

May 9, 2010

Mark 10:17-22 / Revelation 3:14-22 / Luke 14:25-35

Discipleship and the Need for Absolute, Unreserved Surrender

I was tempted to change the title of this message to: "The Day Jesus Thinned Out the Ranks." Or better yet, "The Day Jesus Let Everyone Know That He Would Not Settle for Non-Committed or even Partially-Committed Disciples." The day He let people know that with Him it was either all or nothing!

And I know that to some that sounds a bit stern or ungracious or harsh and even un-Jesus-like. Some might even suggest it sounds like works-righteousness. But regardless of what anyone may think, it is impossible to get around the FACT that at least when it came to Jesus, He would settle for nothing less than 100% / all-out / unconditional / all or nothing discipleship whose ultimate goal was absolute surrender of everything to Him.

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In fact, this text is one of two notable passages where Jesus looks around, and noting the huge number of people that are following Him, says something so startling and so extreme and so unsettling to the typical religious person that one cannot help but see that He is purposefully trying to thin out the ranks. He does it here, and He did it in John chapter 6, where after feeding the 5000, huge crowds of people pursued Him — to the point that He couldn't get away from them!

And some, seeing the huge multitudes following Him around, would think this is great! But not Jesus! For He knew human nature and thus He knew that many in that multitude were following Him with little more than the hope of getting another free meal. He told them so: ***"You follow me,"*** He said, ***"because you ate the loaves and had you fill."***

Missionaries coined a term for such people long ago. They call them "Rice Christians" -- people who have little or no interest in Jesus at all, but keep coming around for the sake of getting the free handouts.

And Jesus, seeing this mentality at work even back then, purposely does something to thin out the ranks! What does He do? He tells them they need to come to HIM and believe in HIM and feed on HIM if they expect to have eternal life. Even eat His flesh and drink His blood. Yet at the very same time He adds that they cannot do so unless the Father sovereignly enables them by His grace.

And their response to all these things? *“This is a hard saying. Who can believe it?”* Yet Jesus had already answered that question in verse 44 and would answer it again in verse 65 where He made it clear: *“No one can come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”*

And it had its repercussions on the crowd, for in the very next verse we are told: *“From this time on many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.”*

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Jesus essentially does the same thing here in Luke 14. And by doing it He show us that FOR HIM, the purpose of preaching and teaching and healing and doing ministry was NOT simply to be popular / or see who could have the most followers / or see who could grow the biggest church in town (and thus be perceived as being "successful" by the world's standards).

Not at all. Unlike many today, His goal was not to gain the largest number of followers. But rather, to gain followers who were totally committed to Him. Better to have only 120 true, believing, sold-out disciples after three years / who had counted the cost / and understood what He required of them / and were willing to sacrifice everything for Him / than 10,000 people who were as committed to Him as to their families, jobs, hobbies and other recreational activities.

You see, Jesus WAS interested in gaining more disciples. Make no mistake about that! But as He makes clear in today's text (and the text from John's Gospel) He was not interested in doing so if it meant settling for half-hearted, partially committed, lukewarm, "follow Him so long as it doesn't interfere with anything else in my life" type disciples! Because in the eyes of Jesus such disciples are not really disciples at all.

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That's what Jesus leaves all of us to wrestle with today — the cost and conditions of Christian discipleship -- and with it the attending need to see if we actually fit into the category of people that He describes.

So, as I speak this morning I would ask that you HONESTLY seek to evaluate your own life in this regard -- using His categories of measurement and not our own. Looking at what Jesus Himself says is necessary to be His disciple, and seeing if we can honestly say we fit into that category. NOT going by what our friends say / or our parents may say / or what our culture might suggest / or what the evangelical community in general might say / or anyone else for that matter / but what Jesus Himself says!

Because Jesus is very clear in letting us know that apart from our willingness to do the things He speaks of in this text, we CANNOT consider ourselves to be a disciple of His.

Thus I leave it to you to determine whether or not you fit into the category of people Jesus would call His disciples. Because in reality only you, and no one else but you, can really know if you meet the conditions for discipleship which He Himself lays out in these verses we have before us today.

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So, what's the **FIRST** condition Jesus lays down as being absolutely necessary if one is to be considered a disciple of His (or in our categories, if one is to be considered Christian)? And the answer is simple: To be a disciple of Christ (and this is NOT optional!) demands that we offer Him our absolute commitment, unrivaled love, and wholehearted devotion in the relational sense.

*"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said, 'If anyone does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters -- yes even his own life -- he cannot be my disciple.' "*

It's a verse that has caused multitudes of people to stop in their tracks when they first read it. And rightfully so, because at first glance Jesus does indeed seem to be contradicting numerous other passages of Scripture in demanding that we "**HATE**" the very people which God elsewhere tells us we are to "**LOVE**"!

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So, how does one reconcile this verse with Exodus 20:12 which commands us to "*Honor our father and mother*"? / Or with Eph. 5:25 which tells husbands: "*Love your wives as Christ loved the church and laid his life down for her.*"

Or with I Tim. 5:8, where Paul says that "*anyone who does not care for his own relatives, and especially his immediate family, is worse than an unbeliever*"?

