

Sept. 13, 2009

## Vision Series 1 – The Necessity of Discipleship

Alright good morning. You know I always say that I'm glad you are here – and I always am – but today I am especially thankful that God brought you here today because today we start something new together. You can call it a vision series, a strategy session, whatever – basically we are going to spend the next several weeks letting God set up the next several years of what it means to be His church.

For the past several months we have been walking through the first two chapters of Titus letting God show us His blueprint for establishing His church. And we did that on purpose – to get us ready to be here today. We will pick up where we left off in Titus, but for this series we will take a break from our normal pattern of studying verse by verse through a specific book of the Bible and will take a wider view of what God has written. The Word will still be and will always be our guide, so go ahead and turn to **Luke chapter 14**. We'll get there in a moment.

I want you to think with me a moment about life before you started following Jesus – if you can. Or if for you that was too young of an age to really think before, then imagine a lost friend of yours. I want us to think about how we approached life outside of a relationship with Christ. C.S. Lewis<sup>1</sup> give a great explanation of this.

The way we approach life outside of Christ is that we take as our starting point our self – call it our natural self – with all our various desires and interests and wants and plans – that's our starting point as we approach life – everything filters through that. We then realize we aren't the only person in the world (or at least most of us do) – that something else – call it morality or the good of society or decent behavior – has claims on us – claims that sometimes don't match up with what we want. What most of people mean when they say "being good" is giving into those moral or societal claims.

Some of the things our natural self wants to do we call "wrong" and so we, in keeping with those claims, must give them up. Some things we call "right" and so it is ok to do them.

But all the time we are hoping that when all the claims are finished taking their toll on us, there will be a chance for our natural self to get on with its own wants – to do what we like. Kind of like an honest man paying his taxes. He pays them alright, but he hopes there will be enough left over for him to enjoy living on.

Here's the deal. As long as we are living that way, one of two things is going to happen. Either we will eventually give up trying to be good altogether or we are going to be really miserable. Cause if you are going to try and meet all those demands on the natural self, there's not going to be anything left over. In the end you'll either give up trying to be good or become one of those discontent and grumbling people who are always wondering why everyone doesn't notice how good you are more often and is always making a martyr of themselves. And when that happens, we become more of a pest to anyone who has to live or work with us than if we had just been frankly selfish in the first place.

But that's not what it looks like or feels like or is like to be a Christian. The Christian way is different – it is both harder and easier. And here is where I need to warn you that there is a good chance you aren't going to like this today. It may be new to you – it may be more than you bargained for – it may not be what you have heard before – whatever – and that's why we are in Luke. The reality we are going to see today is not only crucial, it is all through the Word, but because we don't like it, I want you to hear it from the mouth of Jesus so if you get mad – you can focus your anger somewhere other than at me. Look at Luke chapter 14 with me. We'll start in verse 25. **(25-33)**

You see here's the deal. **Jesus says – give me ALL.** He's not asking *just* for your Sunday mornings – He doesn't *just* want a tithe of your money – He isn't after *just* so much of your work. He says I want you. He hasn't come to torment that natural self – He's come to kill it. No half measures are any good. He doesn't want to cut off a branch here and a limb there – He wants the whole tree down.

**Jesus wants us to hand over all the desires we think or know are BAD as well as the ones we think are innocent or GOOD – the whole thing. And Jesus wants to give us a new self instead – in fact the Word says He gives His self – He wants His will to become ours.**

And that's the really hard thing – maybe the almost impossible thing – to hand over your whole self – all your wishes and wants and precautions and all – to Jesus. But what Jesus is saying in Luke and why Jesus is saying it is because as hard as it is, it is so much easier than what we are trying to do instead. What we try to do is to keep that same starting point – that same approach.

**What we often try to do is to remain “ourselves” – to keep personal happiness or COMFORT as our great aim in life and yet at the same time to be “good” – to let our hearts and minds have their own way – to go after money or pleasure or ambition, etc and yet hoping to still be honest and humble and “Christian” (whatever we've decided that means.)**

And that is exactly what Jesus is saying here that we can't do. If I am a field that contains nothing by grass-seed, then I cannot produce wheat. I can cut the grass and keep it short, but I still will produce grass and not wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change has to go beyond the surface – I've got to be ploughed up and re-sown.

