

What Is Being A Christian All About?

September 8, 2013

Luke 14:25-33

A Wilderness-area camp gave out some comment cards to its staff asking for ideas on improving the camp and the wilderness experience. Here are some actual responses from those cards.

- Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
- Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the areas of these pests.
- Please pave the trails; Chair lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.
- The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.
- A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed? Please call.
- Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.
- A MacDonald's would be nice at the trailhead.
- Too many rocks in the mountains.

I think we can all agree that these comments and complaints indicate that the people who made them do not really understand what it means to stay in a "wilderness area." They were looking for something convenient and comfortable, but definitely not a wilderness experience.

I believe that in a similar way, many people today don't understand what it means to be a genuine Christian. There are multitudes that often follow Jesus or claim to be a Christian but they do so on their terms and not his. They do not truly comprehend the Biblical definition of discipleship.

Because of this misperception there are many who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus who are not, even though in many ways they do fit the mold.

They go to church, read their Bibles, pray, even pledge and contribute, but they are not the real deal, or at least are not living and thinking like the real deal.

Jesus confronts this problem in our gospel reading for today. He makes very, very clear what it means to be a disciple - his follower - and therefore there is no reason for anyone not to know or be self-deceived.

We will take a look at how Jesus defined discipleship in a minute, but first let's think about that word "disciple" which is repeated several times in these few verses.

A disciple is a true follower of Jesus Christ, what we would call a "Christian." What Jesus is teaching here is that if you are not a disciple as he defines it then you are not a Christian.

You might be interested to know that the term "disciples" occurs 269 times in the New Testament, while the term "Christian" occurs only three times.

But we are told in the Book of Acts that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). So this would indicate that the terms are interchangeable.

And I think it's important to be clear about this because I believe it underscores the seriousness of what Jesus was saying.

For instance, Jesus' words in verse 27, "If you do not carry your own cross and follow me you cannot be my disciple" could also be phrased, "if you do not carry your own cross and follow me you cannot be a Christian."

That phrasing somehow gets our attention more, and it definitely emphasizes the seriousness of the issue Jesus is teaching about.

Let's take a closer look at this scripture passage. First, notice to whom Jesus is addressing these words about being his disciple. Luke notes specifically that "large crowds" were following Jesus and that Jesus specifically "turned to them" and elaborated on being a disciple.

Jesus was not talking to those who were antagonistic toward him or to those who were uninterested in his life and message. No, these were people who were traveling with Jesus.

They are positive in their attitude toward Jesus. They were interested in what he had to say. And they apparently mistook this positive attitude and interest in Jesus for true discipleship, as many people do today. They considered themselves to be followers of Jesus. However, in reality they were casual followers but not committed followers.

They were willing and even anxious to follow Jesus providing the cost was not too high or the demands too great. They were like many people today who do "Christian things" like go to church, do church work, pray, and all those things. but are not really committed to Jesus. In a sense they were "along for the ride" but were unwilling to give up everything in their lives that conflicted with following Jesus in a committed way.

They were like many today who look to Jesus to solve their money problems, relationship problems, health problems, or other wants and needs but who quickly grow disillusioned and unwilling to obey Jesus completely when following Jesus doesn't solve these problems or following Jesus requires real sacrifices in their lives.

These "large crowds" were casual followers and not committed followers. And that is a question I think each of us should ask about ourselves. Which are we?

Jesus addresses this mistaken understanding of discipleship. He explains in clear and unmistakable terms what it means to be a disciple of his. What he teaches is that to be his disciple you must be committed to him above everything else.

Jesus is saying that in our hearts he must come before our loved ones, self-interest, possessions, careers, hobbies, goals in life, and even our very lives.

That is really a tough requirement, isn't it? So tough, in fact, that many would-be disciples just sort of side-step it or try to convince themselves that "Jesus didn't really mean that." But even with the best of intentions, in practice this commitment to Jesus will be tested and sometimes, being human, Jesus will not come first in our choices. But genuine disciples have made a sincere commitment in their hearts and will not continue to put other things before Jesus.

Jesus goes on to say that this commitment level applies to "anyone who comes to me. . ." In other words, Jesus is not speaking exclusively to a special group of Christians such as apostles, evangelists, missionaries, pastors, or even mature believers. He is saying that this principle applies to everyone who would be one of his followers.

According to Luke, Jesus says that if we want to be his disciple we must "hate everyone else by comparison - family friends, even our own life. And here, I think some explanation and understanding is in order.

As you study the language and customs of the times, you realize that the word "hate" here is not meant to be taken literally but is rather used figuratively to express a point. It is hyperbole or exaggeration similar to what we use when we say, "That man was as big as a house. . ." or when a parent says to a child, "I've told you a thousand times not to do that."

In Jewish culture the word "hate" was used to express lesser love, and did not carry the meaning it has for us today. So what Jesus is saying is that we must love him much more than we love our closest family relationships or even our own lives. We must love him more than our hobbies, more than our goals in life, more than our careers, and more than our self interest.

And understand also that Jesus is not speaking of our emotional feelings toward him or our families - not that kind of love. But rather he is speaking of our level of commitment. He is saying that our commitment to obey and follow him must be greater than any other commitment in our lives. In other words, Jesus must be first in our priorities and loyalties. Again, that is a question we need to ask ourselves. Is he?

For instance, if following Jesus obediently results in problems or interferes with your closest relationships, will you still follow him? This is no mere hypothetical situation. In other countries following Jesus can sometimes mean being kicked out of the family, or losing your children.

