

The Cost of Discipleship

There are not many things I consider myself to be an expert on, but one thing I do have a fair amount of experience at is being a student. After the obligatory 12 years of schooling we are all compelled to attend, I spent another six years attaining a Bachelors and Masters degree which were then followed by another 10 years of post graduate studies. And just for good measure last May I finished another 2 years being a student getting a Masters at LCU. That 30 years represents nearly half of my life! I have also spent over 10 years teaching in schools during that time. One thing I have observed both as a teacher and as a student is that there are different kinds of students.

One student might be called the casual student. Technically he is a student because he is registered, he buys his books, he attends classes, usually, he takes tests, passes enough of them to stay in school then eagerly sells his books back to the bookstore and over the next few years promptly forgets most of what he has learned. Going to school and studying is not a real passion to him. Then why he is he there, you ask? There are several possible reasons. His parents have strongly urged him to go and they are largely footing the bill. It's generally expected by society and his peers that he go. Eventually he will need to get a job and an education will be helpful

if he wants to get a good job. And he really doesn't have anything better to do. Besides, the social life is not that bad. There are actually several perks to being a student. So, the casual student goes to school with little passion, little commitment and if he endures to the end, little appreciation for the diploma he receives for his time and effort.

There is another kind of student that might be called a serious student. In many ways she looks the same as the casual student. She too registers for classes and attends them. She too takes the tests and passes them. But while there are some similarities, the differences are striking. She rarely misses a class and when she does works hard to make up anything she has missed. She not only passes her tests, but with superior grades because she has actually read the books, listened carefully to the lectures and participated enthusiastically in class discussion. She rarely sells back her books because they have become prized contributions to her ever-growing library which is becoming for her a valuable resource for future study and education. She knows the day will come when she will leave the campus and begin her professional career, but she is in no hurry to rush through this time of learning, *because she is learning*. She is there to learn and to grow. She has a passion for her studies and especially for those studies she has chosen for her major. Whether or not her parents push her, whether or not her society

pressures her, whether or not there is great financial reward waiting for her afterward, she studies and learns because she has a passion for education. When she finishes she too receives a diploma, but with greater appreciation for she knows she has received much more. She has received an education.

The first student is technically a student but the second is closer to what is meant by the word disciple. An ordinary student of literature may study Shakespeare in hopes of getting a passing grade. But a literary disciple wants one day to write her own "Hamlet." An ordinary student of science will go to his science lab when assigned to, but a disciple of science will live in the lab and experience her whole world as her classroom. The ordinary medical student will learn to diagnose disease and prescribe medications but a disciple of medicine wants to be a healer. An ordinary law student may want to be a successful lawyer, win all of his court cases and enjoy a fine career in law, but a disciple of the law has a passion for justice and will work for justice no matter how many cases he loses and even if it costs him everything he has.

Discipleship implies a level of commitment, a level of passion that is willing to follow a quest no matter where it might lead, commit oneself to a cause no matter what it might cost. I was trying to think of a good example of the commitment and passion implied in the idea of discipleship. There is

that wonderful scene in *The Lord of the Rings* when Frodo agrees to take the ring to Mordor and cast it into the fire to be destroyed. It is a terrible task, against terrible odds but it is the right thing to do. And after announcing his willingness to make the quest, others join him: Gandalf the wizard, Aragorn the Ranger, Elrond the Elf, Gimli the dwarf, Boromir the Steward of Gondor, and Frodo's fellow Hobbits Samwise, Pippin and Merri . Together they make up the "Fellowship of the Ring." It is one of the greatest scenes in one of the greatest, if not the greatest fantasy tale of all times. It is important for us as a church to strive for that kind of committed, courageous fellowship. Jeff Bridges writes, "The level of our obedience is most often determined by the behavior standard of others Christians around us.

I thought about showing you the scene from *The Lord of the Rings*, where this fellowship of travelers commit to their quest to destroy the ring, but I'm not going to because it is a fantasy. It did not really happen. Instead, I want to show you a scene that really did happen and because it did captures even better for us the level of commitment and passion that the biblical idea of discipleship implies. It comes from one of our families favorite movies, "1776" the story of the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*. This scene comes at the very end of the movie when all the

arguing and debating by the constitutional delegates is over and it is time to decide who is willing to put his name on the line. (scene from 1776)

There were many Americans in 1776, but not that many willing to put their name on the line for America. In a similar way, there were many in Judea who followed Jesus around, but not all willing to be disciples. In John 8:31-37 there is recorded an example of the difference. *“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”* They answered him, *“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”* Jesus replied, *‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.’”*

This is a revealing passage. Remember, these were Jews who had believed in Jesus. They were following him. They had registered for the course. They had bought the books. They came to class, took the tests and they wanted credit for what they had done. But Jesus flunked them. They

did not pass the test. They dropped out of the class. Now they are ready to kill Jesus. Why? What would cause such a change in them?

Jesus said it was because they were not willing to “hold to his teaching.” They were okay with following Jesus as long as the potential benefits were good. As long as the crowds continued to be fed and healed, as long as the possibility of a powerful new Jewish kingdom seemed real, as long as it was clear that they were going to get what they want from Jesus there were more than willing to follow Jesus. But of course the problem was they were not actually following Jesus at all. They were using Jesus to get what they wanted, which wasn’t Jesus but only what he could do for them.

But when Jesus started teaching them what being his disciple would cost them, they started to reconsider. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”*

(Matthew 16:24-25). *“If anyone comes to me and 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. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* (Luke 14:26-27).

