

The Cost Of Discipleship

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[0 : 00] I want to talk about Matthew chapter 16 verse 24 following, and if you have the wee books on the Gospel of Matthew and the Pews, you might find it helpful to turn up those verses so that you can follow them.

I'm departing from something I've tried to do since I came to St. John's, and that is preach a different sermon at both services. But my problem is that I get so emotionally involved in one sermon that I never get out of it into the other one.

So this is for my benefit that I'm doing this, and I would like to apologize to Cannon Robinson, who's already been edified this morning by this sermon, to some of the members of the choir and one or two members of the congregation who already know everything I have to say.

So I hope it will serve to reinforce in a good way what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The 16th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew deals largely with the matter of Jesus teaching his disciples.

He had taken them up into Caesarea Philippi, which you remember was for the purpose of getting away from the crowd, which were constantly after him because of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 and then the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 and the healings that went on so that he was a very popular person.

[1 : 19] But he had to get away from them, and then he had to get away from the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were threatened by his teaching to the extent that they wanted to argue with him and, if possible, defeat him in argument so as to discredit him among the people.

So Christ had to get away from both those things and had to have a time when he could concentrate on the business of teaching the disciples. And I have emphasized on a couple of occasions here that this is fundamentally the task of the church to teach disciples because we are involved in a life-long learning process.

And some of us conclude that it's best to learn by mistakes. Once I drove across Canada, and one of the things that intrigued me most about the prairies was the gophers who stood in the middle of the Trans-Canada Highway looking to see what would happen.

And that's how you learn by mistakes. Standing there, you get a first-hand view of all the traffic going by. But sooner or later, you come to a very unhappy end.

And that's the way some people, I guess, live their lives, is sort of looking up and not being aware of the danger there is. So we don't want you to be gophers, but rather learners so that you can be learning all your life.

[2 : 57] I was at a medical convention at the Vancouver Hotel this week where Dr. Balfour Mount of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal spoke and spoke brilliantly about the palliative care unit that they've set up down there.

And this is because he said hospitals are always organized to diagnose illness, to treat illness, to cure illness. But he said a lot of people in our hospital got to the point where no more diagnosis was necessary, no more treatment was possible, and the prospect of curing was gone.

So what do the hospitals do with them then? Well, they ignore them by and large because they're not geared to deal with them. And so the palliative care unit was set up to deal with them.

And one of the things that he said is that that period in a person's life is the final growth period. And their purpose is to make, even those days of terminal illness, a growth situation where people can grow even though their time on earth is coming, some cases, rapidly to an end.

And that, I think, is the spirit of Christian discipleship, that we go on growing, and we go on growing because we go on learning all the time.

[4 : 29] And Christ is there to teach us. So Christ wants disciples. But he doesn't mess around with us, nor did he with his disciples.

And he laid down the conditions of what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is one who attends upon another for the purpose of learning from him.

And all of us are, in that sense, disciples because we're learning in some way what Christ invites us to learn from him. And you, by your involvement in this church this morning, are in some measure disciples of Jesus Christ.

So what I'm telling you is to edify you and to encourage you and to strengthen you in the high calling that you have to be the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ. Now, these then are the, this is the cost of discipleship that Jesus puts very plainly in front of his disciples. When, if you read in the verse, if anyone wants to come with me, he must first, forget himself.

[5 : 42] Secondly, carry his cross. Thirdly, follow me. To deny himself. Now, a lot of people consider that that runs contrary to the human potential movement.

And the human potential movement is the movement whereby you look deep down into your inside and find all sorts of untapped resources. And so by meditation, by exercise, by self-hypnosis, by all sorts of ways you maximize your potential as a human being.

And I'm all for that, I'm sure. I, I really wish I could do better than I do, but it, it's certainly important. But it's not contradicted by Christ's statement that to deny yourself is the first condition of Christian discipleship.

Because deny yourself does not mean that if you are given to large chocolate cakes that you do without them. Or if you're given to lemon pie, you do without it for a while.

Or if you're given to McDonald's hamburgers that you do without them. It's not a matter of simply denying some of your appetites. It's denying yourself.

[7 : 00] And what that means is that you recognize the fact, which isn't easy to recognize, that you are not the answer to the world's problems.

You come to terms with the fact that, as one lover said to another, I've got along with you before I met you and I can get along with you now.

And what you do is recognize that the world in which you live can get along with us. You're not that important. You're not definitely needed.

I tell you this with great enthusiasm because I spend most of my life hoping that somebody needs me. And I'm very threatened by the discovery that maybe people don't need me as much as I need to be needed.

And then I'm in a quandary. But we all go through that experience in some way or another. Christ says, come to terms with it. Deny yourself. Recognize that you're not needed.

