

The Cost of Following Jesus

A few of the most ignored verses in all Scripture are in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus makes bold demands of those who follow Him, and if we're serious about our relationship with Jesus, we'd better heed what He says. Let's look at two places in Luke, Chapter 9, verses 23 to 27, and Chapter 14, verses 25 to 35. We dare not ignore what Jesus says here by presuming upon grace.

First, let's understand that when Jesus talks about being a disciple, or about following Him, He's referring to us. A disciple is a believer, a Christian. A follower of Christ is a believer, a Christian. These are all synonymous terms. The word "disciple" occurs 270 times in the NT, the word "Christian" occurs 3 times. So the demands that Jesus makes in these two passages are for us, for everyone who supposes that he's a Christian. They're not for only some super-committed believers, nor only for the professionals of the Church. They're for everyone. There's no category in the Bible as a Christian who ignores the demands of discipleship. The words of Christ in these passages regarding discipleship apply to all of us. Jesus didn't call people to simply believe in Him; he called people to follow Him, to obey Him to commit to Him.

And let's also understand what discipleship means biblically. At the time of Christ, all the important rabbis took disciples, who in turn committed to imitating their master's entire way of being. A disciple would leave his everyday life, his work, his family, to be full time with his master, to travel with him, to share meals with him, all so as to learn from the master his life-style, his worldview, and his teachings. Why? So as to pass on all that he learned to other disciples, who in turn would pass them on to other disciples, etc. A disciple was expected to express the character and teachings of his master so perfectly that it was as if clones of the rabbi were perpetuating the life of the rabbi from generation to generation.

And let's understand further that to be a Christian doesn't mean simply to know and agree with certain facts or truths about Jesus. In contemporary culture, that's what being a Christian means, but that's not biblical. In the NT, a Christian is someone who knows and loves Jesus and is transformed by the Holy Spirit so as to think and love and live just like Jesus. The Gospel calls us to discipleship, to following Jesus.

The word "disciple" appears almost only in the Gospels. Luke uses it just a few times in the Book of Acts. But then it disappears from the New Testament; the term that's used instead of discipleship is sanctification. Both terms refer to the process of transformation into godliness and Christ-likeness that results from salvation. I suspect that Jesus intended His disciples to be the prophetic righteous remnant, Israelites who follow the Suffering Servant and continue His ministry. At a point early in Church history, as Jewish leaders persisted in rejecting Jesus as Messiah and King even after knowing of His resurrection, and as believers from the Gentile nations filled churches, the practice of biblical discipleship ended. So biblical discipleship is not occurring anywhere today, except perhaps to some small extent in Bible colleges and seminaries. The demands of discipleship, however, as expressed by Jesus, are for us today. Now let's look at those verses.

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Jesus said, **"If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me . For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, this one shall save it. . . "** (Luke 9:23-27). Jesus is the rejected Messiah-King, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and all who follow Him will also be rejected and suffer while serving. To identify with Jesus—which is what "saves"—means experiencing rejection and suffering loss. If we're attached to this world, we'll not be rejected or suffer, but Jesus in this passage warned sternly against such

attachment. Our reward for the commitment that He demands of us will be in the future, when we're with Him and at His glorious Return.

We are to "deny self." What does that mean? For one thing, it means no self-righteousness! The sin nature that controls us craves merit before God, but that's an absolute absurdity. We are depraved souls, totally dependent on God's mercy. We need to abandon our sinful desires and will and adopt God's desires and will as our own. We deny self so as to commit to Jesus, to His values, His purposes in life, His character, His teachings.

What is "daily taking up a cross"? It's publicly bearing testimony that we accept rejection and shame and suffering on behalf of Jesus. We're in humble submission to Him, to His words, and to His will. We submit to His authority over us. A person carrying a cross is about to be dead; he's not thinking about sports or music concerts or politics or *anything* except being very shortly in the presence of the Judge of all humanity. A person carrying a cross no longer cherishes notions of being autonomous. All that matters at that point is, Did I fulfill God's will? And Jesus says, Do this daily!

What does it mean to "follow" Jesus? Ah, this is discipleship. It's sanctification. It means to be just like Jesus and do as He did. It means to continue His mission of revealing the Father in this wretched world, calling people into the Kingdom and preparing them for it. It means to obey Him, and it means to submit to rejection, shame and suffering. To follow Jesus is what Christianity is (or should be).

What does it mean to "save one's life is to lose it"? If we live for personal happiness, comforts, peace, and for the things this world puts on offer, and for the pleasantries of prosperity, we forfeit the blessings and the life that God places on offer in Jesus. Prosperity is exceedingly dangerous. It steals spirituality from us, it deprives us of the intimate relationship we could have with Jesus, and it possibly also means that our "faith" is phony. It's only by "losing" our life, that is, self-denial, taking up a cross, and following Jesus, that we gain true life. And the unique privilege of being with God. I hope that's what we all sincerely desire more than anything.

