

# “Is Our Religion Too Easy?”

a sermon by

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Text: “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Mark 8:34).

Over the past several years I have spent a good bit of time on the campus of Princeton Seminary. There is a particular spot that almost always catches my attention. As one enters the Mackay Campus Center, there are a number of plaques that are embedded on the entrance to the student dining hall. There are three plaques that memorialize graduates of the Seminary who were killed in service of their faith. One of them reads as follows:

OF THESE THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY  
WALTER MACON LOWRIE, class of 1840  
thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea 1847

JOHN EDGAR FREEMAN class of 1838  
ROBERT MCMULLEN class of 1853  
who with their wives were shot by the order of  
Nana Sahib 1857 at Cawnpore India

LEVI JANVIER class of 1840  
stabbed by a Sikh fanatic at Lodiana India 1864

ISIDOR LOEWENTHAL class of 1854  
shot accidentally or by design at Peshawur India

JOHN ROGERS PEALE class of 1905  
killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou China 1905

The second plaque memorializes a young minister by the name of Elijah Lovejoy, who ran an abolitionist printing press in Missouri and was killed by an angry mob of proslavery fanatics.

The third plaque is especially haunting to me. It calls to memory the life of a young minister by the name of James Reeb, who in March of 1965 answered the call of Martin Luther King, Jr., to come to Selma, Alabama, to help register black people to vote. Reeb was killed on the first day he was in Selma by an angry mob of white men.

I have wondered on a number of occasions how many students bother to look at the plaques as they rush to catch a quick meal on their way to class. I have wondered as well how many schools in this country would have the nerve to place these kinds of plaques at the center of the campus. After all, it doesn't appear to me to be a great marketing tool to recruit students. If this was the best a school had to offer, why would anyone suffer through Greek and Hebrew to end up dead in the China Sea or in Selma, Alabama?

## I.

This morning I want to say one thing and it is this: Beware of making your Christianity too easy. The Scripture this morning is taken from Mark's gospel. It is the so-called "watershed passage" of the gospel of Mark. Everything prior to this leads to it and every subsequent passage leads from it.

The setting of the passage is Caesarea Philippi, a spot just north of the borders of Israel, near what is today the Golan Heights. It is here that Jesus questions his disciples concerning his identity. Peter, always the leader, acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ, but when Jesus replies by saying that it is necessary for the Christ to suffer and die, Peter rebukes Jesus, making it necessary for Jesus to reprimand Peter as being on the side of man and not of God.

This sets the occasion for Jesus to explain the nature of discipleship. He does so by means of the sentence that forms our text: "If anyone wants to be my disciple," he says, "let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). John Calvin treated self-denial as the summary of the Christian life:

"We are not our own; therefore, neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

"We are not our own; therefore, let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours."

“On the contrary, we are God’s; to him, therefore, let us live and die.”

From these words Dietrich Bonhoeffer carved his famous sentence: “When Christ calls a person, he bids that person come and die.”

We don’t talk much about this in the church. For the most part we sit pretty loose to this kind of commitment. Often in the church we don’t confront people with the demands of discipleship. We say, “Come to church when you can, if you can.” We serve donuts and coffee, but not very often do we remind people of the cost of discipleship. So this morning I want to speak of the dangers of making our religion too easy.

## II.

One of the dangers of making our religion too easy is that we turn a religion of faith into an ethic of mediocrity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, makes a distinction between what he calls “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” “Cheap grace” to Bonhoeffer was the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism with discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. It is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

“Costly grace” is the gospel that must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a person must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Costly grace reminds us that our redemption cost God the gift of his son.

Next Sunday is Dedication Sunday. It is a time when we are asked to respond to God’s love for us in Christ by our gifts to the church. In the Presbyterian Church giving is an act of worship. That is the reason we ask people to bring their pledge cards and place them on the communion table. Giving in the Presbyterian Church is also seen as a sign of gratitude. We do not give to gain favor with God. We give in response to what God has given to us. In the Presbyterian Church giving is proportional. We are not asked to pay dues or even to pay our “fair share.” We are asked to give in response to what God has done for us.

As a church, there is much for which we should be thankful. We are a growing, thriving, church in the heart of a very vibrant city. We are in many ways an anomaly. We are a growing church in a declining denomination. We are a congregation that is filled with young families and children in a time in which most downtown churches are aging and struggling to find young people.

Moreover, this church offers many opportunities to its members. The Weekday School and Child Development Center here are among the finest children’s programs in the city. Our church offers its members many opportunities of service and outreach. Today we have two worship services on Sunday morning, one on Sunday evening, and one on Wednesday at noon.

Furthermore, we are a generous church. Our per capita giving is among the highest of the larger Presbyterian churches in the State of North Carolina. Recently, we raised in excess of \$130,000 to aid the victims of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita.

And yet, we are not where we need to be to fund adequately the programs of our church. For several years the pledges of our church have not been adequate to fund the various ministries of our church. Many of our members give generously and graciously. Many of our members do not pledge or give at all. Most of us could do better. Last year members of the stewardship committee estimated that the annual income of the 1,100 families of our church is close to \$100 million dollars. If that is true, we are returning only two and a half per cent to our church. Stewardship is always more than giving our financial resources to the church, but it is never less than that.

### III.

Then, too, the danger of making our religion too easy is that we devalue our faith by lessening the demands of the gospel. Mark is very clear about the cost of discipleship. Being a Christian is not about being a nice person. It is not about trying one's best. The demand of the gospel is to deny oneself, take up a cross and follow Jesus.

Throughout the ages Christianity has been most effective not when it watered down the gospel, but when it confronted people with the real cost of following Christ. In fact, some of the most powerful witnesses to the gospel have been those individuals who found God making an impossible demand on their lives. Where did Jesus say, "Not my will, but thy will be done"? In Gethsemane. When did Martin Luther write the great hymn: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." He wrote it when he was preparing to face the Emperor of Germany, knowing that by defying the medieval church, he might well lose his life. When did Sir Thomas More say, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first"? He said it when he was on the scaffold about to be beheaded.

I mentioned earlier James J. Reeb the young minister who was beaten to death in Selma, Alabama, on March 11, 1965. Four days after his death the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, introduced to congress the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The President invited Martin Luther King, Jr., to attend the joint meeting of congress, but King refused to attend, choosing instead to deliver the sermon at the funeral service for James Reeb at Brown's Chapel in Selma. In that funeral service Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that it was natural to ask the question, "Who killed James Reeb?" But King insisted on asking "What killed James Reeb?" because as King put it, when we move from the who to the what the blame is wide and the responsibility grows.

"James Reeb was murdered," said King, "by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amidst social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism."

Let us not deceive ourselves. Following Jesus is not easy. The most fascinating thing in Christianity has always been the cross. The reason for that is that in the long run we do not want an easy religion. We want a commanding, challenging religion that will take all that we have and are and call for more. That is the kind of religion that we have in Christ and that is the kind of religion that will not fail us.  
Amen!