How does one reconcile it with the Greatest Commandment in the entire Bible, which tells us we are to "*Love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.*"

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And the answer? "*The word hate,*" as Darrell Bock points out, "*is used figuratively to suggest a priority of relationship.*"

*"Jesus request to 'hate' the members of one's family"* says Leopold Sabourin, "*reflects the Old Testament way of speaking, which used the contrary of love to substitute for the comparative, which Hebrew does not have.*"

And likewise, Leon Morris points out what we should all know anyway: *"There is no place in Jesus' teaching for literal hatred. He commanded His followers to love even their enemies, so it is impossible to hold that He is here telling them to literally hate their nearest and dearest... Hating (here) means something like 'loving less'..."*

It is actually translated that way in Gen. 29:31 and 33 where the Contemporary English Version renders it: *"The Lord knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah."* Jacob didn't hate Leah (as we think of hate), he loved her less than Rachel.

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So what does Jesus mean? He means that the love a disciple has for Him must be so great that the best of earthly loves -- our love for even our nearest and dearest -- for husband or wife; for mother or father; for siblings or even one's own children -- must pale in comparison to the love we have for the Lord Jesus.

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I love my WIFE, but if she were ever to give me an ultimatum and say, "Choose between me or Christ," I would have to say goodbye to her, for I could never disown Christ -- and visa-versa. Because any love that surpasses my love for Jesus is an expression of sinful idolatry.

If my MOTHER (or DAD when he was alive) or BROTHER or TWIN SISTER or CHILDREN or BEST FRIEND or anyone I know or care for, were to tell me I must choose between them or following Jesus, I would have to part ways with them as well.

In fact, if EVERYONE I KNEW AND LOVED were to shun me and abandon me and have nothing to do with me ever again and never speak another word to me so long as I live, it would simply be part of the cost I would have to endure for the sake of being Jesus' disciple.

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Because Jesus says (and I quote again from the Contemporary English Version): *"Unless you love me more than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, your brothers and your sisters, you cannot be my disciple."*

And notice He does NOT say, *"If you love me less than them you won't be a very good disciple,"* or *"You'll be a poor example of what a disciple is supposed to be."* Not at all! He says, and He says it very clearly: *"Unless you love ME more than all of them, you CANNOT be my disciple."* It's HIM above all, or you can't be HIS at all!

WHY? Because the reality is, that whatever owns our heart, owns us!

If we love anything more than Christ, then when persecution or difficulty or hardship or division of allegiance forces us to choose between:

- 1.) Christ or Country (as is still the case in many communist countries),
- 2.) Christ and Religion (as is still the case in Muslim, Jewish Hindu or other lands),
- 3.) Christ and Family, Ethnic Background or Cultural Convictions (as one Japanese friend I knew discovered), then we will find ourselves choosing against Christ.

For when anyone is driven to decide, their choice will always be determined by the thing they fear losing the most. The relationship we cherish the most, depend upon the most, feel we need the most (and thus fear losing the most) will ultimately determine whom the heart will cling to and remain faithful to, or whom it will reject and abandon... always!

And Jesus essentially says: ***"Only those who would choose to sever every other relationship in order to cling to Me (if forced to choose) can be my disciple."***

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So I ask you: By THAT standard, have YOU become a disciple of Jesus? / Do you love Him more than anyone else (including your fiancé or spouse / your grandparents, parents or children / brothers, sisters, friends or relatives)? / Does Jesus possess the supreme affections of your heart, or is there someone else whose influence, threatened withdrawal or relational ultimatum could get you to reject or turn away from Him?

Because if there is, then according to Jesus, you have yet to become His disciple. ***"Unless you hate" (that is, "love all others less than Him") you CANNOT be His disciple."***

***LISTEN: If you want to be His disciple, then no one in your life can come before CHRIST / be more important to you than CHRIST / captivate your heart and affections more fully than CHRIST / be a greater priority in your life than CHRIST / be more precious or treasured by you than CHRIST / or call forth a greater degree of love, devotion and commitment than HIM. Not if you hope to be His disciple.***

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Which brings us to the **SECOND** condition Jesus lays down for discipleship in today's passage. You must NOT ONLY love Him more than all other people who are near and dear to you, but you must also love Him more than you love yourself! ***"If anyone does not love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters -- YES, EVEN HIS OWN LIFE -- less than Me, then He cannot be my disciple."*** And in keeping with that last emphasis on loving Him more than our own lives, He adds: ***"And anyone who does not carry His cross and follow me, CANNOT be my disciple."***

You see, that's what discipleship is all about: Doing what God asks, when God asks, in the way God asks. / It's about living for HIM, and not for ourselves.

Or as Paul puts it in Romans 12:1, it about "offering our lives as a *"living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him, which is our reasonable service of worship."* / It's about dying to the self daily, that we might follow Christ and live for Him.

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You see, the one thing every person has to resolve before they can ever enter into Christian discipleship, is who they are going to live their life for. On this earth we have only one life to life -- just one -- and it's relatively short in length -- 50, 60, or 70 good years -- maybe 80 or 90 if you're blessed to live that long.