What does it mean to be "ashamed" of Jesus and His words? This is the very core of this passage. What is our response to Jesus? To His teachings? We can either embrace and commit to Him in humble obedience, or not. If not, it's because we're ashamed of Him and His teachings. It's strictly binary, one response or the other. Indifference is really being ashamed of Him and/or His teaching, it's rejecting Him. If we reject Him, He will reject us. Beware! We have only this one life, so our response to Jesus and His words had better be exactly what God expects. At stake is eternity. What does Jesus want from us? To follow Him.

And Jesus said, **"If anyone desires to come to me and does not hate his [family] and even his own soul, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever is not bearing his own cross and coming after me cannot be my disciple . . . So also whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple"** (Luke 14:25-35. Following Jesus is *exceedingly* demanding. If someone cannot be Jesus' disciple, then that person cannot be saved. Notions of grace and forgiveness of sins and assurances of eternal life notwithstanding, Jesus plainly and clearly stated here that one cannot be saved apart from these radical demands. This is heavy in the extreme.

What does it mean to hate one's family and even one's own soul? The Gospel invites us into a relationship with a living Person, Jesus. We're not saved by agreeing with or assenting to certain biblical truths. We're saved by knowing and loving Jesus. The Gospel is Jesus, *everything* Jesus. And the relationship that Jesus requires is one of radical commitment to Him. We're to be so committed to Jesus that all others, even including ourselves, are remote to us. Jesus is to have such priority in our lives that all other relationships pale in comparison. And the commitment it demands is on-going and life-long, not a "decision and it's forever settled" arrangement. We experience salvation on God's terms, not ours. There's nothing casual about what Jesus demands, there's no option of complacency

or indifference. He really intends that we forsake all others, even our own desires and will, to follow Him.

We've discussed "cross-bearing" already. There's real pain and real shame and real loss in being Jesus' disciple. Self-sacrifice for Jesus' sake is inherent in following Him, and without it, there's only delusion. It's disastrous to not be following Jesus.

What does it mean to "renounce" all that we have? We're to abandon all attachments to the things of this world, that is, our possessions. The interpretive key here is "attachments." It's a matter of what we love, what we desire, what we want in life. Things? Or Jesus and His will? A disciple is bonded to His master, and the allegiance is intense.

The "salt" matter at the end of this passage introduces another issue, viz., we're here for a purpose. Salt functions. So do we. The eternal Son came to earth to reveal the Father and to establish the promised Kingdom, which includes making people fit for the Kingdom. He came also to defeat all evil. Jesus' followers are to continue that ministry, that purpose, amplified in scale and scope. Failing to do that means we're useless to God. And as salt, if useless, is thrown out because it's not suitable for anything else, so we may be. Everyone on earth is necessarily serving someone. We're not here to serve ourselves. Or Satan or some wicked god. Salvation is to serve the Creator God.

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It's possible *and necessary* to fulfill Jesus' discipleship demands. The Apostles gave us the NT Scriptures, and Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us to be sanctified thru the Word. So we can, and must, do our part as willing followers of Jesus to be and to do all that these verses require. Jesus' words here stand as truth to be obeyed. The threat of not obeying, which after all is rebellion, is too terrible to ignore. The tragedy of it would be that Jesus' words are right there in our Bible for us all to read and heed.

Something else. The persecution and rejection that's in these verses has been largely absent in the Christianized Western world. How should we therefore understand these verses? The demands are still there, and we're responsible for them. The prosperity and freedoms we have in the West must mean that we're held to an even higher standard of accountability. **"To whom much is given, much is required"** (Luke 12:48). Sadly, we've used our wealth and freedoms to enable a self-indulgent life-style rather than to freely express God's love. We absolutely must take these verses in Luke seriously, while time allows.

Now let's ask, *Why* is such deep commitment as Jesus demands in these verses necessary? I suspect there is mystery here. God has not revealed all that He's doing in His creation. We may learn why some future day in glory. But what's rather obvious is, (i) the selfless obedience to the demands that Jesus makes in His teachings and the self-discipline necessary to fulfill sanctification are so heavy that only self-sacrificing devotion to Jesus will enable us to pursue them. (ii) It's the humble selflessness of the eternal Son that makes us Christ-like, or godly. We can only glorify God by voluntarily and deliberately, lovingly imitating Him, by being just like His own Person. By glorifying God, we defeat Satan, indeed, we join Christ in the defeat of all evil. (iii) And I offer this: In perfect justice, we will receive in the end something very, very great in proportion to our commitment to God's will in the here-and-now.

There's no greater, more lovely Person in all existence than Jesus. There's no greater gift on offer in the entire cosmos than salvation. There's no greater blessing possible than what God in love has promised those who are united to Jesus. And there's no greater privilege anyone can have than that of serving Jesus as He has revealed we're to do it. Let's therefore be faithful followers of Jesus, joyfully accepting the consequences.