

The Cost of Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 12:49–53; Deut. 21:15; 1 Cor. 9:24–27; Matt. 18:8, 9; John 14:1–3; Heb. 11:32–12:4.*

Memory Text: “Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:7, *ESV*).

Throughout history, nameless millions willingly sacrificed their lives for Christ. They were imprisoned, tortured, even executed. Millions have foregone employment, suffered ridicule, endured expulsion from family, and persevered through religious persecution rather than forsake Christ. Only God knows the full extent of the suffering that His faithful ones have endured.

Of course, Paul forewarned, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12, *ESV*). And Peter said, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21, *ESV*).

Despite the promises of the so-called “prosperity” preachers, luxurious automobiles and financial gain are not automatic embellishments afforded to believers.

In the end, we can be sure that whatever the cost of discipleship is, considering the ultimate reward, that cost is cheap enough.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 29.

Calculating Cost: First Priority

Study Luke 12:49–53; 14:25, 26; Matthew 10:37. In what way are we to understand these strong words? What is Jesus telling us here?

Modern television newscasters would have concocted a prominent scandal from these words: “Today, celebrated religious leader Jesus of Nazareth advocated familial hatred during His afternoon address. Analysts are comparing these current pronouncements with previously released statements that promoted loving relationships with neighbors and enemies. Informed commentators wonder if this indicates recent policy shifts. Other unconfirmed quotations suggest selling everything and turning the proceeds over to the Jesus movement. Stay tuned for further developments.”

A closer study of the Bible and the way in which the word *hate* is used helps to clarify what Jesus meant. Deuteronomy 21:15 contains Mosaic legislation regarding men with multiple wives. The King James Version, following the natural sense, translates thus: “one beloved and another hated,” concerning those wives. Moses’ point is that if the husband favors one wife above others, he cannot deprive those less favored. The *New Revised Standard Version* and *Modern Language Bible* change the terminology rendering *beloved* with *loved* and *hated* with *disliked*. The *Tanakh* (Jewish Bible) and the *New American Standard Bible* (Protestant) settle on *loved* and *unloved*. Clearly, the intended understanding was relative affection. *Hatred* in this context may indicate “loving less.” Matthew 10:37, the parallel passage, certainly lends credibility to this suggestion.

Jesus’ point is simple yet full of deep implications. Whenever family receives precedence and Christ becomes secondary, Jesus relinquishes lordship. Serving multiple masters is impossible. Christ certainly supported strong family connections. Such connections, however, receive strength from unshakable foundations. That foundation means loving God unreservedly, first and foremost. God disallows every barrier, interruption, or distraction. Discipleship exacts the supreme price: undivided loyalty to Christ.

How do we, on a daily, practical level, put Christ before everyone, including family? What does it mean to do just that, and what could be some of the consequences?

Bearing Our Cross

“And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (*Luke 14:27*).

Discipleship means accepting Christ as Savior and Lord. Following Jesus means that you are ready to undergo the same suffering that Christ did. Thus, we must be honest in the way in which we present our message. Certainly the glorious truths of righteousness by faith, Christ’s forgiveness, Jesus’ imminent return, heaven’s incomparable wonders, and God’s unmerited grace should be taught.

But should believers desire to proclaim God’s complete message, they cannot overlook cross-bearing. Sadly, some believers erroneously think that preaching any message whereby human beings are called into action is legalistic. “Divine grace has accomplished all,” they proudly exclaim, “and the human race does nothing except receive it.” Jesus, however, disagrees.

Read Matthew 16:21–25; Luke 21:12–19; John 15:17–20; 16:1, 2. **What should we take away from these texts about the cost of following Jesus?**

Before baptism, every candidate should understand that Christ Himself has assigned him or her a cross, without which they absolutely cannot become His disciple. Does this dampen the joy of conversion? Would unrealistically promising them carefree lives somehow increase this joy? Conversion releases believers from the burdens of sin, not from the responsibilities of discipleship. By taking the name of Christ and by publicly revealing that choice through baptism, every believer must be aware that discipleship comes with a cost. What, though, does this world offer that makes what Christ offers not worth it? Nothing.

When was the last time that you took up your cross? What was the experience like? What did you learn from it that could help someone else struggling with a similar challenge?

Disciplined Response

Analyze the following passages: Luke 14:31–33, 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Hebrews 12:1–4, 2 Peter 1:5–11. What are these texts telling us about the life of a disciple? How have you experienced the reality of what the Bible tells us here?

