

The Cost of Discipleship

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] We live in a world of many paradoxes, don't we? If you don't know what a paradox is, it's when something that seems absurd or contradictory turns out to be true.

So I came up with a few sayings myself. Actually, I looked up Google, I Googled and I found these. So here they are. The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know.

The only constant in life is change. The more you try and keep someone close, the more you push them away.

Less is more. Life is full of paradoxes, isn't it? And I think in our passage today, we've come to yet another. This time, it's for the person who desires to follow Jesus.

In fact, it's essential if you want to follow Jesus. And unless you understand it, you'll struggle in the long run. And the paradox at the heart of the Christian life is this.

[1 : 08] If you want to find and enjoy eternal and abundant life, you have to die. In short, you have to die in order to live.

Now, of course, if you've been following along over the last few weeks, in the last two chapters, you probably picked up this vibe already. Remember some of what Jesus has said.

The first shall be last and the last first. Those who expect to enter God's kingdom don't. And those who think they can't do. Being in God's kingdom is both easy and hard.

It's easy because it's a gift from God. It's free. All it takes is trust in Jesus. And yet, paradoxically, it's also hard.

It's costly. Because it's not cheap grace, but costly grace. It was costly to God in the death of His Son. But it's also costly for us in the death of our own lives.

[2 : 11] And so here we read in verse 25, large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them. He said, If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own children, such a person cannot be my disciple.

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Now, here we see many, particularly the poor and the outcast, in Jesus' day, attracted to Him and His teaching.

Finally, they say, there's someone here who is championing us, who's taken notice of us, who's sticking up for us against the rich and the powerful. And yes, Jesus was.

But Jesus was also challenging them as well because He loved them. He knew that just like the rich and the powerful, they needed to take up their own cross to follow Him as well.

Now, everyone, not just the rich, had to humbly lay down their lives. Now again, Jesus isn't asking them literally to cut all their ties with family and friends.

[3 : 18] But Jesus is saying that even the most important relationships that we have in our lives, in our marriage, in our closest friendships, all of which are precious to us, these need to be put below Jesus.

To be His disciple, Jesus has to be number one. Otherwise, He's nothing to us. Which makes sense, doesn't it? Because if Jesus is God's divine Son, and He is, then He is God.

And we need to treat Him as God and not anything less. And I think deep down, all of us, those of us, particularly who are Christians, we know that, don't we? But the tricky part is, how do we put it into practice?

And for each of us, those struggles are quite different or slightly different depending on our circumstances and who we are. For some of us, it's our money and possession.

Like the rich ruler whom Jesus asked to sell everything, we find it so hard to let go. We cling on to our money and our possessions. For others, it's our professional status or our reputation or some, our family and relationships.

[4 : 34] For some of us, we are too afraid to speak truth to them because we are afraid of losing them. For others, we might prioritize the success of our children in this world.

And so we might end up objecting if they became a missionary, say, or if they spent too much time doing ministry at church because it would jeopardize their studies and career. excuse me.

And then for some of us, it's our time. We may even say, look, I'm willing to do these things and give up some time for God just as long as I can do whatever I want with the rest of my time.

Well, I think at the core of all these, the common question is that of control. Who really is controlling my life?

Who is the sovereign ruler over it? I mean, even for us, those of us in ministry, I mean, as a pastor, we can even go so far as to boast, you know, I've given my life to serve God only to think quietly in my own heart, but I'll only do it on my terms and in my way.

[5 : 47] Well, Jesus says that if you want to be His disciples, then we need to hand over the reins to Him. Totally. Will we allow Him full control and final say over our lives according to what He says in His Word?

Jesus uses a gruesome picture, doesn't He? He says we are to carry our cross to follow Him. And we know that in His day, that was the most gruesome of punishments.

The equivalent of wearing a noose around your neck today instead of a tie and walking around. Or if you've seen the picture of, in the States, these prisoners on death row wearing these orange overalls and with cuffs around their hands and legs.

Well, imagine walking around like that each day. That's what it's like to be carrying the cross. Now again, Jesus is not saying that what God's going to do is literally take away all that we hold dear in our lives.

