

Following Jesus (3) - Committed Discipleship

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[0 : 0 0] and to his own name be the praise and the glory. I'd like us to look at some verses from this chapter now, from verse 25 through to the end of the chapter, continuing with a short series of studies on following Jesus, what's entailed in following the Lord, something we refer to very often, as we said at the beginning of these studies a few weeks back, and here we find another passage dealing with following Jesus and some of the features of following Christ and what that means.

Now, we want to be followers of Jesus more than in an outward, formal sense. The Bible speaks about following in a formal or outward sense. For example, John chapter 6 has an account of many disciples that called, followers in that sense. They were following Jesus up to that point, but his teaching became just a bit too demanding for them. They just could not accept what he was setting before them at that point, and so many of them turned away and walked no more with him. They ceased to follow him because their following was basically just outward. There wasn't any commitment inwardly in their own hearts to him as a person or to his teaching. So, when it came to that point, it became too difficult, and they turned away and stopped following him. And today, we're going to look at this passage with a view to looking at committed discipleship, discipleship in a way that's more than just formal or just in an outward sense, a discipleship that really is a discipleship of the heart, if you like, where we've got that kind of following of Jesus that is willingly and lovingly committed to him.

And so, some of the features of the passage will come across to us. Now, as you know, a disciple in the Old and the New Testament and Old Testament, discipleship was really being under the tutorship or leadership of a rabbi or somebody who was actually in charge of a group of people that became their disciples. And Jesus, in that sense, is no different. The group of disciples that followed him, that were committed to him, were under his teaching. They were disciples in that sense. And we have a word in English which probably captures the idea of discipleship as well as any other word.

That's the word apprentice, because it's not just a matter of following somebody that's showing you how to do things. It's actually going deeper than that. I don't know if you've seen the program recently on television, Fake or Fortune, with Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, where they usually take a painting or something like that that's been discovered, painting that's been discovered, and the person thinks this might be a long-lost masterpiece. So, they go through a lot of examination, both the old type of examination, but also modern technology. They put it through these various tests to actually see whether this is, in fact, a masterpiece indeed, or whether it's just a copy. Because in the old days, the great painters of the past always had schools, always had disciples, always had apprentices. Sometimes, some of them were so good that it became very difficult at times to know whether a work of art was really by the pupil or by the master himself, because some pupils paid such close attention to the way the master went about painting, whether it's the brush strokes, the colors used, and so on. It became very difficult, if they were skilled, to distinguish between the work of the master and the work of the pupil. And being a disciple of Jesus is, as we said, more than just looking outwardly at things and just finding descriptions in the Bible about it. Being a disciple of Jesus is indeed being an apprentice of this master. You're under his teaching. You're under his leadership. You're looking as you see things in Scripture, as you take the whole of Scripture. You're learning about Jesus. You're learning from Jesus. You're actually watching him. You're seeking to imitate him. You're picking up all the details that are there to apply to your life as somebody who wants to be like him, because every one of these apprentices of great painters in the past, they wanted to be as like the master as possible. They really wanted to be able to produce a work of art that even experts would find difficult to distinguish whether it was the master's or not.

[4 : 40] That's what discipleship, if you're a committed disciple today, and that's what we all want to be, then this is really at the heart of our discipleship. You want to be like the master. As you study him, as you follow him, as you learn more and more about him, as you're under his teaching and his guidance, as you learn from his Word, all of these things that he wants you to have through in your life, this is your concern, to be like himself, to be so much in the same mold, if you like, as the human life that Jesus lived in this world. So what is involved in that? Well, this passage today gives us four points that I'm going to cover very briefly, and the four points about discipleship are as follows. Discipleship, committed discipleship, willing, committed, loving discipleship, following Jesus is first of all giving Jesus priority. Verses 25 and 26, you see the crowds that accompanied him. Then he said,

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Now, how are we going to understand this? Because on the surface, that looks as if Jesus is just looking for the impossible. And in fact, it looks on the surface as if Jesus is really contradicting the standards that he himself set for his people. Because after all, God's commandment, the fifth commandment, says, honor your father and mother. And Jesus would never have gone against the commandments of God to which he himself was committed in his life in this world.

So how are we going to understand this kind of emphasis? If anyone comes after me and does not hate his own father and mother, he cannot be my disciple. Well, it's an example of the Bible or of Jesus here using hyperbole or exaggerative language. He's using the kind of language that grabs the attention so that the point that he wants to put across comes across forcibly.

