



## Love and Sacrifice

This past week, I enjoyed the honor of performing the wedding ceremony of a couple of wonderful friends that Margo and I met through my role directing a local community theater production last year. It was especially sweet because I had an opportunity to share briefly with those gathered, and I talked a bit about God's vision for love as an act of self-sacrifice.

I referred to God's instructions to husbands and wives from *Ephesians 5*, where he tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, and where he tells wives to surrender themselves for the sake of honoring their husbands the way they surrender themselves for God's glory. You see, God has woven the task of self-sacrifice into every home and every family, and when a couple can truly surrender themselves for someone else as an act of love, that's the stuff that "happily ever after" is made of.

This very idea of self-sacrifice is at the heart of our faith. It is the essence of Christianity. So it's a shame that so many churches are tempted away from this

pinnacle of selflessness in favor of catering to the consumerism of our culture. Without realizing it, we reduce the gospel to a marketing appeal, proclaiming all that God does for us in loving us and redeeming us, while kind of hiding the cost of following Jesus somewhere in the fine print.

One of my heroes — not because I agree with everything he's written, but because I am inspired by his commitment and self-sacrifice for Christ — is **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, the German pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. The focus of his life was on the impact Christians should have in the secular world, and his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is a classic. In that book, Bonhoeffer talks a bit about the *cheapening* of the gospel... of reducing God's grace to something that is so free and abundant that it has no value.

Of course, God's grace *is* free. Our relationship with the Lord is a *gift*, not a prize that we win through our efforts. Grace is something we *receive*, not something we *earn*. And God's grace is, indeed, infinite. Yet sometimes in our celebration of God's free and infinite grace, we take away it's worth. We somehow make it sound like there's no cost to following Jesus.

So Bonhoeffer writes:

**“Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks’ wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost!... *Cheap* grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate...**

***Costly* grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him... Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is *costly* because it costs a man his life, and it is *grace* because it gives a man the only true life. It is *costly* because it condemns sin, and *grace* because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a**

**price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us."**

Yeah. Bonhoeffer knew what he was talking about. And he *lived* — and *died!* — what he was talking about. His commitment to *unlocking the way* for others to discover God's grace, and to standing up for the infinite value of all people, eventually cost him his life at the hand of the Nazis.

## Recap

Since Memorial Day, we have been exploring what it means to follow Jesus... and especially how Jesus prepares his followers to *unlock the way* for others to discover his life-changing grace.

- We've seen the theme and appeal of all Jesus' teaching: **"Repent, turn around, go in a radically different direction, because God's kingdom is being unveiled."**
- We've seen him extend that beautiful invitation to some men from Galilee... to **"come and see,"** to hang out with him, to listen to him, to watch him as he shares compassion and hope and new life with others.

- We've seen that invitation ripple outward as those early followers in-turn invited their own friends and family to **"come and see"** Jesus for themselves.
- We've seen Jesus offer the very same message about the kingdom and new life but in totally different ways tailored to the people he was reaching, be that sharing theology and biblical stories to a religious scholar or offering refreshment and welcome to a woman desperate to be loved.
- We've heard how Jesus' strategy ultimately impacts the way we share the good news of new life with the world today, as last week Rabbi Neal pointed out what Paul meant in **1 Corinthians 9** about **"becoming all things to all people so that we might win them over."**
- And we've seen how the season of **"come and see"** ended after about 4 months as Jesus sent his followers home to ponder what they had discovered. Jesus wasn't about making quick decisions driven by an emotional appeal. He wanted them to really consider what it means to follow him... because, ultimately, following Jesus costs us our lives.

Let me say that again, because it's as true today as it was back then:

Following Jesus costs us our lives.

But...

Following Jesus costs us our lives.  
Following Jesus is the only way to live.

This will be the recurring theme of Jesus' teaching through the rest of the gospels, from his messages to the crowds, to his enigmatic parables, and ultimately to his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of our redemption.

And we see this message of *the cost of following Jesus* revealed as Jesus meets up again with those early followers who had been sent home to ponder what they had seen.

The stage of “**come and see**” had ended; now it was time to “**come and follow.**”

## Come and Follow

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother

Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. *(Mark 1:16 NLT)*

Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him. *(Mark 1:17–18 NLT)*

A little farther up the shore Jesus saw Zebedee’s sons, James and John, in a boat repairing their nets. *(Mark 1:19 NLT)*

He called them at once, and they also followed him, leaving their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired men. *(Mark 1:20 NLT)*

Familiar story, right? We’re kind of back to where we started this journey of discovery as a church family. Jesus shows up at the shore and extends the new invitation: **“Come and follow.”** Immediately, these guys drop everything and follow him.

Their response would make every salesman drool. It would make every politician envious. And it would leave every psychologist puzzled. What happened here? How could such simple words — **“come and follow me”** — provoke such a total surrender and change of life?

It wasn’t a matter of Jesus using his divine powers to mesmerize them or something like that. The truth is

that these guys had *already been with Jesus*. They had previously accepted the invitation to “**come and see**” what the kingdom was all about. And they had been given time to ponder what they had seen, to settle their affairs, and to prepare for this moment.

