

Re-Examining Serious discipleship...

by Larry R. Sinclair

The sermon emphasizes the importance of serious discipleship, which requires self-denial, absolute obedience, and total commitment to Christ, and warns against the dangers of shallow or half-hearted commitment.

Scripture: Exodus 26:31, Matthew 27:51, Luke 23:45, John 2:19, Romans 5:2, Hebrews 6:19, Hebrews 9:3, Hebrews 10:19-20

Topics: "Christ's Sacrifice", "Faith Anchors"

Description

The preacher delves into the significance of the veil (katapetasma) in the Bible, particularly in the tabernacle and temple, as a separation between the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place, symbolizing the presence of God. The tearing of the veil at Jesus' crucifixion signifies the opening of God's presence to mankind through Christ's sacrifice, granting believers access to God. The veil represents Christ's flesh, which when torn, provided a new and living way for believers to enter God's presence. The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith as an anchor of the soul, keeping believers steady amidst life's storms and uncertainties.

Transcript

It is a familiar line in a book or movie or even in a real life situation involving a romantic relationship. It may have been a chance encounter when they first met, but there was clearly an interest in one another from the beginning. Both made sure that they would occasion to be together again, and the dating process began. They have been seeing each other regularly for some time. They have increasingly enjoyed each other's company and have begun to share their ideas and plans and hopes with each other. But she begins to realize that he has a more exclusive and long lasting relationship as his desire and objective. And while she cares for him, she finds the thought of a deeper, exclusive commitment disquieting. She certainly does not want the relationship to end... but the realization of what a continuing commitment necessarily involves, brings a sobering hesitation and uneasiness. Knowing that the deeper this relationship progresses the more difficult it will be to control within the safe and predictable confines initially enjoyed, finally she speaks the words which he did not want to hear... "I'm not sure that I am ready for a serious relationship."

But he really loves her and is determined to pursue a deeper relationship. And while she knows in her heart that he is a wonderful person and more than she could ever deserve, she persists in her determination to avoid a total commitment. It is not so much that she desires to pursue a deeper romantic

relationship with someone else, although she enjoys flirtations with others. And she has no intention of completely breaking off this relationship. But she enjoys its limited nature. She prefers freedom from a deeper, exclusive commitment.

How long do you suspect their relationship can endure this situation? How long will he patiently entreat her affection and commitment? Do you sense that she is making a serious mistake?

It might not be so tragic if I were describing a young woman and her suitor... but I am not. What I am describing is the relationship between the typical Christian and Christ. What this romantic melodrama typifies is discipleship in the church today.

Even though most Christians know that Jesus is the most wonderful one with whom we could ever hope to spend our lives, by our refusal to absolutely surrender to his Lordship we, in effect, tell Christ, "I'm not sure that I'm ready for a serious relationship."

Perhaps you disagree with my assessment about the depth of commitment in the church today. Maybe you believe the typical church member is truly serious about Christian discipleship. If so, I suggest that you need to reconsider your definition of "serious discipleship."

Admittedly, there probably has always been a considerable variation among Christians as to just what is meant by serious discipleship. Perhaps most people today would consider that anyone who attends church every week and regularly contributes to its financial needs, is a serious disciple of Christ. And if someone attends church on Sunday and Wednesday nights, then there can be little question that he or she is involved in a serious discipleship. But I wonder if God would agree. I wonder just how favorably our concept of serious discipleship would compare to the expectations of Christ.

I am convinced that our idea of serious discipleship is considerably flawed. I believe the depth of devotion and commitment which Jesus expects of his disciples is a whole different dimension than our concept of discipleship. You see, we evaluate Christian discipleship by comparing ourselves with others. If we attend church more often than some Christians, if we contribute more generously than most members, if we engage in more ministry activities than many people do... then surely we would be credited with serious discipleship. Right?

The problem with our comparative assessment of Christians discipleship is that many of the people with whom we compare ourselves are not serious at all about their commitment to the Lord. In fact, some of them may not be Christians. Someone has said, "If you ask the wrong question, you will always get the wrong answer." Well, I would suggest this variation on that thought: If you compare yourselves with the wrong standard, you will always get an erroneous assessment.