**So what we see in Luke 14 is Jesus calling us to be DISCIPLES.**

That was the word during Jesus' time on earth and during the early days of the church that was used most often to describe the followers of Jesus – it is used 262 times in the gospels and Acts and so discipleship is a central theme to those parts of Scripture. And through a word for disciple is very rare in the Old Testament and it doesn't appear at all in the rest of the letters of the New Testament, the theological concepts of discipleship are abundant in Scripture. It is most clear when Jesus walked with his disciples but the Old Testament prepares for what we see Jesus explaining in our passage here and the rest of the New Testament describes how that relationship is carried out after Jesus returned to God's right hand.

The root of biblical discipleship in the Old Testament is the covenant relationship between God and Israel expressed over and over again by God's promise of “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Even when God's call came to individuals like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, it was directed toward their offspring so that God was creating a national community that would be His people and in turn His people would be a source of blessing to all the people of the earth.

That calling and that relationship was reiterated over and over again in history. When God gave the Law to Israel, God stressed the covenant intent again – that “I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people” in Leviticus 26:12.

Fast forward to the gospel of Matthew and we see the significance of what Matthew explains in Matthew 1:23 when he says *“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”-- which means, “God with us.”*

And so what we see as the pattern in the gospels in the life of Jesus defines the life of a disciple. We won't walk through all the passages, but here's the nutshell today – the initiative begins with Jesus – His call and His choice of who would be His disciples. **The response to that call involves recognizing and BELIEVING that Jesus is who He says He is and counting the cost of full allegiance to Him. It means losing one's old life and finding new life in the family of God through OBEYING the will of the Father.**

And that life all through the Old Testament – the gospels – Paul's and Peter's and John's letters – all describe that life of following Jesus metaphorically as walking in the ways of God – walking with Jesus – being a disciple.

But the point isn't just verbal here. Listen – **all of the assurances and promises and benefits that are offered to mankind in the gospel and throughout God's Word PRESUPPOSE such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it.**

What does that mean? Listen – it means that being a disciple of Jesus is not the heavy duty model of the Christian – it isn't the deluxe version of being saved. What Jesus meant when he said these words in Luke 14 then is the same thing He is saying to us today. **His intent then is His intent right now – to bring the crowds – to bring us – to a crisis point of understanding that to be a CHRISTIAN is to be a DISCIPLE.** To be saved is to follow Jesus. To live forever in heaven is to obey God's Word on earth. I don't know how many ways to put it. To be a Christian is to be a disciple. There can be no separation.

And yet, as Dallas Willard<sup>2</sup> has observed, for at least the last several decades, the churches of at least our part of the world, have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. A person is not required to be or even to intend to be a disciple in order to become a Christian and supposedly one can remain a Christian without any signs of progress in discipleship.

American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example and spirit and teaching as a condition for membership – of entering into or staying in fellowship in a local church. You may be able to think of exceptions to this – I probably can too – but the exceptions just prove the general rule. As far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship is clearly optional.

At some point we basically have reworded the Great Commission. In Matthew Jesus lays out the model. Turn there with me: **Matthew 28:18. (18-20)**

**The goal Jesus gave the early church was to use his power and authority to make DISCIPLES.** And having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and they were to be taught to obey everything that Christ has commanded.

But somehow – at least around the 50s, 60s, 70s if not in the 1830s or before – in the place of Christ's plan, we substituted "Go and make converts and baptize them into church membership." And so we've omitted or missed a couple things in the Great Commission. We've omitted the making of disciples – students of Christ – followers of Jesus – when everything else should wait on that. And we've omitted the step of taking our converts through training to bring them more and more to do what Jesus directed. And we've missed the assumption in the command of Jesus. **The command to go and make disciples presupposes BEING a disciple in the first place. BEFORE we can make disciples, we must be disciples.**

What does that mean?

Disciples then had to be with Jesus to learn to do what He did. There was simplicity to the mechanics at least of going with Him in an attitude of study and obedience and imitation.

The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with Jesus in the same way as they could. But the priorities and intentions – the heart or inner attitudes – of disciples – of Christians – are forever the same. There is a settled intent there. The disciple of Jesus desires above all else to be like Him. Our text in Luke 14 says Jesus says if you won't follow me, you can't be my disciple.

So to borrow again from Dallas Willard, **the disciple – listen, the Christian – is one who, intent upon becoming CHRIST-LIKE, and so living in his 'faith and practice,' systematically and PROGRESSIVELY rearranges his affairs to that end.** And here's the deal with that – if we intend to become like Christ, it will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves.

