

# Giving Up Being a Part-Time Christian

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November 14, 2021<sup>1</sup>

I know that professional football teams give themselves one day to bask in victory before turning their sights toward their next opponent. But I'm still thinking about last Sunday's inspiring performance by the Cleveland Browns.

At one point in the game the Browns took over the ball after stopping the Bengals on fourth down. Browns wide receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones gathered in a 60-yard pass launched by quarterback Baker Mayfield. In full stride, Peoples-Jones gathered in the ball over his left shoulder and ran the final ten yards to cross the goal line. Legs, eyes, arms, hands, feet all perfectly attuned to bring the play to fruition.

He saw it, he reached for it, he gathered it in, and he completely engulfed it so that it could never get away.

Did you ever think that the Cleveland Browns could teach us a lesson in living the Christian life? Who would have thought that the play of the Browns would show us how to respond to the gospel?

You see, we're supposed to receive the gospel—the good news of God's unconditional and unstoppable love--the way Donovan Peoples-Jones received that football. He grasped the ball and pulled it in close, wrapping himself around it so tightly that he and the ball were unshakable. When we hear the Gospel message, we need to grasp it, to take it in, to engulf it so completely that it cannot be taken from us and we cannot be separated from it.

But that's not the way we tend to treat the good news of God's saving love. We don't engulf it completely. No, we tend to be part-time Christians to some degree.

What does the part-time Christian look like?

- Let's start off with an easy one: the global pandemic has changed our habits in many ways. Of course, illness or the risk of it has kept some from public settings like eating establishments, entertainment venues, or gathering for worship, and some are homebound because of limited mobility and other reasons. But there are quite a few able-bodied persons who claim membership in a church, but you wouldn't know it from their lack of participation in their life of their church.
- A part-time Christian always has time to eat, but rarely takes time to return thanks before eating.
- Part--time Christians find the money to remodel or redecorate, to go out on the town or to go out of town... but can't seem to spare a dime when

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<sup>1</sup> Originally preached February 6, 2000 under the title "Giving Up the Part-Time Life"

their church makes an appeal for mission project or education program or building drive.

- Part-time Christians cherish the Christmas sentiment of “Peace on Earth, goodwill to all,” but when an international crisis arises, they assume that a military response of force is the only viable option.
- Part-time Christians are the kind who claim that they have respect for all God’s people but they don’t see a problem with adults viewing pornography, which exploits vulnerable women and men and children.

Interesting that some can only “dabble” at being a follower of Jesus, but they can immerse themselves completely in Buckeye or Browns football or their fine arts group or their golf league or their wine club.

But Jesus calls to us. He calls to us to surrender our lives – our whole lives; to hand them over to the one to whom they really belong. We need to give our lives to the one whose property they were in the first place.

Consider the example presented in Mark’s gospel. When Jesus went to the Galilee, proclaiming that God’s kingdom had come near, Simon and Andrew came into his view. Jesus saw them casting a net in the sea. Mark adds, “for they were fishermen.” That seems obvious to us because we’ve heard the story dozens of times. But the significance of that phrase “for they were fishermen” becomes apparent only after Jesus says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” For Mark reports, “...Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Because Mark has told us that they are fishermen and not farmers or butchers on a little afternoon fishing trip, we realize, “My goodness, those men walked away from their occupation, from their livelihood, in order to serve Jesus!”

Right after that Mark tells us that Jesus came across James and John, sons of a man named Zebedee. Like Simon and Andrew, James and John were also commercial fishermen – we know because Mark tells us that they were in their boat mending the nets. When Jesus called them to come with him, Mark tells us that James and John “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed [Jesus.]” “My goodness,” we think to ourselves, “James and John gave up the comfort and security of their family in order to follow Jesus.”

And let’s not forget the very first person mentioned in today’s gospel lesson: John the Baptist. What did he walk away from? What did he give up? ...Just his freedom and his occupation. Of course, John the Baptist wasn’t following Jesus – quite the opposite was true: he was clearing the way for Jesus. But John’s life was committed to serving God: announcing the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Savior. To do that, John the Baptist surrendered whatever else he would have done with his time, and eventually sacrificed his life.

I believe that Mark’s gospel is pleading with its readers to do more than dabble with the knowledge of the good news of Jesus. The gospel isn’t a hobby to be taken out of the closet when we are feeling nostalgic. The gospel isn’t an analgesic to be consumed only when we’re feeling pain. The gospel is to be embraced with everything we bring to our lives.

- If we embrace the gospel completely, who we are and what we do in our work will illustrate the unconditional love of God, because our behavior and actions will contribute to the common good and build up human dignity and self-worth.
- If we embrace the gospel completely, the values we hold will reflect our awareness of God's love for us and for all people, so we stand up for justice and speak out against behaviors and attitudes that try to build up some people at the expense of others.
- If we embrace the gospel completely, the way we use the wealth and resources that come our way will illuminate the gospel of God's love for all people. That means we will show respect for God's creation by being good stewards of the Earth's resources. We will gain pleasure from being joyfully generous with whatever possessions and treasures might come our way.
- If we embrace the gospel completely, worship and praise and prayer won't be optional diversions for those occasions when we feel we can spare the time and are in the right mood, because we will crave and treasure those times of intimate connection with our Creator.

You need to give your life in response to God's giving us the life of Jesus Christ. ...What you think, how you treat people, what you do, what you buy, what you say, where you go – if you realize that the gospel message of God's unconditional and unmerited love is for you, it's not enough, then, to be a "partial Presbyterian" or "conditional Christian." Surrender your life to the power of the gospel.

When the gospel is embraced, it changes lives. If a football player holds the football at arm's length like he's afraid it's going to bite him, he's probably not going to hold onto it long enough to reach the goal line. When you hold the saving love of Jesus Christ at arm's-length, you cannot experience its life-giving warmth any more than you can feel the warmth of a fireplace by standing outside looking in through the picture window.

Don't stay on the outside, looking in. In Jesus Christ, God is trying to persuade you, convince you, entice you, invite you to accept the truth. And the truth is that God loves you without any preconditions and without you having to do anything to warrant or earn that love. That offer is hanging out there, waiting for you to say, "Yes, Lord."

The answer to a life that feels filled by frustration and futility, the answer to a life that feels adrift and without purpose... the answer is to say, "I'm done acting like a part-time Christian." Receive and embrace God's love – love made visible in Jesus our Lord and friend.