

Have you ever looked back at a missed opportunity with regret?

My father used to tell a story on himself about one such occasion. Dad was the first in his family to go to college. When he headed off to Iowa State University back in 1954 he wasn't quite sure of what was what on campus, but he wanted to join a fraternity. He heard frats were where the fun was, so he pledged what turned out to be a top fraternity.

Things went OK for a few weeks – until football season came along. Dad thought going to the football games would be a highlight of college life, so he was looking forward to attending the games.

But unknown to him, it was a custom in his new frat for the pledges to stay home and clean the house as the upper classmen went to the game. WHAT?! Dad wasn't having any of that! This wasn't what he was at college for. So, being a German, and a little hard-headed, he marched right out of the frat without looking back. He joined a new frat that had just come on campus – a smaller, more poorly organized outfit – that would let him go to all the football games. But looking back, Dad

said, he wished he would have just given up a football game or two and lived out his years at the first frat. It turns out it would have been a much better experience and community.

“He went away sad.” I want to look more closely at this Rich Young Man (although in Mark’s version he isn’t described as ‘young’), because, even though he ends up sad, there is much to admire about him. First, he runs to Jesus. This man is eager to know more, eager to meet Jesus. How many of us are so energetic in pursuing the faith? Then he calls Jesus “good teacher.” So, he knows he needs to listen and learn from Jesus about the moral life and how to get to heaven. Are we as willing to acknowledge the teaching of Christ? And he kneels before Jesus. He acknowledges the reverence due to Jesus. Finally, the young man is virtuous. He can honestly say he has kept all the Ten Commandments. How many of us can say the same?

But the problem comes when Jesus asks the young man to go farther. Jesus offers him more. But the young man can’t accept the

offer. Following the commandments only means not harming others, avoiding sin. And, make no mistake, that is a good thing, not easy to do. But it's not the goal of the Christian life! There is so much more Jesus offers to those who are willing to give up lesser things.

I know that many would say, "I can't even avoid the major sins, Father. Let me start there." OK, but the problem is that if all we aim for is not to sin – to avoid hurting others, we aim too low and so will probably miss even that target. And we'll certainly never know the glory of holiness. Nobody ever becomes a saint just by avoiding sin. Life in Christ is not just a negative thing – even a very necessary, healthy negative like avoiding sin.

To be a Disciple of Jesus is something positive and new that's added to our human lives. It's about a true, two-way friendship with Jesus. It is total opening to grace. "Go and sell everything." If we're satisfied with merely not sinning, but go no farther, we won't grow in

our relationship with God to the point where we really know and love Him. It will all just remain dry rules -- commandments.

I think of my Dad as a young man, and of his fraternities. He was willing to be a member of that top frat as long as they didn't ask him to do anything he deemed over the top – like giving up a football game. He couldn't sacrifice a lesser good – a few Saturday afternoons at the football stadium -- for the sake of a much better community to live in all four years of college. He later admitted he didn't grasp of life's priorities back then when he was a young man – what was valuable and what wasn't, what would last, and what was worth giving up.

Maybe comparing life in a frat with the Apostles' life with Christ is a stretch. But how much more necessary it is for us to be willing to let go of worldly considerations getting in the way of what Jesus wants from us. Jesus looks on the Young Man with approval and love – what an honor! Jesus' invitation to the man to give up everything and follow Him isn't said with harshness, as if trying to get his stuff, but is said with

love. That's the tragedy of the Young Man's refusal. He's invited into a deeper, personal life with Jesus, where they would walk together along the roads of Galilee with the other Apostles in the ultimate fraternity -- but he refuses to go. For him it isn't football games that keeps him from Jesus -- it's his money and status and comfort. It doesn't mean he's a sinner, just that he won't become a saint.

So "he went away sad." Dad was also a young man when he made that mistake at Iowa State. He would have time to learn from it and keep growing. What about us? How high are our expectations and hopes in our spiritual life with Jesus? Do we feel -- or even have any expectation -- that's there's more to it than we experience now? And how much are we willing to give up to gain that "more" Jesus offers? What lesser thing is Jesus asking us to let go of so we can have more of Him? Have we said, "No?" There's still time to change our minds. And, remember, in the long run the only ultimate sadness in life is not to become a saint.