

September 11, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

To Whom Shall We Go?

John 6:60 – 71

What I see going on in this passage is the distinction being made between real followers of Christ and those who prove to be false followers. Those whose lives have been truly impacted by the gospel and those who are simply in it until their comfort or convenience or security are threatened. If the gospel is true – if the words of Christ are reality – then what is the more dangerous position to hold? Is it better if you hear the implications of the gospel and openly reject it? Or to say you believe but in reality you don't fully embrace the implications of the message? Is it a better position to be in, if you hear the claims of Christ and say 'I won't submit to that' or to follow Christ for false or wrong motives? True unbelief is always remedial – false belief is dangerous because you have deluded yourself that you believe when you really haven't. And the message Jesus gives His listeners at this point uncovers and lays bare the thin veneer of discipleship that covered their false belief.

In the gospels, Jesus was always warning against the dangers of false belief. In the parable of the 10 virgins, Jesus says that five were wise and five were foolish, and they all look the same on the outside, but five are really waiting for the Bridegroom and five are not. And in the end five are granted entrance and five are rejected. He tells the parable of the two houses – two men each build a house and they both look exactly the same but one is built on shifting sand and one is built on solid rock. And their foundations are exposed for what they are when the storms come, and one falls and the other one stands. Jesus also tells the parable of the four kinds of soil on which the seed is sown. And then Jesus gives us the interpretation, that these four soils are four kinds of hearts and the seed is the gospel that is sown. And three of those hearts actually germinate something but only one produces fruit. This is one of the key elements in Jesus teaching – a warning to those who think they are genuine followers but they really aren't. **Jesus was always warning against false, superficial belief that in the end is exposed for what it really is.**

At the end of chapter nine in Luke, a man shows up and says to Jesus that he will follow Him wherever He leads. And we might think that this is praiseworthy and Jesus would be pleased to see such devotion. But Jesus' word to this man is almost harsh. *'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'* Luke 9:58 What Jesus is saying is, 'Do you really know what it will cost you to follow Me? It might just cost you the things you value the most.' At the very end of Jesus' discourse on the mountain in Matthew chapter 7, we see supposed disciples of Jesus coming to Him and saying, 'We prophesied in Your name, we cast out demons in Your name, we performed miracles in Your name.' And Jesus says to them, 'I never knew you. What you did was unlawful. Your hearts are not right – you have followed Me for the wrong reasons. What you did you did for you, not for Me – you never recognized My authority in your life' Jesus is telling us that it is more dangerous to be a false follower than a non-follower, because a false follower never allows Christ to truly rule in his heart. What this text here in John shows us are three things: **The danger of false discipleship; the kinds of false discipleship; and the essence of true discipleship.** The danger of false discipleship; the kinds of false discipleship; and the essence of true discipleship.

The danger of false discipleship

In verse 53 He says, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.* John 6:53 The conclusion Jesus' disciples come to is that this word was hard and that no one could hear it. *Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?"* John 6:60 The word is *skleros* and it means hard, harsh, rough, stiff, violent, offensive, even intolerable. The gospel landed on their hearts like a ton of bricks. They found it hard – they found it harsh, talking about eating flesh and drinking blood – they found that they couldn't listen to it. When they said, 'Who can listen to it?' they weren't asking around saying 'Who **understands** this?' They were saying, **'We can't accept this. This is too hard to swallow. No one could accept this. The implications are too great.'** Apparently these people were followers of Christ to this point. John deliberately uses the word '**disciple**' to describe them. But when Jesus starts talking about what it really means to be a follower of His, they turn away.

When this happens, Jesus turns to them and says, *"Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?"* John 6:61-62 In other words, if you stumble now, what is going to happen when things get really tough? This word **ascending**, or **lifted**, is the same word Jesus uses in John 3:14 where He tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up like Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness. He was speaking of His coming crucifixion and resurrection and ultimate ascension to the right hand of the Father. **If these disciples were grumbling at the hard sayings of Jesus here, what would their response be to the scandal of the cross?**

He was talking to His disciples – His followers, they're in the church, so to speak, but He says, 'I've known all along that you don't believe.' *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."* John 6:63 – 65 In other words, they have no life – their following Him was not based on any inner change but rather on outward performance, and now this hard saying has exposed them. False discipleship is undetectable for the most part, from true discipleship, until something hard comes along and the false ones fall away. It may go on for years, but one day there will be an exposing word that comes to shine a light on the real condition of the heart and the coverup is revealed.

