

## “The High Cost of Discipleship” (pt. 2)

### Matthew 10:38-39

When Jesus called His twelve disciples to follow Him, and they accepted His invitation, their entire lives changed in a heartbeat. Nothing was the same ever again, because His call required that they abandon some things that had previously been important to them, including their personal ambitions, loyalties, incomes, careers, homes, and material possessions. When they said “yes” to following Jesus they were reorienting their entire lives around their relationship with Him.

When we hear about the Twelve having to leave everything and follow Christ there may be a tendency to think that their calling was unique and atypical—applicable only to them. But as you read Jesus’ words in the Gospel narratives you quickly discover that His call to *anyone* who would be His disciple contains the *identical* conditions. The particular ways those conditions are expressed vary from person to person, but the call and the commitment is the same.

In other words, the *expectations* Jesus has for all of His followers are extremely high. The *cost* is extremely high! Consider these words from **Matthew 10:38-39**. *<sup>38</sup> And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

If you have been here in our study of Matthew 10 you will remember that Jesus has been addressing His twelve disciples, preparing to send them out to preach on His behalf. But a few months later Jesus made a very similar statement to a *crowd* that had gathered in Caesarea Philippi. There He said, *<sup>34</sup> “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:34).*

When Jesus said, “if anyone would come after me,” He meant *anyone who* would be His disciple. In other words, this is just as applicable to you and me as it was to the Twelve or the people in that crowd. To “come after” Jesus means to follow Him, to accept and embrace His teachings, to obey His words and commands, and to enter into the life that He offers. This is what it means to be His disciple.

And one of the requirements of someone who would be a disciple, according to this passage and Matthew 10, is to “*take up one’s cross.*” What does that mean?

Obviously, Jesus is using a metaphor here (He is not asking His disciples to literally carry a cross around). But what is the meaning of this metaphor, and what relevance does it have to being a disciple of Jesus?

It is not uncommon for someone who has a physical ailment, or who has to endure challenging circumstances, or who is stuck living with a difficult person to say, “This is the cross I have to bear.” But if that’s what Jesus meant He would have said, “Endure your cross...” However, Jesus said, “*Take your cross*” or “*take up your cross,*” which suggests that your cross is something you choose to pick up and carry. It’s not a reference to something that happens to you, but something that you initiate.

We cannot fully appreciate this metaphor of carrying one’s cross unless we understand that capital punishment in the Roman world was carried out in a very public manner. In places like Jerusalem where crucifixion was practiced, the condemned criminal was led through the

streets on foot, carrying the crossbeam of his cross, and forced to walk past jeering crowds on the way to his execution. That is the picture Jesus' words would have painted in the minds of His hearers (Bruce, 151).

It was a particularly unnerving metaphor for those present with Jesus, because they would have immediately considered the outcome of the condemned man's journey, which was a slow and tortuous death. They associated taking up a cross with death.

So what death is Jesus referring to in verse 38? I would suggest to you that, given the context and based on the language Jesus uses in parallel passages when He talks about taking up one's cross, the death is a reference to *self*. Verse 39 talks about losing one's life for Jesus' sake. Later in Matthew 16 and its parallel in Mark 8 Jesus said, "*if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*"

One of the major barriers to following Jesus is *self*! Self-centeredness and self-will are incompatible with following Jesus. And so Jesus says that in order to be His disciple we must deny self, crucify self, and lose self.

That's not easy. Because we are born with a nature that is inherently self-centered. We naturally coddle ourselves and indulge ourselves. We have a propensity to satisfy our own desires, follow our own impulses, gratify our own cravings, pursue our own ambitions, protect our own interests, and promote our own welfare. But *being self-oriented and self-centered is incompatible discipleship, because a disciple of Jesus is Christ-oriented and Christ-centered.* A disciple of Jesus is first and foremost about His glory, His pleasure, and His business. And because the demands and desires of "self" so greatly interfere with and militate against a Christ-oriented, Christ-centered life it (self) must be put to death.

David Platt, in his book, **Radical**, writes, "*Ultimately Jesus was calling [His disciples] to abandon themselves. They were leaving certainty for uncertainty, safety for danger, self-preservation for self-renunciation. In a world that prizes promoting oneself, they were following a teacher who told them to crucify themselves*" (p. 12).