Jesus illustrated it being obvious in Luke 14 from the other side when he talks about someone who starts to build a tower and bails before it is finished – everyone will see it and ridicule him. So **more than once, Jesus says, count the COST.** Clearly in this passage, **when Jesus said that we must give up the very dearest things – family – all that we have – even our own lives – insofar as**

**that proves NECESSARY to go with Jesus, He was stating a simple fact – it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.**

But here is where I want to spin this point and look at the other side. Yes salvation cannot take hold in our lives without us counting the cost of being a disciple and willingly embracing it in exchange for Jesus. **But the cost of non-discipleship is even GREATER than the price paid to walk with Jesus.** Even if you leave heaven and hell out of the equation, and just look at life on this planet – the cost of not being a disciple is greater than the price paid to walk with Jesus.

Because all the blessings of the gospel and the Word presuppose the life of a disciple, nondiscipleship costs, too. As Willard put it: “Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that see everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said He came to bring.”

**See the correct perspective on the words of Jesus we’ve seen today, is to see FOLLOWING CHRIST not only as the necessity in salvation that it is, but as the very best life there can be.**

And that is what the church exists for. God’s church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Jesus – to make them little Christs. **If we are not – if our church is not - making DISCIPLES, then everything else is a waste of time.**

When Jesus said this then and today it is intended to reveal a crisis point – to force a challenge and a response.

First – in each of us individually. Jesus says, “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” What a rebuke to those so-called Christians who dishonor the name under which they profess to live.

I’ve use the illustration before with you of the Spaniards in America who acted so cruelly and with such a lust for gold that when they sent their missionaries to convert the Indians, the Indians just wanted to know if the religion that was being held out to them was the religion of the Spaniards – because if it was they wanted to believe something the very opposite. And if there was no heaven except where the Spaniards were, they would rather go to hell than be with them.

The challenge today is how many professing Christians give the same flavor to the Christian faith – to Jesus? Where people look and say – is he a Christian – is she a follower of Jesus – then I don’t need to be one nor do I even want to. **When people look at my life do they WANT to follow Jesus, not want to, or think being a Christian must not MATTER since I am pretty much just like them?**

Charles Spurgeon – possible the greatest preacher since the apostle Paul – calls such people nothing more than cartoons of godliness. And we’ve got to hear the challenge God speaks through him today. He says “If there is one such here, may his conscience prick him. You have crucified the Lord afresh and put Him to an open shame. How dreadful will be your punishment if you die in your present state! Repent of your sin and ask the God of grace to make your profession sincere.

And if you will not do this, at least be honest enough to give up your false profession – for you do but degrade it and yourself. There is no necessity, surely, to add to your innumerable sins this sin of hypocrisy. What do you gain by it? No Sir – if you must serve mammon and devil, then serve them. But why with [persistent and indulgent] iniquity must you pretend to serve Christ?”

As Jesus said often, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And as harsh as that may sound to our Bible belt ears, to not say it has the great potential of not only enabling someone today to suffer through life missing the real abundant life in Jesus, but to stand before God and hear God say depart from me, I never knew you.

People, I love you – but more than I want your comfort, I want your confident salvation. **If your life is not that of a disciple – I – but even more – the Word of God and Jesus Himself – beg you – be RECONCILED to God. You don't have to be the apostle Paul – you just have to be in the process Paul was in.**

And that's the second way this passage challenges us today. Is as a church. Are we giving people a biblical process of being disciples – of moving through life in Christ – of making disciples – or are we wasting our time in wishful thinking that people will just “get it” if they come?

**The CORPORATE life of a church that fits God's blueprint for His church ought to clearly move us through life in Christ. What we do – what we emphasize, what we expect of each of us should encourage and lead DISCIPLES into Christ-likeness.** And that's what we'll spend the next several weeks looking at. Just the basics – the starting point – the bare minimum of what a great church should be about. If we are going to move people to life in Christ one step at a time together – if the end result of being at Fairway is to make disciples – then how are we going to do that? Come back and see where it starts next week.

*1 – The natural man approach versus the call of Jesus approach to life can be found in more detail in C.S. Lewis' classic Mere Christianity.*

*2 – The absence of and explanation of discipleship and its cost can be found in more detail in Dallas Willard's The Spirit of the Disciplines.*