

“What It Costs to Follow Jesus”

A college coed, interviewed on TV about her religious beliefs, said, “Oh yes, I believe in God, but I’m not nuts about Him.” One young man, in a personal ad seeking a partner, said this about himself: “Christian, but I’m not a freak about it.”

The Barna research group once interviewed teenagers about religion. When teens in the survey were asked to rate 19 life goals, “having a close personal relationship with God ranked *eighth*, “being deeply committed to the Christian faith” ranked *fourteenth*, and “being personally active in a church” placed *16th* out of 19 life goals. And of those teenagers claiming to be “born again”, less than half (44%) said they are absolutely committed to the Christian faith. The researchers concluded: “Neither their behavior nor their beliefs support the notion that they are deeply spiritual or truly committed to Christianity.”

More recent studies have been done on teenagers and their view of religion. Kenda Dean is an ordained United Methodist minister and a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. One summer (which she says was one of the most depressing summers of her life) she interviewed American teenagers about their faith. She came to the conclusion that more American teens are embracing what she calls a “moralistic therapeutic deism” – a watered down faith that portrays God as a “divine therapist” whose chief goal is to boost people’s self esteem. God simply wants us to feel good and do good; that’s the summation of our faith.

It’s easy to pick on young people! But I can’t help but wonder how much different adults’ responses would be? I’ll be religious, but I don’t want to go overboard!

This gospel of niceness...a God who simply wants us to feel good and do good...has little to do with the message of Jesus! ***Jesus made it clear that if we are to follow Him, it will be very demanding!*** Take these words of Jesus found in Mark 8:34: “He (Jesus) 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.’”

Unlike many preachers and church leaders today, Jesus didn’t sugar coat what it would cost to be a disciple. ***We must deny ourselves.*** Human nature tends to be self-centered and self-serving. We often operate out of self-interest – what’s in it for me? Jesus says if we’re to follow Him we have to put to death this natural inclination to satisfy and gratify *ourselves* and put His will and purposes ahead of our own. A young actress named Martha Scott once commented on the great amount of energy acting requires. “It’s...exhausting. It takes enormous energy and stamina, much more than meets the eye.” She notes that she was already clued in to the sacrifices demanded of actors when she was in college acting in school plays. Her theater arts director wouldn’t even let her go to football games. Football was big at their school, but when she mentioned going to a game the director chewed her out. He said, “If you’re serious about acting, you’d better know it’s like taking the veil in church. You give up other pleasures. You can’t use your vocal chords at a football game Saturday afternoon and expect to have a speaking voice Saturday night on the stage.”

Sometimes we have to deny ourselves lesser things for a greater good. Musicians, athletes,

craftsmen, astronauts, medical students – often deny themselves many things in order to achieve success in their field. Jesus says the same kind of self-denial is required if we're to “make it” as a follower of His!

Next, Jesus says: ***We must take up our cross.*** Those words would have been chilling and shocking to those who first heard them! The cross meant *death, execution!* The cross was the Roman way of executing criminals. It was humiliating and an excruciatingly painful means of capital punishment. It was like hearing someone say, if you're going to follow me, you risk being hung to death or shot to death, beheaded, sent to the electric chair, or given a lethal injection to end your life.

See how radical and unnerving Jesus' words are! You follow Me, he says, and you have to be willing to suffer, endure shame, and even die! In some parts of the world today, that is a reality! If you admit you are follower of Jesus, you will suffer, and maybe be put to death simply because you follow Jesus! Fortunately, in our country we don't have that. But perhaps we will be made fun of, or be excluded from things, or not be the most popular person at work or school. Who knows what the future will bring, since our culture is becoming more anti-Christian and anti-church than in the past.

Jesus said if we want to be a disciple we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and ***follow Him*** Someone has commented, “(Jesus didn't say) would you like to do lunch sometime or how about forming some little religious organization...Jesus said, ‘Follow Me’... we see a lot of people who are inquiring about Jesus, studying about Jesus, and even believing in Jesus, but how many people are really following?” Just like the rabbis in Jesus' time, Jesus invited people to follow Him, and be His students or “disciples”. They didn't sit in a classroom studying books; they walked with their master. They would go where the rabbi went, watch him and learn from him, then eventually do what He did.

There is a big difference between a mild belief in Jesus and *following Him*. If you and I were to really follow Jesus, where do you think He would take us? Probably further than the TV or computer. No doubt at times out of our comfort zone!

The title of this sermon is “What It Costs To Follow Jesus.” The answer: It costs a lot! Luke 14:33 relates these words of Jesus in an even more blunt way: “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” Whoa! These are tough words of Jesus! So, where are you and I in this whole thing? Are we like the young person who said, “I'm a Christian, but I'm not a freak about it”? Or are we willing to give everything we've got to following Jesus?

There are a lot of people with a partial commitment to Christ. They come to church when they feel like it...or limit their involvement just to Sunday morning worship. There are others who claim to be Christians but have no interest in even being part of a church, the body of Christ. And there are plenty of people who believe in Jesus, but will shy away from letting that be known if they are in a crowd or with people they don't know, or if it means taking an unpopular stand on anything.

Yet while there may be few who are willing to make a radical commitment to Jesus, many are making *huge commitments* to lesser things – endeavors that are only temporal, not eternal. One of my pet peeves is the amount of commitment being asked of kids and parents today for youth sports. Youth in many cases are now expected to play just one sport year around. Every weekend they travel to tournaments all over creation. This cuts into family time, church attendance, time for other interests. (This is a topic for some other sermon!).

