

The Costs of Discipleship Matthew 8:14-27

What does it cost to follow Jesus? At this point in our history, we Americans have to admit, not very much. Oh, sure, the first Presbyterians who moved to Southwest Mississippi, when the Spanish were still in control of this area, weren't allowed to have any sorts of religious gatherings. In fact, the first ruling elder of this congregation, John Bolls, was put in prison for holding a Protestant prayer meeting.

But for the last two centuries or so, Christians in the United States haven't had the same sorts of worries that our brothers and sisters in the communist or Muslim world routinely face. We haven't had to be afraid that the government will tear down our sanctuaries or arrest our pastors, as has happened in Communist China in recent years. We haven't had to worry about bombs exploding during our worship services, as happened in Pakistan in 2013 and 2015. We haven't had to worry about being driven from our homes, as is happening to the Armenian Christians in Nagorno Karabakh today. No, we have been able to build grand structures like these with big, beautiful stained glass windows without fear that angry mobs will smash them because of what we believe.

But our relative safety doesn't mean that following Jesus is ever really cheap or easy. No, I'm not saying that anyone has to pay anything for our salvation – that comes as a free gift from God, given by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But if we want to follow Christ, there are things we will have to give up. If we want to be His disciples, there's always a cost involved.

Discipleship may cost us some personal comfort, as Jesus pointed out to the scribe in verse 20. After all, Jesus Himself had no home during His earthly ministry. Instead, He was a wanderer, traveling from place to place preaching the gospel. Moreover, as Matthew reminds us in verse 17 with a quote from Isaiah 53, in order for Jesus to take away our infirmities and carry away our sicknesses, He had to be despised and rejected by men. He had to be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Oh, no. Jesus' life wasn't one of comfort or ease, not by any means.

So, what might true discipleship cost us? Perhaps giving up habits that make us feel good but that bring no glory to God. Perhaps embracing people that seem strange or hostile to us. Perhaps redirecting our time, money, or abilities to projects that aren't pleasant or easy. And yes, Jesus could be calling some of us to leave home to serve Him in other cities, states, or even in foreign countries. But in one way or another, as we live in an increasingly sinful world, Jesus calls all Christians to go outside our comfort zones in various ways.

So, do we really want to follow Jesus? Or have our homes, our comforts, our habits, our popularity, or our leisure become idols – things that we put ahead of Him?

Of course it might be the case that we have set up people or relationships as our idols, as things that are more important to us than Christ. And thus we come Jesus' second prospective disciple in verse 21 – the one to whom Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead."

Now at first glance, Jesus' words seem quite harsh, don't they? I mean, what could possibly be wrong with attending a funeral? But if we probe a bit more deeply into the culture of that day and time, things might become more clear. For when this disciple says, "Let me first go and bury my father," he may have meant that he wanted to wait until after his father's death to follow Jesus. Thus, Jesus might not have been insisting that this disciple leave before a funeral could be held for a recently deceased parent, but that the man not wait to follow Jesus until all his obligations to his father had been fulfilled.

So, could Jesus really be saying that He doesn't want us to elevate even our family obligations above the claims of discipleship? Does Jesus mean that His call on our service takes precedence over the opinions or the approval of our family? Well, this is the same Jesus who goes on to say in chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

Now, that's tough, especially for us family-oriented Southerners. And for most of us it's hard to imagine our families ever standing in the way of our service to God. But what if you, for example, were to tell your family and your friends that you were going to leave your job and your home and go into full time ministry? What if you believed God was calling you to go to Lebanon and plant a church there, in spite of the economic instability and political unrest? Might they try to dissuade you? Or what if you were a Muslim refugee living in Lebanon, and you heard the gospel for the first time. Might your parents or other family members try to discourage you? Might they make you choose between your loyalty to them and your allegiance to Jesus?

But before we complain about Jesus requiring us to make such difficult choices, we need to remember that He had to do the same sort of thing. In chapter 12, Matthew will go on to point out how, when Jesus' mother and brothers tried to interrupt Him during His preaching, He chose His ministry over His family – He said that His disciples were His true brother and sister and mother, that whoever does the will of the Father is His true family.

Moreover, if we look at the passage from Isaiah to which Matthew draws our attention, we remember how Jesus wasn't just despised and rejected by the priests and the religious rulers of the day, but by all men. Isaiah insists not that "they" did not esteem Him, but that "we did not esteem Him." And we remember that none of Jesus' disciples chose to die with Him – all of them

abandoned Him and fled. In other words, Jesus gave up all His family and friends in order to complete His mission of salvation for the world.