When Jesus began to talk about the cost of discipleship, those who were following began to sort into two very distinct groups. Some thought

his teaching was too demanding too radical. *“On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘ This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? ... The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe’ ... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”* (John 6:60-66).

Others did not leave. At the very moment the crowd of would be disciples trailed off into the distance, Jesus turns to the few who stayed with him and asks a poignant question. *“You do not want to leave too, do you? Simon Peter answered, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”* (John 6:67-69) Peter’s words have the same ring of passion and commitment as the words of those founding fathers who signed their lives away on a document that concluded with these words, *And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.*

That’s discipleship!

There is a difference between the discipleship that Jesus talks about and ordinary Christianity, and unfortunately it is ordinary Christianity that too often characterizes those who call themselves Christians, including us.

G. K. Chesterton known for his wit and wisdom remarks, “The Christian ideal has not been found tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.”

Down through history however, there have been disciples who have called believers away from convenient discipleship and back to costly discipleship. Church history rings with the stirring words of disciples like Jim Elliot, “*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to have what he cannot lose.*” Those words have special meaning since Elliot gave up his life trying to help the Auca Indians of Peru find a life they could not lose. Perhaps no one has more elegantly expressed the cost of discipleship as the one who authored a book of that title, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose principled stand against Nazism’s evil landed him in prison and cost him his life. “*Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.... Salvation is free but discipleship will cost you your life.*” Sort of sounds like Jesus doesn’t it?!

So many of the Jews who followed Jesus had not come to Jesus to learn of him, to submit to him or be changed by him. They came only to confirm their own religious ideas and pursue their own selfish agendas. But if they would take hold of Jesus they would have to let go of self. Jesus offered freedom from the slavery of sin; they were offended that anyone

would think they were sinners. Jesus offered them the chance to be sons of God, a permanent place in the divine family; they were quite content to be merely the sons of Abraham. But they were not the sons of Abraham, because Abraham was a disciple. He left his home and commit himself to journey for a city that God would show him. He held nothing back, not even his only son, in order to receive what only God could give. These Jews were no sons of Abraham. Oh, they were registered and they attended class for a while but when the instruction in the course got hard, they dropped out, because there was no room in them for the words of Jesus.

Discipleship is different. Discipleship is demanding. The demand Jesus makes which is so different is that we love him more than anything or anyone else. If we love our possessions, our jobs, our friends more than we love Jesus then we love these too much. If we love our nation more than we love Jesus, we love our nation too much. If we love our children or our spouses more than we love Jesus, we love them too much. If we love our causes more than we love Jesus, then no matter how great or noble or worthy our cause may be, we love it too much.

And there is a simple reason for this. Jesus knows that if we are in this Christianity thing for anything less than for him, then we will not stay in it when it gets hard. When our faith demands we forgive those we would

rather hold grudges against; when our faith insists we give up pleasures that will destroy us; when our faith costs us money, time, relationships, security even, God forbid, our lives, if we are not in this thing because we love Jesus, we will not stay. We will do what so many of those early Jewish believers did. We will turn and walk away. Or perhaps worse, we will change Christianity, distort it into something else, something more comfortable, less demanding, something that conveniently helps us get what we really want.

When I hear Jesus' words on discipleship two emotions well up in my soul. One is the passion to be that committed to Jesus; to sign my name on that line and stand with fellow believers who have also signed on to show their support for the King and his Kingdom and *with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.*

But I am so far from living up to that kind of discipleship I also feel an unworthiness. Like Peter I want to follow Jesus but for all the wrong reasons. He confidently announced in that upper room before his fellow disciples, "I'll never forsake you" only moments later he falls asleep in the garden, denies his Lord three times and runs away in fear. Later Peter surely believed his failures and his inadequacies and his lack of faith disqualified him from discipleship. Even after the Resurrection it appears Peter is

uncertain of the status of his discipleship. The next thing we hear Peter say to his fellow disciples is considerably less heroic, “I’m going fishing.”

Peter lost confidence in his faith. It wasn’t that Peter didn’t love the Lord, surely he did. But his discipleship was not primarily motivated by his love for Jesus but rather his desire to show Jesus what he could do, what he could bring to the table. When he failed he thought he had nothing left to give. But though Peter may have lost confidence in his faith, Jesus had not lost his love for Peter. He comes to Peter to reassure him that his failures have not disqualified him. Jesus does not choose us for what we can do for him, but for what he will do in us. Jesus asks Peter a simple question. Not will you never fail me again? Not do you think you can come through this time? Not, can you cut it? No. He asks Peter a much more important question. “Peter, do you love me?”

I don’t need your intelligence. I don’t need your ability. I don’t need your confidence. What I need, what I want is your love. Peter’s answer must be ours as well. “Yes Lord, I love you.” There is no other motivation that will sustain us in the storm; no other reason will keep us afloat when life’s torrents come at us like a flood. It will not be enough if our discipleship is for what we can get in this life. Jesus calls us to be willing to give up everything in this life, even life itself, to be his disciples. This kind

of discipleship both inspires and intimidates. It calls us to try harder even as it exposes how little we have tried at all.

A. W. Tozer has written a prayer that captures both the yearning and desire for a deeper more passionate discipleship as well as the penitent and sorrow that our desire is yet so small.

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace.

I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still.

Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, that so I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, "Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away."

Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus' name, Amen.

We are about to sing a song that reminds of the high call of discipleship. He calls us to follow him, to love him more than the things of this world. It ends with a prayer that I hope we are all praying daily.

“Savior, make us hear thy call. May we give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.”