

Luke 9:23-26
The Cost of Discipleship

That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the grace hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly, because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "you were bought with a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
The Cost of Discipleship

In this passage Jesus is calling to all (23). He is speaking to the multitudes, not only His disciples. It is an invitation to come behind, to get in line and follow Jesus. Yet, Jesus knew this would not be easy, ¹³"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus also knew fully well that the ramifications of choosing to be a disciple would be personal. There is no more clear statement of what discipleship means. And we must remember that this comes from Jesus Himself. It is absolutely contrary to many modern notions of a Jesus that is a Santa Claus whose main purpose is to give us whatever we want. It has no room for a gospel of wealth and success if only we have enough faith. It is unrelated to a preaching of self-esteem and self-image. It is definitely not seeker-friendly. In reality, following Jesus may actually make your earthly position worse. When He admonished His disciples in another conversation about discipleship Jesus said, ³⁴"do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (Matthew 10:34-36).

Three Principles

Jesus began His call to discipleship by plainly stating that “if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (v. 23). In this brief statement, Jesus laid out the three principles of discipleship.

First, a disciple must deny himself. The word used for “deny himself” is the same intense word used to describe Peter’s three increasingly emphatic denials that he knew Jesus. We can remember the passion and intensity with which Peter tried to disavow any knowledge of who Jesus was and any implication in being His associate. That same passion, that same commitment and intensity, is required of a disciple.

But what are we to deny when we deny ourselves? Worldly pleasures? A good home and plenty of food? Is Jesus asking us to never eat at a restaurant or enjoy a vacation? Of course not. The call to discipleship is not the call to asceticism. What is meant here is a self-denial of anything that merits salvation. We are to give up on any dependency of earning our salvation. We are to recognize that there is nothing in either ourselves or our efforts that can compel God to save us from our sins.

Paul, of all people, understood this. He wrote, “⁴If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6). Later, he defended himself before Herod by stating that he “lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion” (Acts 26:5), and in putting forward his credentials to a stubborn Galatian church he maintained, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions” (Galatians 1:14). Clearly on paper, Paul had much to recommend himself.

Yet despite all this honest assessment of his personal value, Paul came to the following conclusions. “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (Romans 7:18). “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7). “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.” (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul had denied himself and renounced self-righteousness.

Paul was not alone among the great saints who recognized their own insignificance in the presence of God. The Old Testament saints did as well.

“I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted . . .
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1, 6).

“Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:4).

And even Peter, with his imperfect faith, cried out after seeing Jesus produce a miracle beyond what he could imagine, “go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8).

Such a true self-awareness produces repentance. When God calls a person to repentance, there are three components. First, true repentance is an intellectual turning from sin. It is a recognition of the fact that we are on the wrong path and are headed to destruction. Second, true repentance produces an emotional response. We are genuinely broken because of our sin. We are sorry, not in a childish sense, but with the emptiness and agony that David felt when he wrote,

“¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
¹¹Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
¹²Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:10-12).

Third, true repentance is a willful intention to go a different way. We cannot repent and continue in our sin.

But denying oneself is not only a part of salvation, but a part of sanctification. For example, Scripture reminds us to:

- Crucify the flesh, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” Galatians 5:24.
- Resist the devil, “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” James 4:7.
- Fight the daily fight, “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” 1 Timothy 6:12.

The second principle Jesus mentioned was cross bearing. It is clearly stated by Paul in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

Our popular culture can refer to any inconvenience as cross-bearing. Traffic, a long line at Starbucks, not finding a close parking place at the mall all can come under the heading of “bearing one’s cross” to some. The disciples would not have seen it this way.

In the classical Roman world, cross bearing meant one thing. It meant death. There was no other purpose for carrying a cross. It was a sign of judgment, rejection, suffering, and death. Crucifixion was a well organized, thoroughly performed, and highly efficient practice of execution. Jesus was speaking with the most graphic illustration He could use of what it meant to be a disciple.

Today there are those who suffer, perhaps not crucifixion, but death nonetheless for the cause of Christ. The vast majority of us, however, do not risk such an extreme. Yet, we must ask ourselves if we are willing should it come? Would we die for Christ? If we fail to practice some of the easiest requirements of a disciple, it is difficult to be convinced we could endure the greatest hardship.

The third principle of discipleship Jesus laid down was obedience. This was perhaps the most common element of discipleship that Jesus preached. It was the logical response to faith. Jesus once asked His disciples “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Obedience is the clearest and most consistent manifestation of discipleship.

Jesus emphasized this as His time on earth drew to a close.

“¹⁵If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. . . . ²¹He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him. . . . ²³If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. ²⁴He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:15, 21, 23-24).

Finally, let us understand that these principles are not chronological. We do not first deny ourselves, then after some time begin to bear our cross, and then perhaps later start down the road of obedience. They are not more sequential than they are optional. They are commanded of every disciple. They are to be done as one act of faith. Some practical examples include:

- Overlooking an offense or a misjudgment against us
- Being content with our circumstances
- Not envying others when they have what we want
- Not drawing attention to our accomplishments
- Bearing with the daily annoyances of others
- Humbly receiving correction

Paradox and Punishment

Then Jesus explained the consequences of choosing to be a disciple or not. He continued, “²⁴For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. ²⁵For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?” (v. 24-25). This makes no sense according to the values of the world. It is contrary to our modern evolutionary thinking of self-preservation. Yet, it is what Jesus taught time and time again.

“³⁷He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:37-39).

“²⁴Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26).

“Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it”

(Luke 17:33)

Taking His explanation to the extreme, Jesus said that the world would be insufficient gain, if one lost their soul. There is nothing this world can provide that is equal to salvation and eternity with Christ. No matter the wealth we attain, the experiences we have, or even the joys we feel, nothing compares to eternity with Jesus.

Jesus explained that the consequences for failure to be a disciple are clear. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (v. 26). The concept of being ashamed in this context means to despise and reject. No excuses are accepted; no extenuating circumstances considered. It is plain and simple. People who do this chose the approval of man before the approval of God.

Scripture has examples of wretched people who chose not to be a disciple of Jesus. The rich young ruler described in Mark 10:17-22 is perhaps the most memorable..

“¹⁷As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁸And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments, ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰And he said to Him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.’ ²¹Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ ²²But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.”

There is a time when Jesus will return. During our lives or not, the time will eventually come. And when that event happens those who were not disciples will suffer eternal punishment. We want to be in that place where Jesus “is not ashamed to call them brethren” (Hebrews 2:11).

Take Aways

Ask yourself honestly if you are a disciple measured by the three criteria Jesus put forward. Do you deny yourself daily, recognizing that only the work of Christ is sufficient for salvation? Do you bear your cross with readiness in the last extreme? Do you obey the commands of Jesus?