A man had tickets to game 7 of the World Series. Box seats, right near the home team dugout! As he sat down, a man came and asked if anyone was sitting in the seat next to him. “No,” he says, “it’s empty.” The guy replied, “Empty! That’s really something! Who in their right mind would have a seat like this for a World Series and not use it?” The man seated said, “Well, actually the seat belongs to me. I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. The other gentleman replied, “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. That’s so sad. But couldn’t you find someone else – a friend or relative, even neighbors, to take the seat?” The man shook his head, “No. They’re all at the funeral.” (Well, that’s dedication to a sport!)

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But there’s good news: ***There are people willing to live out a costly commitment to Christ – and these are the people who are making a difference in the world.*** With such high standards one would think Jesus would attract nobody. Yet for 2,000 years, men and women and young people have experienced joy and fulfillment in giving up their all for Jesus. Why?

For one thing, Jesus was willing to do it for us. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). Jesus willingly suffered and died for us, that we can be forgiven of our sins, brought back into a relationship with God, given a new start and a new life that will last forever.

Many years ago, the U.S. Navy ship USS Pueblo was hijacked by the North Korean Military. The incident provoked international tension. The 82 surviving crew members were exposed to a period of brutal captivity. For example, 13 of the captured sailors were forced to sit in a rigid manner around a table. After several hours of strict immobility the door flung open and a North Korean guard entered and brutally beat the sailor in the first chair. On the second day this ritual was repeated – the same man in the first chair was violently beaten. On the third day it happened again to the same man. Knowing this man couldn’t survive, another young sailor took his place. When the door was flung open the guard automatically beat the new victim senseless. For weeks each day, a different sailor stepped forward to sit in that first chair, knowing full well what would happen. At last, the guards gave up.

That’s what Jesus did for us. We deserve God’s judgment and punishment for our sins. We deserve to be separated from a holy God. But Jesus willingly took our place in that chair so we can find forgiveness and new life with God. *Because He gave His all for us, many are willing to*

give their all to Him!

The other reason why many are willing to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Christ is that *it is when we give up all for Christ that we find life in its fullest dimension!* Hear these words of Jesus: “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? (Mark 8:35-37).

Jesus says when we try to hold on to life, live it our way, put ourselves first, we lose it! But when we’re willing to give it away for Christ, we find life! And whatever we may have to give up or sacrifice for the Lord, Jesus replaces it with something better!

Will Willimon, professor of preaching at Duke University Divinity School, tells of the time when a representative from “Teach America” visited their campus. “Teach America” tries to recruit this nation’s most talented college graduates to go into some of the nation’s worst schools to try to transform them into something better. The woman stood up in front of a large group of Duke students (a larger group than Dr. Willimon expected). She said to them, “I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place. Somebody told me this is a BMW campus and I can believe it looking at you. Just looking at you, I can tell that all of you are a success. Why would you all be on this campus if you were not successful, if you were not going on to successful careers on Madison Avenue or Wall Street? And yet here I stand, hoping to talk one of you into giving away your life in the toughest job you will ever have. I’m looking for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of South Los Angeles, and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed while on the job.

“And I can tell, just looking at you, that none of you are interested in that. So go on to law school, or whatever successful thing you are planning on doing...but if by chance, some of you happen to be interested, I’ve got these brochures here for you to tell about Teach America. Meeting’s over.”

With that, the whole group stood up, pushed into the aisles, shoved each other aside, ran down to the front, and fought over those brochures. Dr. Willimon commented: “That evening I learned an important insight. *People want something more out of life than even happiness. People want to be part of an adventure. People want to be part of a project greater than their lives.*”

At the beginning of this sermon I talked about some studies done of young people – teenagers – and their view of religion and faith, indicating a lack of commitment to a gospel that demands the best from us. But here’s the rub: *several of those youth leaders who researched the faith of these young people indicated that rather than blaming the youth, we adults have to take responsibility for not modeling this kind of costly faith!* Kenda Dean says that it is the parents and adults (including the church) who are to blame for the religious apathy of young people!

She says that many of us adults practice a “gospel of niceness”, where faith is simply doing good and not ruffling feathers. The Christian call to take risks, witness and sacrifice for others, is muted. She says, “If teenagers lack an articulate faith, it may be because the faith we show them is too spineless to merit much in the way of conversation.”

Another youth leader, an Emory University professor named Elizabeth Corrie, says churches, not just parents, share some of the blame for teenagers’ religious apathy. She says pastors often preach a safe message that can bring in the largest number of attenders to the church.

She asks: What can a parent do? Then she answers: Get “radical”. She suggests that parents who perform one act of faith in front of their children convey more than a multitude of sermons. A parent’s radical act of faith could be something as simple as turning down a lucrative job to stay at a struggling church, or spending some time in a foreign country working on a food or agricultural project. But, she says, it’s not enough to be radical – parents must explain “this is how Christians live.” She says, “If you don’t say you’re doing it because of your faith, kids are going to say my parents are really nice people...it doesn’t register that faith is supposed to make you live differently unless parents help their kids connect the dots.”

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Noted Bible scholar and author, William Barclay, in his commentary on this passage from Mark, chapter 8, writes: “Jesus never sought to lure (people) to Him by the offer of an easy way; He sought to challenge them, to waken the sleeping chivalry in their souls, by the offer of a way than which none could be higher and harder. He came not to make life easy, but to make (people) great.”

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
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