

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself ...” In the name of the Father ...

This is one of the most challenging sayings of Jesus.

We live in a day of "casual Christianity." I read recently that the average church could drop one fourth of its members from the membership roll and neither the church nor the dropped members would notice any difference. Casual Christians are those who want to be numbered among the membership of the parish, but could care less about following our Shepherd. They want the forgiveness the cross of Christ brings but never intend to carry their own cross. They want warm moments on Sunday in church but offer no commitment to Jesus on Monday mornings. In short, they want the crown without the cross [John Hamby, minister].

Right before Jesus revealed Himself to Peter, James and John, in all His glory in the transfiguration, he first asked them who they said He was, and then told them what was expected of a true Christian. Jesus said, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. The first stipulation to cease being a casual Christian and become a true disciple of Christ is that one “must deny himself.”

We are not allowed to come to God on our own terms we must come to Him on His terms. I looked recently at a contract. In the contract I am committing to certain things, but in it were a whole list of things the other party must commit to doing. And if they agree, I will sign it. It's my terms. But if I am going to be a disciple of Christ, it will be all on His terms!

It is important to understand that Jesus does not mean what we usually think of as “self-denial.” By this we usually mean that we are giving up something. It is like how we observe Lent, by giving up something. Perhaps it is the giving up of a bad habit in life, or giving up something really important like, chocolate or spending too much time on the computer, or smoking cigarettes. That is NOT what Jesus is talking about. He is not concerned only with what we do, but even more importantly with what we are. Therefore he is not talking about denying ourselves luxuries or even necessities, but about “denying SELF”. It is entirely different.

Denying self means that we renounce our right to ourselves, the right to rule our own lives. The phrase “deny himself” literally means, “to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone.” We deny ourselves. Strikingly, it is the same word used to describe Peter's denial of Jesus outside the high priest's home. Peter said to Jesus, “I will not deny you ... If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” Jesus said before morning he would deny Him three times. A few hours later, after the trial had begun, when asked if he had been with Jesus, Peter cursed and swore, “I do not know the man!” He did it three times. And then when the cock crowed, he remembered what Jesus said and was heartbroken with shame.

The disciple is to utterly disown himself, to refuse to acknowledge the self of the old man.

- We are to count the old man as being dead (Rom. 6:11).
- We are to make no provision for the flesh (Rom. 13:14).
- To deny oneself means to follow the example set forth by the Lord Himself in coming to this

world, who “emptied himself” (Phil 2).

- We are to live our lives as one alive to God, but dead to sin and to the world (Gal. 2:20). [John Hambray.]

What does all this mean in a practical sense? A fellow named Craig Giannini wrote it this way: “If when you are good, evil is spoken, and when your wishes are crossed and your advice is disregarded, and your opinions are ridiculed and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart, and even defend yourself but you take it patiently in loving silence, then you are dying to self. And when you lovingly and patiently bear any disgrace, any irregularity, any annoyance, when you stand face to face with extravagance and folly and spiritual insensitivity and endure it, as Jesus did, that is dying to self. And when you are content with any food, any money, any clothing, any society, any solitude or interruption by the will of God, that is dying to self. And when you never care to refer to yourself in conversation or record your own good works, or itch after commendation from others, and when you truly love to be unknown, that is dying to self. When you see your brother prosper, see his needs wondrously met, and can honestly rejoice with him (with his big house, with his big car, with his big swimming pool – whatever it may be) without feeling envy, and never question God though your needs are greater and still unmet, that is dying to self. When you can receive correction and reproof from someone of less stature, and admit that he is right and find no resentment or rebellion in your heart, that is dying to self.”

It sounds hard because it is hard! Self does NOT like to be denied, but until it is, we cannot possibly follow after Jesus like He desires for us to do!

A man named Fred Craddock, addressing clergy, expressed the practical implications of this. “To give my life for Christ appears glorious,” he said. “To pour myself out for others. . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom—I’ll do it. I’m ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’ But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid’s troubles instead of saying, ‘Get lost.’ Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it’s harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.”

I said in the sermon on Pentecost, Christians have no rights. I suppose what I meant was that serious Christians, true Christians, have no rights. And it is only because they have surrendered those rights. They did have a right to choose, we are all born with a right to choose: and the choice is whether to hear and answer Jesus’ invitation to be one of His disciples or remain on the edge. God has many, many casual Christians in this world, all bystanders watching alongside the edge of the road. And perhaps you’ve been one.

But at any time - and that time may be now - at any time you can choose to cease being a casual Christian and accept His invitation to be a true disciple. You can decide to deny yourself and any rights to yourself and become truly one of His disciples. It will change your life; you will be liberated, you will be set free. You will no longer be a casual bystander, watching Christ from the distance. You will be one of the ones that follow Him all the way to the cross. You will live

your life with Him, and He will live His life through you. And to those who do He promises you shall receive your everlasting crown.

Robert Frost penned the famous poem, *The Road not Taken*. It ends with these words,

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Let us no longer be casual Christians; God has thousands of casual Christians. Let's take the road less traveled. And let us fulfill the Lord's will: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”