He doesn't at all mean that we, in following Jesus, then turn against our own loved ones or our friends in this life. Christ would never contradict his own word. After all, if you go back to chapter 6, you'll see what he says. They leave in regard to those who are our enemies as Christians. He says there in verse 27, I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. And all the way through to verse 36 there, you find him dealing with how we react to those who exercise or show hatred or animosity or antipathy toward us. And you cannot imagine Jesus now turning and saying, if that's what you have to do as a disciple in regard to your enemies, you can't imagine him now saying, to be my disciple, you actually need to literally hate your father and mother.

Now what he's really saying is, you have to give me first place. I must have the priority, even over your loved ones in this life. Not at all to the neglect of family, not to fail with our family responsibilities because on Christ's list of priorities, they're very, very high.

[8 : 18] And the Bible makes it very, very high as to how we are in regard to our families, how we are in terms of our marriages, how we are in terms of being a husband or a good wife or a good husband, how we are in terms of children and how we look after our children and grandchildren.

They're very, very high up in the level of importance in the teaching of the Bible. So you can't imagine Jesus in any way contradicting that. So he's really saying to us, by this kind of language, he's saying to them there, you must give me the first place.

I must have that priority. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. If you are going to be my apprentice, then I have to be the master. I have to be the one that you seek to give first place to. If you look at chapter 8, just cast your mind back to chapter 8 there, verses 19 to 21, you'll find him there saying, his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.

And he was told, your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you. But he answered them, my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

[9 : 37] You can see from there that Jesus is not neglecting his mother and brothers literally of the flesh. He is in no way advocating that we just ignore looking after or looking to the well-being of our loved ones, of our family.

But what he is saying is, here is my priority. For them, I come first. And I regard all my people as my family.

That's what he's really saying. The blessings that belong to family life are blessings that we are never to neglect and never to lessen in importance, never to make less than God makes them. But you see, that's where the danger is in regard to following Jesus. Because family life is so important, because relationships and families are so important, because looking after our children and our grandchildren and our husbands and wives, whatever they may be in family life, because

that is so important, that's so easily then a temptation to just put Jesus aside for a moment and to cease from following him completely or wholeheartedly and to put other things or other people first ahead of him.

So here is what he's saying. Give Jesus priority. Even family comes second, but please don't misunderstand. I'm trying to emphasize that it's not about ignoring or in any way dealing or treating family in a way that's not respectful and does not accord with the demands of God himself in that respect.

[11 : 19] Simply saying, Jesus is saying, I am number one. And if you be my disciple, then that's how it has to be. And there's the question for myself, for myself today.

I may not be ignoring my family responsibilities, my marital responsibilities, my responsibilities as a husband or as a father or as a grandfather.

I may not be ignoring or neglecting any of those, but here's the other question. Are they from my life aware that Jesus comes first? Is the way that I treat them lovingly and respectfully, is that itself a means of showing where Christ sits in my life?

Because if he is our number one priority, how we treat others will reflect that. His values will become our values. His emphases in regard to how we treat others will be our emphasis too.

So actually putting Jesus first is far from then inevitably ignoring or lessening the demands of other parts of our human life.

[12 : 31] It's the other way about. It's the other way about so that that will be fed into how we go about treating others. So there's the first thing. If we are to be his disciples, followers of Jesus, if we are to be so willingly and other than just formal or outward, it will be giving Jesus priority.

Number one in our lives. Secondly, it will mean bearing our own cross. You see there verse 27.

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Now we often in life speak about people having a cross to bear. Sometimes life is very much like that. You have such difficulties in life.

Maybe you can say this of yourself even or people can say it of others. Well, he or she, that's a really heavy cross they have to bear. Of course, that language comes from the Bible but it applies in the way we speak usually of it like that.

We speak of it in terms of life's trials, the difficulties, the challenges, the experiences we have going through life when life becomes really difficult and struggles and a struggle.

[13 : 50] They have a heavy cross to bear and there's nothing wrong with using that language but that's not the kind of meaning that in this passage is given to the use of the word cross.

Whoever does not bear his own cross. What does that mean then? If it's more than just dealing with the difficulties and issues of life that are challenging, what does it mean?

Well, in those days, of course, as you well know, the cross was an instrument of death. If you saw somebody going to be hanged or crucified or attached to a cross which was very common under the Roman Empire, that's how they dealt with certain criminals even as they dealt with the two who were crucified along with Jesus and Jesus himself indeed as if he were a criminal because a cross was really an instrument of death and you could often see it living in the days in which Jesus lived on earth.