And what Jesus presses upon us today, with great force and intensity, is the need to decide who will you live that one short life for, adding of course, that we cannot be His disciple unless we are willing to live that one short life for Him.

Yet the problem (and everyone who has ever contemplated the cost of discipleship knows it's a big problem for many) is that living for Him means we must often practice self-denial. In fact, if we understand verse 27 correctly, it means we must often die to the self or the dreams and desires and plans and heartfelt yearnings we once had and may still have for ourselves, that we may live for Christ.

That, by the way, is what "carrying one's cross daily" means. It doesn't mean bearing the inevitable burdens of life or enduring difficulties that comes our way. It doesn't mean putting up with sickness, or a rebellious teen, or a difficult boss, or an emotionally distant spouse. Such things are not what Jesus refers to when He speaks of cross bearing.

John MacArthur is right when he very passionately points out that in the Bible *"a cross is never spoken of as anything other than an instrument of death or execution."* A cross was something upon which one was killed -- period! It has no other meaning in Scripture!

And thus carrying our cross daily means going to the place of execution daily. It means dying daily. Dying to self daily. To our urges and wants and dreams and desires and passions and temptations, whenever they conflict with what Christ would have us do.

To "carry our cross and follow Him" means to die to what we want when it conflicts with what He wants, so that we might follow Him in doing His will instead of ours!

In fact, Jesus makes it plain that if we are not willing to love Him more than our own lives; if we refuse to go to the place of execution daily and die to our self-will that we might do His will, then we CANNOT be His disciple. Because that's what discipleship is! Living for Christ instead of ourselves, and doing His will instead of our own!

After all, if in the end I only do what I want, when I want, who am I really living for? I'm living for me!!! And if I live for me, or to please me, how am I any different than anyone else?

The person who loves their own life more than Jesus only obeys when it's "convenient," or "fits with what they want to do anyway," or "costs them nothing," or "means that they won't have to practice self-denial" (that is, saying "no" to what the self desperately wants to do, because we know Jesus wants us to do otherwise).

It's only when His plans are AT ODDS WITH OURS / or His call upon our lives CALLS US TO DENY WHAT WE HAVE OUR HEARTS SET ON that we really find out who we love more -- Him or ourselves. Only then do we find out if we are "disciples."

*"Discipleship," as R. Kent Hughes rightly points out, "is a series of deaths. A life of perpetual dying, where we follow Christ on a path of self-denial."* Part of the sin nature and the self's will to rule, and be totally autonomous, dies every time we say "I want to, but I won't, because I'm now a disciple of Christ."

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So I ask you? *Is Christ and what He wants more important to you than your own life? / Do you carry your cross, the instrument of self-execution, with you daily, dying to the self-will daily -- to your personal plans and dreams and wants and desires when they're in direct conflict with those of Christ? / Are you committed to living the life YOU WANT TO LIVE, or are you committed to living the life HE WANTS YOU TO LIVE?*

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Which brings us to the LAST condition Jesus lays down in regard to discipleship. It's the cost of discipleship in regard to things. And rather than go into great detail and explanation, let me simply quote what He Himself says in verse 33 where we read, *"In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has, cannot be my disciple."*

The rich young ruler could not be Christ's disciple, because his wealth was more precious to Him than Jesus. So when Jesus asked him to give it all away and come follow Him, he went away sad, we are told, "for he had much wealth."

It's just one example of what Jesus is speaking of here. His call to discipleship is a call to unconditional obedience and unreserved surrender of all that we are and all that we have for Christ.

So if He asks us to leave all that is near and dear to us and go to the other side of the globe, because that is where He wants us to go, then that's what we need to do. No "buts." No conditions. No ultimatums where we say to Jesus, "I'll only go if you let me take this or do this first. This house, this land, this inheritance, or this career is precious to me, so unless you let me keep this, or assure me it will be waiting for me when I get back, I'm not going."

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You see, it doesn't work that way! If you're not willing to give up or sacrifice ***EVERYTHING YOU ARE and EVERYTHING YOU HAVE*** for Christ (if He should ask it of you) then you cannot be His disciple. Because He doesn't accept partial commitment, half-hearted service, or self-dictated terms of obedience and sacrifice.

C. S. Lewis was right when he wrote of the difficulty of Christian discipleship:

*"Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time, and so much of your money, and so much of your work (or service) -- I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures... I don't want to cut off a branch here and there, I want the whole tree down... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked...'"*

I want everything, says Jesus, nothing held back. I want absolute, unreserved surrender.

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So I challenge you: *Do you want to be His disciple?*

Because these are the terms:

- 1.) You must love Him more than anyone else.
- 2.) You must love Him more than life itself (more than you love yourself)!
- 3.) You must die daily, and crucify the sin nature daily, so that you can be freed to follow wherever Christ might lead, daily!
- 4.) And yes, you must also be willing to give up everything you are and everything have, otherwise you cannot be His disciple.

*He calls you to be His disciple. / Those are the non-negotiable terms.  
What will your answer be?*