

The Danger Not Being a Disciple

What radical abandonment to Jesus really means

Twenty leaders from different churches in the area sat on the floor with their Bibles open. They had gathered in secret and intentionally arrived at different times to not draw attention to their meeting. They lived in a country in Asia where it is illegal for them to gather like this. If caught, they could lose their land, their jobs, their families or their lives.

“Some of the people in my church have been pulled away by a cult,” said one man sitting in a corner. The cult he referred to is known for kidnapping and torturing believers. Brothers and sisters having their tongues cut out of their mouths is not uncommon. As he shared about the dangers his church members were facing, tears welled up in his eyes. “I am hurting,” he said, “and I need God’s grace to lead my church through these attacks.”

A woman on the other side of the room spoke up next: “Some of the members in my church were recently confronted by government officials. They threatened their families, saying that if they did not stop gathering to study the Bible, they were going to lose everything they had.” She asked for prayer, saying, “I need to know how to lead my church to follow Christ even when it costs them everything.”

As I looked around the room, I saw that everyone was now in tears. The struggles expressed by this brother and sister weren’t isolated.

They went to their knees, and with their faces on the ground, began to cry out to God not with grandiose theological language but heartfelt praise and pleading: “O God, thank You for loving us.” “O God, we need You.” “Jesus, we give our

lives to You and for You.” “Jesus, we trust in You.”

They audibly wept before God as one leader after another prayed. After an hour, the room drew to a silence, and they rose from the floor, leaving behind puddles of tears in a circle around the room.

A Different Scene

Three weeks after my third trip to underground house churches in Asia, I began my first Sunday as the pastor of a megachurch in America. The scene was much different. Dimly lit rooms were now replaced by an auditorium with theater-style lights. Instead of traveling for miles by foot or bike to gather for worship, we'd arrived in millions of dollars' worth of vehicles. Dressed in our fine clothes, we sat down in our cushioned chairs.

To be honest, there wasn't much at stake. Many had come out of normal routine. Some had come simply to check out the new pastor. But none had come at the risk of their lives.

Please don't misunderstand this scene. It was filled with wonderful Christians who wanted to welcome me and enjoy one another. People like you and me, who simply desire community, who want to be involved in church and who believe God is important in their lives. But as a new pastor comparing the images around me that day with the pictures still fresh in my mind of brothers and sisters on the other side of the world, I couldn't help but think that somewhere along the way we'd missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We were settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.

Don't Follow Me Unless ...

Luke 9 tells the story of three men who approached Jesus, eager to follow Him. Yet in surprising fashion, Jesus seems to

have tried to talk them out of doing so. The first guy said, "I will follow You wherever You go."

Jesus responded, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." In other words, Jesus told this man that he could expect homelessness on the journey ahead.

The second man told Jesus that his father had just died. The man wanted to go back, bury his father and then follow Jesus. "Let the dead bury their own dead," Jesus said, "but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Having lost my own father unexpectedly, I can't imagine hearing Jesus say the words: "Don't even go to your dad's funeral. There are more important things to do."

A third man approached Jesus and told Him that he wanted to follow Him, but before he did, he wanted to say goodbye to his family. Jesus wouldn't let him: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Plainly put, a relationship with Jesus requires total, superior and exclusive devotion. Become homeless. Let someone else bury your dad. Don't even say goodbye to your family. Is it any surprise that, from all we can tell in Luke 9, Jesus persuaded these men not to follow Him?

What About Us?

What if you were the man whom Jesus told to not even say goodbye to his family? What if we were told to hate our families and give up everything we had in order to follow Jesus?

This is where we come face to face with a dangerous reality. We do have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We do have to love Him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that He will tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor.

But we don't want to believe it. We're afraid of what it might mean for our lives. So we rationalize these passages away. "Jesus wouldn't really tell us not to bury our father or say goodbye to our family. Jesus didn't literally mean to sell all we have and give it to the poor. What Jesus really meant was ..."

And this is where we need to pause. Because we're starting to redefine Christianity. We're taking the Jesus of the Bible and molding Him into our image—a nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn't mind materialism and who'd never call us to give away all we have.

A Jesus who wouldn't expect us to forsake our closest relationships so that He receives all our affection. A Jesus who is fine with nominal devotion that doesn't infringe on our comforts, because, after all, He loves us just the way we are. A Jesus who wants us to be balanced, who wants us to avoid dangerous extremes, and who, for that matter, wants us to avoid danger altogether. A Jesus who brings us comfort and prosperity as we live out our Christian spin on the American dream.

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that the first call every Christian experiences is "the call to abandon the attachments of this world." The theme of his classic book is summarized in one potent sentence: "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."

Based on what we've heard from Jesus in the Gospels, we'd have to agree that the cost of discipleship is great. But I wonder if the cost of nondiscipleship is even greater.

A few months before becoming a pastor, I stood atop a mountain in the heart of Hyderabad, India. This high point in the city

housed a temple for Hindu gods. I smelled the offerings that had been given to the wooden gods behind me. I saw teeming masses in front of me. Every direction I turned, I glimpsed an urban center filled with millions upon millions of people.

And then it hit me. The overwhelming majority of these people had never even heard the gospel. They offer religious sacrifices day in and day out because no one has ever told them that, in Christ, the final sacrifice has already been offered on their behalf. As a result they live without Christ, and if nothing changes, they'll die without Him as well.

As I stood on that mountain, God gripped my heart and flooded my mind with two resounding words: "Wake up." Wake up and realize that there are infinitely more important things in your life than football and a 401(k). Wake up and realize there are real battles to be fought, so different from the superficial, meaningless "battles" you focus on. Wake up to the countless multitudes who are currently destined for a Christless eternity.

The price of our nondiscipleship is high for those without Christ. It is high also for the poor of this world.

Consider the cost when Christians ignore Jesus' commands to sell their possessions and give to the poor and instead choose to spend their resources on better comforts, larger homes, nicer cars and more stuff. Consider the cost when these Christians gather in churches and choose to spend millions of dollars on nice buildings to drive up to, cushioned chairs to sit in, and endless programs to enjoy for themselves. Consider the cost for the starving multitudes who sit outside the gate of contemporary Christian affluence.

Where have we gone wrong? How did we get to the place where this is actually tolerable?

Indeed, the cost of nondiscipleship is great. The cost of believers not taking Jesus seriously is vast for those who

don't know Christ and devastating for those who are starving and suffering around the world. But the cost of nondiscipleship is not paid solely by them. It is paid by us as well.

Consider Mark 10, another time when a potential follower showed up only to hear Jesus challenge him with the seemingly impossible: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me."

Did you catch the second half of Jesus' invitation? If we're not careful, we can misconstrue these radical statements from Jesus in the Gospels and begin to think that He doesn't want the best for us. But He does. Jesus wasn't trying to strip this man of all his pleasure. Instead He was offering him the satisfaction of eternal treasure. Jesus was saying, "It will be better, not just for the poor, but for you too, when you abandon the stuff you are holding on to."

This is the picture of Jesus in the gospel. He is something—someone—worth losing everything for. And if we walk away from the Jesus of the gospel, we walk away from eternal riches.

The cost of nondiscipleship is profoundly greater for us than the cost of discipleship. For when we abandon the trinkets of this world and respond to the radical invitation of Jesus, we discover the infinite treasure of knowing and experiencing Him.

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David Platt shares how every believer can live radically

abandoned for Christ at