No, that's not what He's saying. And we mustn't picture God as this cruel ruler that's just out to do it just to, you know, cause us pain. No, God has a really good reason why He wants us to do that.

[7 : 04] And it's actually for our best. It's for our good. Because when we carry our cross, when we lay down our lives for God, we end up doing His will. Which is something that Jesus Himself did.

He carried the cross, not just in His death, but also in His life. During His ministry, He was carrying His cross daily. So, Jesus asked us to carry our cross so that when we do that, we place our lives in His hands.

And we willingly allow Him to rule over us so that He can do what is best for us in our lives. He doesn't promise that the journey will be easy, but it will be the best for us because we're doing God's will and living according to His plan.

And now, because Jesus knows that's not going to be easy, He moves on next to tell them to count the costs first. And in both the examples He gives, the point He's trying to make is that we have to count the costs up front first and then commit as a result of that.

So, verse 28, suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Wouldn't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, this person began to build and wasn't able to finish.

[8 : 31] Or, the king in verse 31, suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Wouldn't he first sit down and consider whether he's able to, with 10,000 men, oppose the one coming against him with 20,000?

If he's not able, he will send a delegation while the other is far 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 disciples.

You see, Jesus' point here is this, that whenever we embark on something challenging or difficult, the sensible thing to do is to first sit down, he uses that phrase in both instances, and count the cost.

Because the worst thing that can happen is for you to start, just like the builder, and not finish. And then you'll be laughed at. Or like the king, who foolishly goes to war and sacrifices his men when he knows he cannot win.

Now, the point of all this is not to say that, you know, we're supposed to count the cost and then we'll sit down and weigh up whether the benefit of following Jesus is worth it or not. No. We've already seen in the parables in the last few weeks that following Jesus is absolutely worth it, isn't it?

[9 : 42] We're being invited into his glorious kingdom. Jesus is not saying go and count the cost and then work out whether it's worth it. No, it's absolutely going to be worth it. But he's saying, even

though you know it's going to be worth it, sit down and count the cost anyway.

that is, work out what the sacrifices will be, what you'll need to do in order to live the Christian life. Go into the life as a disciple of Jesus with your eyes open as to what the challenges are so that when they come, you won't be caught out, you won't be surprised, but you'll be prepared instead. Now, I don't know if many of you have built your own house or renovated, done any home renovations. Alyssa and I have done it twice, probably twice too many.

But one of the key things about doing something like that is that you need to set a realistic budget, right? Which we failed to do in both cases. But a realistic budget is one where you put all the costs in, including the likely risks that will result in cost.

And sometimes we don't realize how important it is to do it. Our temptation is that we undercook the budget. So we get the quote from the builder who has an incentive to underquote anyway, and then he has all these exclusions at the end.

[11:14] This is the price, but it excludes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and, you know, it goes to five pages longer than the quote itself. The reason is that he wants to give you an attractive price. And he knows that commonly those exclusions, those risks, are likely to eventuate.

But he just doesn't want to put it in. He doesn't want to put it in. And so that if it's not in the budget, you know, you think, yeah, it's cheap. And so you naively, or me naively, accept the cost as it is, treat it as the budget, and then once the project starts a little down the track, and when the risks do eventuate and the costs start to rise, what happens?

You start to get a shock, don't you? You start thinking, oh, was it worth it? Should I have done it? Can I afford this? And of course, with builders, right, when they first quote you, that quote is fixed price.

Everything in it is fixed price. But then all the exclusions, you know, they'll tell you it has to be done, and you go, okay, all right, do it. And then it's, how much? And he says, oh, I don't know.

I'll work it out later. And so it's always, you know, whatever the cost will be. And so you can start worrying, well, what's it going to be? And so you get all stressed, don't you? And that's, you know, then you start worrying, and you start working out whether you should have done it in the first place.

[12:35] But, if you had done the homework, you had cost all the extra risks, and done a proper budget, then what happens? It doesn't surprise you, does it?

When the risks arise, and you have to spend the money, then you go, oh, yeah, right, I've actually allowed for that. Better still, if you tell the builder to price in that risk, then you know that you, you may have had a bigger budget, but you know that it's not going to take you by surprise, and you're not going to stress about it.

