

“The High Cost of Discipleship”

Luke 9:23-27

When I go to purchase something I need, one of the first things I do is, look at the price. I know about how much I'm prepared to spend. I sometimes think about how long it took me to earn the money. If the item I'm interested in is more than I want to pay, it stays in the store. I count the cost.

We need to count the cost in spiritual matters too. The Scriptures make it clear that every person must come to the realization of their need of a Savior. The Gospel message is simple, but it accepting it is not easy. Unfortunately, many today have embraced an Aeasy believism. People are given the impression that if they just accept Jesus as Savior, all their troubles will be over. They're not informed of His lordship; that discipleship and cross-bearing are part of what it means to be a follower of Christ. They were counting on adding Jesus to their life and going on in their own way. Then they find out that Jesus demands total surrender! Is it any wonder they become disillusioned?

Jesus told his disciples in Luke 14 about a man who wanted to build a tower. The first thing he did was sit down and figure out how much it's going to cost to build it. He didn't want to start and not finish. People would mock him for his poor planning. So he sat down and carefully figured out what it would cost to complete the project. We too need to give serious consideration to any project we take on; especially when considering “The High Cost of Discipleship.”

In our text for today, Luke 9:23 to 27, Jesus instructs His disciples to count the cost of following Him. Listen now as I read the Word of God to us from **Luke 9:23 to 27**.

This text gives an accounting of the several **FACTORS** that must be used in determining “The High Cost of Discipleship.”

The First Factor is:

Give Up Your Identity

Every person born into the world has an identity. We identify ourselves by name, by our parents, by nationality or race, or by our physical features. Most of these we cannot change. God decides them for us.

As we grow into adult life our identity is established in part by what we do. I can say a person's name to you, for example, Osama bin Laden, and immediately your mind probably goes back to the destruction of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001. Like it or not, our identity is established, at least in part, by the choices we make.

In verse 23, Jesus said if you make a conscious decision to follow me the first factor you must consider is the cost of giving up your identity. His actual words are, Let him deny himself. To deny means to deny utterly or disown completely.

I think you and I often misunderstand this concept of denying self; it is not primarily about denying ourselves certain THINGS; although it CAN express itself that way. Following an ascetic lifestyle can become a point of pride. That belongs to our old identity. Instead, denying self involves forsaking our personal ambitions and desires to fulfill the will of God. It means making conscious choices to live for His sake rather than our own. This will often involve ridicule, rejection, and loss.

But there is something important that must happen before we can give up our identity. We must first own it. Let me illustrate it this way. Picture a fifteen year old girl, unmarried and pregnant. She has already decided that abortion is not an option and she has made the decision to give the baby up for adoption. But then the question arises; should she see the baby prior to giving it up or not? One might suggest it would be easier to have the baby and leave the hospital without seeing him and avoid the trauma of separation. That may seem easier, but would she have faced the reality of the situation?

Did you ever try to give away something you never had? Without seeing the baby, there's a sense of unreality about the situation. Of course, she's carried the baby in her womb, but there's a difference between that and holding the baby and owning him. Once the young mother holds the baby and owns and loves him for a day or so, and then gives him to the adoptive parents, the reality hits with full force. Then it's possible to go through the grief process, the separation anxiety or whatever sense of loss the mother experiences.

My point is, when it comes to our humanly achieved identity, each of us needs to ask the question, “Have I owned my identity or is there still a sense of unreality about the identity out of which I live?” For us to accept our new identity in Jesus Christ, each of us must define our humanly achieved or fleshly identity and look it squarely in the eye. It is the only way to understand what we must lose if we are to live out of our true identity in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we want to know the joy and blessing of our new identity as accepted and dearly loved children of God in Christ, we must “lose our fleshly identity.” For some, that identity has been in the formation stage for a lifetime. It will not be easily surrendered.

Have you “owned your identity”? Have you understood your identity based on positive performance-based acceptance, of pleasing other people; of using your wit or your talent or your skills to impress others? For a disciple of Jesus that is a part of your past. But you have to own it before you can give it up and receive the identity of Jesus Christ.

At Heralds of Hope we receive letters from former Muslims who have come to know Christ as Savior. You know what happens to many of them when they do that? Their families disown them. They say “You are no longer my son or daughter!” The reality of this separation is often reinforced by threats of death. The oldest son is charged with clearing the family name from disgrace by killing the infidel who has converted to Christ. That’s the idea Jesus uses here in our denying self, disowning self. It is a complete rejection of my will, my way, and my wants.

