



“Following Jesus: A Cost-Benefit Analysis”

This morning we embark on an unusually brief two-Sunday series of messages aimed at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus...a follower of Jesus...what it means to be a Christian. And I'm coming to you a bit extra-inspired because this last week I was in Denver for a two-and-a-half day training session with 10 other pastors from our denomination, on leading churches through a process of transformation. We are all seeking to understand how we can better lead our churches to be transformed and flourish more for the Kingdom of God.

However, this is not just a one-time thing. All of us pastors have signed up to be in a cohort together called a “Pastor Learning Community” and we will meet together with a mentor over the next 18 months mostly via zoom, and three times in person. In between our meetings we will be reading different books that will be the basis for each meeting. So, this is an ongoing, 18-month period of equipping us to be better pastors so that our churches would flourish more for Jesus.

Here's the best part, however: This actually ends up being a whole-church recalibration and transformation experience! Isn't that exciting? If I was the only one going through this, the chances of success would be slim. And we've been working on being a transformed church for a few years now as we've sought to be a generationally balanced church where disciples of Jesus are made. And we've made a lot of good progress. But we need some help. So, I wanted to sign up for this cohort, and our Elders agreed; it fit perfectly with discussions we'd been having at our Session meetings about where we're headed as a church. But the Elders also wanted to participate in the second component of it that was offered, of having someone come and work with them and even with our whole church some as well. So, sometime in early 2022, we will have someone come and work with our Elders and with us as a church on how we can flourish as a church more than we already are. You will be hearing about this more over the next few months.

You might wonder how this fits into today's passage, or if it does at all. It completely does. And the cool thing is that God is all over this, because I scheduled this passage back in late June when I took my annual week of laying out Scripture passages for a year – with today being the first of those 52 Sundays – and it wasn't until a couple weeks *later* that the Elders and I talked about me participating in this church transformation cohort which began this week.

And today's passage fits perfectly with what is perhaps the key thing that I've picked up on this week in Denver. Here's the key thing for us to grasp in this church transformation process: **Discipleship to the Lord Jesus is paramount, and that doesn't look like how most of us were brought up believing discipleship to Jesus to be.** Your discipleship, my discipleship, to the Lord Jesus is paramount, but discipleship doesn't look like how most of us were brought up believing discipleship to be. In fact, one of the three books we read prior to going to Denver essentially had this sentence as its thesis statement.

We need to step back for a moment and have a brief church history lesson. For a couple centuries until the 1980's or so, America was more or less a Christian nation in the sense that people understood the faith and were familiar with it. Even for people who didn't believe in Jesus and weren't a part of a church, there was a greater degree of overlap between Christianity and secular culture. People understood Christianity, knew the language of our faith, the customs, and so forth. For instance, no one would bat an eye or be offended in a conversation if someone asked, "What church do you go to?" That overlap with American culture started to wane some in the 1960's, but it nonetheless stayed fairly true into the 1980's, and even beyond in some parts of America.

But slowly Christianity became pushed to the margins. That has continued until today, and at an accelerating pace. American culture, Western Washington, Kirkland, the people who live here...all of that has less overlap and less familiarity with the Christian faith than it once did. Jesus has been pushed to the margins. The good news in the 1950's through 1980's was that the high degree of overlap and familiarity made it easy to be a

Christian. The bad news is that it made it easy to be a Christian. And as a result discipleship in our churches became lethargic.

With the shift in American culture, churches started doing what they could to appeal to non-Christians. This is understandable. **The “seeker-sensitive” movement of church began in the 1980’s and continues until today, though with diminishing returns in the last decade or so.** In this era, the gospel message has sometimes (this is not true everywhere, for sure) been compromised, even turned into a spiritualized self-help message, in an effort to appeal to people who didn’t know Jesus. People got “in the door” but weren’t really connected to Jesus. Or even if the message wasn’t compromised, it began to get lost amidst the moving lights, fog machines, 100 decibel worship services, ginormous screens and 7 day a week church programming to meet a person’s every need. Again, the intent was good, but: **The result of this has been that rather than making disciples of Jesus, we have made consumers of Jesus.** American Christianity today is trapped in consumerism. Anyone who studies this stuff – scholars, for example – would agree with this statement.