And that's the same way with Christian discipleship. Often as churches or leaders, you know, I know we're guilty of being afraid to spell out the full cost to members, to the flock.

And then what happens though, is that when testing invariably comes, people get discouraged, don't they? They go, oh, I didn't know I had signed up for this. They're surprised. They get discouraged.

And then they think about giving up the faith. But that's not the way it should be, should it? We should count the cost up front. Now for some of you, I know you that perhaps you may have already counted the cost, and you are, you know that you have to carry your cross.

[13:51] But again, sometimes we tend to forget, don't we? Or we think, you know what, yeah, God did warn us, but maybe I'm one of those that He wouldn't follow through with it, you know.

Maybe He'll do it with others, but I'll be alright. But again, God didn't promise that, did He? It may be different for different people, but the Christian life is one of carrying our cross daily, whether in small ways or big.

Everyone, every Christian is called to lay down their lives, not just the committed ones or the serious ones. Everyone who wants to follow Jesus has to lay down their lives. So if, for instance, right now, you feel like you are being tested in your faith, that life is hard because you're a Christian, well then, let me encourage you that what you need to do then is to, if you've counted the cost at one time before, go back to that commitment which you made.

Tell yourself that God has already told you that the Christian life may be like this sometimes. And then also remember what you already have, the benefit of following Jesus.

That is, the joy that comes from knowing that He's died for your sins, that you have a relationship with God and that you have eternal life. And so, from that, remind yourself that this cost that you're

paying right now is worth it because of the glory and the future that you're heading to.

[15 : 20] And also, take heart that whatever God has asked you to go through, Jesus Himself understands because He too carried the cross day by day.

He's done exactly what we've gone through. In fact, He's done much more than that. And so, when we tell ourselves those kind of things, it will give us the strength to persevere even if it's physically or emotionally or relationally tough.

But what we mustn't do is get angry with God or start to doubt His goodness toward us because it's not like He's hidden it from us, has He? No, He's actually been very upfront as this passage shows. He's told us to count the cost upfront so that then we can commit in full knowledge. Now, this is, of course, very different to the way the rest of the world lives, isn't it?

because we're being asked to put our faith and trust in God even through hard times because of what His promise will happen at the end. And when we live like that, we will stand out from the world, wouldn't we?

[16 : 35] And Jesus knows that in our weakness, there will be pressure to conform to the world. The world may not tell us explicitly that we need to follow them, but just the peer pressure, seeing that other people's life is easy whilst ours is hard, might tempt us to give up.

And so, knowing this, Jesus concludes with verse 34. He says, Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor the manure pile.

It is thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. So, there are two related points here, I think. First, as I've said, Jesus is warning us against conforming to the world.

Salt, in order to be good and useful, has to be salty and unlike the thing that is salty. So, we need to accept that as Christians, we're going to be called to live apart from the world, not like the world, not be like the world.

Instead, we're going to be distinctive. We might even be the minority, the only one in our workplace or the only one in our school to do that. But that's okay because we are salt and salt needs to stand out.

[17 : 48] In the olden days, monks would physically stand out, wouldn't they, by wearing habits. That was their way of showing that they've died to the world. Well, we don't need to do that nowadays and we shouldn't anyway because that's not the point.

It's not the physical manifestations of us standing apart. But rather, we stand apart by how we live our life, how we make choices. For example, not to satisfy ourselves and live for self, but to bring glory to God, to Jesus.

So, as a church, that should be the way we are. We are not here to promote the name of Holy Trinity. No, we're here to proclaim and promote the name of Jesus.

Even at the expense of Holy Trinity, sometimes. Or secondly, if people wrong us, the way of the world is to seek revenge, isn't it? To get even.

But as Christ's disciples, the way we stand out is to forgive. That's one way that we lay down our lives for others. By forgiving them when they deserve to be punished.

[18 : 54] I'm not sure whether many of you have been watching, but on Channel 7, just, I think it was a week or so ago, there was a lady in Sydney, a mother, her name I think is Lila Abdullah.

Her three children were killed with the cousin as they were walking down the street down to the local shop, I think, to get ice cream. They were run down by a drunk driver. And you could see all the reaction in the news by others, even on social media.