The cost of discipleship involves discipline. Every impulse, every imagination, every ambition, and every desire *must* be submitted to Christ. Every possession, physical or invisible, every talent and ability, and everything of value must be under Christ’s command. What we don’t surrender to Him can, and inevitably will, become an idol, with the potential to lead us astray.

Christ indeed offers us the power to overcome our character defects. Every appetite, emotion, and intellectual inclination can be under the guidance of His Spirit.

Notice the athletic example that Paul used in some of the texts for today. No athlete conspires to run slower, jump lower, or throw shorter. No believer should look backward either, especially when that which is at stake in the “race” is something that’s eternal, as opposed to whatever prize an earthly runner might win as a result of all his or her diligent effort and training.

“The runners put aside every indulgence that would tend to weaken the physical powers, and by severe and continuous discipline trained their muscles to strength and endurance, that when the day of the contest should arrive, they might put the heaviest tax upon their powers. How much more important that the Christian, whose eternal interests are at stake, bring appetite and passion under subjection to reason and the will of God! Never must he allow his attention to be diverted by amusements, luxuries, or ease. All his habits and passions must be brought under the strictest discipline. Reason, enlightened by the teachings of God’s word and guided by His Spirit, must hold the reins of control.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 311.

Comparing Costs

Corporations explore the viability of proposed projects through cost-benefit analysis. Do specific proposals contain the ingredients necessary for bringing successful returns on investments? Does the benefit outweigh the outlay? Another frequently used measurement is durability. Does the proposal offer sustainable returns?

The rewards of discipleship may likewise be measured through comparison with the costs. Those costs may include emotional suffering, social rejection, physical torture, financial deprivation, imprisonment, and death itself. Everyone who undertakes discipleship should first consider carefully the investments involved.

What do the following texts tell us about some of the costs of discipleship? *Matt. 18:8, 9; Luke 6:35; Phil. 2:3.*

What do the following texts say about the benefits? *Luke 18:28–30, John 14:1–3, Rev. 22:1–5.*

There is no question that the cost of following Jesus can be high, perhaps the costliest thing that anyone can do. Indeed, we should question the reality of our faith and our commitment if following Christ hasn't cost a lot, maybe even everything.

But one thing is sure: whatever we gain in this life, whatever we accomplish, whatever we make for ourselves, it is only temporary. It is something that will not last. It will vanish and vanish forever.

In contrast, what we gain through Jesus—eternal life in a new heaven and new earth—is by far worth more than anything and everything that this world could ever offer us.

Think through all the pleasures, all the joys and good things of this world here and now. What are they in comparison to eternity with Christ? How can we learn always to keep this contrast before us? Why is it important that we do so?

A Better Resurrection

Read Hebrews 11:32–12:4. What do these verses say to you, personally, about the cost and the reward of discipleship?

What a powerful concept this passage reveals, especially in the verse that says: “Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection” (*Heb. 11:35, NKJV*).

In a sense, being both a disciple and disciple-maker can be boiled down to one thing: “a better resurrection.” We follow Christ because we have the promise, the hope, of redemption, of a new life in a new world, one without sin, suffering, and death. At the same time, because we have been given this hope, this promise—made certain by the life, death, resurrection, and high-priestly ministry of Jesus—we seek to point others to the same hope, the same promise. In the end, before the great controversy is over, we will either face the first or the second resurrection. We know, for sure, which is the better one. What else matters other than not only being in that resurrection ourselves, but doing whatever we can to lead others to it, as well?

The harvest has ripened; millions await the call to discipleship. We have been blessed not only with the gospel but also with the gospel in the context of the “present truth”—the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14, God’s last warning message to the world.

What are we going to do with these truths that we love so much? Thus, we ask, Where are the reapers? Where are those willing to come alongside Christ and share the risks? Will you accept God’s invitation not to only be a disciple but to make disciples, regardless of the cost to yourself?

Think through the implications of the first resurrection and of the second resurrection. In light of these options, what else matters other than being in the better one and helping others to get there too?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “In the Regions Beyond,” pp. 219, 220; “Berea and Athens,” pp. 241, 242, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Fire comes down from God out of heaven. The earth is broken up. The weapons concealed in its depths are drawn forth. Devouring flames burst from every yawning chasm. The very rocks are on fire. The day has come that shall burn as an oven. The elements melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein are burned up. Malachi 4:1; 2 Peter 3:10. The earth’s surface seems one molten mass—a vast, seething lake of fire. It is the time of the judgment and perdition of ungodly men—‘the day of the Lord’s vengeance, and the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion.’ Isaiah 34:8.

