

November 1, 2015

Counterculture: The Cost of Discipleship

Luke 14:25 – 35

This Sunday is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. According to Open Doors USA, Christians are the most persecuted religious group worldwide. An average of at least 180 Christians around the world are killed each month for their faith.¹ The U.S. Department of State says that Christians in more than 60 countries around the world face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Christ². And in 41 of the 50 worst nations for persecution, Christians are being persecuted by Islamic extremists.³ In Iraq over 75 percent of the Christian community has been forced to flee the country because of their Christian beliefs. Some 700,000 Christians have fled Syria over the past four and a half years. One of the worst countries in the world for the persecution of Christians is North Korea. With the exception of four official state-controlled churches in Pyongyang, Christians in North Korea face the risk of detention in the prison camps, severe torture and, in some cases, execution for practicing their religious beliefs. North Koreans suspected of having contact with South Korean or other foreign missionaries in China, and those caught in possession of a Bible, have been known to be executed.⁴

Clearly, to be a Christian in many parts of the world is literally worth your life. And the truth is, these brothers and sisters of ours really seem to understand what we often fail to understand about the gospel and the call of Christ to His followers. When Jesus called His disciples He made it clear where this thing is going: *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."*⁵ He had just finished telling them that the end of the road for Him on earth was to be put to death on a cross by evil men. And then He said, 'If you still want to follow Me, it's going to involve a cross'. The only reason you would carry a cross is because you're on your way to die. It was never meant to simply be jewelry around your neck.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazi's in WWII, who said it best: ***When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.***⁶ Christianity is the only faith that is so counter-intuitive and so counter-cultural. Jesus was always saying things like: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.* To save your life, you lose it? And when you lose it, you find it? **26** *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*⁷ So if you gain the world you forfeit your soul. And the implication is that if you forfeit your soul, you gain the world. Or how about when He says, *"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!"*⁸ To tell a bunch of would-be converts that to follow Jesus means being on the outside and having people hate you doesn't seem to be the best strategy for growth. Or to tell them, *"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."*⁹ What are the chances a defenseless, little sheep is going to have a successful ministry to a bunch of hungry wolves?

1 (Source: Open Doors USA)

2 (Source: U.S. Department of State)

3 (Source: Open Doors USA)

4 (Source: Christian Solidarity Worldwide)

5 Matthew 16:24

6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

7 Matthew 16:25-26

8 Luke 6:22

9 Matthew 10:16

I think what we in the west desperately need to understand is what those who are undergoing persecution and suffering and death for the sake of the gospel already know. And that is, the gospel does not only bring good news, it also makes demands. And here in this section I see five things the gospel demands of us: The gospel demands that we love Christ more than anyone or anything else; the gospel demands that we continually sacrifice what we want for what Christ wants; the gospel demands that we count the cost to follow Christ; the gospel demands that we say goodbye to our stuff; the gospel demands authenticity. Now look at the text: *Now great crowds accompanied Him, and He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.* Luke 14:25-26

It is always interesting to me how throughout the gospels, the writers record how great crowds always seemed to follow Jesus around. On the surface it seems like His ministry was prospering, at least by the standards we put on successful ministry. But it was always at times like this that Jesus took the opportunity to do the counter-cultural thing. In fact, whenever big crowds gathered, Jesus always seemed to say things guaranteed to make them disappear. In the gospel of John Jesus tells the crowd *'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you'*. That's not a word picture likely to win you a lot of followers. But Jesus was never interested in crowd appeal. He wasn't trying to market Himself to the masses. He was laying out the radical demands of the gospel. And here in Luke He was zeroing in on two issues that keep us from obeying the gospel: **idolotry and self-love**. If we make our family our god, Jesus says, we cannot be His disciple. And if we pursue our own happiness instead of His joy, we cannot be His disciple. **The gospel demands that we love Christ more than anyone or anything else**, and Jesus starts with the things that are most dear to us, our families and ourselves. And He makes this hyperbolic statement to press home the point that the gospel demands that Christ be ultimate in our lives and our love for ourselves and our families should seem like hate in comparison to our love for Him.

