

“The Difficult Sayings of Jesus: 1) The High Cost of Discipleship”

a sermon by

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Text: “He called to 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)

One of the great problems that the church faces is our attempt to domesticate Jesus. Nowhere is this more evident than in reading the New Testament. So often we have taken Jesus’ words in such ways that they do not offend.

There is, however, something offensive in the teachings of Jesus. He does not conform to our world view. Even after all these years, there is something breath-taking about the sayings of Jesus.

This morning begins the first Sunday of the Season of Lent, which has traditionally been a time of repentance, examination, and preparation for Easter. Over the next five Sundays, I want to examine five of the difficult sayings of Jesus: the enigmatic saying in Matthew that Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword; the question of family values and the disturbing incident in Mark’s gospel where Jesus appears to repudiate his mother and family; the problem with serving God and Mammon; and finally, the unpardonable sin.

I.

This morning we begin with the saying of Jesus about discipleship. “If anyone will come after me, let him to 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 not presuppose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh.

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.

We are God’s.

Therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

We are God’s.

Toward him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.” (Institutes, III, 7)

And from this sentence Dietrich Bonhoeffer carved his famous sentence, “When Christ calls a person, he calls that person to come and die.” (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

So, let’s look closely at these words of Jesus.

II.

“If anyone would come after me,” says Jesus, “Let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Notice the graciousness of this invitation. Following Jesus is not something that any of us has to do. Several years ago, when I was preparing my income taxes, one of my children asked why I was doing it. I replied by saying that filing one’s income tax is something we have to do.

But following Jesus is not something we have to do. There is little compulsion in our society to follow after Jesus. Jesus never offered anyone comfort or ease. He did offer them a glory. When Winston Churchill became prime minister of England in those dark days of May 1941, he addressed the people of Britain with these famous words: “‘I have nothing to offer,’ he said, ‘but blood, sweat, toil, and tears.’ You ask, ‘What is our policy?’ I will say; ‘It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark lamentable catalogue of human crime.’ That is our policy. You ask, ‘What is our aim?’ I can answer with one word: ‘Victory’ – victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.”

That is the spirit of discipleship that Jesus offers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* distinguishes between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Cheap grace for Bonhoeffer is forgiveness without repentance, communion without confession. It is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without discipleship, and grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it, a person will gladly go and sell all that he has. Costly grace is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a person will pluck out the log that causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follow 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 person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life.

Today, the great temptation in the church is to live by “cheap grace.” Cheap grace is worship turned into entertainment. It is discipleship viewed as self-fulfillment. Cheap grace is the gospel of wealth that is shamelessly proclaimed from a host of pulpits in this country.

Costly grace is the reminder to all of us that following Jesus makes demands of us. We are not our own, but we are bought with a price. In April of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis, Tennessee to show his support for the sanitation workers who were on strike in Richmond. It was in Memphis, Tennessee that King was assassinated.

On the night before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared with the people that gathered to hear him speak in Memphis, Tennessee that he and his wife had once travelled the road that led from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road is the road that Jesus described in his Parable of the Good Samaritan. King pointed out that it is a very treacherous road. It begins in Jerusalem, which is 1200 feet above sea level but by the time you get to Jericho, you are about 2200 feet below sea level. In the day of Jesus it was called the “Bloody Pass” and it was a dangerous road. King went on to say that the Priest and the Levite who encountered this injured man were probably very frightened. It was, after all, a dangerous place. And so they asked themselves the question, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But when the Good Samaritan came, he asked a different question, “If I do not stop to help this man, then what will happen to him?”

King said he had thought long and hard about whether to come to Memphis or not. He had many demands on his time. Finally, he said, he was left with the same question as the Samaritan – not “What will happen to me if I go to Memphis?” but “What will happen to the sanitation workers if I do not go?”

Today, we are facing one of the most challenging times in the recent history of our city and nation. The economy is in a tailspin. Unemployment is on the rise. Many people are struggling for the basic necessities of these lives.

Surely, in such a time like God is calling our church to “costly grace.” God is calling us to be a light in the darkness – to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, and reach out to those in need, in the name of Christ.

III.

The key to all of this is found in verse 35, where Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”

Surely, there is no more difficult saying of Jesus than this. But surely there is none that is more central to the gospel than this verse.

Most of us are intent to preserve life. We spend a great deal of our time and money to insure that we eat the right food, get the right exercise, and get enough rest. Now, of course, there is nothing wrong with this.

Jesus however, suggests that there is more to life than this. He tells us that only by giving up life can we fully save ourselves.

Dr. Tom Currie, the Dean of the Union-PSCE campus in Charlotte, spoke this past Thursday to the Church in Vocation group at Covenant Presbyterian Church. In his address, he made reference to a man named Polycarp, who was a second century bishop of Smyrna and who was one of the first martyrs of the Christian Church. When Polycarp was 86 years old, he was martyred; burned at the stake. At the last moment, he was given the opportunity to curse Christ and to be set free. The old man replied with these words: “Eighty six years I have served him and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

In his book *A Private Diary of Prayer*, John Baillie includes a prayer that has always captured my attention when he says, “When thou callest me to walk through a deep valley, O God, do not allow me to believe that I know an easy way around.”

As we enter this season of Lent, I believe that God is calling each one of us to a life of discipleship and service.

May we never deceive ourselves into thinking that there is an easy way around.

Amen.