What is the danger of false discipleship? The danger is the failure to come to grips with the all-inclusive Lordship claims of Christ. Both non-believers and real believers have a better understanding of the claims of Christ for total authority on their lives than these false disciples. Jesus told them that unless you eat My flesh and drink My blood you have no life in you. What does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus tells His true disciples that He must be our meat and drink? Well, what is your meat and drink? What is it that you feast on? What gives you energy and vitality and life? What is it that gets you up in the mornings? **It is what makes you tick – it is that for which you live.** Is your meat and drink your career and success? Is it relationships? Is it sexual relationships? Is it material things? Is it money or fame or simply a desire to be significant? Is your meat and drink knowing that somebody needs you – someone depends on you? What is it that really energizes you? **Your meat and drink is whatever is central to your existence.**

And Jesus says, 'I must be your meat and drink. I must be pre-eminent in your life. It is not good enough to be your teacher or your inspiration or moral example or your sugar daddy. I must be central – I must be your meat and drink. **I will take second place to nothing.**' And this is what the false disciples were gagging on – they couldn't accept that kind of authority in their lives. It was not that long ago that there was a major league baseball player that committed suicide and also killed his wife in the process. When his friends were interviewed about this tragedy, they all said that he had begun to go downhill when he blew an important game for his team at the end of the season and his team lost the pennant. After that he was never the same; he had lost his confidence and his friends said that when he failed as a baseball player he had lost his meaning in life. **He starved – because baseball was his meat and his drink.** That is what he was eating and drinking. When baseball was gone, he starved to death. Why do people take their own lives, why do they commit suicide? There are many and various reasons, but underlying all those is that the thing they have built their lives on one day proves to be an illusion, it fails them in some way, whatever they were feasting on went away. Their identity is all wrapped up in the one thing that was supposed to give them significance and when it fell, they fell.

Jesus says, 'I must be your meat and drink – eat of Me and live.' Both non-believers and true believers are more able to accept the absolute Lordship authority claims of Jesus Christ on their lives than false believers. You see a person who is not a believer says, 'Yes I see the claims that Christ has on those who would follow Him. It says that Jesus is the only way to God – that He has absolute claim on my life and I must obey Him no matter what I feel to the contrary.' And so what does the non-believer say? **'I see those claims, I recognize the magnitude and depth of those claims and I reject them.** I don't give that kind of authority and priority to anyone else but myself.' That person has grasped the essential element in being a true disciple of Jesus.

And real Christians in the same way, come to grips with the fact that they are not their own, they've been bought with a price and He is owed all our allegiance and affection and honor and love. And at the same time realize that any allegiance, or affection or honor or love is by the grace that only He provides. But a false disciple is someone who comes to church, lives a pretty moral life, giving intellectual assent to the Lordship of Christ, even involves himself in Christian service and prays once in a while – but when it comes to coming to grips with the reality of the claims of the gospel on his life, he never submits, never comes under the authority of Jesus, he never gives Christ the pre-eminent position in his life that He demands.

Have you ever put coins in a machine and nothing comes out? You put coins in the candy machine and you get no candy. You put coins in a soda machine and you get no soda. Why? ***It is because the coins went in but they didn't drop.*** That's where we get the saying '***The penny didn't drop***'. Unless the penny drops – nothing happens. Unless the penny goes all the way down, it won't trigger the machine to produce the product. So what do you have to do to the machine to make it produce? You have to bang the machine until the penny drops and the mechanism is released to make it produce the product. Sometimes though, the penny never drops. That is false discipleship. There is a kind of mental assent to the claims of Christ in a very general sense – there may even be a semblance of good works and moral living – but the penny has never dropped. No Christian product has ever come out. There has never been a surrender to the authority of Christ. There has never been a realization that Christ says '**I must be your all – or your nothing. You cannot play at this – I cannot be dabbled with – I am not a product that simply adds meaning to your life. I must be your meat and your drink**'.

