

Who is a Disciple?

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Date: 18 June 2023

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[0 : 00] If you could turn with me to Luke's Gospel in the New Testament, chapter 14. Luke's Gospel, chapter 14, and we're going to read from verse 25.

Luke's Gospel, chapter 15, and we're going to read from verse 25.

And are not able to finish it. Anyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, this person began to build and wasn't able to finish. Or, suppose a king is about to go to war against another king.

Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with 10,000 men to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciple.

[1 : 41] Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the mature heat it is thrown out.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Amen. May the Lord bless the reading of his word.

I'm going to be speaking today about two things from these verses and also from Mark's chapter 8, their book we read earlier on.

Very simple things, if you like. First thing is called to be disciples. And the second thing is being a disciple. I'll tell you how this message came about.

You know, when I was a minister up north and then in Kilwinning down in Ayrshire, like Colin, I used to do quite a lot of consecutive preaching.

[2 : 56] But when you're going here, there and everywhere and you're a wandering preacher, you tend just to have a sermon for that place.

And so I was wondering, what will I preach here on Sunday evening? And there are two things that I usually use for my personal, if you like, quiet time, as people call it.

One is the C.S. Lewis, the business of heaven. And the other is F.B. Meyer, which is more devotional. And in the devotion earlier in the week, he had been quoting this text here.

And what struck me was how Jesus said three times in very, very emphatic language the phrase, You cannot be my disciple.

Jesus could never be accused of confronting people with what a former pastor of mine said, easy believism. And therefore, that is the reason for the title of the sermon, Who is a disciple?

[4 : 29] Why am I asking this question? Because I believe that sometimes Christians have wrong ideas about disciples and discipleship.

And these wrong ideas, I reckon, can either be conscious or subconscious. In other words, there could be an idea, even, as I say, subconsciously, that there are two types or tiers or classes of Christians.

There's the kind of ordinary mass of Christians. And then there is disciples. And allied to that kind of idea is that we can choose whether or not we sign up for discipleship.

And also, you find that discipleship courses are offered to those who may wish to enroll in them.

So that's why I'm asking the question, Who is a disciple? I want to put forward a proposition tonight.

[5 : 49] Don't worry about that word proposition. It's dead simple. Although it comes up a lot in philosophy. Just think of the word proposing. Anything you propose, anything you make an assertion about or a statement about.

Well, what I'm proposing tonight is, if we're not a disciple, we're not a Christian. That's my proposition. I could put it another way.

The words disciple and Christian in the New Testament are synonymous and interchangeable. In the cost of discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was executed in 1915, 1945, at the very beginning of one of his famous books, The Cost of Discipleship, at the very beginning of

it, said this, We are fighting today for costly grace.

And I believe that if Bonhoeffer was here right now, he would say the same about a lot of Western Christianity. I'm thinking here of the church in its broadest sense, and should I say that the person in most need of this sermon is me.

I said that I've got this proposition that if we're not a disciple, we're not a Christian. Let me just remind you that the word Christian is only used three times in the New Testament.

[7 : 38] In Acts, where Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch in the 11th chapter of Acts, and it tells us there that the disciples were first called Christians.

in Corinthians, and in Peter, where Peter talks about if you suffer it as a Christian, in contrast to the word Christian, the word disciples is used over 250 times.

both words, it's obvious by the context, if you do a wee bit of research and you go through all of those words, I invite you to do that yourself, you will discover that both these words describe and denote followers of Jesus Christ.

It's very, very clear in the Gospels, and Jesus makes it clear, that a disciple is someone that responds to the call to follow Jesus and leaves their old life for an utterly new life.

You know these first day instances of Jesus calling people, they left their nets, they left their boats, they left the tax booth and followed Christ. And with this theology, the Apostle Paul agrees, because Paul says that being a Christian is something revolutionary, radical, because he says if any man is a Christian, he's a new creature.

[9 : 32] The old has passed away and the new has come. As Bonhoeffer puts it again in that book, The Cost of Discipleship, when Christ calls someone to himself, he bids them come and die.

The stakes could not be higher. You know, in Mark's Gospel there, in verse 35, listen to this verse, because here's what's at stake.

For whosoever would save his life will lose it. Paradoxical, seems surprising, seems strange, but while it's paradoxical, surprising, and strange, let's remember it's Jesus that's telling us who is the truth.

for whoever would, whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it.

You know, these words, we can read these words sort of, you know, just slipping over them. These are, these are either words of a megalomaniac.

