

“The Cost of Discipleship” (John MacArthur)

“... today’s gospel message rarely matches the gospel Jesus taught.” (1988)

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Excerpts from “The Cost of Discipleship”, in the “The Gospel According to Jesus” series:

Discipleship – more than just being a learner, being an intimate follower, having an intimate relationship, following to the point where you would go as far as death out of love. There’s no question about the fact that the only message Jesus ever proclaimed was a message of discipleship.

The call that Jesus gave was a call to follow Him, a call to submission, a call to obedience. It was never a plea to make some kind of momentary decision to acquire forgiveness and peace and heaven, and then go on living anyway you wanted.

The invitations of Jesus to the lost were always direct calls to a costly commitment.

... still there are many who deny that there is any such call involved in salvation. They say, “Just believe and take the gift – just believe and take the gift.”

Again, reading from a book entitled *The Hungry Inherit*, the author writes, “How fortunate that one’s entrance into the Kingdom of God does not depend on his discipleship. If it did, how few would ever enter that Kingdom,” end quote. Oh? Isn’t that exactly what Jesus said? “Narrow is the gate and” – what – “few there be that find it.”

But wanting to assume that more than a few are saved, these teachers say one can be a believer saved without being a disciple obedient. So they come up with two levels of spiritual life.

Level one is an uncommitted disobedient, even unbelieving believer, who made a momentary decision to receive salvation, but has no desire to follow Christ, and they often call him “the carnal Christian.” Hopefully someday, such a person will come to level two.

Level two is disciple, and there you have the obedient, committed people who love and serve the Lord, who turned their back on their former life and long to live the new life. They’re not perfect, but the desire of their heart and the fruit of their life shows the work of God.

Level one people, these folks say, are saved, but the only way they can know they’re saved is by remembering the decision they made in the past. That’s all the assurance you need, they say. If you need assurance, just reach back into your past, and remember the moment you believed.

But we are told it is enough for someone to simply believe, receive the gift, without repenting, without confessing Christ as Lord, without surrendering their life to Him.

... but there are no believers who aren't disciples. It simply means that we have entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ in which we follow Him. We don't follow perfectly, and please, we don't follow out of our own will and our own flesh; we follow because God in His sovereign grace transformed us into followers.

The term disciple, never in the Scripture is it applied to second-level believers. The truth is that evangelism itself is to make disciples.

Matthew says make disciples. Mark says preach the gospel. Luke says proclaim repentance for forgiveness, and speak of the death and resurrection of Christ. It's all one and the same.

Disciples are people who believe the gospel, people who have turned from their sin to embrace the forgiveness of God, people who have had a transformed life so that they are motivated to obey what the Lord has commanded them. The term disciple is used synonymously for believer.

So believer, disciple, Christian – all the same. Why make a distinction? Why do people do this? Again, I point out because they're fearful that if you have conditions involved in salvation, you have negatively affected grace.

In other words, they want salvation to be purely of grace; only believe, purely grace, do nothing, just believe. And they say if you add the fact that you have to turn from sin, confess your sin, repent of your sin, surrender to Christ, you've added all these human works to grace.

And then secondly, I believe that people hold this view because they want to develop a theology that will dispose of the hard demands of Jesus. They want to make it easy for everybody to be saved.

And the third reason that people hold to this is because they would like to save some people that are lost. What do you mean? Well, they have people that they love who made a profession of faith in Christ, never demonstrated a changed life, and they'd like to develop a theology that will get those people in heaven.

John Stott wrote ... "For thousands of people still ignore Christ's warning, and undertake to follow Him without first pausing to reflect on the cost of doing so. The result is the great scandal of Christendom today, so-called nominal Christianity. ... Their religion is a great, soft cushion. ... No wonder the cynics speak of hypocrites in the church and dismiss religion as escapism,"

In other words, there's a sense in which you recognize the total cost of giving up your life for Christ.

The Christian isn't somebody who buys fire insurance, who signs up for an escape clause to keep him out of hell.

Puritan William Perkins wrote these words, "The true Christian is of this disposition of mind that if there were no conscience to accuse, no devil to terrify, no judge to arraign or condemn, no hell to torment, yet he would be humbled and brought to his knees for his sins, because he has offended a loving, merciful, and long-suffering God," end quote. That's the difference.

The truly repentant sinner is devastated by the way he has offended God with his sin. He's not whimsically looking for some fire insurance.

A true disciple loves, a true disciple obeys.

Sometimes we love very imperfectly and disobey, but the pattern of life is obedience and love for the Lord. And even when we fail to love Him, we feel the guilt, and we fail to obey Him, we feel the guilt, because we do belong to Him.

We have that intimate relationship which God has in His grace given to us. Let me say it again. I do not believe that these are human efforts; I believe that this is what God does in your heart. God gives you a love for Himself. God gives you a heart to obey. God turns you from your sin. They're not pre-salvation human works; they're inherent in God's saving work.

Jesus calls for total commitment. What does it mean? Number one – I'll give you three thoughts. Number one: it means confessing Christ before men.

There are those who profess the name who aren't real, but there are none who are real who don't profess the name.

All of us have times of failure, but it's not our purpose, it's not our desire to keep our relationship to Christ hidden; it's our desire to pronounce it, to proclaim it. And if we willingly affirm our loyalty to Christ, then we are the ones that He will affirm His loyalty to as well.

And again I say, this is not something we do in our flesh, this is something God produces in us by giving us the heart of a disciple. He gives us a heart to love Him, a heart to want to proclaim Him, a heart to want to announce that we belong to Him.

If there's any human relationship that holds you back from naming the name of Christ, from serving submissively under His lordship, you're not worthy to be His disciple.

Why is Jesus so strong about this? Because He wants to chase away the uncommitted. You understand that about Jesus? He wanted to drive away the false disciples. He didn't want the tares. He didn't want the false believers. He didn't want them because He didn't want them to be deceived, and He didn't want His church to be affected by them. So He chased them away by the strength of the call to commitment.

... there's no way that statements like that can be made to accommodate the kind of carnal approach to conversion that is in vogue in our generation. (1988)

Salvation is a lifelong commitment. ... Salvation is a lifelong transformation.

Those who would tell us that a person can become a Christian without becoming a disciple do a great disservice to Scripture, and they do a great disservice to people, who then live under the illusion that they can be saved without following Christ in obedience. ... That's tragic.

... we had better get the gospel message straight. We can mess up on some things, not on this – not on this. Eternal souls are at stake.

I trust that's your heart, that you're a disciple who follows Christ. If not, then you better examine yourself to see whether you're genuinely in the faith.