So how do we put self to death? First, let me say that we need God's help. Without His help we wouldn't even *want* to die to self, let alone be able to do it. He has to do a work in our hearts to give us the desire to do it. But by His enablement, we put self to death by renouncing our self-will and self-interest in order to wholeheartedly pursue God's will and God's interests. By relinquishing control and ownership of everything in our lives and handing it over to Him, by letting Him be the boss of our own lives, and determining that whatever He says we will do, and wherever He leads we will go. We do it by living to please Him rather than please ourselves. This is the way we die to self, and it is an essential requirement of being a disciple of Jesus. It is not optional.

Jesus says in **verse 38**, ***38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*** Last week we studied the previous passage where Jesus said, ***37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me***" (10:37). We learned what it means to not be worthy of Jesus. I suggested that a reason *why* someone who loves father and mother and child more than Jesus is not worthy of Him. It's very simple, and it's very logical. It is not merely because He demands it; it is because He deserves it, and anything less than Him having first place in one's life is an indication that someone doesn't really know Him.

Jesus is the King and Lord of lords, the Messiah, our Savior, our High Priest, the Bread of life, and the Living Water. Everything in the entire universe, which He created for His own

glory and pleasure, revolves around Him.

And because of these things, Jesus is worthy of the total allegiance and the unrivaled commitment and the wholehearted devotion of every living creature in this universe. There is no one whose worth or worthiness comes close to His. So it's unthinkable, given who He is, that He would be okay having disciples who consider others as more worthy of our attention and devotion than Him—even family members.

In verse 38 Jesus is saying that it's unthinkable, given who He is, that He would be okay having disciples who consider themselves as more worthy of their attention and devotion than Him, or their interests as more worthy than His. So, because "self" wants to be in charge and will not voluntarily submit to another, it must be put to death.

This is the high cost of discipleship. It is a high cost because we naturally want to be in charge of our own lives. We don't *naturally* want to give up control to someone who undoubtedly has a different plan and a different path for my life. So choosing to die to self is consequential. It's so consequential that for many it's a deal-breaker. And I suspect it's a deal-breaker for many because they don't understand or believe that dying to self is part of the *gospel*—the *good news*.

Oh, I know, it doesn't sound like good news; it sounds like *bad news*. It sounds like a plan that robs us of our freedom and pleasure. It sounds like a method that smothers creativity and self-expression. So, how is this good news? How can a condemned man on his way to an execution possibly be equated with good news?

It is because Jesus wants our lives to count for something. He doesn't want us to waste our lives on frivolous, superficial, inconsequential things. He wants us to *really* live, and to be able to reap real rewards from really living. Look at what He says in **verse 39**.  
***39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***

How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm on a path of self-discovery"? I'm trying to figure out who I am and why I react the way I do. I'm trying to understand what it is I really want in life, and how to go after it.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? A person who devotes himself to finding his life in this world (self-discovery) will lose it. In other words, when people live primarily to satisfy their own desires, gratify their own cravings, pursue their own ambitions, fulfill their own dreams, look out for their own interests, promote their own welfare, and live for their own pleasure they ultimately waste their lives and will forfeit their souls. They lose everything. They may have *had* everything in this world, but in the end, on the Day of Judgment, when the value of their lives and accomplishments are all added up it will amount to a big fat zero. There will be nothing to show for it, except eternal regret.

On the other hand, the one who loses his life in this world—who does not live for self but for Jesus—who lives primarily for His glory, His pleasure, and His business, will find his life. That is, he will fulfill the purpose for which he was created, which is to know Christ and have a relationship with Him; she will get to be with Jesus for all eternity and enjoy His splendor and glory and majesty and holiness and love. Because life is ultimately all about Jesus!

It's not about you and me. It's not about the here and now. It's not how comfortable we can make our lives on this earth. It's not how happy we can be in this life; it's not, 'he who dies with the most toys wins', it's not about grabbing for all the gusto since you only go around once in life.

It's about preparing to see Jesus and live with Him forever and ever. That's why the Bible calls us aliens and strangers in this world. This world is not our home, we're just passing through. Our citizenship, even now, is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, so we can finally see Him and live with Him.

The call to die is actually a call to really, truly live. In the end you're not giving up anything; you are gaining everything.

