

Sermon 45: Luke 9:23-27: The Cost of Discipleship

OUTLINE

The call of discipleship
The paradox of discipleship
The warnings of discipleship
The hope of discipleship

INTRODUCTION

Would you become a Christian knowing that it would probably get you killed? Throughout Church history many have had to make the choice to follow Christ knowing that it would possibly result in their deaths. Even today in various Muslim, Hindu and Communist countries conversions result in death. This choice to embrace death as the cost of becoming a disciple is the choice that Jesus put before His disciples when He called them to follow Him. Jesus has just revealed that the Son of Man must suffer. He has revealed that there is coming conflict and those in positions of power will be against Him and will attempt to murder Him, and in fact do so. Now He tells His disciples that to follow Him they have to be willing to walk with Him into the fire. If the world hates Christ it will also hate His followers. To follow Christ is to follow Him into this persecution.

How different the call to become Christ's disciples is from the call that we hear today. Many today are on the defensive as they preach the gospel, so they feel they have to talk about Jesus as a nice guy, the Christian life as the happy and successful life, and try and sell discipleship on the basis of all the benefits you will get. Conversion is presented not as a dethroning of oneself and a turning away from those sins which are contrary to God and Christ had to die to pay for, rather it is presented as a change in self-help programs. The appeal is often made on the basis of self-interest not the glory of God and the seriousness of sin. Conversion is stripped of repentance and conviction of sin. Jesus calls us to follow Him to death.

In one way this would have been a bit of a dampener. The disciples have just returned from a successful mission where they had been able to do all sorts of miracles, the crowds are all excited about Jesus feeding the 5000. This message of impending doom against Christ Himself and those who followed Him would have felt like a bucket of cold water. But Jesus does not deceive those who follow Him; He spells out the fine print, properly preparing His followers for what they will encounter. So as we look at these verses we will divide them under four headings: The call of discipleship; the paradox of discipleship; the warnings of discipleship; the hope of discipleship.

The call of discipleship

V23, 'And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.' Luke tells us that these words were said to 'all.' Mark 8:34 makes clear that there was a crowd present for these words along with the disciples. In other words, the standards that Jesus is about to lay out are standards for all those who would follow Christ not only the 12. This is confirmed by the words, 'If *anyone* would come after me.' The basic call of discipleship consists of three commands: deny yourself; take up your cross; and following Christ. All three commands are just different ways of saying the same thing, that being a disciple is an all or nothing affair. But each command also brings a particular emphasis into the foreground.

Deny yourself: firstly, let us consider what this does not mean. It does not mean denying your own existence. This is a call to deny your sinful self, not your God given self. There is what we call a gnostic view of Christianity that sees all desire as sinful instead of all sinful desire as wrong. As a young Christian I made this mistake. I thought if I wore shoes they should not be comfortable shoes; I could eat but should not try to enjoy the tastes of food; I felt guilty for wanting to marry; and thought that to deny self meant having no desires for the future because all desire was somehow sinful. We call this gnostic because it fails to recognize that our desires are God given desires, sin is when we take God given desires and use them in ways that are contrary to His will and design. To deny yourself is to deny your sinful self. It is not a call to suppress your God given personality; the gifts that He has given you; the preferences you have, and the things that you enjoy more than other things. This is not a request to deny your humanity, nor your God given uniqueness but sinfulness.

Denying yourself is always saying no to sin; but it is also often saying no to legitimate things. This is probably the main point that Jesus is trying to make, sin is always wrong, that goes without saying; but the discipleship that we are called is hard not because we should not sin, but because we will often have to suffer the denial of all sorts of legitimate desires. We all like to have safety, denying self means being willing to sacrifice safety; we all like to be liked by people, following Christ includes risking being unpopular; none of us like pain or dying, but denying self includes putting to death even our most basic instincts for survival. Self likes a predictable routine; a quiet environment to recharge in; time to ourselves without having demands placed upon our time and energy; to be around people we enjoy; to spend our money on our interests; and to be free from responsibility. But to follow Christ is a life of servanthood, a life of self-sacrifice and self-denial.

This life of self-denial is not being put forward as a way to earn your salvation. We do not win our way into heaven by how well we give stuff up. This is not done for merit. No rather, because we have been saved out of sin, to a life of gratifying service, and because we seek to imitate the God who loves us so well, we serve as He served us. This is not an attempt to add some pain to our cushy lives, but the path that love walks in obedience to God and service of others.

Take up your cross: this statement has lost some of its original power. The disciples do not yet know that Jesus will die on a cross. Jesus has spoken about His death but has not spilled this detail. A cross was an item of execution common in Israel. The Romans who had picked up the practice and perfected it used it as a deterrent for criminals. It was their practice after a criminal had been tried and found guilty to make the criminal carry their own cross to the place of execution. It was a public display of guilt, of someone who was too bad or dangerous to be kept alive, and a one way trip from which you did not return. Jesus was making the point that to follow meant to fall out with everyone else and to run the risk of the greatest cost, your very life. In fact Jesus goes further and tells the disciples that they will have to pick up their cross daily. Every day will be a choice to be hated and ridiculed and misunderstood, to be seen as bad and guilty and the scum of the earth, and to be willing to pay the ultimate price.

