

At All Costs (Serving - Chapter 3)

n/a

Ready:

Then He said to [them] all, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it. What is a man benefited if he gains the whole world, yet loses or forfeits himself?”

Luke 9:23-25

Set

In 1954, a World War II veteran turned college coach named Don McClanen sat across the table from Pittsburgh Pirates general manager Branch Rickey. The meeting was the result of a letter-writing campaign in which McClanen was seeking face-to-face encounters with Christian athletes—the people he considered to be heroes.

The five-minute meeting between the two men dragged on for several hours and eventually birthed a revolutionary organization called the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Rickey lent his name to fund-raising efforts while McClanen oversaw administrative efforts to get the ministry off the ground.

Shortly thereafter, McClanen left his coaching job at Eastern Oklahoma State College to focus on his passion for reaching young athletes with the gospel message by utilizing summer sports camps and school-based Bible study groups known as Huddles. McClanen and his wife, Gloria, made many sacrifices—mostly financial—as they balanced a desire to serve God with a responsibility to raise three children.

It was 51 years later in 2005 when a retired Marine and former NFL coach named Les Steckel became FCA’s seventh president and CEO. By then, not only was FCA the largest interdenominational, school-based Christian organization in the United States, but the ministry was also exponentially increasing its international presence. The reality of FCA’s overwhelming success had long since surpassed McClanen’s wildest dreams.

So when Steckel—an active participant in FCA since 1972—was afforded the honored privilege to spend some quality one-on-one time with McClanen, now in his 80s, he was taken aback by the direction of their exchange.

“I’ll never forget when Don McClanen looked at me in the eyes, and it was just the two of us standing there,” Steckel recalls. “He said, ‘Let me ask you something. Do you suffer?’ I’ve never been asked that question in my entire life; and I looked at him and I said, ‘Do I suffer?’ And he said, ‘Yes, do you have times of suffering?’ And I said, ‘I sure do.’”

No one had ever asked Steckel that question before, but he instinctively knew exactly the point McClanen was trying to make. He understood as well as anyone the fact that being in God’s will often brings trials and tribulations and varying measures of emotional (and sometimes even physical) pain.

“When there is a cost to be paid, there is a moment where we have to stop and reflect,” Steckel says. “If we’re not suffering, then we may not be doing our job. Christ definitely suffered for us, so we need to suffer for Him.”

No matter what the topic, Steckel will usually spend some portion of the conversation relating back to his 30 years of experience with the Marine Corps. The phrase “no pain, no gain” didn’t originate in the military, but for anyone who has ever endured boot camp, the phrase could easily pass for the motto of any of its branches.

But surprisingly, it’s not the pain Steckel tolerated that first comes to his mind. Instead, he thinks about how honored he was to serve his country with the Marines—particularly his tour in Vietnam—and how that service laid the foundation for his commitment to faith, family and FCA and helped him better understand the concept of serving.

“A Marine always says, ‘Sir, reporting for duty, sir,’” Steckel relates. “Now, shouldn’t we as Christians come to the Lord every day and say, ‘Sir, reporting for duty, sir’? I really believe being a servant is reporting for duty on a daily basis.”

It shouldn’t be a surprise that one of Steckel’s favorite verses is Luke 9:23, where Jesus tells His disciples, “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” The theme of sacrifice—which Steckel has wholeheartedly embraced—is embodied in those powerful words of exhortation.

Steckel also believes that a selfless approach to one’s relationship with God ultimately results in the rewarding benefits that come from being right in the center of God’s will. It’s a concept he has always shared with his three children and anyone else who cares to listen.

“People always say, ‘I feel called to this position’; and when you’re called, it’s exciting, but you also have to pay a price just like Christ paid the price,” he says. “Oftentimes, I smile because we say that as believers in Christ, we want to be Christlike. But think about what Christ dealt with. First of all, Christ was rejected. So we get rejected a lot. There are times that we are scorned. We sacrifice. We have to surrender. We have to deny ourselves.”

Steckel’s interpretation of serving and sacrifice goes even deeper and is based on the following two verses found in Luke 9:24-25—which he believes holds one of the keys to understanding Christ’s emphatic teaching of self-denial: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it. What is a man benefited if he gains the whole world, yet loses or forfeits himself?”