The sight of the cross with somebody crucified on it was not uncommon. These people would know exactly what Jesus meant by using the word cross. They would know that he wasn't referring to the difficulties of life.

He was referring to that literal cross on which people died. And so that's how they would understand his use of the word cross. They would be very familiar with the sight of crucified people dying and agonizing death.

[15 : 15] death. And so how then in the spiritual sense can it be used? How is Jesus how do we understand it from the way Jesus puts it here? Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples.

Well it's really the same in the spiritual sense as it is in the literal sense. It's an instrument of death in the literal sense of it. It is also in the spiritual sense because there's an element of dying in being a disciple of Jesus and beginning to and continuing to follow Jesus as a disciple.

You die to your own preferences. You die to your own priorities as they are in yourself. You die to the things that you think might be best fitting to actually work through in your life.

The priorities are changed around. See that's why he's saying here in verse 26 his own life as well. Yes and even his own life.

He cannot be my disciple. And if you go back again to chapter 9 we can get some light on that from that chapter. Chapter 9 verses 23 to 25.

[16:32] And at that point Jesus is saying if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me for whoever would save his life shall lose it whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

So there you see he's saying if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross. That's the same thing as chapter 14 hating even his own life denying himself. Denying this thing that the Bible calls self.

This warped sinful proud resistant part of our being. The thing which lies deep in our hearts and our minds.

The thing which is resistant to God. The things which want to live by our own priorities by our own by the way that we ourselves see what is best fitting in life. And that's how we live until we come to realize that that's actually bondage not freedom.

You're not actually free when you're not denying self. You're set free when you deny yourself and you surrender to Jesus and you have him in charge of your life as your master.

[17:50] And so denying you know denying yourself is at the heart of discipleship and following Jesus. You'll find it here everywhere Jesus speaks about it virtually you'll find this reference to denying yourself.

you and I here today by our very spiritual nature by our sinful nature by our lost condition our fallen condition we want to please ourselves.

And the difficulty for us when the word of God comes really to strike home into our conscience is that it breaks through against that natural demand of our own hearts to please yourself.

That's what the world lives by. If you look out in the world today it's full of this sort of stuff in the way people live their lives in the way people think of others in the way people would want us to organize our lives as well.

It's just absolutely brim full of self. And that self is really at the heart of the human problem. You don't want Jesus in charge of your life until Jesus comes and shows you the folly of being without him.

[19:04] And then he becomes the most important person of all. So you see becoming a disciple and continuing as a disciple is to surrender yourself to Jesus to make himself or his self the master in your life the ruling the priority in your life.

You could say something like this when you give your life over to Jesus I'm not suggesting this is other than through the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart but when that happens what is it that's really happening?

Well you're putting a sign over the door of your life and that sign reads under new management. The previous occupancy is no longer relevant.

The occupant is now Jesus and as Jesus occupies your life under new management so you come to deny yourself and you live to please him not yourself and as you live to please him you follow him as a disciple not just formally or outwardly but meaningfully and inwardly and willingly and lovingly. So it's giving Jesus priority it's then bearing our own cross surrendering to him dying to self it's thirdly counting the cost verse 28 for which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost whether he is enough to complete it otherwise when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish all who see it begin to mock him and you've got another illustration what king going out to encounter another king in war will not sit down first and deliberate whether he's able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him.

[20:58] So there are two images that Jesus gives us in order to add to what he said already about discipleship and here he's talking about counting the cost. And these two images these two illustrations are illustrations where it's important for us to see that Jesus is not again making discipleship to be so rigid to be so closed to be of such a standard that people are put off.

It's the very opposite that Jesus intends. He's not saying any of this so that we will actually put off being his disciple or stop from following him.

What he's really saying is we need to think about what it entails and not just at the beginning of following him but all the way through the life of discipleship the life of following Jesus you have to

think really about what this is.

You have to think even in advance. You have to think as you go on with it because if you do it unthinkingly inevitably you're just going to give up or almost certainly you're going to give up. That's what this man is illustrating. He began to build a tower but he hadn't counted the cost. He hadn't really thought about it very deeply and so it came to the stage where he wasn't able to finish it.

[22 : 16] And so coming to be a follower of Jesus you calculate the cost. You think about what it means. Not so that you don't begin to do it or continue to do it but so that you reckon really with the kind of life that it is.

So that we'll take account of what he says about the difficulties we're going to meet with. About the challenges that face us. But also about the wonderful exhilarating experiences as well as the challenges that you have in the life of disciples.

It's by no means all negative. In fact it's more positive than negative despite what the world says, despite what your own heart and my own heart might tell us. The life of a disciple is a hugely positive thing.

