

Acceptable Risk
Louis Garbi

What a tug at our heartstrings when the demagogue says, “If just one life is lost, it is one life too many.” Only a calloused few would say that the life of one man is not important. However, the “if just one life is lost” argument has no basis in the reality of being born on this earth. The process of birth can be dangerous. There are not many activities which do not have some risk attached. How many people have choked to death from eating? How many deaths occur daily from being on the job? Every sector of the blue-collar world involves tools and machinery, all of which have the potential to kill. While the white-collar world probably has a low statistic of death by keyboard, it contains many stress-related issues that are carriers of death. The CDC 2018 data cites accidents, including road incidents and falls, as the number three leading cause of death in the United States. Heart disease and cancer are one and two, respectively. Therefore, we all subscribe to the acceptable-risk way of life as a matter of course. It is such a part of daily existence we hardly think about it.

Arguments about acceptable risk usually occurs when it comes to matters that seem especially perilous and personal. There are concerns over public safety versus the individual’s right. Is personal liberty worth the risk to others? Yet, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is one of the leading principles in the Declaration of Independence. Since the rise of Covid-19, to wear or not to wear a mask has been controversial. Along with this has come social distancing, how to safely assemble, the concern over a cough or sneeze, etc. Each one of us has some level of response to this. The question of acceptable risk comes down to the individual. Even if there are government mandates, we as individuals make the final determination of how we will respond. The real area of risk has to do with how much we value our response over loving our neighbors as ourselves. In this, there is an unacceptable risk, a risk to our own souls.

How do we treat others who do not conform to our point of view? Maybe we feel we are taking the high road by wearing a mask. The common reason is, “You wear the mask for the sake of protecting people around you.” However, is it worth risking our souls to speak evil of our neighbors because they do not accept our understanding of good? “Meatheads refuse to wear a mask.” On the other hand, we may feel that freedom is at stake, and that the risk factor of disease is being amped up by people who want the world to be under their control. Therefore, we refuse to wear the mask. Do we not risk our souls if we revile others who do not share our point of view? “Sheeple” is a common expression of scorn from such (which ironically, is an attempt to cow others into submission). With either position we have a potential and temptation to scorn or belittle those who do not see things the way we see them. Our attitude can contain a potential for being condemned to hell, an unacceptable risk. If we follow Christ, we have an obligation to love our neighbors as ourselves. That is acceptable risk. Loving people in a confused society requires on-the-fly adjustments made with prayer. It requires compromising our preferences. It also requires that we set aside any personal offense we may feel about others who see things differently. We must please our heavenly Father rather than man.

Health and safety and/or liberty are not always the most important. There is an account during the life of Jesus containing the fundamental principle of what is right in the world versus what is right in the will of God.

Then one from the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:13-15).

This has to do with one’s need for justice and enlisting Jesus to back it up. Jesus pointed to something more important than a just claim. Covetousness is not just about possessing things; it has to do with having life the way we want it. We can go beyond love in the pursuit of even good things. If our life does not consist in the abundance of what we possess, then what is life? Jesus did not come here to right all wrongs. He came to take us beyond ourselves.

“Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). Jesus could have weighed in with one faction or another. He could have been a populist and drummed up support by appealing to the sentiments and consensus of the masses. He knew what was in man. He knew our human wants, passions, and assessments. He knew that our wisdom would fail. What a sorry testimony it would have been if He used His power as the Son of God to make our dreams come true – a tawdry nightmare. We need/ed someone beyond and above us to help.

Do we take it to heart that others do not follow us as we follow Christ? Do we become offended? If so, we need to re-examine what it is to follow Jesus. *“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:38-39).* Jesus said take up your cross. He did not offer a way catering to our personal sense of comfort and satisfaction. He called His way a cross. It is easier to love those who think along the same lines as ourselves. Carrying our cross, in part, is to love those who do not think like we do.

The way of the cross is found in the attitude and behavior taught by Jesus.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:43-45).

We stand to lose much in this world by following such a practice. Many of our personal preferences will be sacrificed. The foremost occurrence in loving our enemies is that *we* do not become their enemies. For our sakes as well as theirs we must adhere to a singular way of life: bless them, do good to them, and pray for them. Subsequently, they may misidentify who we are and make accusations against us. Our enemies may paint us with broad brushstrokes, or even further. But we can identify with them because we were once as they are now. *“For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Titus 3:3).* We have salvation because of God’s mercy. Therefore, loving others with the love of God is an acceptable risk.