I believe what Jesus was driving at with this statement is the importance of our choices. He said “If, @ that’s a word of condition, if any man will, @ that’s a conscious decision, follow in my way, let him reject what pleases him and choose what pleases me. We make a conscious choice to disown or renounce self and subjugate all our works, all our interests, and all our enjoyments for the sake of Christ.

That’s a message we don’t like. Our world surrounds us with the idea that we deserve certain things. Yet God’s Word says, we deserve to die for our sin. The world says, pamper yourself; take it easy. God says, exercise spiritual disciplines. The world says, you’d better look out for number One. God says, “Adon’t have any other gods before me.”

So much of what you and I do is based on what we want, what makes us feel good. Christian homes break up because husbands and wives focus on their own desires instead of denying themselves and honoring their commitment to love unconditionally. Teenagers rebel against parents instead of denying themselves and heeding God's command to honor and obey. Church members leave because they claim they're not getting fed; instead of denying themselves and recognizing you only get out of the worship service what you put into it. It's this mentality of **ME** that Jesus is saying we must disown completely.

If you and I want to be Jesus' disciples, we must understand it's not about us, it's about **HIM**. The only thing that matters is what He wants. I admit, that's painful for me and I don't like it. You will find it to be the same for you. But we really have no other option. If you and I want to be disciples of Jesus we must **DIE** to self. And Jesus said, it needs to happen daily!

The patriarch Abraham modeled this truth so beautifully in his willingness to offer Isaac on the altar. All the promises God made to Abraham were wrapped up in this boy. And God said, I want you to offer him to me. God was testing Abraham to see if his trust was in the promise God had made or actually in the God who made it!

You know, there was no way Abraham could do that until he died to self. He had to give up his plans, his hopes, his future; his identity. In Abraham's mind, will, and emotions, the deed was done. He had died to Isaac emotionally. His identity was lost, gone.

It is the same with us. All the things that make up our identity must be laid on the altar. We must disown them. We must give up our identity. This is one factor of **The High Cost of Discipleship**.

The Second Factor is:

Take Up Your Cross

Have you ever heard anyone talk about a grouchy neighbor, or an ungrateful spouse, or a nasty co-worker, and then say, **"I guess that's just my cross to bear?"** Or maybe it's an illness or a physical limitation that's referred to as a cross. Is that what Jesus is talking about?

No; and unfortunately, we have, in many ways trivialized the Cross; we've removed its rough edges. Modern day Christianity and the world have generally turned the cross into a nice piece of harmless jewelry, all shiny and pretty.

Today, the Biblical symbolism of the cross is abused by women wearing low cut blouses with a cross hanging on the exposed flesh. Or how about young people wearing the cross on body piercings, and earrings, or on their clothing while living lives that scream of the immorality and self-possession of this world. And what about all the ways of making merchandise out of the cross? These are not the kinds of things the disciples pictured when Jesus spoke of the cross.

Jesus and the Twelve lived under the Roman occupation of Israel. The Jews were a subjugated people. As you may recall from your reading of history, Rome was a fairly tolerant of those nations and people who submitted themselves to its governance. But for those who rebelled, as the Jews often did, they were merciless. Their primary form of capital punishment was crucifixion. The people of Jesus' day had seen crosses by the hundreds and even thousands. And they hated the Romans for it.

The condemned were flogged almost to the point of death and then compelled to carry the crossbeam of their cross to the place of execution. That crossbeam could weigh anywhere between 75 to 125 pounds. Once at the crucifixion site, they were stripped completely naked and either tied by cords or nailed to the crossbeam. Artists have tried to protect our sensibilities and lessen the humiliation of the victim by adding clothing to their paintings.

Then the crossbeam was hoisted into place in a notch on the upright and secured. The victim's feet could then be nailed, one on either side of the upright. The crosses held the victim's feet just a few inches off the ground, not high in the air like we often see in pictures. This left him exposed to humiliation by those who passed by; to their mocking, their taunts, their spitting.

