

The Cost of Discipleship

Matthew 8:18-22

Dietrich Bonhoeffer struck a nerve with many people and captured a profound thought when he wrote a book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. For Bonhoeffer, that meant engaging with the evils of Nazi Germany, and for him, ultimately, it meant imprisonment and death. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and executed by hanging in April 1945 while imprisoned at a Nazi concentration camp, just 23 days before the German surrender. Following Jesus had a cost, one that few of us today would have to confront. Unfortunately, we are so enamored with our own comfort and security that any thought of trouble or deprivation immediately makes us think that something is wrong, that God has somehow failed or deserted us. And few people in the soft, American culture of easy-believism would be willing to embrace or even understand Jesus' words in our text tonight. "Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Nor can many people today understand this seemingly inappropriate response to the Scribe who professed such an unreserved commitment to him.

The rebuke is somewhat devastating, for Jesus exposes the foolishness and emptiness of,

I. CARELESS PROMISES.

Again, the words themselves seem very good.
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It's hard to be critical of that, isn't it, but Jesus certainly is. Because the promise was careless. Impulsive perhaps, or maybe downright deceptive. But regardless of the motive, the scribe was expressing a commitment that he was unwilling and unprepared to keep. And Jesus identifies a chief problem among sinful men.

We all are tempted to make such rash and foolish promises, vows we take without much forethought and with little resolve to keep.

Some people commit this sin in the formal realm of specific vows, such as marriage vows. Marriage is a relationship requiring the fullness of this commitment, and many people take that promise ever so lightly. And they break that commitment without just cause. For others it would be promises made in the context of employment, or in conducting business. A man's word used to be his honor, and a handshake was as good as your word. But too often, now, it seems that you make a promise, only to ignore the commitment whenever it becomes profitable or advantageous to do so.

And what about those words within personal relationships? If you make a commitment by saying, "I'll pray for you," then be sure that you do! Or in the realm of ordinary, mundane life, "I'll take out the garbage," "I'll do the dishes...". With any such promise, be careful that you never make them carelessly. For you students, it might be a promise of an assignment in school, a deadline that you agree to meet. Homeschoolers can be especially prone to this danger, careless with commitments and promises related to schoolwork. Be sure that you don't become guilty of careless promises. Much more broadly,

A. Empty words are no substitute for true discipleship.

The words themselves seem so very appropriate, so devoted, so energetic. "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." But the Scribe was offering only words. And words, by themselves, are cheap. Words, by themselves, are insufficient. Inadequate.

We don't know the fullness of the motivation of this scribe, but Jewish scribes were well known for their hypocrisy, for their self-satisfied boasting, for their words. So John would write,

1 John 3:18 "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but

in deed and in truth.”

And Jesus gives this rebuke,

Mat. 15:7 “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 8 “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

I grew up attending a church where we said the same words every week, the same exact liturgy, and I learned it by memory. After many decades, I could go back into a similar service in the Episcopal church and recite nearly word-for-word what is written in the liturgy. And after I became a Christian, after I came to understand the Bible, after the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to understand, I discovered that those words were actually good words. The words expressed a true and lively faith. The trouble is, as a child, they were just words. Empty words. Words devoid of understanding and words devoid of commitment. Thus, those words were no substitute for true discipleship.

So it is that mere words are not the goal of evangelism, as if the goal is merely to pray the right prayer, to say the right words, to repeat after me certain phrases and expressions. That’s not evangelism. That’s not the gospel, not mere words. Not mere verbal expressions of a commitment, not when those words are not the expression of the full commitment of the heart. “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

So beware of this danger, within your own heart. Beware of the carelessness that can so easily afflict us these days. Beware of giving mere lip service to God, attempting to substitute the living sacrifice of your whole life.

Careless promises have another obvious danger, one Jesus so thoroughly emphasizes in our text. They are inadequate when

you confront the deep and painful issues of life, the suffering of life. So Jesus responds to this scribe’s careless declaration of commitment with a declaration of his own suffering, and that response was intended to show just how empty those words really were. For,

B. Empty words are inadequate preparation for the suffering of life.

Rather than rebuke this man directly, Jesus offers a statement of his own suffering. And obviously, this scribe is not prepared to back up the words of his commitment with the willingness to follow Jesus in this way. That was the rebuke.

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So the true disciple must realize, with Jesus, that he is an alien and a stranger in this land. He is a sojourner, and this world is not his home. That gets right at the heart of our characteristic sin, doesn’t it, for we are so often tempted to love this world. And to love the things of this world. But we have no home here. We have no freedom here, no comfort, no place even to lay our head, not if you are united to Jesus.

