

Discipleship

Study 5: The Cost

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Authored by: Mark Watson

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The Message

We have briefly spoken before about the cost of being a Disciple of Christ. It is an incredibly broad topic, one much too large for us to cover in totality. In this study, we want to encourage people to reflect about the true cost of discipleship, and so grow in faith and love of God.

What message are we hearing in our churches today? Are we hearing teaching along the lines of the 'prosperity gospel' or other 'experiential' teaching based on the Toronto blessing? How many times do we learn of the true cost of discipleship?

Jesus' teaching can only be interpreted in one way when we read "...and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me"¹ and "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*"² These passages are further substantiated throughout the New Testament (Galatians 5:16-26, Philippians 3 et al)

We are called to live lives that often can seem so alien to the world. The very decisions that we take can seem to 'fly in the face of adversity'. God has told us in Scripture that "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"³ The world can so often question and challenge our 'raison d'être', our very meaning and purpose for existence which is founded in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is based on a call by Jesus (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13f; Luke 9:50-62). It involves personal allegiance to him, expressed by following him and giving him exclusive loyalty (*Mark. 8:34-38*; Luke 14:26-33). In at least some cases it can be taken to mean literal abandonment of home, business ties and possessions (Mark 10:21, 28), but in every case readiness to put the claims of Jesus first, whatever the cost, was demanded. Faith in Jesus and allegiance to him are what determined the fate of men at the last judgement (Luke 12:8).

In part, Discipleship can be summarised in Servanthood. The disciple who is privileged to be a member of Jesus' Kingdom is a servant, which means thinking God's thoughts (Mark 8:31-33), pursuing the life of the cross (Mark 8:34-38) through the message (Mark 9:1-8) and the example of Jesus (Mark 9:9-32), and hence rejecting status (Mark 9:33-37), exclusivism (Mark 9:38 - 10:16) and the treasures of the world (Mark 10:17-31).

We saw in Mark 8:34 that Jesus required the 'would be disciple' to count the cost not only before becoming a disciple, but also clearly after becoming a disciple. It is necessary for each and every one of us to continually re-evaluate the price of discipleship – think of the conversation that Jesus and Peter (John 21:15-25). Disciples must deny themselves daily, and take up the cross and follow Jesus (*Luke 9:23*). It is possible for one not to be a true part of the Way while externally travelling with Jesus (e.g. Judas). Therefore, the challenge is directed not only to the crowd but also to the disciples (*Mark 8:34-91*; Matthew 10:37-39; 16:24-26; Luke 9:23-27)

¹ Matthew 10:38

² Matthew 16:24-26

³ Isaiah 55:8-9

Counting the cost is part of putting away the sinful desires of the flesh and putting aside our childish nature in order to grow like Jesus into maturity and adulthood. Jesus declared that to be a disciple is to become like the Master (Matthew 10:24-25; Luke 6:40). Becoming like Jesus includes going out with the same message, ministry and compassion (Matthew 10:5-15), practising the same religious and social traditions (Mark 2:18-22; Matthew 12:1-8), belonging to the same family of obedience (Matthew 12:46-49); exercising the same servanthood (Mark 10:42-45, Matthew 20:26-28; John 13:12-17), experiencing the same suffering (Matthew 10:16-25; Mark 10:38-39).

Counting the cost of discipleship is not just about being prepared to face torture, imprisonment and persecution in the way that so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are doing at this very moment throughout the world. Although that is something we must all be prepared for and willing to do there are other aspects to 'cost' that we must not forget. This includes being able to turn the world's values upside down in order to evangelise and witness the message of the gospel, a wonderful example of which is detailed in Paul's book Philemon. As we grasp hold of this truth we realize that evangelism comes at a cost, and can often be a fundamental aspect of discipleship.

Questions

1. In what ways can we be called to 'take up our cross' and follow Jesus?
2. Can the cost ever become too great or too heavy for us to bear (Matthew 11:28-29, Philippians 4)?
3. Counting the cost is part of witnessing the gospel to a secular world. Why is the book of Philemon so important, what can it teach us and how can we put those lessons into practice?