Now, Jesus doesn't always ask His followers to go to such extremes, to move far away from home or to give up their families in order to enter His service. But what if He did? Would you be willing to give up your family's love or respect in order to follow Him? Or would you deny Christ's call and cling to human relationships, making an idol of them?

Of course, there's a third test, a third obstacle that can stand in the way of true discipleship. For what happened at the end of this passage, when Jesus and the disciples got into a boat and headed across the Sea of Galilee? A great storm arose, one that was sufficiently violent that even seasoned fishermen like Peter and Andrew, James and John were frightened out of their wits. Yes, the fact is that following Jesus into that boat, as they did in verse 23, had led them into a place of great danger.

Now, again, this hasn't been the experience of most American Christians over the last two centuries. But as our culture continues to collapse around us, as our belief in the truth of Scripture puts us increasingly at odds with those who reject, for example, God's plan for marriage and family, who knows what the future may hold for us? Maybe the experiences of our brothers and sisters in Muslim or communist countries won't be so strange to us in the coming years.

But, once again, the fact is that Jesus isn't asking any of us to go where He hasn't already gone. He was, after all, literally in the same boat with the disciples, in the midst of the same threatening, terrifying storm. Moreover, Isaiah 53 reminds us that Jesus didn't just put Himself at risk of bodily injury. No, He went so far as to be wounded for our transgressions. On the cross He was actually bruised for our iniquities.

Yes, Jesus was willing not only to endure all sorts of discomforts and difficulties for us. Jesus was willing not only to give up all sorts of human relationships for us. He was willing to go into the most dangerous of circumstances for us, to go all the way to the cross, to take upon Himself the chastisement, the punishment that has made all who trust in Him whole and well, forgiven and freed. It was because He allowed Himself to be beaten and crucified that we are healed.

But that healing points to the other side of the ledger. For if it is the case that we need to count carefully the costs of discipleship, if we need to acknowledge that discipleship may require us to give up our comforts, our relationships, and even our safety, we also need to remember that the One Whom we follow has done much more than set us an example of self-sacrifice. He has also triumphed over each and every one of these difficult situations. And He has proven Himself able richly to repay whatever the costs of discipleship may be.

Yes, it's true that Jesus had no home during His earthly ministry. It's true that He possessed few of the physical comforts this world can afford. But it's also true that He brought tremendous comfort into the homes of His disciples. When He came into Peter's house, He brought healing with Him, as so many people received relief from their sickness, or even from the control of demons. In the same way, Jesus continues to bless all those who trust in Him, giving us everything we need.

But what about those Christians who have to turn their backs on human authorities, or even on their own families? Well, think again about that tender scene in Peter's house, as Jesus brought healing to Peter's mother-in-law with a simple touch. In that moment, in a very real sense, Jesus restored not only her health. He not only brought her into a right relationship with God as she ministered to Him. He also restored Peter's family, didn't He? In the same way, we can be confident that Jesus has complete control even over the most stubborn opposition, even over the bitterest disagreements that we might face even from those who are closest to us. The same Jesus Who can cast out sickness with a touch and Who can cast out demons with a word is the Master of whatever relationships we might strain or whatever authorities we might offend on His behalf. Oh yes, we can follow Him without fear.

And we can follow Him even into the most dangerous situations in which we might find ourselves. For the fact is that Jesus didn't just endure that storm with His disciples. No, He stood up even as that boat was being tossed about and He commanded the winds and the waves to be still. And just as in the days when His same Word had called the very waters into existence, it was so. When the Son of God rebuked the winds and the sea, there was a great calm. No, there can be no peril that is greater than His power, no danger that can deter His divine will.

But how do we know Jesus really has such power? How do we know He really can provide the comfort, the relationships, and the safety we are so hesitant to give up for Him?

Once again we turn to Isaiah 53. For if Jesus was cut off out of the land of the living, if He really did die on the cross, and if He really was laid in His tomb, He didn't stay there. No, He rose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven. And because He was willing to give up all the comfort, the relationships and the safety this world can offer, because He conquered sin by paying the death penalty all His people deserve, the Father has divided Him a portion with the great, highly exalting Him, and giving Him a name that is above every name. And He will divide His spoil with the strong on the day that every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess Him to be Lord, giving glory to God the Father.

So, yes, in one sense it will cost a lot to follow Jesus – it may end up costing us everything in this world. But as Jim Elliot, who gave his life in the attempt to spread the gospel among aboriginal people in Ecuador once observed, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to

gain that which he cannot lose.” Surely, where it comes to discipleship, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

So, let’s not just marvel at Jesus’ awesome power from afar. And let’s not turn back, considering the cost of discipleship too high to pay. Let’s take up our cross, and follow Him wherever He leads, confident in His power, in His protection, and His provision.