There have been plenty of opportunities for Steckel to fall prey to the trappings of this world. He understands just how easily fame, fortune and power can trick people into thinking they’ve

got it made when in reality they are in danger of losing everything—even their very life. It was during his time in the coaching ranks that this reality first became clear.

Steckel was a college football assistant at the University of Colorado and then Navy before moving to the NFL, where he spent 23 of his 32 years as a coach. His stops have included San Francisco, New England, Denver, Houston, Tennessee, Buffalo and Tampa Bay. Steckel was also the head coach for the Minnesota Vikings in 1984 and coached in Super Bowls with the Patriots (1985) and the Titans (2000).

“I admire the men I have worked with over the years who stay in close contact with their high-school buddies and their college buddies before they ever become a Hall of Fame football player,” Steckel says. “Everybody wants to get your attention, and they give you plenty of affirmation to be your friend, and maybe they don’t have a pure motive. I think those that God has given a platform where they can share their faith—like Tim Tebow or Tony Dungy—they have to be on constant guard against the secular world, against Satan and against self.”

“It’s very hard,” Steckel continues. “People often rise to the top, and then they’re suddenly no longer around. What happened to those people? You can think of athletes and coaches who have risen to the top quickly, and they’ve disappeared quickly. Like they say, it takes class to get to the top. It takes character to stay there.”

Another key to having a servant’s heart is humility. When his children still lived at home, Steckel says the entire family had a tradition of watching the movie *Jesus of Nazareth* every Easter. There was one scene in particular that had a tremendous impact on his understanding of serving.

“When I saw [the depiction of] Jesus washing the feet of His disciples, I couldn’t imagine a more humbling experience,” Steckel says. “Humility is an elusive thing. Once you think you’ve got it, you’ve lost it. I think we as Christians do a great job of faking it. We know how to say the right things. But there’s a way of expressing yourself almost nonverbally, and the humility of a person can come through quickly. You don’t see it too often, though, particularly in the athletic arena. But when you do, it’s glaring; and when it’s glaring, it can be mimicked and can sometimes be contagious.”

In order to maintain humility, Steckel says one must stay “grounded in the Word” and recognize that all talents and gifts come from God and are for the purpose of bringing Him glory. That understanding will consequentially move a person down a different track. Steckel is realistic, however, and knows that most people—especially those who don’t have a relationship with Christ—often glaze over that principle and take the path of least resistance.

Steckel also warns that the athletes and coaches who do choose to serve God with their abilities shouldn’t automatically expect to enjoy nothing but success on the playing field. But he does know from his personal experiences that they can “have great satisfaction in knowing they’re going about it the right way.”

But according to Steckel, all of the humility in the world won’t matter in the quest for a lifestyle of serving without first diving headlong into the example set by Jesus—the greatest servant to ever walk the earth. Sadly, many people—entire generations, in fact—not only fail to understand what serving means, but also can take on a completely skewed idea of what being a follower of Christ means.

"I've always felt like God brought His Son, Jesus, to this earth not only to save us and be our Savior but to serve us," Steckel says. "But you ask young people these days what it means to be a Christian, and you hear some shocking statements such as, 'When I don't swear or use profanity, I'm a Christian.' I've heard that. I've heard, 'If I go to church at least two times a month, then I'm a Christian.' People miss the boat completely."

Steckel looks no further than the symbolically charged Christmas story as proof that Jesus' mission was just as much about serving as it was about salvation.

"It's a paradox," he explains. "Here Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords and the Son of the living God, and here He is being born in a cold, stinky cave. You talk about serving and sacrifice. And what about Mary who was put on a donkey? I think about the word 'labor.' Can you imagine being pregnant on a donkey going across a desert? I just think about the examples of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and the sacrifices they made and the humility of it all—the embarrassment of Mary initially, who gave birth to a child and claimed to be a virgin. I think about how God paints this picture."

It saddens Steckel when he realizes that most of the country and even most of the world celebrate Christmas, yet they never stop to consider the true purpose and meaning behind the story that ultimately conveys key ingredients of a Christian life—humility, serving and sacrifice.