That’s the cost of discipleship, put elsewhere in these words, Luke 9:23 “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. 25 For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”

Do you know what Jesus said just before those words?

Luke 9:21 “And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, 22 saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

So true discipleship is a matter of being united to Jesus in his death. True discipleship is a matter of having fellowship with Jesus in his sufferings. So here is true discipleship,

Col. 1:24 “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

This is a true declaration of discipleship,

Phil. 3:7 “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Peter puts it this way,

1 Peter 5:9 “Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever.”

The true disciple knows and understands that the path to glory is suffering, true discipleship is being united with Jesus in his suffering in his death. And that's the rebuke to this scribe. He knew nothing of the sort, and his careless promises had no power to sustain him in the circumstances which Jesus describes in verse 20.

If your commitment to God is merely a matter of words, then what will you do when suffering comes? What will you do when you encounter the suffering of the trials of this life? You will be unprepared, if you only preparation were rash and careless promises. Jesus knows the heart of this Scribe, and rebukes him appropriately, even as he gives a testimony of his own suffering.

But then Jesus goes on, in response to a response from one of the disciples who makes what seems to be a legitimate request.

v.21

So what's wrong with that? What's wrong with burying your father? That seems very normal and natural. But again, for Jesus, it is a matter of priority, and ultimately the priority must be following him. Thus, this request reflects one of several,

II. COMMON DISTRACTIONS.

Common distractions to discipleship. In that context,

A. Earthly responsibilities are secondary to following Jesus.

The point is very similar to the point Jesus makes in,

Luke 14:26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

I don't know anyone who advocate what we normally associate with the word “hate,” but by contrast, by comparison, even that which is best in this world must come second.

Jesus continues,

Luke 14:27 “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to

build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

So this is the cost of discipleship, even your family comes second. God comes first. Jesus comes first. Even your father and your mother come second. Even your son or your daughter come second. In the context of discipleship, even those things which are of the greatest value in this world, become a distraction to true discipleship.

I am one to highly value my family. And treasure the commitment of time and energy I give to my family, to say nothing of money. In this world, nothing comes first. Not my own desires, and not even the ministry to which God has called me. I get that. I believe that. I seek to live out that priority. That's what makes these words of Jesus so startling.

v.22

B. The cost of discipleship is startling.

To the point of being offensive. So what is Jesus' point? "Follow me," obviously. Be my disciple. That's the challenge. But what of those words, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead." I think that the startling point is simply this, that we cannot be distracted by the attractions of this world. Those who are engaged merely in the things of this world cannot be a disciple of

Jesus. Those who love the world, those whose priorities lie in the ordinary affairs of this world, cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

And the startling illustration is used for its obvious effect. The inhabitants of the world are dead, spiritually. Those whose home is in this world are separated from God, dead in their sins, by nature enemies of God. And those who belong to this world are consumed by the responsibilities of this world. They are devoted to the affairs of this world. Indeed, they love the world and the things in the world.

So "leave the dead to bury their own dead." Leave those who belong to this world, who have no hope of life beyond this world, leave them to attend to the physical details of burial, because that is all that they have. That is their own hope, as life itself is snuffed out. Burial belongs to this world, so leave the inhabitants this world to their own destiny. You, disciples of Jesus, "Follow me."

Please don't take from this passage the idea that is improper to conduct a funeral service or a burial for a Christian who has died. That's not the point. The point is to rebuke those whose attachments to this world are of greatest priority, a rebuke to those who are attached even to the corpses of those who have died with a greater attachment than they have for Jesus. To be blunt, there are people more concerned with all the details of a funeral service than they are in offering their own bodies as a living sacrifice to Jesus.

So Jesus says, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Leave those who belong to this world to attend to the affairs of this world. A disciple of Jesus is called to follow him!

Luke's gospel gives us a few more details of this conversation,

Luke 9:60 And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61 Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” 62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The cost of discipleship is startling, isn't it? The cost is your life, the living sacrifice of your whole body. The cost is to turn away from all that the world offers you, to reject all the pleasure and security this world would have to offer. This is the call of Jesus, “Follow me.”

That is his call to you this afternoon. Follow me. The details will differ for each one of you, but the challenge is the same. The calling is the same. The obligation is the same. The definition of discipleship is the same. Follow me, says Jesus. Follow me into suffering. Follow me into death. And follow me into life.

So count the cost. Perhaps you are holding back, holding back part of your life. Maybe you are not willing to pay the full cost, maybe you want some of the benefits but shrink back from the fullness of the demands. Jesus' words are clear, however. If you would be a disciple of Jesus, it will cost you your life.