

What Following Christ Means

Luke 14:33; Matthew 16:24

(For this message I had two boxes—one pretty beat up and the other a white box in good shape. In the old box I had placed some marbles, which I poured into the white box at some point in the message.)

Every five minutes, someone somewhere in our world is killed because of his or her Christian faith. Every. Five. Minutes. Every five minutes being a disciple of Christ means that they pay the ultimate price for following Jesus. As recently as April 22, Islamic extremists killed 19 Christians as they worshipped in Kano, Nigeria. A recent (May 21, 2012) story on CBS revealed that an estimated 100,000 Christians have fled Egypt because of persecution there. They are paying a price for being a disciple. And there are many, many more. It is happening in Syria, in Pakistan, in Mexico, in China, Somalia, The Sudan, and North Korea.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who dared to oppose Hitler and the Nazi movement. He knew a thing or two about being a disciple of Christ, and following Him regardless of the cost.

Eight years before he died, Bonhoeffer wrote a book, now a classic, entitled, *The Cost of Discipleship*. The Nazi regime was just beginning to rise, and Bonhoeffer could see the dark cloud on the horizon. In that book, Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Little did he know just how accurate that statement would prove to be in his own life. Because of his opposition to the Nazis, he was arrested by the Gestapo and then executed by hanging in April 1945, just 23 days before the Nazis' surrender.

Bonhoeffer also wrote, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

What is a “disciple”? I’m afraid that we here in America do not even have a clue. Others around the world are dying daily for their faith in Christ, but we get our noses bent out of shape at the smallest inconvenience or perceived slight. We use the word “disciple” only occasionally in our day. We know about the twelve disciples of Christ, but we don’t even think about them all that much. So let’s define the word. It means “learner,” but being a disciple of Jesus means a whole lot more than just learning what He taught. At a deeper level, a disciple is one who adheres to what he has learned. He follows it. He lives by it.

So when we apply this understanding of what a disciple is, we see right away that a disciple is much, much more than one who reads his Bible only every once in a while, or one who says, when backed into a corner, “Yeah, I believe in Jesus.” Being a disciple means more than just having your name on a church roll, or being the grandchild of a Sunday School teacher, deacon or even preacher.

The Bible says that being a disciple of Jesus means that we put Jesus first, ahead of everything else. Jesus Himself said, “*Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:33). He said the same thing in a different way in Matthew 16:24, “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*”

You see, salvation costs us nothing, because Jesus paid the price for our sin. But discipleship will cost us everything. So I’m telling you right now that this message is a call to everyone of us here today to decide, to commit, to becoming a disciple of Jesus, to be one who follows Him, not just one who stands on the fringes of the crowd and claims to be a part of Him.

What will it cost us to follow Jesus? We have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are losing everything—their jobs, their homes, their possessions, their families, and even their lives—because of their faith in Christ, and because they refuse to surrender to anything or anyone but Christ. It is no different for us. It will cost us everything—every desire, every thought, every leisure, every preconceived notion, every genetic predisposition, every attitude, every sin, every goal, every dream—*every* thing.

That temper? It’s got to go. That foul language? That, too. That hateful attitude toward someone else? Yep. What about that unforgiving spirit or that prejudice or that lust or that deeply-harbored pet sin? Yeah, all those. Gone. Before you argue too long or loudly, remember what Jesus said: “*Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.*”

Someone may object, “I can’t help it! That’s just the way I am!” But listen to me carefully. Following Jesus means that you surrender everything—including all the things that make you who you are. So to argue “That’s just the way I am” won’t help at all.

Let’s describe it another way, by using this old, beat-up box. Let’s say that this box represents our lives. Someone in Australia mailed me something in this box, and it’s seen better days. In fact, about the only reason it even looks like a box anymore

is because of the shipping tape he used to seal it shut. That's what holds it together. It's still functional, can still hold stuff, but it's been around the world, and is pretty beat up. And yes, sometimes our lives are just like this.

And let's say that all of the things that make up my life, including my possessions, my accomplishments, my goals and desires, my personality quirks, my past, my thoughts—everything that makes me who I am—can be put into this box—represented by all these marbles. Got that picture? Okay. Now understand this. Coming to Christ and becoming a disciple of His means I surrender my life—my box—to Him. I don't bring with me all the old things from my former life and merely add Jesus to the mix. That's not what Jesus had in mind!