And so he's really concerned that they be not mistaken as to what that life entails. That they will actually be different to this builder who didn't really calculate the costs.

And you know, I think we can certainly say that the sad sight that you see throughout our land of empty church buildings or church congregations that are rapidly declining, in many respects, I'm not saying this is the whole answer by any means, but in many respects, it's really due to the fact that people following Jesus had not really counted the cost.

[23 : 42] And when the Bible's teaching became too demanding as they took it literally as the word of God, or was presented to them saying, well, I can't go through, that's not discipleship, that's going too far, that's not for me.

They'd never really caught on to the teaching of Jesus as to what the cost of discipleship is. And if you follow Jesus, then you reckon with what's going to meet you in the way, and you look at it in the light of scripture, and you say, well, okay, but that's what he said I would meet with.

And I'm prepared to actually do that. And it's not just a question of asking yourselves today, are we serious about faith? Are we serious about holiness? Are we serious about witnessing? Are we serious about perseverance?

I hope we are of all of these things. But the other thing along with that is, do I really have the resources in place for this job to be completed? For me to reach the end of the journey as a disciple?

And of course that means, am I depending on Jesus himself? Am I glad that the Holy Spirit is in charge of my life? Am I concerned that that's what my life rests upon and not my own ingenuity or the quality of my own thoughts or my intelligence?

[24 : 54] Do I have the resources that God provides for the completion of a Christian life in this world? world? And that's where Jesus is saying, we have to count the cost and ask ourselves, am I really building in a way that's in accord with the Bible's teaching?

Do I have Christ as foundational? Do I have the Holy Spirit? Am I depending on him? Because that's essentially what Jesus is saying. Count the cost and go on counting the cost.

And when you meet struggles and when you meet with challenges and when you find a way becoming really difficult as a disciple will turn to Jesus himself and say, Lord, help me through this. Help me not to actually give up with this because I know that this is what you said it would be like at times. And I'm glad, Lord, that I counted the cost of the beginning as you led me to.

Otherwise I wouldn't have expected these difficulties and I might have given up. But because you've taught me that this is how it is, help me now through these difficulties that I face.

[25 : 59] And the second illustration is very similar. It's this man was king. He encountered another king with superior forces and he really had to take a decision, didn't he?

He had to decide, am I going to just go on and meet this other king who's coming against me in war, in conflict, who has superior forces to mine?

Am I just going to be pig-headed about and just go out and meet him and see what happens? Because he knew if he did that he would inevitably be defeated. He was going out with 10,000 to meet someone who's coming against him with 20,000.

The odds are against him. So he says, well no, he says if he's really wanting a solution to this while he's still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.

So what is that really saying to us about discipleship, about following Jesus? Well for one thing, it's saying we have to make a choice. We have to make a choice not just to begin to follow Jesus, but we have to make choices after beginning as to whether we're going to keep on in this life or not.

[27 : 09] The choices are always there. We need God to help us with the choices. We need the Holy Spirit to be active within us, but the choices need to be our choices. And the choice is, well do I go out and make a peace deal with this Jesus?

Or do I go on fighting him and knowing that I'm inevitably going to fail? Because he's going to come out on top whatever I think. And so it's really saying to us, you cannot be neutral about Jesus.

This king had to make a choice. he couldn't just stand there all day and not think about what he needed to do. He couldn't be neutral in the situation. It was either one or the other.

It was either suing for terms of peace with this other king or just going out to fight him and being the loser. And that's what Jesus is confronting you and I with today.

You cannot, if you're not already a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, there is no way you're going to win the battle. There is no way you're going to be superior to this Jesus as king.

[28 : 29] We can go on fighting him, refusing him, putting him aside, choosing not to have him and surrender to him all our lives. But at the end of the course, what is that going to do?

As he put it in that passage earlier, what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? But Jesus is saying, if you surrender to me, if you accept my peace terms, you see, this is not saying to us, well, we go and make demands of God or of Christ as to what the peace terms are going to be.

We're going to demand, well, this is how I would like the arrangement to be made. No, the arrangement's already there. in Christ, God has given us the peace, the reconciliation that Christ died for.

And today, what he's saying to us, these are my terms of peace, and you will find them most acceptable, you will find them most suitable to your needs, you will not find better terms of peace than these.

So you see, he's saying to us, they're there for your acceptance. they're there so that you'll sign your name on them and say, that's really what I need in my relationship with God.

[29 : 53] That's what I need to be a disciple, accepting Christ's terms of peace, denying myself, putting Jesus first.