Jesus talks in the same way in Matthew, using hyperbole to make a point with maximum impact, when He calls for true believers to cut off their hand, or gouge out their eye if that hand or that eye is causing them to sin. I don't believe He had in mind a heaven full of one-eyed, one-handed people. ***What He was saying was that we need to fight sin with the passion and intensity that causes us to radically amputate those things in our lives that lead us to sin.*** Or when He likens the chances of a rich man entering the kingdom to a camel going through the eye of a needle. He did not have in mind a peculiar gate that a camel could only go through on its knees – such a thing was unknown in His day. ***He had in mind that particular love of money that would keep you out of heaven because it leaves no room for loving God.***

So in the same way here, if we make our families our gods, or we live to please ourselves and make ourselves happy, we cannot be His disciples. I don't believe He said this in the sense that He won't **allow** us, but rather in the sense that we won't **want** to be His disciples because we are too busy with our families and our pursuit of our own happiness. Let me be clear here – I am not saying, and Jesus is not saying that we shouldn't care for our families and that we shouldn't love ourselves. In fact the Bible says that the person who doesn't care for his family is worse than an unbeliever. And it instructs men to love their wives even as they love themselves and that the older women are to teach the younger women to love their husbands and love their children. ***But Jesus makes it clear that if we make our family ultimate or make self-satisfaction ultimate, we are not really disciples of His at all.***

The gospel demands that we continually sacrifice what we want for what Christ wants

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:27 Too many people have embraced the proposition that the gospel calls us to a one-time decision, and having made that decision, the rest of our lives is spent making ourselves happy and living for ourselves. But the gospel demands, and enables us to turn from our sin, take up our cross, die to ourselves and follow Jesus, wherever He calls us to go. The gospel beckons us to die to ourselves and to believe in God and trust Him. It is the death of our ambitions in favor of His, the relinquishing of our short-term happiness in favor of His eternal joy. There is this belief in our culture, especially our Christian culture, that happiness is a God-given right. That is a lie. Christ did not come to make us happy, He came that we might have joy, and have it abundantly. Happiness is that feeling you have when everything in your life seems to be tracking – the weather is nice, the sun is shining, the Seahawks are winning, you're healthy and fit, your wife respects you and your kids obey you and life is good.

But suddenly the curtains come down and the clouds come in and with one sentence your wife destroys your universe and the kids are determined to disobey everything you say, and the doctor gives you the bad news about your health checkup. Happiness, in other words, is fleeting. Joy is eternal. Jesus endured the cross – **for the joy set before Him**. Acts records that the disciples endured the beatings for the sake of Christ's name – **rejoicing in it**. Happiness doesn't last – joy is eternal. Happiness can be snatched away in an instant – joy can never be taken away.

Dori Hadad came from one of the oldest, wealthiest, and most respected families in Syria, but none of that was of any use in protecting her and her husband and children from the violence and bloodshed of the present conflict in Syria. Forced to flee her home in Damascus after her husband was arrested and probably killed, Dori and her two children made their way to a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan. There Dori and her daughter began having dreams of a man dressed in white who called Himself Jesus. It was there in that camp that Dori met a Christian woman called Samar and heard the gospel for the first time and put her trust in Jesus. And now Dori spends her days witnessing to Muslims in that camp. From a privileged life of frequent trips to Europe, long weekends in the playgrounds of Dubai, wearing the latest fashions and eating at the best restaurants, to living and working and surviving in a refugee camp in a foreign country, Dori doesn't appear to have anything to be joyful about.

But these are her own words to us: 'Jesus and His early followers are also wonderful examples for us refugees. On the night He was betrayed, He said, 'Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. (John 16:22) His followers would soon be forced to leave Jerusalem, making them refugees. People now tell me that I have eyes filled with hope and joy. I no longer have to worry about anything in this life – nothing! Jesus is on the throne, and He watches over me. Whatever happens to me – even if it is persecution or death – must go through Jesus first...Regardless of how good or bad your situation, He is your provider and will give you what He knows is best for you. You see, when you are in Jesus, you can never be a refugee. You are not forgotten'.¹⁰

The gospel demands that we count the cost to follow Christ

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. Luke 14:28 – 32

In his book, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?*, Tom Doyle tells the story of Kamal and Noor. Kamal is a young muslim convert to Christianity living in Cairo. "His friends think of him as the friendliest person in all of Egypt. His smile shines a block away, and his large green eyes are unforgettable. Joy radiates from every cell of his body, and he is immediately likeable. Even when he was arrested for evangelizing Muslims and questioned for hours by the secret police, they ended the interrogation by telling him how glad they were he had stopped by for a visit!"¹¹ On one particular Friday morning in Cairo, while Kamal was reading his Bible, he felt a compelling urge from God to go to the Friday Market in the heart of the city. It was unusual because Kamal almost never ventured into that massive, sprawling, chaos of vendors and hawkers and pickpockets and tourists. But he went.