The proper standard is no less than Christ himself. The seriousness of his commitment is the acceptable criterion. The depth of Jesus' devotion is the example which we should emulate. And the word of God is always the plumb line by which we should measure and evaluate our discipleship.

As long as Christians persist in assessing our commitment to Christ by comparing ourselves to the lost people or backslidden believers or superficial disciples all around us, we will never have an accurate understanding of serious discipleship.

Jesus gave us the keys to comprehending serious discipleship in Mark 8:34, where he said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." If we adopt the very

simple definition of discipleship as following and learning Christ, we can see that Jesus gave two requirements for serious discipleship: (1) self-denial and (2) absolute obedience to the will of God.

With regard to that second prerequisite, let me just say that for Jesus, obedience to his Father's will meant the cross... voluntary laying down his life on the cross as a sacrifice to forever atone for the sins of all who would fully trust that sacrificial death of Christ for the forgiveness of sin. So Jesus meant that a serious disciple must give absolute obedience to the Father's will, as exemplified by his death on the cross.

But most Christians never get past the first prerequisite... self-denial. And that is the requirement I want to consider in some depth.

How old were you when someone first asked you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Quite young I suspect. Perhaps it was a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, or maybe a neighbor, who first asked that question of you. Whoever it was, he or she probably went on to tell you that you could be anything you wanted to be if you are willing to work hard enough for it. Most of us were bombarded with such suggestions in our childhood and teenage years.

We grew up listening to songs like "Climb Every Mountain," in which we are admonished to climb every mountain "till you find your dream." We were challenged to "dream the impossible dream."

And then there were all the speeches to our graduation classes, further entrenching the conviction that we have the privilege and right to determine what we want to do in life, and what we want to accomplish.

All of these questions and comments and songs and speeches were calculated to convince us that our potential to be, to become, to achieve, to accomplish is unlimited... that our capacity is only limited by our ability to dream.

Now doesn't that sound like the American dream? Doesn't that sound like the indomitable human spirit of man? Doesn't that sound exciting? Doesn't that sound appealing, noble and challenging?

You see, these are the messages we were saturated with as we grew up in America... especially in America.

And we have come to believe these messages. We have bought into these suggestions. We have grown up believing that we have the right to decide what we want to be when we grow up. We have grown up thinking we have the right to determine what we want to achieve in this life. We have grown up convinced that is our own choice to make regarding what mountains we want to climb.

After all, the people we rely upon most were the ones who have told us this. The people we trust the most -- our parents, our grandparents, our teachers, our community leaders and sometimes even our pastors were the ones who have given us this advice.

But right here in Mark 8:34, Jesus, the very Son of God, in effect said, "It is not true! It's all wrong! In fact the opposite is true! If you want to be my disciple, the very first thing you 'must' do is to deny yourself. You have to give up all your dreams. You must surrender all of your plans. You have to forsake all of your ideas."

And about now your thinking to yourself, "Man, what a bummer! What a raw deal! What a balloon-buster! What a let down!"

You see, what all of those questions and comments and songs and graduation class speeches were instilling in us was good old-fashioned self-centeredness... something of which we already had enough. Something that Adam and Eve had passed on to us from the beginning. Me! My right! My life! My dreams! My goals! My ideas! My desires!

But Jesus indicated, "If you are ever going to have any hope of really being a serious disciple of mine, the very first thing you must do is deny yourself. Give up all that. Surrender all of that. Abandon your plans and dreams and goals and ideas. And if you don't, you'll never be able to really follow me. You will never be a serious disciple of mine."

Let me inject at this point that there is no basis for the serious disciple of Christ to feel denied or deprived of any good thing in life. To the contrary, God merely desires to have his children avoid wasting their lives on themselves, without finding real life... abundant life (Mark 8:35). Jesus promised, "...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29). Christ is not, by his requirement for us to deny ourselves, intending to deprive us of anything really good or beneficial. He is merely trying to prevent us from missing the abundant life, which following him brings (John 10:10). Insisting on pursuing our own way will only cause us to settle for less than the fulness of life (at the best), or to experiencing utter frustration and futility (at the worst).