I looked up that word, “consumerism,” this week. I know generally what it means, but I was curious about a dictionary definition. According to the first definition at the top of my search results, and this comes from the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of consumerism is this: Consumerism: “The protection or promotion of the interests of consumers.”¹

So: If we are consumers of Jesus, therefore, then we are about the protection or promotion of our own interests. Does that sound like what being a disciple of Jesus is about – a place of safety and comfort where our interests take priority? Is that what it means to be a part of the body of Christ? Isn’t being a disciple of Jesus about the protection and promotion of the Gospel of Jesus and His Kingdom? Isn’t *that* what Jesus is all about?

Jesus utterly destroys a consumer mentality in today’s passage. Jesus has just asked his disciples who they believe him to be. Peter responds, “You are the Messiah.” Then, as we just read, Jesus begins to teach them what it means that he is the Messiah: He’s going to be rejected, killed, and then raised to

new life. Mark, the author, tells us that he spoke plainly about this. In other words, it was just straight-forward. No apologies, no hedging his bets on the future that this might happen or might not. He spoke plainly. But Peter can't handle it, and he began to rebuke Jesus.

Jesus puts Peter in his place, and tells him that he doesn't have in mind the things of God, but the things of man. Let's pause here for just a moment. We actually see Peter with a consumer mentality here. **Peter wants to protect and promote *his* interests, not those of Jesus.** His concept of the Messiah is different than what Jesus had. In their day, Israelites thought the Messiah would liberate them from Roman rule and oppression. So, that's what he wants. And when Jesus starts talking about rejection and death, Peter's consumer mentality reacts. He's not thinking like a disciple of Jesus here; he's thinking like a consumer of Jesus, wanting Jesus to protect and promote what he and other Israelites wanted.

Then Jesus teaches what it really means to be his disciple: Deny oneself, take up your cross, and follow him. There's no self-promotion or protection there, and it's risky; the safety and comfort of our desires being met is gone. He first says that a disciple of his must deny himself. In other words, lose the consumer mentality. It's not about protecting and promoting you and your ideas and your desires; rather, it's about Jesus and his ideas and desires. It's about Jesus actually being Lord of our lives. Second, "take up your cross." Remember, a cross to them was not a thing to decorate a wall in a worship space, or hang on a necklace or tattoo onto your arm; a cross was an instrument of death, brought into their culture by that very Roman government that the consumer Peter wants Jesus to overthrow. So, with this phrase – deny yourself and take up your cross – Jesus is telling them that consumerism has no place in following him, and you should expect hardship and persecution and maybe worse as you follow him.

So, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." *That* is discipleship to Jesus. Now, although there is a cost here as Jesus kills our desire to protect and promote our own wishes, and we may face hardships in following him, he goes on to then say, **"For whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35).** In other words, if we drop our self-

protecting and promoting consumer mentality toward life, and *if we do so for Jesus and his gospel* we will actually save our lives. So, there is a benefit for us: Our lives are saved. But that happens when Jesus is Lord and we are truly his disciples, not his consumers. It's a benefit to staying on the mission with Jesus.

We might wonder, therefore, if we're consumers or followers of Jesus. The fact is, it's easy to *say* we're a disciple of Jesus, and be blind to the fact that we really are a consumer of Jesus. Peter did that right here, and Jesus was *literally* standing in front of him. How much easier is it for us, then? But there are some questions we can ask ourselves to find out. For instance, we can ask: **Which am I protecting and promoting more: my interests or those of Jesus?** One way people find out the answer is when a change occurs in their church, and some part of the church that they liked is taken away or altered in order to better make disciples of Jesus. And I get it, no one likes to experience loss. I've heard it said countless times that what people fear about change is not the change itself, but the loss they experience because of the change. We fear losing something that we value.