If that's what's in place in your life, you're a follower in more than just a formal way. You're a follower in your heart, in your mind, you're counting the cost, you're reckoning with the things that Jesus is laying before you, and you're happy to have it that way, his own way.

So there's counting, there's giving Jesus priority, there's bearing our own cross, there's counting the cost finally, just in a word, there's living effectively.

Why does he tack on, I shouldn't say tack on, why does he actually add this passage, verses 34 to 35? It's good to have these headings in the likes of the ESV translation and the modern translations, sometimes however they can get in the way really, can't they?

Because here's a heading, salt without taste is worthless, the previous passage is the cost of discipleship, but actually the two passages are very closely woven together, so you can just ignore the paragraph heading there, salt without taste is worthless, even though that's what it's saying, because you have to see that it's so closely related to what he said before.

[31 : 16] How is it closely related? Because, well, in those days, salt that was used commonly in food, it wasn't pure salt like you find nowadays. Pure salt doesn't lose its saltiness, but impure salt can, if it's mixed with other elements, as you would commonly find in those days, in the ancient world, so that it was very possible for the sodium chloride of salt to leach out, depending on its storage, and what you were left with was really what looked like salt in substance, but didn't have the properties of salt.

Sodium chloride had leached out of it, it's no longer salt, it's useless. What can you do with it? Well, not much, nothing, in fact, Jesus is saying it's no use either for the soil, you can't even put it on the compost, keep.

It's no use for anything, it's thrown away. Now he's saying, if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? What he's saying is, we have to seek to live as effective disciples, because

discipleship and being a disciple or being disciples together is not just for your own consumption, it's not just for your own personal benefit, although it is that.

Being a disciple of Jesus is actually living effectively in the world, having just like the properties of salt to food, as a preservative and as a flavor enhancer, that's what the life of a disciple is about, living in the world to seek to actually influence people, influence thinking, influence society, and there's so much you could bring into this, but the time is gone, and it would be good to follow this out.

So much that you can do in terms of discipleship, you know, when you get something in the post that wants you to write to your MP or to your MSP with regard to some important vote that's coming up in Parliament, whether it's to do with caring for the unborn, abortion, or euthanasia or assisted suicide, all of these things are there currently and they never seem to go away, sadly.

[33 : 35] But this is really what the Bible is setting for when this thing comes into your possession, this opportunity to write to your MSP. If you're a Christian, then you're acting as salt when you do so.

You actually give your own views, biblical views, you present these and you say, this is what really I would like you to support. This is why I would like you to support it.

You see, the salt is being effective in its setting in society. That's what discipleship is for. It's not just for nice, cozy times with fellow Christians, that's absolutely fine.

It's not just to share together in Bible studies where everybody has pretty much the same opinion about the basic things, that's also very good. is for being out there and being noticed and being taken account of as a follower of Jesus and living for Jesus and living the values that Jesus would have us live by.

So that people would say, well, whatever you think about being a Christian, that person is consistent. That person has not lost his saltiness or her saltiness.

[34 : 51] What is it to follow Jesus? Jesus, so many things, these four that we've looked at today are really very much to do with the essence of it as Jesus sets it out for us.

It's giving Jesus priority, it's carrying our own cross, it's counting the cost, and it's living effectively just as salt is in the ordinary world.

May he bless these thoughts to us. we're going to conclude now by singing in Psalm 63. Again, it's in the Sing Psalms version. Psalm 63, verses 1 to 6.

That's on page 80. O Lord, you are my God alone. I seek your face with eagerness, my soul and body thirst for you in this dry, weary wilderness.

I've seen you in your holy place, your power and glory held my gaze. Far better is your love than life, and so my lips will sing your praise.

[36 : 01] Psalm 63, these verses 1 to 6. Again, we stand and sing. Amen. O God, you are my God alone.

I seek your face with eagerness, my soul and body thirst for you, endless, dry, weary wilderness.

I've seen you in your holy place, your power and glory held my name.

Far better is your love than life, and so my lips will sing your praise.

praise. I'll bless you, Lord, throughout my life.

[37 : 32] I'll raise my heart to you in prayer. My joyful lips will sing your praise.

my soul is with precious care. upon my bed. I lie awake, and then my thoughts remember you.

I meditate through the heart, the night I meditate through the heart, the night and the night I am with precious care. upon my bed I lie awake, and then my thoughts remember you.

I meditate through the heart, the night and keep your constant love in you.

Amen. Now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen.

[38 : 49] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.