[10 : 59] To imagine any of the prophets standing in Elijah or Moses or any of the prophets, Jeremiah, standing in front of people, fellow human beings, and saying, if you lose your life for my sake, you'll find it.

And if you keep your life, you'll lose it. So, I've said the word disciple is used over 250 times.

I've said it's the emphatic teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. I've said that if you look at the context of the word disciples, it's denoting followers of Jesus.

And furthermore, remember the Great Commission. What is the Great Commission? To make disciples. Christianity is like a diamond.

It's many-sided. and we must not preach one side of Christianity and ignore all the other sides of Christianity.

[12 : 10] Let me put it this way. There are certain sides of Christianity, and I don't mean this facetiously because they're ultra-important, and I thank God for them and I'm sure you do, that are comforting, that are palliative.

There are other sides of that diamond of Christianity that are challenging. This is one of them. We must not preach one side of Christianity ignoring the other sides, such as discipleship.

we must be faithful as preachers of preaching the whole Christ. Because if we don't preach the whole Christ, we will end up, I believe, peddling what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace.

I think I've said enough to demonstrate that we're all called to be disciples. Let's turn now to see what Jesus tells us from this passage in Luke about being a disciple.

before I look at it in a wee bit of detail, I just want to say a couple of things about it.

[13 : 44] Notice how it opens in Luke 14 verse 25. Large crowds were travelling with Jesus.

Colin preached today and he was talking about those that are associated with Jesus have a history. Those that are associated with Jesus are travelling with him.

And those that are associated with Jesus have a passion for mission. And I think this sermon, Colin had no idea what I was preaching tonight, but I think they chime.

But I want to say this, that the opening words of Jesus here, I'm going to use them in a slightly different way from what Colin was using them this morning.

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus and turning to them. I love visualising these things.

[14:58] I don't just read words, I visualise them, I hope you do. And turning to them he said, if anyone comes after me and does not hate father, mother, wife, children, etc, etc, he cannot, she cannot be my disciple.

I bet you that caused them to stop in their tracks, especially the way that he phrased that. Now, Jesus is not, I know the word hates there, but he's not asking anybody to hate anyone, especially their kin and their family.

He's using what preachers did and writers even, he's using hyperbole, exaggeration, he's getting their attention and he's saying that if something stops you from coming to me, that means that you'll not be able to be my disciple, even if it is your closest relatives.

And if they mean more to you than my offer to you of salvation and forgiveness and a life of fellowship in time and eternity with God, if they mean more to you for the cross that I went to, then you cannot be my disciple.

Sometimes it's nothing spectacularly like that that stopped people coming to Christ. Sometimes it's golf. Sometimes it's gardening.

[17:07] So, what I want to do, there are three things here that Jesus says that if we do not do, we cannot be his disciple.

They are denial of self, carrying the cross, and following him. And I want to use the rest of the time available just to say something about each of those categories.

You need to deny yourself, said Jesus. What does he mean? Does he mean give up something for Lent, chocolate, or what I like, rhubarb, crumble, or whatever it might be?

not at all. Pay close attention to the language. Deny themselves.

Why is this so important, this denial of the self, of the you, of you being in control of your life, of you being on the throne of your life, and what you will do religiously, or morally, or in terms of life's opportunities?

[18:44] Why is this so important? I want to say it's so important because it's our fundamental problem as human beings.

our fundamental problem isn't we have this sin or that sin. Our fundamental problem is the direction of our will.

The fundamental problem is that we are turned on in ourselves and turned away from God until grace comes to us.

We are the dictator of our lives. Jesus is saying, as long as that is the case, you cannot be my disciple. The stakes are so high, as Jesus says there, in Mark's gospel.

So high that it's gaining or losing a life. And you know, there's a tragedy in that verse 35 in Mark. It's so tragic, that verse as well.

[20:05] Because you know, in the story you know, of the rich young ruler that met Jesus and he allegedly wanted to know about the gospel and eternal life and so on.

He wanted to travel with Jesus. But then when he heard what the cost of discipleship was, he didn't want to travel with Jesus.

It says that Jesus, looking on him, loved him as he walked away. Wonderful, wonderful sort of statement, that I think. And the tragedy here is that such as the deceitfulness of sin, this power and this principle that seems to have a hold of us, that we think that holding on to our little dream of life will reach some sort of happiness or utopia.

Indeed, what Jesus is saying in talking about self-denial, he's actually giving us an opportunity for real life.