[8 : 10] And that's what it is to deny yourself. You're not the answer to the world's problems. One of the significant Christian disciples of the last century was G.K. Chesterton.

And he made what is always for me a wonderful and memorable statement. He said, if you want to know what the trouble with the world is, it's me.

He got it right down to that point. Most of us have a long list of troubles with the world that we can point to. And it takes us a long time to come to recognize that one of the basic problems of the world is me.

And that you have to come to deny yourself as being the solution to the world's problems. And you're part of the problem, not part of the answer. So Christ says the first condition of discipleship is to deny yourself.

The second condition of discipleship is to take up your cross. Now, a cross is a grim symbol of a cruel death.

[9 : 19] And you shouldn't forget that because that's how it is meant. It was something which was used on slaves and rebels in the Roman Empire. And even if a Roman citizen committed a capital crime, he would never be humiliated by death, by crucifixion.

So it was a very ghastly form of death. And it was one that awaited many of the followers of Jesus Christ. The Romans were good at using it.

At the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, there were so many crosses on the hills around the walls of Jerusalem that the Romans ran out of wood.

They couldn't find any more wood, so they had to stop doing it. So crucifixion is a terrible death. But what Christ is saying is come to terms with the fact of your own death.

Don't allow it to be an enemy which is hovering around you and which you think you can escape from. Recognize that it's there and it's a part of your earthly existence.

[10:35] For many Christians, it was death by martyrdom. That's probably not likely for you, but it's still a reality. And Malcolm Muggeridge has said, There's nothing that wonderfully concentrates the mind so much as a condemnation to death.

The condemned men sort out what their life values are very much more quickly than most of the rest of us who think that we might like to do this or we might like to do that or it's possible we could do that or we can dream of this or fantasize about that.

All that is swept away when you come to terms with the reality of your own death. Deny yourself.

Take up your cross. And the third condition or cost of discipleship is to follow me.

Christ says that to you. And that is a very unique experience. It doesn't matter, and Christ points this out in the last chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, it doesn't matter what that person is doing as a Christian or what that person is doing as a Christian.

Your responsibility is to follow the Lord Jesus in personal obedience. He doesn't lay on a package tour for Christians, which he'll take you on with all the accommodation paid for in advance.

[12:02] That's not what he lays on. Nor does he give you a handbook to tell you where to go and where to stop and what to do and what to see. All he says is, follow me.

He doesn't give you a map or a handbook or a package tour. He says, follow me. So the only way you can be a Christian discipleship is by keeping in personal touch with the one who is leading you. And that's Jesus Christ. So that Christian life is not following a particular pattern, obeying a bunch of rules and regulations. It is personally following Jesus Christ.

And that's what he says. Those are the three things that are part of discipleship. And he gives the reason behind this, because a lot of people might think, well, that's much too costly.

I couldn't possibly do that. So these are the reasons that he gives us for this life of discipleship. And if you read it in your text, you will read this.

[13:08] Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. And he's simply saying that if you try to hold on to it, you will lose it.

If you're willing to let it go, you will keep it. And that's true. That's true between lovers, too, if any of you are interested.

If you try to hold on or to possess one another, you lose it. If you're free to let people go, then they continue to belong to you.

It's probably true between you and your children. But if you try to hold on to them too tightly, you'll lose it. If you're willing to let them go, you may keep it.

And that's true of your life. If you try to hold on to it too tightly, you'll lose it. And we become obsessively concerned with doing that, with holding on to this frail thread of human existence that is you and me.

[14:16] And we have no sense of adventure and no sense of joy and not much happiness. So concerned are we to hold on to what we've got. And Jesus says, if you try to hold on to it, you'll lose it.

If you're willing to lose it, you may find it. And an illustration of that, which I find very poignant and helpful, is Jim Elliot. And Jim Elliot was the missionary whose wife, Elizabeth Elliot, has written a number of books that are at the back of the church.

And Jim Elliot was one of the missionaries who went down among the Alka Indians and the Amazon River Basin of Brazil.

And I don't know if you remember the story, but it was written up in Life magazine way back in the 50s, I think, where these men very ingeniously made contact with an aboriginal tribe by dropping down a bucket at the end of a rope.

And the pilot learned to be able to fly in a slow circle. And the bucket would stay in one place as he threw around at the other end of the rope. And so they began to trade with the people down there.

[15:32] And gradually they thought they had won their confidence. And in due course, five men were landed on the riverbank to meet with these people and try and establish a bridgehead for missionary work.