What it means is that I take my old “box”—my old life—with all that it is and everything in it, to Him and surrender it. I give it to Him. I willingly leave my old self with Jesus for Him to do with as He chooses. I take *my* hands off, and leave everything in *His* hands. That's discipleship.

And this is what He does. Watch this carefully. He gives us a new “box”—a brand new life, a clean one, represented by this white box. In fact, the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*” But it's not an empty box, not an empty life. (*Pour the marbles from the old, beat-up box into the clean, white box.*) All of the things of our lives are still there: the dreams, the habits, the language, the attitudes, the possessions, the leisure activities, the hobbies, and so on.

Now comes the “learning” part of being a disciple. As we stay close to Jesus and learn more and more from Him about what following Him involves, He begins to point out certain aspects of our lives that need to change or even be eliminated entirely. Remember, we don't have any say any more, because we've surrendered our lives to Him. We “learn” from Him what should be in our lives and what shouldn't be, even if it's something that's been there since childhood.

So He may reach into our lives and say, “Let's do something about that anger.” (*Reach into the white box, pick up a marble for each item named and drop it into the old box.*) He'll say, “That doesn't belong in your new life. That belongs in the old life.” Or He might point out some long-standing resentment we have towards someone, and tell us that it has to be dealt with. His Holy Spirit may convict us of certain sins we've harbored for years. He may totally remake the insides of our lives by removing certain desires and dreams, and replacing them with beautiful and awesome things far beyond anything we could ever imagine.

He might convict us that the way we spend our time needs to honor Him more. Christ might speak to our hearts and tell us that we should engage in prayer on a regular basis, or worship with other believers more. Stewardship of our possessions might be another area He will touch on.

The ultimate goal of all this is not to destroy us or to prevent us from being happy. It's so that we can know His good and perfect will for our lives. It's so we can experience the abundant life He so freely offers those who follow Him.

So let's go back to Luke 14:33. It reads, "*Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.*" There's a word in that verse we need to focus on. The King James Version uses the word "*forsaketh.*" It means to renounce something, to turn your back on it, to walk away from it. Why would Jesus tell us to give up everything we have and walk away from all our hopes and plans? Why would He tell us to renounce who we are?

Because if we're going to be disciples of Jesus, then He must be first—not that person, that goal, that possession, that stock, that hobby, that sin, that personality, that job and so forth. There must be nothing between us and Him, not if we're going to be His disciples. We must be willing to turn our backs on anything and everything that would prevent an unhindered surrender of ourselves to Him.

But now focus on what He said in Matthew 16:24, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" Focus here on the word "follow." This is how it plays out in our everyday lives. We say, "Jesus, I want to follow You," and Jesus says "OK, come on, let's go this way." And we may start out following Him for a while, putting our feet in His footprints.

But then we see something over here that attracts our attention. Or we get tired and don't keep up. Or we just simply take our eyes off Him and our love for Him grows cold. We wander off in a different direction. And we call that "following Christ"!

Following Christ means, as we've already said, that we surrender our lives to Him, that we totally remove our hands from who we are and what we own. It means that we are different, that Jesus changes us and remakes us, not just that we add Jesus to everything else we've got going on. It means that we begin to care more and more for those around us who need Him, or in some cases, just need the basic

necessities of living. It may mean that some of our favorite activities will need to be reexamined in light of His claims on our lives.

Following Christ means that we open up to Him for an honest evaluation of our hearts, lives, time, leisure, hobbies, attitudes, and possessions, and turn away from anything that even smells like sin. It means we deny ourselves, and die to self.

And it means a thousand other things.

So when we send out the call for men and women to forsake all and follow Christ, we're talking about a radical change in some cases. We're talking about an all-out, hold-nothing-back surrender to Christ. We're talking about surrendering all of our joys, our pains, our sorrows, our hopes. It's about a consistent way of living that proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives.

And that is exactly what I'm asking you to do. I haven't sugar-coated the truth of the Scripture today. I've put it out there as plainly as I know how. What will you do with what I've told you? Will you surrender everything to Christ, or will you yawn and walk away?

We've sung the song a lot, but I don't know if we have really paid attention to the words:

*All to Jesus I surrender, All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him, in His presence daily live.*

*All to Jesus I surrender, Make me, Savior, wholly Thine;
Let me feel Thy Holy Spirit, Truly know that Thou art mine.*

*All to Jesus I surrender, Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power, Let Thy blessing fall on me.*

*I surrender all, I surrender all;
All to Thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.*