As he was standing there in the marketplace, wondering why he was there, a woman wearing a full-length black hijab approached him, pointing her hand and shouting, 'You're the one! You're the one!' As she got closer, she said, 'You were in my dream last night!' "Kamal instantly recognized why this person had so passionately invaded his life, 'Was I with Jesus', he asked. 'Yes', the woman cried, 'Jesus was with us!'¹²" And then she proceeded to tell him the rest of the dream. "Jesus walked with me alongside a lake, and He told me how much He loves me...I think my husband loved me at one time, but that love I felt in my dream – His love – was much different than anything I've ever experienced. I've never felt so much peace in my heart. I didn't want to leave.

10 Doyle, Tom, *Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe*, (W Publishing Group, Nashville, Tenn. 2015), 73

11 Doyle, Tom, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?*, (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tenn., 2012), 6

12 Ibid., 4-5

I asked this Jesus, 'Why are you visiting me, a poor muslim mother with eight children?' And all He said was 'I love you Noor. I have given everything for you. I died for you.' As He turned to leave, the last thing Jesus said was, 'Ask My friend tomorrow about Me. He will tell you all you need in order to understand why I've visited you.' 'But Jesus, who is Your friend?' I pleaded in my dream. 'Here is My friend.' Jesus pointed behind us. 'He has been walking with us the whole time we've been together.'"¹³ It was Kamal, dressed exactly as he was today in the market.

And for the next three hours, Kamal shared the love of Jesus with this veiled woman, steeped in the harsh demands of her religion and culture, and yet shaken to the core by a very real visit from Jesus. Finally, at the end of their time, Noor said, 'What do I do with all I've learned today? When I give my life to Jesus and I'm new on the inside, will I still be Muslim?' Kamal didn't answer. Suddenly, Noor sat up straight. The energy of resolve rose in her voice. 'I'm ready now. I want to follow Jesus!'¹⁴ But to her surprise, Kamal asked her two questions, 'Are you willing to be persecuted for Jesus?' And he followed that up with, 'Are you willing to die for Him?' You see Kamal and Noor and so many others like them, understand that there is a cost to following Jesus, but in spite of the huge cost, He's worth every penny and more.

The gospel demands that we say goodbye to our stuff

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce [say goodbye to] all that he has cannot be My disciple. Luke 14:33 The word **renounce** here has the meaning of saying goodbye. The gospel calls us to a radical abandonment to Christ that few of us have really considered or thought deeply about. For many Christians the gospel is a message once heard and responded to, but it has made little practical difference in their lives. If our lives are not manifestly changed through the gospel, we have not really heard the message. The message Jesus shares through the gospel is '**Leave everything and follow Me**'. When He called His disciples, He didn't talk to them about God's wonderful plan for their lives – He said 'Peter and John, leave your nets, leave your family, follow me. Matthew, leave your comfortable tax office, follow Me'. Jesus is manifestly not saying that we don't need to work anymore. That isn't the point of Him saying, Leave it all and follow Me. The point is that we live with His call as the priority in our lives. The distinctive characteristic of disciples of Christ is their peculiar abandonment to the cause of Christ in the world. **That is, those who are Christ's disciples, are those who risk the security and comfort of the stuff of this life for the sake of the gospel.** I'd like to share with you the story of one such disciple – Suta of India.

[Suta video]

The gospel demands authenticity.

"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Luke 14:34-35 Salt has two outstanding qualities – it both seasons and preserves. Authentic followers of Christ have a seasoning and preserving effect on the world around them. Jesus called His followers the salt of the earth – working to preserve the culture around them from moral and spiritual decay, and injecting the seasoning of love and hope and joy through the gospel.

But it is possible for believers to look like salt and yet have none of its qualities. We are used to buying refined salt off the shelf at a supermarket, but in Jesus' day, salt was usually obtained from evaporating the water from the Dead Sea, and it was a long way from refined. It was often mixed with greater or lesser concentrations of other salts, and it was possible for all the good stuff (Sodium Chloride) to be leached out in the process so all that remained was stale and useless. In the same way, Jesus says, it is possible for people to look like Christians, act like Christians, go to church, attend Bible studies, worship, sing and pray, but not be salty at all. The gospel demands authenticity.