All our crosses are lighter because He bore our cross. We must not think that Christ's cross and ours are the same. The crosses we carry are lighter because He bore His cross. His was a cross of judgement and being God forsaken because He identified with us in our sin; ours is a cross that refines and we are accompanied by God as we identify with the innocent one. We are able to pay the highest cost, the very giving of our lives because He has secured our eternity. We gladly carry our crosses because He willingly carried His.

Following Christ: discipleship also involves following Christ. The Greek is in the continuous tense, so we commit to continually following Christ. Christ does not motivate us to follow by promises lots of nice sights along the way, though of course there will be a happy ending. He calls us to give Him the reins of our lives, to call to shots, to follow wherever he sends.

All three of these commands speak of unconditional surrender. What Jesus is asking here is no different to what is included in repentance. To repent is to turn away from self-rule to be ruled by God; to give up self-will for His will; to make His priorities our priorities; to put to death any sin that rises up to challenge His authority in our lives and silence any nay saying desires. It is not only ministers and missionaries who are to give all to Christ, this is the call of basic discipleship.

The paradox of discipleship

V24, 'For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.' The Christian life is full of paradoxes. Here is a prayer which articulates some of them: 'Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly ...

Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive ...
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
thy life in my death,
thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin,
thy riches in my poverty,
thy glory in my [humiliation].¹

Christ gives us another paradox here in v24 which teaches us that if we try to save our lives, that is our old lives, the lives we had without Him, whether they were filled with morality or immorality, sadness or joy. If we attempt to save and keep this life, it will at last be taken from us in judgement. But if we lose our old lives by giving it up to live for Him, which in truth is not a real loss, but just a loss that our squealing selfishness protests; then we will save our lives because we will know true life and eternal life experiencing the fullness of life as He intended it to be.

We must not miss the literal sense of what Christ is saying as well. If we lose our lives in martyrdom we literally ascend into life in the presence of God. This is one of the major themes of the book of Revelation a book written to equip a church that was just about to go through the Diocletian persecution where many would be martyred. Rev. 12:11 speaks about our great victory over the devil who was moving the world's governments to kill Christians, 'And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.' So when the various promises are made to the 7 churches, 'to the one who conquers,' this is most likely a reference to those who prove faithful in their witness unto death. These promises include eating from the tree

¹ MacArthur, J. (2011). [Luke 6–10](#) (p. 266). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

of life; escaping the second death; receiving hidden manna, a white stone and a new name; authority over the nations and the morning star; white garments, not having our names blotted out and Christ confessing us before His Father and His angels; to be made a pillar in the temple; and to sit on Christ's throne. We literally gain more in dying for Christ than we could ever accumulate for ourselves. 'It was this tradeoff that led Jim Elliot to say, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Elliot was one of five famous missionaries to Ecuador who were killed by the Auca Indians in 1956. The Aucas were headhunters, and Elliot knew the danger of going to them. But he was willing to give up what he could not keep—life itself—in order to give them the gospel. He prayed, "Father, take my life, yea, my blood if Thou wilt, and consume it with Thine enveloping fire. I would not save it, for it is not mine to save. Have it, Lord, have it all. Pour out my life as an oblation for the world." Elliot's prayer was answered. His lifeblood was poured out as an oblation, but he was no fool, because in losing his life for Jesus, he gained something he could never lose: the everlasting pleasure of God.²

Verse v25, 'For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?' None of us have ever had to choose between the whole world and following God. Jesus faced that temptation in the desert when the devil offered Him the kingdoms of this world, but Jesus chose the path of obedience, the path that would lead to the cross, and the path that would lead to God giving Him an inheritance better than any the devil could offer. When people choose not to follow Jesus it is not for the whole world but for a few fleeting sins. Perhaps it will be for some cheap thrills like drugs and drinking or sleeping around. Others might want to be able to follow their materialistic pursuits and don't want any rules to get in the way. Others may want the approval of other people and to be thought well of. Some want to have that relationship with that unbeliever and choose them over Christ. But here Christ puts all of that in perspective. The cost is your very life.

No one thinks when they choose their sins instead of giving their lives to Christ that they are signing their death warrant. Many people think that they will just have their fun and later they will turn to Christ. There is no guarantee that God will continue to strive with you, convict you, and give you a sense of urgency that you must turn to Christ. A terrible sign of judgement is when you feel nothing, no urgency, no guilt, no need to turn to Christ.