I suppose there are some important strategic things we can learn from Jesus here:

Give people time to make solid decisions.

Back in the 1830s, a preacher named **Charles Finney** popularized the idea of *revivals* and *altar calls* (sometimes called “*the anxious bench*”) in an effort to sign up new converts for the abolitionist movement. Over the following 150 years, this idea of an emotional appeal at the conclusion of fearful “hellfire & damnation” preaching, to walk down an aisle, to recite a prayer after a preacher, and to have a milestone moment of conversion as the beginning of a longer conversation about faith and discipleship... it became refined by preachers like **Dwight Moody** and **Billy Sunday**, and known worldwide thanks to **Billy Graham** telling people to come — “**your friends will wait for you**” — as a choir sang “*Just as I Am*” to packed stadiums.

Pretty cool stuff. And I have no doubt that there are many brothers and sisters in Christ who look back on their own journeys to some sort of “altar call” or “conversion” moment as their starting point with Christ. And there are certainly some examples of that kind of experience in the Bible, with the most significant being in **Acts 2** on the first day of the Christian church when Peter preached to the crowds gathered for Pentecost.

But that certainly wasn't *Peter's* experience with Christ, nor was it the norm for Jesus' strategy for changing the lives of people. He chose to ***give people time to make solid decisions***. His appeal to “**come and follow**” him was based upon people having learned who he is, having heard about his teaching, his miracles, and his blessing of the oppressed in that culture.

And when he finally offered these fisherman his invitation to “**come and follow,**” he didn't give them a responsibility for changing themselves. He assumed the responsibility: “**follow me and I will make you fishers of men.**” No hard-line ultimatums. No forced behavior. No demand to conform to religious expectations. Just a beautiful invitation with Jesus bearing the weight of their training. He would not ask anything of them that he had not shown them.

Jesus offered them a *vision*, not a *job*. One of the greatest existential fears of human existence is that our lives will not count, that all our years of toil will be a waste. But there is no danger that Jesus will leave his followers without purpose and meaning. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us to a vision, to a dream, to a goal, to a life-changing purpose.

A wise man once said, **“there is nothing quite as exhilarating as getting out of bed in the morning, going back into the world, and knowing *why*.”**

## The Cost of Following

Of course, the thing that catches most of our attention as we read the story of Jesus’ invitation to these fishermen is their *immediate* and *radical* and *total* response.

“Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him... He called them at once, and they also followed him, leaving their father...

*(Mark 1:17-18, 20 NLT)*

At Jesus’ invitation, they literally dropped what they were doing and left it all behind.

That's not the way most invitations work, is it? I might call you and invite you to *help* with some cause.

- **“Can you squeeze in some time for a planning meeting next week? Let’s check our schedules and see if there’s a free hour or so we have in common.”**
- **Or, “Hey, wanna help us with this really important cause? We’re looking for volunteers to give up a Saturday morning next month.”**

We present our invitations as opportunities to *add* something to our lives. To pencil in some new appointment. To add a task to our “to do” list.

But implicit in Jesus’ invitation is not *adding* something to our lives; it’s *giving up* something in our lives. It’s giving up our very life, really. To **“follow”** Jesus means leaving where you are and going somewhere new. It takes us back to what we first learned as the heart of everything Jesus taught:

From that time Jesus began to preach this message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matthew 4:17 NET)

Change directions. Your life has been going one way. But following Jesus means going a *different* way. It means going *his* way... going where *he* is going. Why? Because of God's kingdom. Because he invites us to become part of something so much bigger and more sacred than what this world has to offer. We no longer belong to this world; we belong to the kingdom which goes *beyond* this world.

And *that* means leaving this world behind. Well, perhaps not physically. Not just yet. We're still living, breathing, biological, physical creatures at least for a little while. But our real life is no longer in this world. Our real life is with Christ in his kingdom.

Here's how Paul later explains it in his letter to the Christians in ***Colossae***:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. (*Colossians 3:1–2 NLT*)

For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. (*Colossians 3:3 NLT*)

Think about that for a second. The implications are *huge*. That's exactly what Jesus was inviting those

fishermen to experience, and what they had been pondering for a couple of months, and what they embraced when they dropped their nets, walked away from their business and family, and followed Jesus.

Not that Jesus posed the invitation in those terms. Jesus didn't say, **“Follow me, and die to this life, and experience a new life that is hidden with me beyond the confines of time and space, and which will last forever, but which will intersect with this physical life for a little while longer so you can unlock the way for others to die to this world and follow me as well.”** Frankly, that's a bit much for someone who is just beginning this journey. These fishermen had hung out with Jesus for about four months, and then they had had a couple of months to think about it, and even then Jesus kept things simple: **“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Follow me, and I will transform you into people who change the world.”**

It was enough for them to take the first step... because that first step is a doozy. It involves letting go of this world in order to embrace the kingdom.

Do you remember playing on the monkey bars when you were a kid? You'd climb up, grab that first bar, and start using the momentum of your body to

move from one rung to the next. Hand-over-hand, you begin making your way across.