In Syria this past August, 11 Syrian Christians were crucified by ISIS near the city of Aleppo. One of them was a 12 year old boy. They all had the option to leave the city before ISIS arrived, but they chose to stay. The ministry director who had trained them, reported with tears in his eyes that they stayed because they believed they were called to share Christ with those caught in the crossfire.

¹³ Doyle, Tom, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?*, (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tenn., 2012), 7

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 11

"Every time we talked to them," the director said, "they were always saying, 'We want to stay here—this is what God has told us to do. This is what we want to do.' They just wanted to stay and share the gospel." The 41-year-old team leader, his young son and two ministry members in their 20s were questioned at one village site where ISIS militants had summoned a crowd. They were asked if they had renounced Islam for Christianity. When they said that they had, they were asked if they wanted to return, and they all said they would never renounce Christ. "All were badly brutalized and then crucified," the ministry leader said. "They were left on their crosses for two days. No one was allowed to remove them." The martyrs died beside signs the ISIS militants had put up identifying them as "infidels."

Eight other ministry team members, including two women, were taken to another site in the village that day and were asked if they would renounce Christ. The women, ages 29 and 33, tried to tell the ISIS militants they were only sharing the peace and love of Christ and asked what they had done wrong to deserve the abuse. The Islamic extremists then publicly raped the women, who continued to pray during the ordeal, leading the ISIS militants to beat them all the more furiously. As the two women and the six men knelt before they were beheaded, they were all praying. "Villagers said some were praying in the name of Jesus, others said some were praying the Lord's prayer, and others said some of them lifted their heads to commend their spirits to Jesus," the ministry director said. "One of the women looked up and seemed to be almost smiling as she said, 'Jesus!'" After they were beheaded, their bodies were hung on crosses, the ministry director said, his voice breaking. He had trained all of the workers for their evangelistic ministry, and he had baptized the team leader and some of the others.

The sorrow of the ministry team leader who lost 11 workers and one of their children last month has been deep, but he takes heart that their faithfulness could help change the hearts of persecutors. "They kept on praying loudly and sharing Jesus until their last breath," he said. "They did this in front of the villagers as a testimony for others." He asked for prayer for surviving family members and for himself. "These things have been very hard on me," he said. "But what is happening is more and more people are being saved. **The ministry is growing and growing—in the past we used to pray to have one person from a Muslim background come to the Lord. Now there are so many we can barely handle all the work among them.**"

So what is Jesus saying to us? I think He is saying that our love for Him is ultimate and every other love pales in comparison; I think He is saying that we relentlessly pursue joy by dying to what we want in favor of what He wants; I think He is saying that we understand that to embrace the gospel is to embrace persecution, suffering and death, with joy; I think Jesus is saying that we live in such a way that our stuff is not a hindrance to the call of Christ to go and make disciples and we risk the security and comfort of the stuff of this life for the sake of the gospel; and finally I think He is saying that we live in such a way that we impact the world around us for the triumph of the gospel in the world.

The question this morning is, 'Do you understand the gracious invitation and the sobering demands of the gospel? Do you understand that as Jesus gave everything for you, that you must give everything for Him? Unless we understand this, our faith will prove to be a weak, wavering thing that may not even be authentic. One of the things I realize when I hear the stories of my brothers and sisters going through the fire and flames of persecution and suffering is that only a faith that is real and authentic is a faith that can save. The other thing I realize is that as believers in Jesus, we have an obligation to remember those brothers and sisters in regular, consistent prayer. *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.* Hebrews 13:3

<https://www.icommittoprayer.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/8thirty8/>

Our good and gracious God and Father,

We ask You to be with our brothers and sisters suffering and dying for the sake of Your great name in places all around this world. Give them the strength to endure and Your unconquerable joy in the face of all the evil that threatens to undo them. Grant that we would be finished with living for ourselves and a fatal devotion to security and comfort in this life, but cause us to risk everything for Your glory and the triumph of the gospel. Help us to redeem the time and make much of You in all we are about. Let every other love pale in comparison to the love we bear for You, and help us relinquish short-term happiness for eternal joy. May we be those who have counted the cost and said goodbye to our stuff, living salty lives to bring You honor and glory. Make us a people whose greatest delight is You, who live to share Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.