But most of us Christians have never really comprehended Jesus' prerequisites for serious discipleship. We have never really come to grips with the cost of true discipleship. Instead, having grown up with the self-centered misconception that we have the right to always decide what we want, we have launched out into life and said to ourselves, "I think I'd like to be a lawyer or doctor or engineer. I think I'd like to have a nice big house. I think I'd like to drive a nice new car. I think I'd like to acquire some land or some cattle or some big savings investments or a fine pension or retirement plan. I think I'd like to have a lot of leisure time to hunt or fish or play golf or work on my computer or pursue some other hobby. I think I'd like to etc., etc., etc. After all that's only normal! That's what everyone said we had the right to do."

But Jesus revealed, "If anyone would come after me, if anyone one would be my disciple, he must deny himself. Because you cannot seriously follow me, if you are the one who is deciding what you want." Jesus showed us that serious discipleship works like this: "First you give up your plans, your goals, your dreams, your desires and then come and follow me and let me put my plans, my goals and my desires in you."

Consider Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. You know the story. The young man asserted that he had kept the commandments of God since his youth. Then Jesus told him, "One thing you lack... go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). I believe Jesus meant that until you learn to deny yourself, there is no need to even try to follow him. And the Bible says that the young man went away sad, because he wasn't that serious about following Jesus.

And neither are most Christians today. Sure, we want to be a Christian. Sure, we want to follow Jesus. Sure, we want to be his disciple, but we're not sure that we're ready for a serious relationship... not that serious!

Looking back at Mark 8:34, did you notice that Jesus used the word "must", clearly indicating the mandatory nature of these two requirements. Neither of these prerequisites are optional. There is no room for trying to bargain away either of them. And most of us have never dealt with the very first one...

self-denial.

Now it is not as if Jesus did not warn "would be" disciples to first count the cost of serious discipleship. He did just that in Luke 14:28-33, giving two illustrations of the importance of first counting the cost of discipleship, and then ending his warning with these words, "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot not be my disciple." But most of us have conveniently overlooked that verse.

Of those who would at some point in their lives seek to follow Jesus, he knew that not many would be interested in a really serious relationship with him. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14), and "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Jesus' call to discipleship has always been a call to leave everything and follow him, His was always a call to total commitment. And these who have accepted Jesus' invitation to serious discipleship have had to deny themselves and abandon their own plans, goals, dreams and desires.

"...and so also James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon...they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him" (Luke 5:10-11).

"And after that He went out, and noticed a tax-gatherer named Levi, sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me." And he left everything behind, and rose and began to follow Him" (Luke 5:27-28).

Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You" (Mark 10:28).

Jesus' parable clearly indicated that discipleship is a matter of commitment.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (Matt 13:44-46).

The truth is that Jesus never called anyone to part-time discipleship. Jesus never invited anyone to follow him part of the time or most of the way. He always called people to full-time, all the way, total commitment. After all, Lordship is inherently exclusive and unreserved in its very nature. The familiar saying is true: If Jesus can not be lord of all, he will not be lord at all.

It was regarding tentative, half-way , part-time discipleship that Christ gave one of his very last and very sharpest rebukes.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth"(Rev .3:15-16).

How it must grieve the very heart of God when he hears us piously sing such words as, "All to Jesus I surrender" or "Now I've given to Jesus everything. Now I gladly own him as my king" or "Wherever he leads I'll go" or "O Jesus Lord and Savior, I give myself to thee...I own no other master", and then he sees us walk out of the church building right back into our self-centered pursuits of our own plans, our own goals, our own dreams and our own desires.

And the call to wholehearted, exclusive devotion and commitment is not limited to Jesus' call recorded in the New Testament. God has always demanded serious, total, exclusive allegiance.

"For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His..(2 Chr 16:9).

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning;" (Joel 2:12).

"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." (Jer. 29:13).

"Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and to his sons I will give the land on which he has set foot, because he has followed the LORD fully" (Deut 1:35-36).

God always expected wholehearted commitment from his people. He is worthy and deserving of nothing less.

An important element of serious discipleship is an exclusive commitment and a single-minded devotion and allegiance. And just as that expectation is what prevents many a young lady from being ready for a "serious relationship", that standard also disqualifies many who clam to be disciples of Christ.

