"The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him." Jeremiah 18:4 NRSV

*The Six Million Dollar Man* was a television series that aired in the 1970s. Starring Lee Majors as Steve Austin, it tells the story of an astronaut severely injured in a plane crash while testing a new aircraft. Nearly dead, Austin’s mangled body is rebuilt, at a cost of six million dollars, using bionic legs, a bionic arm, and a marvelous bionic eye.

Each episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* begins with a picture of the plane crash and a voiceover saying: “Steve Austin, astronaut. A man barely alive. Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology. We have the capability to build the world's first bionic man. Steve Austin will be that man. Better than he was before. Better, stronger, faster.”

And so government rebuilds Austin and he becomes a secret agent serving the Office of Scientific Intelligence. Equipped with new legs, he runs at speeds upwards of sixty miles an hour, lifts tremendous weight with his new bionic arm, and sees clearly at remarkable distances using his bionic eye.

What was science fiction nearly forty years ago is rapidly becoming science fact in the twenty-first century. The cover of the latest *Smithsonian* magazine carries the title: *Creating the New Human: How Scientists are Rebuilding Your Body Part by Part.* Beside the title is a photo of two bionic hands reaching out to touch each other in a pose very reminiscent of God reaching out to touch the finger of Adam in Michelangelo’s famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The article itself traces the remarkable advances made in prosthetics and bionics over the past few decades. According to the author, “Prosthetics are improving so quickly that one inventor boldly predicts that disabilities will be largely eliminated by the end of the 21st century.”¹ Such a claim seems less bold when you learn that in 2011 scientists connected a robotic arm directly to the brain of Cathy Hutchinson, a fifty-eight year-old quadriplegic, enabling her to pick up and drink from a bottle of water using that robotic arm.²

The *Smithsonian* magazine even contains a centerfold of sorts depicting the one million dollar man — a robot built from state of the art bionic parts to
include: a skull, eyes, ears, trachea, heart, lungs, pancreas, spleen, kidneys, blood, arteries, arms, hands, hips, knees, ankles, and feet. ³

With roughly 1,800 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from traumatic limb loss, along with countless other victims of accidents or disasters, one can’t help but be encouraged by these advances in prosthetics and bionics. Perhaps we really are on the verge of creating the new human by rebuilding the body part by part.

But as important as the body is, what about the soul? What about the spiritual part of us – that part designed to relate to God? Without a doubt, the human soul has been badly damaged by the Fall of Adam and Eve as described in the book of Genesis. You see, when God designed and built us, he installed a centrifugal engine in us – an engine that flung us outward and upward in our affections causing us to love God above all else, especially above the self. But with the Fall of Adam and Eve, Satan reversed the gears of this centrifugal engine and created a centripetal engine in the soul – an engine that spirals inward, inward, inward on itself – an engine preoccupied with selfish passions, selfish pleasures, selfish interests and concerns.

According to the Genesis account, God created Adam and Eve to walk with him in obedience and gave them everything for their enjoyment, forbidding only the fruit of a single tree. But Satan, in the guise of a serpent, tempted them to turn their backs on God in order to pursue their own passions and pleasures. Genesis 3:6-7 describes the scene: “(W)hen the woman saw that the (forbidden) tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” (NRSV)

With this act, the gears of the soul were reversed. Our affections ceased to be thrown outward and upward with centrifugal energy and instead they began to cycle downward and inward with centripetal force. And so the soul became preoccupied with itself rather than with God.

Left to ourselves in this sad and fallen state, we would be like the inmates of an asylum described by Ibsen in his poem *Peer Gynt*. When Gynt insinuates that the insane are beside themselves, the doctor in charge of the asylum says:
Oh, no, you’re wrong.
It’s here that men are most themselves
Themselves and nothing but themselves
Sailing with outspread sails of self.
Each shuts himself in a cask of self,
The cask stopped with a bung of self
And seasoned in a well of self.
None has a tear for others’ woes
Or cares what any other thinks.
We are ourselves in thought and voice
Ourselves up to the very limit.⁴

These words are true not only of the mentally or criminally insane; they are true of us as well apart from the saving help of God. For without God, we tend to sail with outspread sails of self, shut up in a cask of self, seasoned in a well of self, with no tears for others’ woes.