But what happens when you stop the momentum? What happens if you try to hang on to the bar you've already reached while also hanging on to the bar ahead? You just stay there, going nowhere, exerting a whole lot of energy to maintain the status quo. It's exhausting. And it's unproductive. You're not where you started, but you're not where you're going.

In order to move forward, you're going to have to let go of one bar and grab on to something new.

That's kind of what this invitation from Jesus is like. **"Follow me, and I will transform you into people who change the world."** It starts with letting go of the stuff of this world so you're free to grab hold of the stuff of the kingdom.

It costs you something to follow Jesus — not because you're *paying* for this new life Jesus offers or anything like that. It's just that...

You can't hold on to the life you have  
if you want to live the new life Jesus offers.

For these fishermen, it cost them their careers. That's a huge deal. All their dreams, their sense of

accomplishment. Their pride. Their income! They let go of all of it.

For a couple of them, it cost them their family. They left dad behind in the boat... not because they stopped loving dad or having a relationship with him. It's just that they had to follow Jesus wherever that took them, and their love for him had to be greater than the love for the people who were so dear to them.

For you, it may cost you your time. And that's a big deal, because time is in short supply in our culture. You may find yourself giving up that vacation, or that hobby, or that favorite pastime. Jesus is essentially saying that every day, as you continue to follow him, you open up your calendar or planner or whatever you use. You mark out every hour as belonging to him. You make yourself fully available to this task of *unlocking the way* for others. You may still have a commute to work. You may still have those appointments. You may still have a task list to complete. But all of it is secondary and supplementary to the bigger purpose of your life: introducing the world to God's grace both in word and deed — in what you *say* to others as you tell the story of God's love and grace, and in what you *show* to others as you extend compassion and generosity and blessing to others.

For you, following Jesus may cost you financially. You may have to sell that house in order to invest in what God is doing. You may have to give up your holiday bonus. You may find yourself passing by that new car, or that new TV, or eating out at that new restaurant, in order to make your resources available for whatever God has in mind. Following may *cost* you quite literally, especially if you embrace this idea of “first fruits” that we talk about here at Hope — that God calls us to give him the first and best of all that we are and all that we have.

For those fishermen, it cost all of that and more. But it was an easy choice for them.

They left their nets at once and followed him.  
*(Mark 1:18 NLT)*

Why? Because they had already died to this world. They had already decided to let go of their old lives. So whatever they had in this world? It was there to be used by God, not by them.

Remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer? The German pastor who not only *taught* the cost of discipleship but *modeled* it in his own life? Who ended up losing his life for the sake of the gospel? He once wrote:

Earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected.

In the wilderness God gave Israel the manna every day, and they had no need to worry about food and drink. Indeed, if they kept any of the manna over until the next day, it went bad.

In the same way, the disciple must receive his portion from God every day. If he stores it up as a permanent possession, he spoils not only the gift, but himself as well, for he sets his heart on accumulated wealth, and makes it a barrier between himself and God.

Where our treasure is, there is our trust, our security, our consolation, and our God.

Hoarding is idolatry. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*)

(Yeah, I told you that guy was the real deal! 😊)

## How About You?

Obviously, all of this leads us to a rather practical question: *How about you?*

We've been looking at this journey of these early followers of Jesus for a couple of months. We've taken a couple of weeks off, allowing us time to ponder and

contemplate what we have seen. At some point, Jesus steps into our lives, into our workplace, into our homes, into our families, into our friendships, into wherever we're experiencing life, and he makes that same invitation: **"Follow me, and I will transform you. Follow me, and I will empower you to change the world. Follow me... away from this old life and the stuff the world offers and into a new life, a forever-life, and the wonders of God's kingdom."**

And you will look down into your hands and see what you're holding onto. For the fishermen, it was their nets. For you, it will be something else. It may be your career, or your home, or your calendar, or your checkbook. It may be your dignity, or your reputation, or your fears. It may be your past, or your shame. It may be your pride. It may be your sense of control. Of destiny. It may be your priorities or your ambitions or your dreams.

And you will have to make the same decision those disciples made. Will you just hang there, going nowhere, holding on to what's in your hands? Or will you let it go so that you can move forward? So that you can take Jesus' hand and follow him wherever he leads?

Just a few months after Jesus invited those fishermen to let go of everything and follow him, he

stood with them in the shadow of the rock walls at Caesarea Philippi. He told them that he would go first — that he would surrender his life so that we might be reconciled with God. And when Peter resisted — when Peter dared to suggest that there had to be some other way that didn't cost Jesus everything, Jesus rebuked him. There *is* no other way into the kingdom. The very way that Jesus unlocks for us, and to which he gives us the keys to the kingdom so that we can *unlock the way* for others, is a path of total surrender and self-sacrifice.

So, at that moment, Jesus called the crowds to gather around him and he spoke these words:

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. *(Mark 8:34 NLT)*

If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. *(Mark 8:35 NLT)*

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? *(Mark 8:36 NLT)*

**PRAYER • SONG:** *I Turn to Christ*