises our commitment to him.

Thankfully, the one who calls us is the one who is totally committed to us. Jesus is so completely devoted to serving us that he gave his all. He kissed his heavenly home goodbye and set his face resolutely to save us. Even though he knew it meant suffering. Even though he knew he would be a prophet rejected by the world. Even though we've done nothing to earn his devotion. Jesus was committed to the very end. Every time we're half-hearted, wishy-washy, Christ's call comes again. To remind us how he has loved us. See his dedication to wash away all our moments where other commitments take priority. For your sake, Christ became poor so that through his poverty, his lowliness, his humble commitment, you become rich.

You can have all you ever hoped and dreamed of. Riches. Honor. Someone who continuously loves you and gives you attention. But this doesn't come from the world. You can kiss all that goodbye. Our eyes are set on a heavenly goal. And praise be to God - it doesn't depend on our commitment to achieve that goal! Christ's commitment gives us a certain hope. That guarantee of heaven allows us to kiss it all goodbye. Christ's love compels us to live for him - totally, completely - because he lived, died, and rose us.

Kissing it all goodbye doesn't have to be sad. When Elisha sacrificed his oxen and cooked them up, he threw a feast for the people there. It was a joyous occasion when he left his old life behind and set out for new ventures. Christ's call to us is a reason for rejoicing! We gladly give up our old life, knowing that we've received something so much better. So whether we're called to sacrifice work, wealth, family, friends, whatever it may be - we kiss it all goodbye to walk with Jesus all the way. Amen.