Many Christians try to divide their love, loyalty and devotion between God and the world... but God will have none of that. God's jealousy of the devotion and worship of his people is well documented in scripture. It is the basis of his first commandment:

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..."(Exod. 20:3-5).

God is so determined to have the exclusive commitment of his people that his word even says his name is Jealous (Exod. 34:14). Repeatedly God warned his people of his jealousy (Deut.5:9;6:15; Josh 24:19), often expressing it in the strongest terms: "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut 4:24).

Jesus affirmed this requirement of exclusivity of his followers' devotion, when he said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or else he will be devoted to the one and despise the other..."(Matt.6:24). But no one will give Christ his undivided worship and commitment and loyalty unless he is ready for a serious relationship with God.

Someone has said that the depth of a person's love and loyalty can be measured by how much pain, persecution and suffering one will endure on account of his beloved. Love and loyalty may be easily professed, but the real testing comes in the trials and persecutions willingly accepted on account of the relationship. We truly find out just how serious one is when continued commitment necessitates persecution and suffering. Accordingly, the character of Christian discipleship can be accurately evaluated by examining one's willingness to persevere in the face of persecution and adversity encountered for the faith.

Again, Jesus himself is the criterion here. Christ set the standard for depth of commitment to the kingdom of God. And the Bible and history record the devotion of many others who followed Jesus' example. In their lives we see what a serious discipleship really looks like. And in a day when Christians insist on finding contentment with our shallow discipleship by comparing ourselves with others, we would do well to learn from such examples.

But most Christians today are proud if we attend church weekly, say a prayer at mealtimes and occasionally read the Bible. If we tithe or teach a Sunday School class, we assume that surely God must be impressed with our depth of discipleship. And we don't have a clue about what serious discipleship would look like.

We claim that God has first place in our lives, but how much time do we spend in meaningful prayer and Bible study? I'm not talking about prayers before meals or weekly preparation to teach a Sunday School class or group Bible study. I mean setting aside the best part of the day (whenever that might be) for really fervent prayer and intensive searching of God's word, ardently seeking his counsel and guidance.

If you are offended by my skepticism at the commitment of most Christians, give some honest assessment of yourself. Do you spend perhaps an average of ten to fifteen minutes a day in real prayer and Bible study? If so, that would probably be more than most Christians. But you probably spend ten times that amount of time watching television. And you probably spend ten times that much time eating... everyday.

How long has it been since you fasted all day because of your burden to know God's will concerning an important decision with which you were faced? How often do you weep over the spiritual condition of an unsaved neighbor or fellow worker? When was the last time you gave the last dollar you had to someone in need whom God impressed you to help financially?

And we claim to be totally committed to Christ? We assert that we are giving God first place in our lives? We think we know what serious discipleship is all about? We're just kidding ourselves!

And few Christians today really know anything about suffering or being persecuted for their faith. The nearest most Christians today come to persecution is perhaps being stared at while saying a prayer in a restaurant before eating their meal, or being thought of as naive and gullible for telling someone you are praying for them.

Of course, most Christians' understanding of serious discipleship is so distorted and naive that we may have sometimes think we are being persecuted for our faith. We consider suffering is having to endure an employee lounge filled with tobacco smoke, or being last in the cafeteria line at noon on Sundays because our pastor preaches too long.

Today's Christians think Christian sacrifice is going to church and missing our favorite team in the Super Bowl on television once a year. We think persecution is the prospect of Congress amending the Internal Revenue Code to eliminate donations to church as eligible deductions.

On a really good day, persecution for most Christians today might consist of being reprimanded by our supervisor for talking to a fellow employee about spiritual matters, or being rebuffed by someone to whom we try to share a Christian witness.