One of the most exhilarating and soul-satisfying things in ministry is when someone says, 'The penny has dropped – I get it! For the longest time I thought I was a Christian but I realize now that I was just playing at this thing and the word of God has penetrated my heart and I have seen who Jesus is and I have been changed forever!' What does it take for the penny to drop? Sometimes it takes a lot of banging – and the Lord knows just how to administer the bangs in the right places for that to happen. But sometimes the banging goes on with no effect.

Just like King Saul in the Old Testament, when God through Samuel told him to destroy the Amalekites utterly – don't leave anyone or anything alive, and destroy their belongings. But what did Saul do? He defeats the Amalekites but he doesn't destroy them utterly. He takes some of the people for his slaves, and some of the animals and goods for himself. And Samuel comes and says, 'Saul, why didn't you do what God told you to do?' And Saul says, 'Well, I did most of it and besides that I am giving God back a good portion of it for a good cause, I'm going to make sacrifices to God with it.' But Samuel says, 'Obedience is better than sacrifice!' In other words Samuel was saying, 'Saul, God didn't want the sheep and the oxen and the slaves – He wanted you!' And by just obeying part of the way you didn't obey at all. By doing it your way, you were just holding on to yourself – He wanted you and you wouldn't give that up.' The penny went in but never dropped. That is the essence of false discipleship.

But there are **many kinds of false discipleship**. If you look at the earlier part of this chapter you see **the crowd followers** – those who are simply carried along by the force of the crowd current. These are those who are following the followers without any real commitment or understanding. It's popular or catchy or trendy. But they are not following Christ – they're following the crowd. The crowd allows you to go along without thinking. Some of you go to church because your family brought you, or your friends are here or you think it is somehow appropriate for your culture but you are simply being carried along by the current.

And then there are those who follow Him for the **miracles**. He is handing out bread and you want some of that. There are those who see Christians living lives of contentment and satisfaction, they see them walk through hard things with joy, and they say, 'I need some of that.' And they come to the miracles of Christ but they don't come to Him. They decide to give the claims of Christ a try and they invest a little – maybe a lot – but there had better be a return for the investment. And what that means is that they make the terms and if He lives up to the terms of their agreement, everything's fine. And you stay with God as long as He is holding to the terms. So what you have is not a God, not a Father, not a Savior – what you have is a business partner. Your relationship is commercial. But the rewards of faith are never given out on your terms – they are only given out on His terms. Real discipleship is following Christ for who He is – not for what He can do for you. When you say, 'How does this profit me?' You are really saying, '**Can I have joy and still keep control of my life?**' And the answer is a resounding 'NO'. You either give up control of your life to Christ, and experience deep, abiding joy; or you hang on to the steering wheel of you own life and never know the eternal joy that Christ gives.

And then there are those who are **disciples out of guilt**. You know you should be a certain way, you know you should love your neighbor as yourself, you know you shouldn't cheat or steal or lie. But that is how you live and you come to church to assuage your guilt. You do good hoping to get a clean conscience, you confess some sins hoping to ease the pain of guilt – but there is no real desire to come to Christ – there is no serious effort to follow Him – there is no real desire to center your life around loving and knowing and serving Him. It is simply an effort to hedge your bets – to bet on both teams as it were – a kind of fire insurance.

There is another kind of disciple who follows because **they like being right**. These are the Pharisees. They like having the right kind of worship and doctrine. They love a church that has the best doctrine and the most biblical practice, so they can look down from their height of scriptural superiority on all those poor folks that just don't have it together. And then there are those followers that want **Jesus to be their King** – a political king that is. They follow Christ as long as he runs on their political platform. But He is not a Tea Party Republican nor a Liberal Progressive Democrat who exists to carry out your political agenda.

Jesus says, 'Unless you eat My flesh and drink My blood, you have no life in you – unless I am the center of your world and everything revolves around Me – unless I am your meat and your drink and I am pre-eminent in your life – your are only fooling yourself that you are My disciple.' *As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.* John 6:66 Until we realize that Christ claims every part of us with no exceptions – the penny hasn't dropped and we may find ourselves not walking with Him anymore.