And you can't talk about any of those attributes without unpacking the multi-layered story of Easter. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggled with the burden of knowing His sacrificial fate. Along Via Dolorosa, the Son of God was stripped, mocked, whipped, spat upon and mercilessly beaten and tortured. Finally, at Calvary (or Golgotha), our Savior was hung from a cross by three nails that pierced his hands and feet. It was at that place where He demonstrated what serving is all about—total sacrifice.

"For the Christian, serving is a total surrender of your life to Jesus," Steckel says. "I think about how when Christ died on the cross, He said to us that His blood washed away our sins and whoever receives Him and believes in Him and serves Him will have eternal life. Now you can receive and believe and still get to heaven, but how can you not serve someone who has given their life for you so that you can have eternal life? There's got to be a love relationship. Why wouldn't you want to serve Him? So I've always said, 'Jesus gave His life for me. The least I can do is give my life for Him.'"

Still, so many who believe that Jesus died for them continue to struggle with the concept of total surrender and sacrificial serving. According to Steckel, the commitment to lay down one's selfish ambitions and prideful ways is to consider the words of the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:19-20: "For through the law I have died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

It's that kind of commitment that makes it possible for ordinary people with ordinary lives to perform extraordinary acts of service no matter the price that often must be paid—a price that might mean walking away from a high paying job, risking the loss of valued friendships or literally putting one's life on the line.

"I believe serving is a sacrifice," Steckel says. "I think it's a self-denying effort. For some it's easy. For others it's not. Serving is an interesting thing, particularly if you're serving as a

missionary for Christ or an ambassador of Christ. We have so many great people in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes who serve the Lord every day. There's a cost."

In fact, Paul takes the concept of serving a step further in 1 Corinthians 7:22-23, where he writes, "For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."

Interestingly, Paul chooses to use the word "slave" ("bondservant" in other translations), a word that for the individual who values freedom will likely invoke a decidedly negative response. But for Steckel, the imagery is both strong and, quite frankly, appealing, because it relates to the freedom that inherently comes from a subservient relationship with Christ.

"I think about how those men on those ships out at sea years ago were chained to the bottom of the ship's hull," Steckel says. "All they did was keep their eyes straight ahead and they just methodically kept rowing and rowing and rowing and at times were tortured and whipped. Being a bondservant, being a slave is something we're really called to do. We're called to be a servant. We're called to be a slave to Jesus."

In a society that promotes individual rights, personal freedoms and a smorgasbord of options, the idea that true happiness and fulfillment can come only through sacrifice and serving is foreign, to say the least.

At the end of the day, however, we must choose how much we are willing to sacrifice in order to fulfill the purpose and calling God has for our lives. We have the ability to accept the call to serve or to reject it. And even when we say yes to His will, we are continually faced with choices. Paradoxically, we still have freedom despite our role as slaves of the Kingdom.

"I really believe that today we can all be the quarterback," Steckel says. "God gives us the free will to make those calls and to audible at the line of scrimmage. But when we do, we have to recognize that what we're trying to do is score for Him and bring Him glory, not ourselves. So when we make those decisions, we have what I refer to as the power of choice. We have the choice to serve or not serve. We have the choice to make that decision to serve or go another direction."

Go

1. When asked the question, "Do you suffer?" in reference to his work with FCA, Les Steckel replied, "I sure do." How would you respond if you were asked the same question? Read Philippians 1:29. How does that Scripture change your perception of what it means to live the Christian life? What are some ways that you might be required to suffer for the cause of Christ?
2. Read Luke 9:23-25. In verse 23, what do you think Jesus meant when He instructed His disciples to take up their cross daily and follow Him? How do verses 24 and 25 remind you of people seeking fame and fortune in today's world? How is it possible to lose your life and save it at the same time?
3. The lasting effects of slavery in America caused strife and contention for hundreds of years, yet Steckel argues that we are to become slaves to Christ. Read 1 Corinthians 7:22-23. How does that passage back up Steckel's claim? What is the difference between freedom in Christ and the kind of freedom the world offers? Which is more attractive, and why?

4. Steckel says, “We have the choice to serve or not serve.” What are some things that might keep you from serving? How do you feel when you’ve chosen not to serve as compared to how you feel after you’ve served?
5. Read Romans 8:16-18. What are the benefits that accompany the sacrifice of service? How does this passage encourage you to embrace that lifestyle?

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Bible Reference:

Philippians 1



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