Death was slow, but usually came within 36 hours. The pain of infected wounds, the weight of the body compressing the lungs and dehydration all added to the torment. Often the bodies were left to decay and be devoured by scavengers. When Jesus mentioned the cross, **this is what the disciples saw in their minds. It was an instrument of the cruelest form of death. They knew that those who "took up" the cross never returned!**

Why did Jesus use this terminology? First, this was the death He was facing. We know from his struggle in the garden that his flesh recoiled from it. It seems Jesus wanted to impress upon the disciples that this excruciating method of death would be to the physical body what death to self would be to the spiritual and emotional. Our flesh dies hard; it hangs on tenaciously to life. We want to retain control. But Jesus says; *Count the cost; if you are not willing to take up the cross and die the kind of death I will die, you cannot be one of my disciples.*

And this cross Jesus was urging them to take up was voluntary. No one is compelled to be a disciple of Christ. But who in his right mind would voluntarily submit himself to such suffering and death? In order to answer that question we must look at the alternatives.

Notice that in verses 24 and 25 Jesus used the terms of commerce; profit and loss. He said, *Whoever protects his physical life, whoever cares more for his body than for the Lord's commands, will lose his spiritual life; he will lose his crown.* That does not mean we neglect the care of our bodies. There are other Scriptures dealing with that subject. What is in view here is the focus on sacrificing the spiritual to protect the physical. That will lead to eternal loss.

I heard the story of a couple who felt called of God to serve on a foreign mission field. They accepted that call and went to share the Gospel with a tribal people in the jungle. In their years of service there the Lord began to bless them with a family. They had four sons.

One of the dangers they faced in the jungle environment was snakes. As the boys began to grow older, their father became concerned about them going into the jungle. He feared they'd fall prey to one of these snakes. His fear became so acute that he finally decided to move his family home to the States, even though he knew God had called his family to minister to these tribal people.

Being missionaries, they arrived back in the United States without much by way of finances. Some friends in the Deep South offered to let them live in a camper on the edge of their property. So they moved in. One day the three oldest boys were playing outside and decided to explore under the camper. There they got into a nest of rattlesnakes and were bitten repeatedly.

The father heard their cries and by their broken and confused stories realized what had happened. He grabbed all three of the boys, hustled them into the pickup truck and, while

shouting to his wife, rushed off for the distant hospital. In his panic, he failed to see the youngest boy who had come out of the house.

Just as his wife came out of the house to see what all the commotion was about, she saw the pickup truck back over the youngest boy, and kill him. She sat down on the steps, had a heart attack, and died right there. That father lost his entire family because he feared snakes. He lost the very thing he'd tried so hard to protect. That's a tragic story, but I believe it illustrates the point Jesus was making here. We must be willing to follow Him even to the point of death.

As I said earlier, this commitment is voluntary. There's no coercion here. If you want to be a disciple of Christ then you must take up the cross. You must take up your responsibility to actively crucify the flesh. And it is something that must be done every day.

You might think all this talk about denying self and crucifying the flesh is depressing. But it's reality; reality we don't hear much about in today's version of what it means to be a Christian. We honor athletes who practice radical physical disciplines in the pursuit of momentary glory in the spotlight. But we ridicule Christians who practice self-discipline as being narrow, or legalistic. I believe we do that because their example puts us to shame.

Are you and I willing to surrender the glory of the Son of Man, the glory of the Father, and the glory of the holy angels for the temporary applause and approval of men? That's not a worthwhile trade in my book!

For the true disciple of Jesus suffering is a reality. And it won't just be the world that is the source of that suffering. Oh no, much of it will come from 'religious' people, just like it did for Jesus and the disciples. The message of the cross is offensive; it causes people to react against it. But Jesus said if we take up the cross daily and follow Him, we are assured of eternal life.

There is a glory yet to come that will far outstrip any kind of earthly glory the world has ever seen. Jesus said whoever is willing to lose his or her life for the sake of the gospel will gain eternal life and the approval of the Father.

When Luke recorded these words of Jesus to "take up [your] cross," he used the aorist imperative, which means – take it up right now! And that is my counsel to you. If you have never taken up the cross, don't wait, do it now. Or maybe, at some point in the past you've taken up your cross, that instrument of death, and vowed to cling to it until all of self is crucified? But as

you analyze your life you realize you've laid it down and gone back to your own way. As I prepared this teaching I realized my need for repentance and renewal; the need to once again embrace the Cross.

You can make any claim you want to about being a Christian; but remember, unless you are willing to deny yourself and take up your cross daily you cannot be His disciple. This is the second factor in counting "The High Cost of Discipleship."