In our own country, many relationships have encountered problems because one spouse was a committed Christian and the other was not. In such cases Jesus wants us to know up front what it means to be a disciple. He must come before even your closest relationships.

And please understand that this is not something the church made up or I made up. We are looking at the very words of Jesus himself straight from Luke's gospel.

To be a disciple of Jesus you must be committed to him above everything else. And we must not only love or be committed to Jesus more than to our loved ones, but we must also be committed to him above "even our own lives." Yes, this refers to our physical lives which we must be willing to surrender for Jesus' sake if called on to do so. And we would agree that this is not a likely threat in this country. But Jesus teaching also refers to our "self" lives, which means our personal desires, goals, interests, and even needs.

We must be committed to Jesus above our bank accounts, our public image, our jobs, every personal desire. If following Jesus means forfeiting these things, then Jesus is saying we must be willing to do that. Again this is not a hypothetical situation. Following Jesus will many times mean making such sacrifices. Jesus uses a metaphor to emphasize this point.

Everyone present was familiar with what Jesus was referring to when he talked about "carrying his cross." The cross was a cruel form of punishment used by the Romans. The criminal was forced to "carry his cross" to the place of execution. Everyone knew that this person was saying "goodbye" to everything. There would be no turning or coming back. Jesus uses this vivid illustration with the intent of showing us that following him requires that same kind of saying "goodbye" to our own will and desires because of our commitment to Him.

Now I wonder if some of you may be thinking that this requirement of total commitment to be a follower of Jesus is contradictory to scriptural truth that salvation is a free gift of God. An illustration may help to clarify that issue

Suppose I had a desire to climb Mount Everest. (I don't have such a desire and I think that those who do are lacking in something - maybe common sense.) But suppose that I did desire to climb Everest. But it costs about \$100,000 to do it and I don't have that kind of spare change lying around. Suppose a wealthy businessman heard of my desire and offered to pay for the entire expedition. He would buy all the expensive clothing and gear; he would pay for my transportation, the guides, and the training. It's totally free for me. But if I accept his free offer, I have just committed myself to months of difficult training and arduous effort. It could even cost me my very life, because many good climbers die trying to climb Mount Everest. It is free and yet very costly.

This is similar to the illustrations Jesus uses to express his simple but pertinent point.

His point is that just like it is prudent to consider the cost involved in building a building or going to war before jumping in with both feet, so it is prudent and necessary to take in to account the cost and commitment necessary to follow Jesus.

Jesus doesn't want people to make a commitment to him without understanding and seriously thinking about what is involved in this decision. Jesus does not want a half-hearted, blind commitment that expects only blessings. He wants us to consider and make sure we are willing to pay the cost prior to making the commitment. Jesus wants us ask ourselves, "Am I in this for the long haul?" He is asking us, "Are you willing to follow me no matter what happens or what you're required to give up?" He makes it very plain - There is only one way to truly follow him!

Unlike many people today, and I'm sorry but I have to say including many preachers, who are only interested in large crowds, Jesus wasn't interested in numbers. Large crowds didn't impress him. What he wanted was totally committed people. Jesus doesn't want crowds, he wants commitment!

We hear a lot of talk today about how our country is losing its Christian values. If we look at the condition of much of the church today I think we see that we have many who are just part of the crowd and not true disciples. There are many who have not listened to Jesus and considered the cost. That total commitment is lacking even though a profession of faith is present. This is why recent polls show little difference between the way the world lives and professed Christians live.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that moral compromise and half-hearted commitment, would not be happening if people really understood what was required of disciples and they had considered the cost as Jesus instructed.

The conclusion of this passage is another illustration by Jesus that his listeners would have readily understood. He talks about salt. Salt is routinely used by Jesus in figurative ways because of the high value people placed on salt in ancient times. Salt was used as a preservative, flavoring, and as a fertilizer.

Salt in this case represents a person's commitment to Jesus. When that commitment is complete then the "salt is good." This means that the Christian's life will have a positive useful purpose in the same way is good salt did for the people.

Salt in Jesus day wasn't pure like salt is today, so it could by various means "lose its saltiness." If this happened the remaining product had the appearance of salt but with none of the benefits. It could not even be used for fertilizer or as Jesus says, "It is fit neither for the soil or the manure pile." In other words it was useless in every respect.

Jesus is saying that people who follow him without total commitment are like that salt that has lost its saltiness. They may have the appearance of being His disciples but they cannot be used in the kingdom as a Christian should. Jesus was referring to those who only give a part of their lives to him.

They will commit to following Jesus one day a week but not seven. They will give up this thing but not that thing to follow Jesus. This half-hearted commitment will not work in the same way salt that has lost saltiness is of no use.

Jesus closes by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." He said this to remind us of our responsibility to listen and respond to this difficult message. The teaching is not difficult to understand but it is difficult to accept.

Leadership magazine once ran a cartoon that showed a church building with a billboard in front that said: "The LITE CHURCH: 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15 minute sermons, 45 minute worship service; we have only 8 commandments - your choice. Everything you've wanted in a church - and less!

This cartoon may present what some people are looking for in a church but to follow Jesus one must be totally committed. The question we need ask ourselves is not "Am I *able* to follow Jesus completely?" But rather "Am I *willing* to follow Jesus completely?"

We are all human and sometimes we will fail in our commitment but the thing Jesus is confronting here is not our ability but our willingness to follow him with our whole hearts He said it: To be his disciple you must be committed to him above everything else.