

The Cost of Discipleship

Luke 9:51-62

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Do you imagine that Jesus ever rolled his eyes at the disciples? Maybe even just took a deep breath before He responded to something that they did or said; maybe thinking something like “Father, are you sure these are the right guys?”

Do you imagine that God ever rolls his eyes at us? Maybe looks at something I have done or said, or thought about doing or saying, and takes a deep God breath, and then uses that breath to breathe life into us one more time? Or to teach us one more time? Or tell us one more time that He loves us?

This has to have been one of those moments for Jesus. I hope you have been reading Luke as we are moving through this great story, and catching the parts in between the passages that we are focusing on for Sundays. If you read the parts between the healing of the demon-possessed man that we had last Sunday and today’s passage, you would have read of some extraordinary things: healings, feeding thousands from one boy’s lunch, empowerment of the disciples for Kingdom work, the Transfiguration. We read those things and marvel at them, but try to imagine how it must have been to be there, to be one of the disciples experiencing all this first-hand. Maybe in that context, a argument breaking out among the disciples about who would be the greatest of them is understandable. Maybe in that context, James and John asking if they should call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village doesn’t seem quite so brash, though it does seem rather presumptuous for them to even think they had the power to do that. It was a heady time for them, and Jesus needed to give them a reality check. It won’t hurt us to get one either.

The response of Jesus to the disciples who wanted to destroy the Samaritan village in some ways lays the groundwork for the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we are going to be exploring in a couple of weeks. We have the advantage of looking ahead for that lesson. The immediate lesson for the disciples, though, went back to when Jesus had taught them about loving their enemies. That was a tough lesson for them to remember

as they traveled through Samaritan territory on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Most Jewish people would use a different route – the mutual enmity between the Jews and Samaritans went back centuries, even though they had a common heritage. It was like some big family squabble, and neither side could let it go. Jesus told them to let it go.

During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln made a number of statements about that incredibly destructive family squabble and the Biblically-grounded mandate to love our enemies. Once told that his obligation as Commander in Chief was to destroy their enemies, Lincoln replied, “Do I not destroy an enemy when I make a friend of him?” That was a tough lesson for the disciples and a tough lesson for Lincoln’s advisers and it is a tough lesson for us. At least it must be tough, because it seems so hard for us to get. It is much easier to label those who disagree with us or don’t think like us or talk like us or worship like us as enemies and just write them off with no effort to change things. Remember, God never gives up on anybody, even if we do.

Maybe the even more startling aspect of this passage for the disciples and for us is in the lessons from verses 57-62 about the cost of discipleship. In three exchanges with people who were expressing a desire to follow Jesus, He gives us some important lessons about what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, fully committed to God.

To the first man, Jesus says, make sure you understand what you are signing up for. God never makes any secret of the truth that truly devoting ourselves to Him in the way He asks, in the same measure of commitment that He demonstrated to us on the cross, would be harder than any other path we could choose for our lives. The blessings are greater than any other path, too, but the road is not easy. We deal Christianity a terrible insult – we deal membership in the church a terrible insult – when we allow people to think that anyone can be truly Christian without it working a complete change in their lives. God expects that when we are truly convicted of our sin and gain full appreciation for the magnitude of His love and grace in forgiving us and cleaning us up and drawing us to Himself as His children that we will gladly and gratefully and enthusiastically rid ourselves of all those things and ways that got us into that mess and bind ourselves to Him. That’s transformation, and it is what really signing up for

Christianity is. That includes commitment to the church, not just to showing up on Sunday, but to the life and work of the community of faith on all the days in between. If we have made that commitment in a truly meaningful way, it will make us different people – different from what we were and different from the world around us.

To the second man, Jesus says, your relationship with God must be your highest priority. Respect for the family is solidly grounded in the Ten Commandments and in the whole history of the people of God, and Jesus was not telling this man to abandon that. Jesus was, however, re-ordering this man's priorities, just as He re-orders ours. Jesus is also telling this man that there are intersections in our lives that we will only come to once, and when we come to those intersections, we have to choose. Whatever we choose in that moment will affect all our future choices, for better or worse, and we must always be choosing to put our relationship with God above all else.

To the third man, Jesus uses the example of the farmer plowing his field to remind us that we do not go boldly into the future with Him looking back over our shoulder. No farmer has ever plowed a straight furrow looking backward, and we do not stay on the straight and narrow path with God if we live only in the past. We need to learn from the past, both our own and that of other people, but we cannot live there. We are living in expectation and anticipation of the second coming of Christ from the direction of the sunrise, not the sunset. That is more than symbolism – it is a call to us to march with Christ toward that time.

All this describes a life of discipleship that is transformed, focused, and meaningful, and that requires our full commitment. Lesser commitment is not discipleship, and discipleship is what we are all called to, every day.

Nobody has expressed the cost of discipleship better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was one of the few clergy who was an outspoken critic of Hitler and his regime in the Germany of the 1930s and into World War II, and because of that, he did much of his writing from prison. His stand eventually cost him his life. This is some of what Bonhoeffer said about the cost of discipleship:

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, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and 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...

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. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at 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...

Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

That is the discipleship that Jesus was describing – a commitment to life fully and completely and irrevocably sold out to God. Few are called by God to be traveling missionaries; we are all called to be instruments of God's grace and mercy where we are, unreservedly living out the love and grace of God in all that we are. It is not required of many to leave family and friends and work behind, but it is required of all to give our relationship with God our very highest priority, and to let nothing deter us from that. We are not in need of a new vision for the future, because God has provided the only vision

that we need in the new heaven and new earth that is the promise for all believers – and we will not see that by looking backward. God was present in our past, is real in our present, and awaits us in His future.

God calls us all to discipleship. Not to some lukewarm, arms-length, mediocre acquaintance, but to real, intimate relationship. God has something unimaginably better for us than any life we can make. For us to have that, to have the life now and life eternal that God made us for, the transformed, resolute path of discipleship is the way. Hear God's call to discipleship for yourself – to the unique, personal discipleship that He made you for from before the beginning, and claim it now.

[INVITATION]