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As she was overpowered by the soldiers of the Sri Lankan army, the woman struggled desperately to swallow a deadly cyanide pill from her necklace, but to no avail.

She was a well-known Tamil Tiger, a guerilla fighter. She lived for a single cause: the war to gain homeland rule for the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. After her capture, an official of the Sri Lankan government visited her in prison. As he talked to her, he was amazed by her absolute commitment to the cause. She didn't beg him for her life, and she did not offer valuable secret information to save her skin. Fully aware of her impending execution, she appealed to him: "Please help our cause. When we are in power, we will remember you."

When he asked her why she had joined the liberation movement, she gave him the following explanation: "I was in my late 20s, well-educated and working as a medical doctor. Then one day my whole life was changed when my parents were killed by soldiers. I left my profession and everything I knew, and I subjected myself to vigorous training to become a freedom fighter."

It was from the very official who had met this woman in prison that I learned about this encounter. This story challenged me afresh to think very deeply about the meaning of commitment to a cause and the willingness to sacrifice all in the attempt to accomplish it.

Of course, this guerilla fighter was giving her life for an earthly, ideological goal. Her dreams might never come to pass. Even if they would materialize, they would all be for the here and now. None of those dreams would last for eternity.

Jesus has not asked us to follow Him for a cause whose outcome is uncertain or questionable. Instead, He has already won the victory over Satan, sin and death through the cross and His resurrection. With His life, He portrayed the elements needed to win any kind of spiritual victory: total commitment to God and His purpose, and unrestricted willingness to sacrifice everything to accomplish victory.

Jesus not only lived this truth, but over and over, He also taught it to His disciples and anyone who considered following Him. He wanted to make sure that we clearly understand that there is no other key to spiritual victory and no other way to fulfill our responsibility to proclaim His kingdom here on earth. To choose Him above all else and to love Him more than our own lives—this is the commitment required to be able to do His will. The sacrifice needed to accomplish His cause is none other than what Jesus told us in John 12:24: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

When we read the New Testament, we cannot overlook the most direct application of this teaching in the lives of the apostles and the early Christians. As they took the Gospel into all the world, it caused them to regard suffering, agony and even martyrdom as privileges. They knew that tremendous victory and fruit would be produced for eternity as a result.

Think what Christ could accomplish through our churches—and in our lives—if we would accept such commitment and sacrifice as the means to victory! What is the result when a church joyfully decides to be satisfied with a modest building and simply the essentials, instead of spending millions on a palace of comfort and prestige, and then uses the money to help reach those who have never heard the Gospel before? And all out of love for Christ? I believe they discover that their sacrifice brings them greater joy sitting in a simple church than they could ever experience in the most costly building.

What happens when we first run our plans and wishes for a comfortable, secure life through the filter of commitment and sacrifice? Think about the time and money spent on entertainment, trips, cars, home decorating and clothes. Could it be that we would discover greater joy and satisfaction without these things if we chose instead to pray and fast for a lost world or to spend our resources to help win souls in the most unreached areas?

We actually deceive ourselves when we think that our clever strategies, conferences and token offerings of time and money will win this world for Christ.

There is no substitute for sacrifice if we care to follow the Son of God, who set His face to the cross and its shame.

Taking up the cross is the ultimate form of self-denial.