Well, these men were down there for several days. And then some mistrust developed. And they were all killed by the natives down there. But Jim Elliot had said of Life that, and it's a beautiful saying, he said, why should you be afraid to give away what you can't keep in order to possess what you can't lose?

And that's how he regarded his life. As giving away something which he couldn't keep in order to possess something which he couldn't lose.

And that's what Jesus is saying when he says, if you try to keep your life, you will lose it. If you're willing to lose it, you'll find it. You may be interested in the sequel that Elizabeth Elliot and Jim Elliot's tiny daughter went into that tribe subsequently.

And I think she's convinced that any man would be considered a threat. But a woman wasn't a threat to the people of that tribe.

[16:54] And so they went in there and she translated their language and was the one who was responsible for bringing them the news of Jesus Christ. So that's why you're to be a disciple.

That's the reason. There is another thing in that statement which I think you need to recognize. And that's when it says, Will a person gain anything if he wins the whole world but loses his life?

Of course not. There is nothing he can give to regain his life. Now what this does is to say something very important and a very important counterbalance.

When Jesus starts off by saying, deny yourself, people think, well, I can't afford to deny myself. I'm much too important. And there's some truth to that.

But when he says that the thing that you must recognize is that your life is of supreme value. And that it's not a matter of measuring your life by the things that you possess.

[18:04] And that you get this and you get this and you get this and you get this. Because Jesus says that the difficulty with that is that there is one thing that you possess that is of ultimate value.

And that's your own life. And there is nothing else that's worth that. So that if you put a human being up against any object of great value, Christ says, you as a person are worth more than that.

The life that God intends you to have. Some commentators call it the higher life. The life that you have in Christ is the thing which is of infinite value.

And to barter that away for the sake of possessions is wrong. You can't do that. Because there is nothing that makes that deal worthwhile.

You're giving away that which is of ultimate value for that which is only of temporal value. You're giving away that which is of infinite value for that. And so it turns out that it's not what you possess that matters, but who possesses you.

[19:20] And that's what Christ does for us. He possesses us. He owns us. He cares for us. And he looks after us. He says, you're giving away that which is of infinite value for that you possesses us.

It's not what belongs to you, but who you belong to that matters. So that's what Jesus lays down as conditions for our ongoing discipleship.

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. Give away your life in order to receive it. Recognize that nothing has such value as you do as a person.

So to give your life for anything is you're the loser. Because your life is of ultimate value.

The life which, not just this earthly life, but the life which God gives you in Christ. Then let me give you two things in conclusion.

[20:22] And these two things are Christ giving us the signs of discipleship. And this means that if we take Christian discipleship seriously, we'll begin to see these results.

If we as a congregation take Christian discipleship seriously. It'll become apparent. And Christ says this is how it will become apparent.

He says, by this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another. It's not just the initiated that will know.

It's the man who comes in off the street will know. I don't know who you are. A stranger in church that you may be this morning. But I wonder if you have seen that we have love one for another in this congregation.

It's simple, isn't it? I mean, it should be simple to identify. It's not complicated. It's something that being disciples of Jesus Christ will teach us.

[21:32] It's not a matter of me standing up here and thundering at you. You must love one another. Because even if you thought it was a good idea, it wouldn't mean you could do it.

The only way you can do it is by being disciples of Jesus Christ. You will come to love one another. Because you will find that you're in the same struggle that other people are in.

And instead of being in competition with them, which throws men apart, you'll find that you want to cooperate with them, which draws men together. And the miracle of love becomes apparent.

And a stranger will come in and say that you are disciples of Jesus Christ because I am aware of love among you. That's something we as a congregation need to learn quite a lot about.

The second thing is fruit bearing. Christ said, by this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit. And so prove to be my disciples.

[22 : 34] And the fruit that we're to bear as Christians is that which is spoken of in Galatians 5 and 20 following where it says love, joy, peace. And these things are fruits of being disciples.

It begins to be fruitful, this discipleship. And the fruit is something that people are aware of. Now I used this illustration at the last service and got in trouble before, so I'm going to apologize in advance for telling you this again.

But one of the disappointments of being in Vancouver in the springtime was I said to a member of the congregation when I saw one of those treats that was filled from one end to the other with cherry blossom.

I said, what do they do with all the cherries? And he said, oh, there's no cherries. Those are ornamental cherry trees. There's no fruit.

And you see, one of the dangers is that we are ornamental Christians and that there's no fruit. And that wouldn't be a good thing to be, would it?

[23 : 43] There's no such thing as an ornamental disciple of Jesus Christ. It's essential that we bear fruit. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have loved one for another.

And my Father is glorified by the fact that you as my disciples will bear much fruit. I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you might know what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

I'm going to sing hymn 492. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 08] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.