They were full of hatred and anger for the driver. You know, lock him up, throw away the keys, or whatever. He deserves what he gets. You know, what an idiot and all that kind of stuff they're saying about him.

But when they actually interviewed this woman, Channel 7 News, she says that she forgives the driver. And she actually explained why it was because of her faith in Jesus.

Now, I was watching the video and it's like, it just really just caught all the interviewers by surprise. They just didn't expect someone to say that and didn't know really what to follow up to ask next.

[20 : 03] And that's, you know, that's what it is, isn't it? When she stands out, she's really caught everyone's attention, hasn't she? Her reaction, her response, is so unlike others.

She forgave the driver, even though deep down, I can't imagine losing my children. She just lost her beautiful children and yet she would stand up and say that she forgave the drunk driver.

In that moment, she was taking up her cross, wasn't she? Dying to the desire within her to hate the driver. And so when we take up our cross, one effect is that we will stand up and God will use it as I'm sure he's using Lila to draw others to him because of their saltiness.

People get a taste of the true gospel when we lay down our lives for Jesus. They hear us proclaim it not just in word but in deed.

On the other hand, the other related point Jesus makes is that if we conform to the world and we live like them, then we lose our saltiness, don't we? We lose the power to proclaim the gospel through our testimony.

[21 : 17] And Jesus says that when that happens, salt, it's only good to be thrown away. I don't know whether that means that we lose our salvation, but even if it doesn't mean that, what Jesus is saying is that Jesus, God is not pleased with how we live when we conform to the world.

We're not set apart for him. It's not the life that God desires for us. God has called all of us to take up our cross.

And that means we'll be different from others. Now, how that might look like will differ from person to person. Like we read in the Old Testament reading today with Abraham, sometimes God merely tests us.

He may ask something of us, but like Abraham, when it got to the point that God knew that Abraham was willing to follow through, he said, that's enough. I will provide an alternative way out of your testing.

But it required for Abraham to truly trust God, didn't he? And God knew his heart. But at other times, like Job, if you read the book of Job, God did take away his children.

[22 : 28] He covered his body with sores as well, took away all his possessions. And yet, through it all, this is what Job said in verse 21 of chapter 1. He said, Naked I came from my mother womb, and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. Job had the right attitude, didn't he?

If you were here a few weeks ago, I did say that everything that we have in this life has been given by God, hasn't it? There is not something that we have just achieved by our own strength, or our own goodness.

Everything we have, our relationships, our possessions, our reputation, whatever it is, it's all been given by God. And so, if God has given, then God has a right to take away as well.

And he's not doing that again, as I say, to be a killjoy. But often, when he does that, what it does is help our faith to grow. And for those of you who have experienced that and gone through that, you know that as your faith grows, there is great joy and peace that comes from believing in Jesus and trusting in Him.

[23 : 45] Isn't there? Of course, if things do go well, I think it also means that we still hang on to these things loosely, not tightly. Be ready, whenever the Lord requires it, to let go of it, whatever it may be, during our times of testing.

So, here's a little thing that I want to encourage to take away with you tonight. If ever you are tested in your faith and asked to lay down your life, can I encourage you to think of it as a gift from God? Will you be able to do that? That whenever God tests you, actually thank Him for it and say, thank you for this gift. because what He's doing is His growing faith in you.

What He's doing is giving you the joy and the peace, the fruit of righteousness that comes from it. And that's a great thing. That's a good thing that God wants for you.

Because we get to be like Jesus. We get to follow Him, to lay down our lives just as He did, to stand apart from the world so that we might be salt and light for the world.

[24 : 58] It's not always going to be easy, but God will give us the strength for it. And then when we're done, we will be welcomed into His kingdom. Let's pray. Father, thank You for Your Son, Jesus, who carried the cross to do Your will.

Thank You that He carried our cross for all of us all the way to death on it. help us to be like Him. Help us to know that discipleship is costly and yet worth it.

And even though we may stand apart from the world as a result, give us joy in it. Help us to be thankful. And may You use us and our example in some small way to bring others to Christ and also to encourage others to live the way of the cross.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.