Do you know what serious discipleship is? I'll tell what serious discipleship is! It is Jim Elliott leaving a comfortable life of wealth and unlimited opportunity in the United States to go to the poverty of Ecuador...

and after having prayed for the Auca Indians for six years, giving his life at their hands in 1956, trying to share Christ with them.(2)

I'll tell you what serious discipleship is! Serious discipleship is Dr. Bill Wallace, who after serving as a medical missionary in China for seventeen years, was arrested by the Chinese Communists, falsely charged with spying for the United States government, and died in prison in 1951.(3)

Serious Discipleship is Dietrich Bonhoffer being arrested by the German Gestapo for refusing to obey the order of the Nazi government to cease writing and speaking about his Christian faith and being imprisoned for over two years and finally being hanged in 1945... learning by personal experience "the cost of discipleship."(4)

Serious discipleship is John Huss standing firm against the Roman Catholic Church in Bohemia (Czechoslovakia) in 1415, being condemned as a heretic, refusing to recant his conviction that the Bible is the final authority from God, and praying aloud as he was burned at the stake, "Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I have patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy upon my enemies."(5)

Serious discipleship is Polycarp, the elderly Bishop of the Church of Smyrna, who was burned at the stake in 155 A.D. for refusing to worship the Roman emperor and curse Christ, saying "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my King, who saved me?"(6)

Serious discipleship is the apostle Paul being able to truthfully write, "...I have...been in prison...been flogged...been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countryman, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger in the sea; in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Cor.11:23-28) and finally giving his life for his faith in Christ.

Serious discipleship is Stephen preaching the stinging, undiluted truth to the Jewish Sanhedrin with such fervency and convicting power that, "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him" and "covering their ears and ...dragged him out of the city and began to stone him..." and Stephen being able to pray, even as the stones crushed the life out of him, "...Lord, do not hold this sin against them..." (Acts 7:54, 57-58,60).

Serious discipleship in the unnamed "others" from the roll call of faith, who "...were tortured and refused to be released... faced jeers and flogging... were chained and put into prison... were stoned... were sawed in two... were put to death by the sword... went about in sheepskin and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated... wandered in the deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (Heb. 11:35-38).

That's what serious discipleship is!

And not many Christians today... not many church leaders today... not many of any of us... know anything about serious discipleship.

Instead, we assume that the opportunity or occasion for persecution for the Christian faith is a thing of the past. We have long ago rationalized out of our minds any possibility that we would ever be expected, by God or anyone else, to live out our Christian faith with such boldness and unwillingness to compromise with the world that we might experience persecution and suffering on account of our relationship with Christ. We have conveniently forgotten that the Bible says, "...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). We have overlooked the fact that God's word says that Christians should expect to meet the fiery trials of suffering for our faith. (1 Pet. 4:12).

Christians who boldly confront evil and challenge sin will today, just as in the past, encounter persecution. In fact, if and when we confront sin within the church, we will experience persecution from within the church!

But instead of offering ourselves as living sacrifices to God and being transformed by the renewing of our minds in Christ Jesus, we have allowed ourselves to become conformed to the patterns of this world. Rather than allowing the Holy Spirit of God to transform us into the image of Christ through serious discipleship, we have transformed discipleship into a shallow, casual, superficial commitment which will salve and pacify our "religious" consciences but not cause us any inconvenience or discomfort... as we pursue our own plans and goals and dreams.

Psalm 14:2 says, "The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God." Surely God must be looking down at Christians, at church leaders, at all of us today... to see if there are any who understand... any who seek God with all their hearts... any who are interested in serious discipleship.

Self Examination Considerations

Can you honestly say that you have dealt with the issue of self-denial posed by Jesus in Mark 8:34? Make a list of the ways in which you have really surrendered your plans, your goals, your desires... in order to follow Christ and be obedient to God.

Are you certain you have not rationalized that "God's will for your life" consists of a broad, general plan and that he allows you the freedom to sort of fill the details yourself?

How many minutes do you ordinarily spend in prayer or Bible study each day excluding mealtime blessings and preparation of Sunday School lessons? By comparison, how many minutes do you spend watching television each day (including television time while you eat meals)?

Do you really believe that God is a jealous God? Just what does that mean in your life? Do you ever think about God's jealousy when you spend long periods of time watching sports on television or pursuing your favorite hobby or working beyond normal work hours at the office, and end up skipping or cutting short your daily time of prayer and bible study?

Make a list of any ways in which you have truly suffered persecution because of your Christian commitment and obedience in the past month... or the past year. How do your instances of Christian persecution compare to the examples related in the chapter?

After considering the thoughts and questions raised in this chapter, how serious would you say your relationship with Christ is? Do you need to stop and pray about that right now?

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