

“A Compelling Cross”

Luke 9:23

The phone rings, shattering the Monday morning solitude. On the other end of the line, the following message is recited, *“Pastor, I’m sorry to bother you on your day off, but I have a problem and I don’t know what to do about it. I have decided not to teach my Sunday School class any more. I know it’s only been a month, but it just isn’t as much fun as I thought it would be. And beside that, it’s a lot of work. I’m just sure God has something better for me to do.”*

The conversation ends. The phone receiver is returned to its resting place. And, in the corridors of my mind, I can hear music—it’s tune is familiar, the lyrics are coming back to me now—*“Another One Bites the Dust”!*

Once again, meaningful ministry is discarded because the price tag was too high.

Now, let me set your mind at ease. I have no particular incident in mind when telling that story. Relax- it was not your phone call! The fact of the matter is, phone calls like this are all too common in the avenues of service and discipleship. My struggle has been answering the question, *“Where did the teaching of a costless, cross-less gospel originate?”*, *“When did the idea of personal involvement and personal commitment to costly service become an intolerable concept?”*, *“Where did we ever get the idea being a Christian was all glitter and glamour?”* Certainly this did not originate with the One who said, *“If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.”* (Luke 9:23)

Unfortunately, I am afraid time has worn those sacred words into nothing more than mere poetic abstraction for many of us. The truth of the matter is, we don’t like to talk about crosses-sacrifice-denial-or high price tags these days. Still, the truth remains- God has graciously given us great and glorious promises that can only fulfilled as we follow Him in a lifestyle of sacrifice, denial, obedience, and not our usual frolic in self-satisfaction.

Well, here’s my dilemma: How can I motivate people to embrace a lifestyle that is so costly? Let me share with you a few of the things rumbling around in my heart.

To Be a Follower of Jesus You Must Count the Cost

It will cost you something to follow Jesus! There is a price to pay if you choose to follow Him. I remember the story of Jesus telling the rich young ruler to sell all of his possessions and give it to the poor. This obviously was not what the rich, young ruler wanted to hear because the scripture said he *“went away sorrowful”!*

It is critically important to make a decision to believe in Jesus, but there is more to it than just saying you believe. Your words need to be supported by your action.

I chose to believe in Jesus at an early age- 10. My life to this point was literally a train-wreck. My mother was on her 5th marriage, and it was failing. Every single adult in my family was an alcoholic. My home life was awful. As a 10 year-old child, choosing to believe in Jesus was maybe the easiest thing in the world to do, since I couldn’t find anyone else in whom I could believe or trust.

However, my decision to believe in Jesus was purely selfish at that point. Choosing to believe in Jesus did not impact my life one little bit. I said I believed, but that belief didn't cost me anything.

Today, I spend my life trying to figure out ways to help people choose Jesus. I've discovered that sometimes you have to be really creative, almost to the point of becoming enticing!

Here's what I'm talking about. Parents, you will fondly recall this game you used to play with your small children at dinner time. Remember, it seemed the only way you could get your children to eat their vegetables was to turn your spoon into an airplane. Then, as the plane (loaded with vegetables) would skillfully swoop down, your child's mouth would miraculously open and in would go the vegetables. The approach was so smooth and so subtle the children hardly even noticed they were being tricked into eating those nasty vegetables!

What a great tactic! Every parent in this room today can tell you it works; it's the easiest way in the world to get children to eat vegetables- for a while! There are times we do the same thing with enticing people to choose Jesus! Strategically we will deploy a similar tactic when it comes to the demands of surrender and commitment. I mean, in all fairness, we have creatively and effectively disguised the whole idea of denial, and crosses.

I don't think so, and here's why. The door to following Jesus is, and will always be, marked by obedience! It can't always be wrapped in a pretty package. There is no way around it- to be a follower of Jesus you must count the cost!

To Be a Follower of Jesus You Must Cut the Chains

In another scripture, MATTHEW 23:8-12 Jesus confronted people who said they wanted to follow Him, people who seemingly were willing to pay the price, yet at the same time were chained to something that was prohibiting them from really following Him. What was the advice of Jesus? He said, "*Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.*"

All of us have chains that effectively keep us anchored to a place that limits our ability to truly follow Jesus. These chains can take the form of other people, jobs, responsibilities, aspirations, habits, or just about anything else. More than anything else, these things become excuses that justify our unwillingness to go where Jesus wants us to go or to do what Jesus wants us to do. These are very things Jesus requires us to sever if we are going to follow Him.

In my early walk of faith my life was characterized by heavy chains! -Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead, and don't look back!" I'm here to tell you the weight of the chains can be incredibly heavy. Life has the capacity of cutting deep, leaving scars as evidence of the pain. Chains can come in the form of an un-forgiven past, a broken relationship, unresolved anger or bitterness, and enslaving habits. The effect is always the same- the weight of the chains pulls us down so low it is impossible to imagine going any lower!