But, if we've already lost ourselves (our desires, preferences, consumerism, etc.) in order to follow Jesus, and as Jesus invites us to do – if we've confessed that, and sought his forgiveness and transformation of our hearts and minds – and if *his interests* are what we're after rather than our own, then *we actually have nothing to lose when a change is made that will further Jesus' mission*. In other words, if Jesus really is Lord, and the change is prayerfully made by leaders and they believe it will help the church be more obedient to Jesus and the Gospel, and will better help people be disciples of Jesus, then we can support the decision because it furthers Jesus' interests. So, it's worth asking ourselves this question, having some honest self-reflection, and then checking our self-assessment against real life situations where we've had to respond.

A second question we can ask to determine if we are consumers or disciples of Jesus is: **Am I seeking to live every moment of my life with gospel intentionality?** You know, we think of missionaries as people who are in some other part of the world as being the ones who live out their faith every

day. But with the changes in our culture the last 30-70 years that I talked about earlier, we Jesus followers are missionaries right here. We have to think like, and live our faith like, and operate our church like, a missionary does in a foreign country. Jesus invites us to follow him in this context, right where we are, and therefore to live a “missional”² life; To live a life with Gospel intentionality. This doesn’t mean every person you meet or have a relationship with that you have to ask them if they know Jesus as Lord and Savior. In fact, I don’t recommend that unless you know the time is right. **But: We can see every relationship (long-time or brand new) as an opportunity to display the Kingdom of God, model for them who Jesus is, and move them just a little bit closer to Jesus.**

Let me give you an example that Dana Allin gave from his life this past week in Denver. For those of you who don’t know, Dana is the head of our denomination. I mean, Jesus is *the* head, but in terms of an earthly leader who you can email and shake hands with, it’s Dana. So, Dana loves to play tennis. And there’s a guy at the tennis club where he plays who Dana has gotten to know as they’ve played together. And this other guy is a very anti-God kind of guy – actively so, in fact. But this guy recently found out that Dana is an evangelical Christian. The guy couldn’t believe it. Not because Dana didn’t behave like one would expect a Christian to on the court – as if he swears or slams his racket on the ground at a missed shot. No. The guy was shocked because he thinks Dana is a good guy, and yet he’s a Christian. It doesn’t compute to him. In fact, when Dana told him that he was a Christian and in fact leads an Evangelical Presbyterian denomination he said, “But I like you.” He was stunned that he could like, and be friends with, an evangelical Christian. That happened because every day, Dana lived with gospel intentionality – integrity, sensitivity, and didn’t try and force Jesus on him because Jesus never does that. Instead, he looked for opportunities to move this guy a little bit closer to Jesus.

So: Am I living each day lived with gospel intentionality? That’s how a disciple of Jesus lives. I mean, do you ever see Jesus *not* live with gospel intentionality? He’s always about the Kingdom of God, about representing his heavenly father so that others would be drawn to him. And he’s inviting us to follow him – to live with him, and live as he does. Are we?

And for those of us who have been following Jesus for 30 years or more, that's just not how a lot of people were trained in our churches to be – because so many people around us were also already Christians. It's not that we lived in an un-Christian way (well, my college years in particular were *not* so Christian, and maybe you've had struggles as well), but **“Back in the day” we didn't need to intentionally live out our faith to attract people to Jesus because they already were.** (By-and-large...obviously, that's not 100% true.)

Really, the environment we're in now is more like what the disciples experienced in following Jesus in his day, and what the early church experienced in the first century or two. And so, we need to live with more intentionality like they did. **We can't be consumers of Jesus anymore. It's time to be his disciples in a more intentional, every-day way.** This doesn't mean adding more Christian “stuff” to your life, like more Bible study or prayer time or devotional time – though we should do some if we aren't. But those things are not the end goal of discipleship. They're a means to being a disciple, they're a means to following Jesus and living as Jesus lived – each and every day...living with Gospel intentionality. And if we cut the consumerism and “have in mind the things of God” as Jesus says here, and live with daily gospel intentionality then we will promote Jesus. That's a benefit that's worth the cost of denying ourselves and taking up our crosses. And it's the life that Jesus invites you into when you follow him as his disciple. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ I simply searched in my search bar for “consumerism definition” and in the search results, this was the very top one.

² “Missional” is the church word of the last 20 years or so to convey this idea of seeing ourselves on mission with and for Jesus each and every day, right where we are.