Fortunately, we are not left alone. God comes to us in Christ with saving help. He, who first made us, comes in Christ to reengineer us; to reverse the gears and set them right and put them in their proper place so that the soul’s engine begins to turn again with centrifugal forces that drive us upward and outward once more toward God.

This work of reengineering begins with Christ’s call to true discipleship. It is a radical call to deny oneself for the sake of God. In Luke 14, Jesus issues this call to an eager audience and says: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple...So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

With these words Christ calls us to love him more than our fondest family members, our dearest possession, and even our very selves. According to Christ, life must stop revolving around the center of self and must begin again to revolve around him. Only then will the soul run smoothly along the course it was designed to take.

Granted, these words are among the most difficult of all Jesus’ teaching. They are like the mechanic’s last recourse – the hammer’s blow – which, when all else fails, is used to free the frozen parts that keep the mechanism from functioning as it ought. Indeed, these words strike a violent blow to the
bloated ego, frozen in its selfish sin. And only those who hear and heed them, who truly and earnestly repent of their selfish and self-centered ways, only those can begin the life of true Christian discipleship.

And so I ask: Have you turned from self to Christ and put him above all else in life? Discipleship begins with this dramatic act. But it’s an act that must be renewed each day. Each day we must turn from self to the Savior and set him high above all. And because we must renew this commitment each and every day for a lifetime, we should review this commitment before the first time we ever make it. In other words, we should count the cost of this commitment before we enter into it.

In Luke 14:28-32 Jesus says, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.”

Yes, according to Jesus, we should only start building if we intend to keep building until we’re done. We should only start fighting if we intend to keep fight until we’ve won! And we should only set out on a journey with Jesus – a journey of Christian discipleship – if we intend to finish it. And this requires daily commitment – each day, every day for an entire lifetime. Yes, it’s the struggle of a lifetime and a daily struggle – this struggle of discipleship – this struggle with the self.

In The God Who Comes, Carlo Carretto describes his own struggle with selfishness after many years of following Jesus. It’s a simple story that highlights the simple struggles that are faced by disciples and the simple decisions that are required of them every day. Carretto writes: “In our community the other day there wasn’t much coffee. Coffee does me good down here in the desert...it helps me...I am old. I was worried about not having any, about spending a few hours feeling dull and weak, and so – without perceiving the evil I was doing – I went into the kitchen before the others and drank up all that was left. Afterwards, having suffered all day and made my confession, I thought in shame of my selfishness, of the ease with which I had excluded my two brothers from those black, bitter remains.
It seems a tiny thing, yet in that cup of coffee, taken and not shared with my brothers, is the root of all the evil which disturbs us, the poison of all the arrogance which selfishness, riches, and power create. The difference between me and Jesus is right here, in an affair that seems simple but isn’t at all; after a whole life time it is still there to make you think. Jesus would have left the coffee for his brothers; I excluded my brothers. No, it isn’t easy to live with hearts like ours: let us confess it.”

Yes, discipleship begins with the dramatic act of turning from self to the Savior; but this is an act that must be renewed every day for an entire lifetime. Every day we must turn from the self to the Savior, setting him high above all. For if we are not careful and watchful, Satan will return to tamper with the gears. If we are not careful and watchful, he will reverse the centrifugal engine; he will engage the centripetal force; and he will turn the soul back inward on itself.

Only with Jesus’ help can this be prevented. Only the One who made us can reengineer us and restore the soul to its proper function. As it says in Jeremiah 18:4, “The vessel he was making...was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.” Only Jesus can reengineer us. Only he can free us from our overweening selfishness - no one else has the power. But he can do it only when we put him above all else, take up the cross, and follow him each and every day. Amen.

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1Geoff Brumfiel, “Replaceable You,” *Smithsonian*, September 2013, Volume 44, Number 5, p. 70.

2Ibid.

3Ibid.

4http://archive.org/stream/peergyntdramatic00ibseyoft/peergyntdramatic00ibseyoft_djvu.txt.