All I am really saying today is that the decision to follow Jesus requires us to sever the chains that keep us bound. The scars, well they are always going to be there. The question is, will we allow them to be a sign of pain or a sign of healing!

To be a Follower of Jesus you must Connect to Christ

Once the chains fall behind you, it is absolutely imperative to make the connection with Jesus. Hey, there is no other way to say it than to tell you the truth- Jesus is the source of new life. It's like the relationship between the vine and branch Jesus talked about. He said, *"Abide in Me, and I will abide in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing."* (John 15:4-5)

The purpose of the parable of the vine and the branches is revealed in these words, *"These things I have spoken to you that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."* (John 15:11) Jesus is talking about a joy in life that can't be kicked out of us!

No one can change my mind regarding the sensation of joy I experienced on a hot, muggy night in July of 1971. The skeptics would rationalize it away as a psychological catharsis. I wonder, how would the skeptics explain the continued sense of joy I have experienced in my life since that day? I'm here to tell you true joy, the kind that comes from knowing and following Jesus lasts! What is the secret? Well, that's the easy part, *"Abide in Me, and I will abide in you."* The vital connection of the Vine and the branch, that's the secret!

Now, the word "abide" chosen by Jesus in this passage means to take up permanent residence, to settle in, to rest. I'm grateful for the day I learned that I can't always be strong, or I can't always figure it out, or I can't always be resourceful enough to make things work the way I want them to work. I mean that; I am very grateful I have learned that to be true. Instead, what I have learned is that all I have to do is *"abide"* in my relationship with Jesus who is strong enough, wise enough, and resourceful enough for anything I can possibly face. All that is required of me is a radical abandonment to Him and a willingness to rest in His assurance.

I love this more contemporary translation of these verses- *"Abide in Me. Cling to Me. Stick fast to Me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with Me. Get nearer and nearer to Me. Roll every burden on Me. Put all your whole weight on Me. Never let go of your hold on me for even a moment. Be, rooted and planted in Me. Do this and I will never fail you."* See what I'm talking about? The branch and the Vine must be connected; they must become one!

To be a Follower of Jesus you must Contend for the Cross

You know what I think? I think Jesus is anxious to love, bless and empower us as His branches! Here's why- nothing is more magnetic and attractive to the world than authentic, genuine joy. When people see real joy in us, they will want to know how they can find it for themselves. We are absolutely essential to Jesus' strategy in reaching the world. There is a mutual dependence between the Vine and the branches. Think about it, the branch cannot produce fruit without the Vine, and the Vine cannot produce fruit without the branch. We desperately need Him. He desperately needs us. We are, by virtue of our relationship with Jesus, contenders for the Cross!

Now let me just tell you the Cross is not popular in today's world! I mean, how do you excite someone about dying on a cross? The answer is you don't! There is absolutely nothing exciting, glamorous, or prestigious about it. Contrary to the sentiment of the hymn, crosses are endured, not cherished! Crosses are not carried out of rabid excitement, but rather out of a personal experience where obedience to the Jesus takes precedence over personal convenience. The secret is found in a burning desire to please Him and serve Him regardless of the cost.

See, I don't think any ordinary person would volunteer to take up their own cross and follow Jesus knowing that it would mean certain death. Yet, that's exactly what I'm talking about today- there is certain death to our own plans, certain death to our own agenda, and certain death to our own will. It is an exacting price. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

I'll tell you what all this is about. Let's change the symbol. When we look at the image of the cross, let's look at a chain around our necks that has an electric chair attached to it. Or, let's look at a cord around our necks that has the image of the guillotine affixed to it.

Today people choose to wear crosses. They are fashionable. They are made of the very finest materials. They shine and glisten. They are beautiful. So, is this the image fixed in our mind when Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow Him? I don't think so. For Jesus, the cross was the path to death. It was a despicable way to die. It was reserved for the very worst criminals in the society. It was painful. It was cruel. Most importantly, it was always fatal!

All this, and Jesus has the audacity to say, "*If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.*" (Luke 9:23) Absolutely! It isn't for the weak. It isn't for the faint at heart. It isn't for the casual observer. No, it is an invitation reserved for those who are willing to follow Jesus!

Yes, you'll have to count the cost. Yes, you might have to cut some chains. Yes, you will have to get connected. Yes, you will be required to contend for the cross- if you choose to follow Jesus!

Here's how I would like for us to close this service today. In my heart, I believe there are many men, women, and young people who really do want to make a decision to follow Jesus- some for the very first time. If that is you, I'm going to invite you to our altar this morning to pray, but before you come... count the cost, get ready to make the connection, bundle up your chains and lay them down, and make today the day you begin contending for the cross.

Today is the day we need to take the first steps in following Jesus. What better way to begin this journey than joyfully, willingly taking up your cross!