I recently came across the writings of someone who was leaving the Christian faith. They did not use that exact language, rather they referred to it as their “evolving spirituality” but just like the term maintenance engineer, we all know what they meant. In their writings they explained their leaving was the result of moving from a focus on what “was true” to a focus on what “was useful for them.” In other words, the same criteria they used to judge an antacid was now being used to decide their religion. And I can’t say that this person’s spiritual shift is unique because in our day and age much of religion has become indistinguishable from the self-help industry – If I do this and I should get that. And if I do not get that then I will try something else. However, if that is how one views religion and the criteria by which one judges it then what we read today in John’s Gospel is probably a bit off-putting. Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” It starts off pretty uncontroversially. We are to love people but when we get the explanation of what Jesus means by love it does not seem real self-helpy. I mean premature death is generally not seen as part of living your best life. And if we have a “is this good for me” criterion in terms of religion then there will probably be vast swathes of the Christian message we reject or at least find unappealing. Which may sound depressing, like true Christianity is one continual hairshirt, but I don’t think it is and so my challenge for the next few moments is to explain why focusing on God first is not just what we are called to, but is a right and good and joyful thing.

Let’s start with going into a little more detail on these two competing worldviews or *weltanschauung* if you want to get all German about it. The distinction I established a moment ago comes down to how what is right and good is defined. Jesus gives a definition for love that is self-sacrificing, while the definition of love given by the aforementioned guy leaving the faith was based on a view that something was valid only to the extent that it worked for them. Put another way, Jesus’ definition of love goes beyond the self while the other never leaves the self. And interestingly, or maybe not so interestingly, this is a debate that goes back at least to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. If you remember, Moses had gone up to the mountain and was a little slow in getting back. While gone the people decided they were not so keen on the God of Israel and so told Aaron, “’Make us gods, who shall go before us’…. And Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’” Aaron then makes a Golden Calf and the people worshiped this thing made by human hands. You see the Israelites were looking for gods who did stuff that was more to their liking. They wanted gods they could control rather than having a God who required and expected things of them. The distinction is one between a god that is an extension of our will versus a God to whom we must submit our will. Meaning that when we decide if we will follow Jesus and lay down our life, we are really asking if we believe that there is something greater which exists outside of ourselves or do we believe that all wisdom lies within us because there can be nothing greater than us.

Before I continue, I want to clarify something. When Jesus talks about laying down one’s life for a friend, I think there can be a danger that we take this only as a literal statement. What I mean by that is we should not think of it as only applicable to an actual physical death. Instead, I think we should take it more broadly. While laying down one’s life certainly can mean an actual physical death like Jesus on the cross, it can also be about sacrificing our will and desires for someone else. This is a little bit of a trite example but for those of you who are parents think back to when your children were babies. Was there ever a time at three in the morning when the baby woke up crying and you thought, “Getting up is exactly what I want to be doing right now.” Unless you are much different than me, I am guessing that getting up was one of the last things you wanted. But we all did it because we had a world view that went beyond ourselves and what was best for us at the time. We yielded to something greater and laid down our will for it.

And I think this may be more helpful when looking at this scripture which says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another…..No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Yes, there are certainly times when people literally lay down their lives, but most of the time laying down our lives it is about living for something greater. It is not about making sure that our every whim and need is our constant priority but is rather about doing the things that make our little corner of the world a little more in accordance with God’s will. Which means there are times where we might need to do something that we would prefer not to do. And a crazy thing happens when we do this, it actually makes us better people and generally makes us happier people. So, in the end it is good for us but that is not the reason why we do it. For while our personal wellbeing might be a happy byproduct of such a worldview it should not be the primary reason for that worldview because if it is we are falling back into the trap of a self-centered worldview, where we judge everything based on what it does for us. And so, if that is not to be the primary reason what is the primary reason to lay down one’s life? For that we need to go back to Jesus’ words. He does not really make an argument for why we should love, he instead says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another.” Therefore, we are to trust that God, as a loving father, knows and wants what is best for us.

Now I realize that obedience may not be in style these days. We are told to be independent thinkers and not blindly adhere to what others say. And because of this view we can get into a mindset where everything God asks of us is subject to veto based on how we may feel about it. But the fact of the matter is if we are truly faithful and if we believe God is truly loving it is not ours to question. Sometimes “because Jesus told us to” is enough reason. Let me end with a silly story that hopefully illustrates my point. Years ago, our previous dog had been attacked by two other dogs and was convalescing. The veterinarian told us to feed her canned tuna, which seemed simple enough until I went to the store and found the tuna aisle. There was white tuna, light tuna, chunk tuna, solid tuna, flake tuna, oil packed tuna, water packed tuna, line caught tuna and so on. In that moment I just wanted someone to tell me what kind of tuna to get. It was beyond me to know what to do. And if I can’t quite figure out tuna, I am not sure that I am capable of always knowing what is best for me. We are sinful creatures full of delusions and are therefore incapable of always knowing what is best. There are times to simply listen to Jesus’ commandments and lay down our lives for others so that we may be his this day and forevermore.