The Third Factor is:

Follow Up Your Commitment

After you've given up your identity and taken up your cross, you need to follow up on your commitment. Jesus told his hearers, "Follow me." Simple, direct, clear instruction given in the present tense, signifying that it begins right now and continues on into the future.

You know, it's important to begin well, but it's not enough. Some people expect to get to heaven on the basis of a decision they made years ago. Maybe you're one of them? I'm not denying that your decision was valid, but how are you following now? What impact does the decision you made back then have on your daily choices, your walk with the Lord today? The direction you're going in life is a lot more important than where you've come from.

I'm reminded of the word of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 18 of his prophecy. *"But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die."*

Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die."

For years Joyce and I had a poster on our bedroom door that shows a set of train tracks vanishing into the distant sunset. Underneath that picture are the words, *With you for the long run.* It reminds us to follow up on the commitments we made to each other nearly 36 years ago. Our marriage is only as good as our honoring of those commitments. In that light the words of Jesus in John 8:31 and 32 are instructive. He said, *If you **continue** in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* If you follow me [an ongoing process], then you are truly my disciples.

Following up on your commitment will make you different. Your primary desire will be to please Jesus, not others, not yourself. That will affect your choices – all of them in every area of life. That will make you different from unsaved friends and family members. And you know something; it will make you different than many church members. Many today want the benefits, the rewards of being a Christian, without making the sacrifices Jesus demands.

Terry Laughlin makes this observation. “The world will tolerate a church that conducts its meetings and has its programs, but a church that vibrantly loves Jesus Christ, teaches His Word and reaches out in love to address the sins that are destroying our nation, our families and people's relationship with the Lord will not be popular. When abortion, greed, drunkenness, divorce, premarital sex and sodomy are handled in a true Biblical manner there will be complaints against and criticisms of that church Body.”

If you're committed to following Jesus, you'd better just plan on it, you're going to face some rejection and ridicule. Others will call you narrow minded, old fashioned, and so on. People will say you take the Bible too literally. They'll say things like *Do you really think God expects us to follow that part of His Word today? The world has changed.*

Or, “you don't have to do all that stuff.” They're right, you don't **have** to do all that stuff. But you'll want to obey the commands of Christ because you love Jesus and you're grateful that he rescued you from a life of sin, and from eternal torment. The apostle Paul said it so well in Romans 12, verses one and two. *Al beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world* (don't let the world squeeze you into its

mold]: *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.* @

Now in verse 26 when the Son of Man comes He will not be ashamed to call you one of His. Instead of being “cast away” or disqualified as Jesus speaks about in verse 25, you will be welcomed into the glorious presence of the Father, the Son, and all the holy angels.

My friend, Jesus is not sadistic; he doesn't derive satisfaction from seeing our pain. But He values the results of that pain when we bring it to Him as part of our cross-bearing. The sacrifices he asks us to make are made with our best in mind. The reverses we face in life are not the hand of blind fate; they have purpose, they have meaning. God has promised that our steps are ordered by him and that all things do indeed work together for our good. But we so often focus on the immediate, what feels good now. Jesus wants our focus to be like his, on the long-term. He wants us to be able to say with Him, *“I do only those things which please the Father.”* He wants us to follow, faithfully until the end.

The reward is eternal life. Seventy or eighty years, or even a hundred, here on earth seems like a long time because our minds can't grasp the concept of something that never ends. But those brief years are just preparation for eternal life and eternal glory in the presence of God the Father. No more sorrow, no more pain, no more broken relationships, no more sickness. That's the payoff for following the Lord.

My friend, have you counted the cost of being his disciple? Have you given up your identity and accepted the identity Jesus has for you. Have you laid down your plans and goals for the ones he has for you. Have you found the joy of a life fully surrendered to Jesus?

Have you taken up the cross of death to self and do you continue to carry it; or have you laid it down somewhere along the way? Have you given up the acclaim and approval of men in order to gain that greater glory Christ offers? Are you daily dying to self so Christ can live his life through you? Is that life being reproduced in others?

And finally, are you following up on the commitments you've made? You started well; are you still in the race, or have you dropped out? Do you understand that “The High Cost of Discipleship” is more than offset by the eternal rewards?

At the end of life will you hear those words of commendation from the Father, “Well done, good and faithful disciple, enter into the joy of the Lord.” Or, will you hear the opposite, “Depart from me you who work iniquity; I never knew you.” Today, you can choose which words you’ll hear.