“The wicked receive their recompense in the earth. Proverbs 11:31. They ‘shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts.’ Malachi 4:1. Some are destroyed as in a moment, while others suffer many days. All are punished ‘according to their deeds.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 672, 673.

Discussion Question:

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose Christian faith led to his death, wrote a famous book called *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963). Below are some quotes from the book. How do these fit in with what we have studied this week?

“The old life is left behind, and completely surrendered. The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus).”—Pages 62, 63.

“If we would follow Jesus we must take certain definite steps. The first step, which follows the call, cuts the disciple off from his previous existence.”—Pages 66, 67.

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. . . . When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”—Page 99.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Corinthians 1:7*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that, by definition, disciples are people who pattern their lives after their master.

Feel: Long to live a life of service by laying his or her life down for Jesus, just as Jesus laid down His life in service for us.

Do: Live a life of discipleship, which carries its own rewards, both now and in the future.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: People Wouldn't Have Followed Jesus if He Hadn't Had a Magnetic Personality.

A How are Christians known in your community? Are they mostly admired or merely tolerated? Why do you think that is?

B If Jesus was so universally admired, why was He arrested and killed? By whom? And why?

II. Feel: The Life of Discipleship Is Challenging, Yes, but It's Also Characterized by Positive Aspects, as Well.

A What do you enjoy most about being a disciple of Jesus?

B Be realistic. What is the likelihood that you'll suffer for your faith? Give reasons for your answer.

III. Do: Embrace Every Day as a New Opportunity to Represent Christ to the People You'll Meet.

A What is your chosen vehicle for demonstrating the joy of the Lord to the people with whom you come into contact?

B What do your neighbors know about Jesus as a result of your contact with them?

► **Summary:** We all look forward to the new heavens and the new earth that God has prepared for us. But as Christ's disciples, we can live the principles of His kingdom—love, joy, peace, mercy, justice, and purity—now. How are we doing this?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *2 Corinthians 1:7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *A life of discipleship has its own rewards, both now and in the future.*

Just for Teachers: *When we accept the role of disciple, we're saying that we will accept whatever discipline is required to honor our Master. But the discipline we're talking about here is not harsh or authoritarian. We're talking about the kind of discipline adopted by an athlete in training or by a student studying for a rigorous career in law, music, medicine, or science in which he or she studies or flunks out.*

Opening Activity/Discussion: If someone in your class works in an occupation that requires a lot of skill or knowledge (such as a doctor or attorney), ask what sacrifices it took to reach his or her level of proficiency.

Or if someone in your class has trained for an athletic event, such as a marathon or triathlon, ask about the training to which he or she submitted in order to be ready for the event.

Or have a discussion about the discipline exercised by world-class Olympic athletes. Most everyone has an idea about what that entails.

The point is, in each case the discipline an individual endures is mostly self-imposed. In other words, in order to perform at our best, we have to discipline ourselves. What correlation is there between such training and sacrifices and the type of discipline practiced by Christians as disciples of Christ?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *The world has changed a lot since the early disciples paid with their lives for living for Christ. There are, however, still countries in the world where religious bigotry is so virulent that violence is practiced between believers of different faiths.*

Perhaps more insidious, though, is the climate in which many of us find ourselves: one in which it doesn't matter how people practice their faith or that they practice at all. The rise of secularism and materialism in many countries of the world leaves little time for the pursuit of authentic spirituality.

How do we stay faithful in either, or both, circumstances?

Bible Commentary

I. The Way of the Cross *(Review Matthew 16:24–26 with your class.)*

“ ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ ” (vs. 24, *NIV*). With those words Jesus gave His disciples a preview of what lay ahead. At the time these words were spoken, the disciples had no idea that Jesus would shortly hang on a cross. But they no doubt knew what the cross was and that it represented a criminal’s death.

Then Jesus added, “ ‘For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it’ ” (vs. 25, *NIV*). In other words, in the life of discipleship, one gains life by giving it away. This was demonstrated supremely in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. And most of His disciples, and countless thousands in the last two millennia, have experienced the reality of this fact.