But Peter shows us **the essence of true discipleship**. When everybody starts walking away, Jesus looks at the twelve who are probably experiencing some anxiety at this point. *So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?"* John 6:67 Everybody else is leaving – why are you staying? And Simon Peter, who rarely got anything right, was given some revelation at that point: *Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. "We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."* John 6:68-69 This is as some have said, the great irreducible minimum of the Christian life.

Look at this – there are two parts: First Peter says, '**Lord, to whom shall we go?**' What does that say? It says that Christians are those who admit that they cannot save themselves. They are powerless, helpless to help themselves. Remember when your child was just starting to assert their independence – what did they say when you tried to help them dress themselves or walk down the stairs, or eat their cereal with their own spoon – 'I can do it myself'. Christians, real disciples – are those who recognize their utter inability to save themselves and understand that there is nowhere else to go, no one else to whom they can turn. *Lord, to whom shall we go?* This is why people stumble over Christ, they choke on Christianity – because it says that we are helpless, we have fallen short of God's glory, we have failed to love God and our neighbor as we should and Christ had to die so that we might be saved. **The beginning of real discipleship is to say, 'Lord to whom shall we go?'**

And then Peter says, *You have words of eternal life. "We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."* Peter says, 'You alone'. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, '**Anyone who has any conceivable alternative to Jesus Christ is not a Christian.**' What does it mean to be a Christian? Look at the difference between the real disciples and the false disciples. The false disciples believed in Jesus, they believed He was the Messiah, they believed He could do miracles – but when He said that He must be their real meat and their real drink – they couldn't accept that. They rejected His Lordship – His ownership – over them. He was telling them that they couldn't do a single thing to save themselves – everything was going to have to be grace – their own goodness was not enough – God didn't owe them anything – and they choked on this.

The message offended them – but sometimes the only way to get the gift is to accept the insult. Suppose your friend gives you a book on how to lose weight as a birthday present and you say, 'Thank you so much!' What you are saying is, 'I know I'm over weight and I need this', and this book becomes an expression of love from your friend. And when you receive the gift of eternal life it is saying, 'Thank you Lord, I know that I'm a sinner and I cannot save myself – all my good, all my righteousness is nothing before You and I need Your grace even to begin to believe in You.'

Some of you may be worried about your motives and sincerity in coming to Christ right now. And you may be thinking that you can't come to God because your motives are impure. But understand this, real sincerity is to know that you are not sincere – that your motives are not sufficient and right. If you wait until you think you have pure motives and honest sincerity before coming to Him, you will never come – or you will come on your own terms. Real sincerity is to say, 'My motives are not pure but I need You and my only hope is what You did on the cross for me. I don't even trust my sincerity but only what Christ has done on my behalf'.

Perhaps others of you have realized today that you are like these false disciples – you have stumbled over this word – you've choked on the enormity of the realization of Jesus' Lordship and authority claims over you. But what you fail to realize is that the independence and freedom you value now will kill you in the end. To false disciples His burden looks onerous and heavy – but Jesus says, Take my yoke upon you - For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. **It is the only burden that won't crush you.**

And maybe you are like the twelve that were left when everyone else left. Your world has been shaken and disturbed, it is a hard word you are hearing, and you are thinking about leaving – maybe you've wandered away in your heart – you've grown slack and somewhat cold. Listen to the words of Jesus to you: *"You do not want to go away also, do you?"* He is not saying, 'Are you going to leave with everybody else too? If you do there'll be hell to pay!' No, His words are full of compassion and kindness: *"You do not want to go away also, do you?"* And the right response this morning is: ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."***

Our gracious God and Father,

*Grant that we would come to grips with the all-inclusive lordship claims of Your dear Son today. Let us have done with crowd-following or miracle-seeking or guilt-driven discipleship, or any of the myriad ways in which we come to You on our own terms. Be to us our real meat and drink – be pre-eminent in our lives – let us center all our existence around You. Satisfy us with the Bread of Heaven and Your blood that was poured out on our behalf so that we hunger and thirst no more for the deceitful and vanishing pleasures of sin and the hollow and vain promises of this world. Lord, cause the penny to drop all the way down until our hearts and minds and souls see and savor the wonder and glory and love of Christ. May we be those who truly have no conceivable alternative to Jesus Christ, and with one voice, declare with Peter this morning – **Lord to whom shall we go, You have the words of eternal life!** Let us delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*