The warnings of discipleship

V26, 'For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.' Our third point is the warning of rejecting discipleship. One of the main pressures that Jesus is tapping into here is the pressure of persecution. This is less of a problem for us in the West because of our individualistic society where we are more insulated from those around us. However, in Jesus day to choose for Christ would divide the family. To choose for Christ would be seen by some as heresy because one would have to betray what was thought to be true religion. Not only that it would be seen to be unpatriotic by some. Others would see the followers of Christ as disturbers of the peace and drawing the heavy hand of the Roman administration. Today those in Muslim countries, or Hindus, or those in Communist countries would feel the weight of this more than us we only have to contend with some peer pressure.

² Ryken, P. G. (2009). [Luke](#). (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 1, p. 463). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

What is important to note is that Jesus expects His disciples to take a public stand for Him and His teachings. For His person and His words. Let me ask you, is this such a big deal? Do you think that your life is worth standing up for Christ and His message? The answer can only be yes. He is God, He is our Creator, He owns us; He gave His life for us; His word is truth and life; He delivers us out of darkness; He leads us on the paths we were made to walk in; He defeats our enemies; He pours out eternal riches upon us; He promotes and adopts us; He will punish all our enemies; He will deliver us from every wrong and pain. To deny Him; to refuse to acknowledge Him; to follow another instead of Him, is the highest act of treason and evil that can be committed in the universe. Our God comes down to earth, He walks among us, He enters into our suffering, He lives a perfect life, He subjects Himself to a death He did not deserve, and all to save a people who were not looking for Him. To not choose Him; to not acknowledge Him; to prefer anything before Him is the highest act of disobedience we could possibly commit. There is no amount of pain that is not worth suffering to be loyal to Him; no sin that is more worthy of our service, therefore the penalty is severe.

The penalty is a promise that at Christ's second coming, the Son of Man who you were too ashamed to own as Lord will be ashamed to own you, and you will be rejected forever in eternal punishment. Can you feel the weight of what hangs in the balance? You cannot be casual about Christ and your commitment to Him.

Of particular relevance for us today I think is the reference to not being ashamed about Christ's words. We live in an age where the world has rejected Christ and His words. All talk of sin and the need for forgiveness; all talk of our only hope of salvation being in Christ; all talk of hell and judgement; all talk of holiness, and the sin of sexual immorality in all its forms. All talk of miracles, of the inspiration of the Bible, of angels, the devil and all the Bible teaches Christians are becoming more and more embarrassed about it. Will we take a stand? We are going to be tested on this front like never before in this generation. The laws on hate speech are coming. Will we be counted for speaking the truth in love. Will we be known for those who are willing to risk it all to speak the words of life that others may live, willing to show with our lives the conviction that our God is real, that His words are true, and that He is worth dying for?

The hope of discipleship

V27, 'But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.'" Now here is a verse that has confused a lot of people. Firstly, we must understand the reason why it is here. I think that Jesus is giving some encouragement. Jesus has dropped the bomb that the Messiah must suffer; now He has just dropped a second bomb that the disciples might have to pay with their lives to be faithful to Him. But it is not all bad news and suffering there are some encouragements, and this verse gives us one to consider. Now the kingdom of God is generally defined as the rule of God, and this is a good definition, I like to fine tune it by saying that it is the eschatological reign of God. In other words the nature of the reign belongs to the New Creation and so bears certain characteristics. Now the Kingdom of God is already being manifest to a degree through Jesus miracles but it is clear by His words that some other manifestation of the Kingdom of God is in mind, the question is, what does Jesus mean here by the Kingdom of God. There are several possible options:

Firstly, Jesus is talking about the transfiguration which is about to happen in v28-36, only Peter, James and John get to catch a glimpse of the unveiled glory of the Son. So literally some, before they have died will see the Son of Man in His glory.

Secondly, Jesus is talking about the death, burial, but in particular the resurrection of Christ. The resurrected Christ is Christ in His glorified human form and the body that He will have for all eternity in addition to His divine nature.

Thirdly, Jesus is talking about the ascension of Christ at the right hand of the Father and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, bringing about the inauguration of the New Covenant.

Fourthly, Jesus is talking about the spreading Kingdom of the gospel going to all nations breaking down the barriers as it goes from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Fifthly, some have thought that it is Jesus judgement upon Israel resulting in the fall of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD.

So what is Jesus talking about? We do not have enough information to say, possibly all of the above. Each of the things mentioned are steps in a progressive realization of God's kingdom in Christ. Whether Christ was intending for any one thing to be in mind is not clear. But what is clear is that Jesus is telling His disciples that they are not like the OT prophets who had to prophesy about things from afar and die without seeing the fulfilment of what they prophesied. The day of fulfilment was upon them, even though some might die as martyrs the kingdom was upon them. It is this hope of the realized kingdom of God that Jesus places before His disciples, the hope of the plan of God coming to pass, the reality of the promises of God fulfilled. This is an encouragement that we can take for ourselves as well. We live in the age of fulfilment where these things have occurred and they all point to the final coming of the Kingdom when all things will finally be made new. We can gladly surrender our lives because the resurrection is around the corner, the New Creation is certain to arrive, death will finally be overcome.