Later in Jesus' ministry He expanded on this. After saying, <sup>35</sup> *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it,* Jesus said, <sup>36</sup> *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?* That's a rhetorical question (a question with an obvious answer), and, of course, the answer is "nothing". It *doesn't* profit a man anything if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul. And what Jesus means by "gaining the whole world" is achieving spectacular success through one's own efforts, and doing it for one's own gain and glory.

When I was young I wanted to be a professional baseball player. In retrospect, the reason I wanted to do that is because I couldn't imagine a more thrilling, glamorous, and exciting profession. I loved the way I felt after hitting a home run, or after making a fabulous play in the field, or after winning an important game. I loved the applause I received when I played well. Baseball was an activity that massaged my ego, made me feel good, and fulfilled my quest for personal glory.

Let's just say that I had pursued baseball as a profession. Let's just say that I became a perennial all-star, a Hall-of-Famer, a legend.

Jesus is saying in verse 36, "So what?"

In the movie, *The Natural*, when superstar baseball player Roy Hobbs was asked why he played the game, he said, "When I walk down the street I want people to point at me and say, 'There goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was.'"

Jesus says, "So what! So what if you were the best baseball player that ever lived? What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" And then He asks another rhetorical question in **verse 37**: <sup>37</sup> *For what can a man give in return for his soul?* And, here again, the answer is "nothing."

Jesus is making a reference to the Day of Judgment, the Day when each of us stands before God to give an account of our life lived on this earth. And He is saying that a person who has spent his life for himself rather than for Jesus will forfeit his soul, and will not be able to buy it back. The total value of his life will add up to nothing, so there will be nothing to give in exchange for his soul, no matter how much status or wealth or fame or favor he had while living on this earth.

Michael Jordan is not going to get a break on the Day of Judgment because he was the best basketball player who ever lived. He cannot exchange his basketball skills or his MVP awards or NBA championships for his soul because on the Day of Judgment those things will prove to be worthless. If he doesn't have Jesus, he'll forfeit his soul and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Michael Jackson were some of the world's greatest entertainers while they lived. But their charisma and their talents and their fame are not going to help them on the Day of Judgment. If they don't have Jesus they'll forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Steve Jobs and Bill Gates' technological genius and their fabulous wealth are not going

to be of any advantage to them on the Day of Judgment. If they don't have Jesus, they'll forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking's intellectual abilities will not contribute anything to their souls' redemption on the Day of Judgment. If they don't have Jesus, they'll forfeit their souls and get nothing and be nothing for all eternity.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Our lives are *not* about what we can make of them in this world. It's not how happy we can be, how accomplished we are, how many adventures we've had, how many friends we've made, how much knowledge we've acquired, how many charitable deeds we've done, or how much wealth we've accumulated.

It's about Jesus and His kingdom and His glory. It's about believing in Him and surrendering to Him and walking with *Him* and living for *Him*.

When we die we take out of this world exactly what we brought into it—nothing! So even if we gain the whole world—even if we're the richest or most powerful or most famous or most accomplished person on earth, yet we don't have Jesus, we forfeit our souls, and we will be impoverished for all eternity, consigned to a place of unending suffering and torment.

On the other hand, those who lose their lives in this world, those who, in the words of Paul, "consider their lives worth nothing" (Acts 20:24) if only they may gain Christ and know Christ and be found in Christ, will be blessed beyond comprehension. Because the call to die is actually a call to really, truly live. In the end we gain everything.

And even if the struggles in this world are intense and painful and seemingly never-ending, those who live for Jesus will have absolutely no complaints and no regrets when they see Him and get to be in His presence forever.

## The High Cost of Discipleship (pt. 2) Matthew 10:38-39

Main Idea: “When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

The Radical, Life-altering call to discipleship

The Call to Die (38-39)

    Taking up one’s cross (38a)

        A voluntary act

        A symbol of death

    Dying to self (38a)

Principle: Being self-oriented and self-centered are incompatible with discipleship; because a disciple of Jesus is Christ-oriented and Christ-centered

    Why Jesus comes before “self” (38b)

    Lost and Found (39)

        Self-discovery leads to loss (39a)

        Self-sacrifice leads to gain (39b)

Principle: The call to die is actually a call to really, truly live. In the end you’re not giving up anything; you are gaining everything