Think about it: many of us dedicate our time, talents, finances, and influence to a cause that brings us very few tangible rewards in this life. We do it because that’s the example Christ left for us.

Consider This: From the very beginning, early Christians faced different forms of persecution. Despite that, the early church prospered, even thrived. And down through the centuries, Christians, seeing by faith the reward waiting for them, willingly risked their lives for the sake of Christ. More likely the token of our dedication is not that we literally lay down our lives but that we give our lives in service for others. To what do you feel God calling you? In what sense might God’s call be considered “laying down your life”?

II. The Race of Life *(Review 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 with your class.)*

The reason more of us aren’t Olympic athletes is because most of us don’t have the discipline to dedicate the time and energy it takes to be world-class competitors. People who compete on that level don’t do much of anything else. Nearly every waking hour is dedicated to being stronger or going faster or higher. Ordinary people like us just don’t have the time.

What about disciples? What kind of discipline is necessary to finish the race?

Paul wrote, “I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air” (vs. 26, *NIV*). He lived with purpose; everything he did was designed to make him a better disciple.

Some seem to think that in order to be truly disciplined, Christians have to immerse themselves in spiritual disciplines all day, every day. That

might be practical if we lived in monasteries or convents, but most of us have to make a living; most of us have lives in the real world, not some fantasyland where we never think a secular thought.

Jesus knew that mountaintop experiences are fine. But He didn't stay on the mountaintop, nor did He allow His disciples to build shelters there (*see Matt. 17:3–5*). His ministry was to work among people in whatever village He could do the most good. Jesus is honored when His disciples do likewise.

Consider This: Well-balanced Christians not only think spiritual thoughts, they are engaged in being spouses, parents, coworkers, and friends. They take seriously Jesus' words, " 'You are the salt of the earth' " (*Matt. 5:13, NIV*), and they aren't afraid to engage society. They still practice the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, witnessing, and service. And because of that, they influence the world more than the world influences them. How are you "seasoning" the world around you? In other words, if something happened to you, what would your family, neighbors, friends, and coworkers miss if you weren't there? In what ways do people know that Christ is a reality in your life? How does it show?

III. The Rest of Our Lives (*Review Matthew 11:28–30 with your class.*)

The life of discipleship is, by definition, a life of discipline. And yes, in centuries past (and in some countries even now), to be a Christian meant to risk persecution, even death. But today the challenge faced by most Christians, at least in secularized, industrialized countries, is to live as spiritually muscular, vibrant disciples. In too many settings Christianity is encrusted with so many stale, useless, and lifeless traditions as to make it all but unrecognizable to that first generation of Christians who "turned the world upside down" (*Acts 17:6*).

Who are the Christians who will stand up and lose themselves in a campaign with eternal consequences? The values of Christ's kingdom—love, grace, mercy, justice, and freedom—are so at odds with the values held dear by the world that when we do engage in such a campaign it will seem as if we're swimming against the current. Yet, Jesus promised, " 'Come to me . . . and I will give you rest' " (*Matt. 11:28, NIV*).

Consider This: Jesus said, " 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' " (*vss. 29, 30, NIV*). If that's true, discipleship doesn't cost anything after all; it pays—both now and forever.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How do you measure the cost of discipleship? What sacrifices did you make to follow Christ?

② What's the hardest part about being a Christian where you live?

③ What demand from Christ would you find difficult to accept?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: One of the great challenges of Christianity is to reinterpret it and make it relevant for the twenty-first century. Most of us live in countries where we can worship freely. We may not be understood, but at least we don't have to fear imprisonment or death because of our faith.

Life Application: A religion that doesn't require much isn't valued much. That might be why Christianity is languishing in many parts of the world; the church just isn't making a difference. What do you value most about your Christian faith? Can you imagine being persecuted for some aspect of your faith? If so, what might you be persecuted for? And what form might that persecution take?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: Your class members should finish this quarter's lessons feeling both challenged by the responsibility of being one of Christ's followers and reassured that not only does He have a place for them to serve but He will also equip them for success. Pass out pieces of paper with copies of the text below (taken from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson).

Activity: Tuck this text into your Bible and memorize it when you have a chance. Though it is just a paraphrase of the Bible, it catches the message: " 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly' " (*Matt. 11:28–30*, *The Message*).