He said, I have come that they might have life and might have it more abundantly in its fullness, in its richness, in a way that nothing in this world can possibly even compete with.

[21:39] what could compete with being able to have a relationship with the everlasting God who is love, with his son Jesus Christ who went all the way along the road for us.

Jesus Christ is the supreme human being who denied self.

And he didn't do it for himself. He did it for you and he did it for me. And then take up the cross or carry the cross says Jesus.

So if you do not deny yourself you cannot be his disciple and neither if you do not take up your cross or carry your cross you cannot be his disciple. There's no such thing as crossless Christianity. It doesn't exist except as a figment in people's mind. Cross bearing Christianity is the only Christianity that Jesus Christ preached.

[23 : 08] And that image when Jesus says you've to take up your cross it is so vivid isn't it? Because it conjures up the image of the criminal facing execution who had to bear the cross beam of that cross.

That's when the Romans were executing people they forced the criminal who was going to his or her execution to bear that cross.

cross. And these people would have known that Jesus was speaking to and he's saying to them you need to take up a cross. cross. And that cross could be the instrument and will be the instrument of your execution putting to death the self.

And not only that maybe even literally being put to death as a martyr. As Bonhoeffer says when he calls anyone he bids them come and die.

Every one of them at least to self. The cross that Christ is talking about is not social suffering or natural suffering.

[24 : 40] The cross that Christ is talking about is suffering in the cause of the gospel standing up for the gospel being salt and light being given the grace to have the courage to speak the truth.

And not only does the cross promise us suffering remember what Jesus said blessed are they that persecuted remember that other statement in the New Testament the godly will be persecuted.

Jesus not only promises suffering he promises rejection because what gave rise to these comments by the way these comments are in all the gospels more than once and what gave rise to these comments is when the disciples realized the kind of Messiah or at least up to a point they realized that Jesus was when Jesus said to them I'm going to suffer and to be rejected and to die. and I think that the words of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane are very poignant as we're thinking of this discipleship and taking up the cross.

Could you not watch with me one hour? I wonder when I go before him he might say that to me.

[26 : 54] So if you do not deny yourself you cannot be my disciple. If you do not take up your cross you cannot be my disciple. Thirdly and finally follow me.

somebody once said in those two words is the whole of Christianity. And they're right.

Because I'll tell you the self denial and the cross are presupposed by follow me. Now follow me when Jesus says follow me it doesn't mean trail behind me.

He means walk and step alongside me. let's travel together along the road of suffering and rejection for the glory of God and the cause of Christ and the gospel.

people. These words that Jesus uses about denying oneself and taking up the cross both of these words are in the imperative mood and all that means is they are critical they are ultra important they are necessary.

[28 : 46] You cannot escape them. They're also in a tense that indicates that they are fundamental decisions at the door of entry to the Christian life of discipleship.

the follow me is also an imperative but it's in the present tense and that's important in Greek because the present tense in Greek is a continuous tense.

Never stop following me. notice Jesus uses the language whosoever.

This is a kind of invitation. Jesus never forces anybody to follow him or to deny themselves or to take up their cross. But it's more than an invitation.

It's a lordly and kingly summons to heed that call or lose your life forever. Note the absoluteness of the summons of Jesus here.

[30 : 17] Now as we close you might understandably be wondering where does grace fit into all of this?

The answer is it's everywhere and is not absent from any of it. We are made willing in the day of his power.

No one can come to me said Jesus unless my father draws them. There's a line in an old hymn which struck me probably about thirty years ago which says every holy thought is his.

But we must never lower or ignore or not preach or think that we can get away with cheap grace.

Of course God understands how fragile and vulnerable we are. That wonderful hymn that we opened up with if you Lord should mark iniquity who should stand I'm done for I'm done for of

course he doesn't treat us in accordance with that fragility and vulnerability in accordance with our sins or our poor discipleship but he still bids us even tonight to come and die because that's the only route to real life and eternal life have we responded to this great call of

[32 : 15] Jesus Christ I began by asking who is a disciple are you a disciple am I a disciple I believe fairly strongly that responding to Jesus' call of discipleship will have a far greater impact on our Christianity than any programs or structures that we as a church may adopt at the time of the war Winston Churchill says all I can offer you is blood sweat and tears

Jesus goes further doesn't he whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple is the cross in our Christianity are we followers of Christ amen may the Lord bless these thoughts to us for his glory and for our good