

A Call for Disciples, Not “Casual” Christians

Matthew 4:12–22

This week, I listened to a pastor speak about his experiences in missionary work around the world. In India, he met a young woman and her husband who left Hinduism and became disciples of Christ. They faced a lot of recoil for this decision from their family and from the village where they lived. On one occasion, everyone in their village came to their hut with lizards whose heads had been cut off and told the couple to drink the blood and convert back.

The wife was also an expectant mother with their first child. They refused to deny their faith in Christ and quickly grabbed a Bible and ran into the jungle. She eventually gave birth in the jungle with only her husband by her side. Her husband recounted how difficult it was for him to find food just to keep the family alive.

Another disciple of Christ in India came to this preacher and began to show him the scars on his arms, his back, and his head—all the result of refusing to renounce his Christian faith. He told stories of incidents when he barely was able to crawl away alive from the crowd that was beating him.

This pastor’s stories moved from one country to another, from India to China. He told about sitting with Christians who were a part of the underground church. He took his oldest daughter on this trip, and they sat and listened to the disciples of Christ in China as they spoke about the persecution they faced from the communist government. These disciples spoke with exuberant joy as they recounted stories of the authorities chasing them. They smiled as they spoke about barely escaping the gunshots.

This is their picture of the Christian life. They thought it was normal to be persecuted and that Christians everywhere suffered like them. The underground Christians in China pointed to Philippians 1:29, which states, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him.”

The pastor began to tell these men and women that in America it is much different. He said that in America we have these little buildings that we call churches. Sometimes people will leave these buildings and go to another building if they have better music program. Sometimes they will leave and go to another place if they have an earlier service so they can get to lunch quicker. Sometimes they get mad at one another over the color of the carpet or what type of

music they sing or even the order of service.

These Chinese disciples began to do the unthinkable: they began to laugh hysterically. They thought he was telling a joke. They thought he was trying to be funny. His daughter told him later, “Dad, did you hear them laughing at you? You were not even trying to be funny.”

Do you know why they were laughing? Because sometimes our Christian faith is a joke. It is laughable. It is nothing more than cultural. We have created an idea of “church” that is not what we find in the Bible.

Do you ever just look around at Christianity that you are seeing or even living and say, “Wait a minute. This doesn’t make sense. This does not mesh with the Christianity in the Bible.”¹

I want to ask you some piercing questions:

- Which brand of Christianity are you living?
- Would disciples in China look at your Christian life and laugh?
- Has Christianity become a building or an activity to you?
- Do you find yourself getting angry about trivial matters that will not last for eternity?
- When is the last time on a Sunday morning you have sat and thought about the sacrifice of Jesus and it has brought you to tears?
- When is the last time you have shared the gospel with someone?

Transition: In this text we have a call for disciples. A call for discipleship from our Lord is not a call for lackadaisical Christianity. It is not a call for subpar spirituality; it is not a call for relaxed expectations. If Jesus has called you to be a disciple, you should know that . . .

1. It is a call to lose your life (verses 12–22).

Notice that I did not say “a call to be a Christian.” I constantly referred to these Chinese Christians as disciples. I believe in our minds we have two stages of believers:

- The first stage is the *Christian* stage.
- The second stage is the *disciple* stage.

¹ Michelle A. Vu, “Francis Chan Shares Details of Asia Trip at Passion,” Christian Post, January 3, 2011, accessed September 26, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/francis-chan-shares-details-of-asia-trip-at-passion-48311>. I heard Francis Chan tell this story in an audio sermon, and here is a transcript where he spoke about it on a different occasion.

In the *Christian* stage, we think someone can be a Christian, but not really live the life. As long as he makes a profession of faith, it does not matter if his life matches that profession.

In the *disciple* stage, we think, “Oh! This is the group who is really ‘sold out’ for Jesus.” Where do we get this generalization? Not from the Bible.

If you have ever been told that you can be saved and live a casual Christian life, you have been sold a bill of lies. This casual Christianity does not exist in the New Testament. It should not exist in our church.

Salvation is more than a get-out-of-hell-free card. Biblical Christianity consists of more than simply missing hell. It is a call to radically follow Jesus Christ in discipleship. This discipleship may be a call to lose your life.

Let’s look at verse 12: “Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.”

Jesus “withdrew,” which is a Greek word often used to refer to an escape from danger. He was not running from persecution; He was fulfilling prophecy. He traveled north in this tactical withdrawal.

Now, about one year had passed between verse 11 and verse 12. About 12 months transpired between Jesus’ victories over Satan in the three temptations to the imprisonment of John by Herod.

Earlier, John the Baptist had called out Herod’s sin. Herod did not like that. Not many people do like it when you call out their sin. Matthew 14 tells us that Herod eventually beheaded John the Baptist in prison and put his head on a dinner plate. The disciples were allowed to bury his body, but no one knows where his head went.

John the Baptist had his number rung to be a disciple, and it cost him his life. Let’s read the next few verses:

And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:13–16)

We have an Old Testament prophet mentioned here. Years before, he had predicted that the promised Messiah would do exactly what Jesus is doing. Isaiah was a disciple of the promised Messiah. He did not know his name would be Jesus, but he knew God would send the

promised one, the Messiah.

What ever happened to Isaiah, by the way? Reliable, but not inspired, historical records tell us that he was martyred for his faith. Do you remember the verse found in Hebrews 11 in the portion of Scripture often referred to as the Hall of Faith? It speaks about men and woman facing persecution. Hebrews 11:37 says, “They were stoned, **they were sawn in two**, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated.”

Most historians’ research reveals that Isaiah was placed in a hollow log and sawn in two. Isaiah’s discipleship to the promised Messiah cost him his life, just as John the Baptist’s discipleship cost him his life.

What about the four disciples mentioned in verses 18–22: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John? What were their fates?

- Historically according to Eusebius, Peter was crucified upside down on a cross. He did not feel he was worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Savior.
- It is believed that Andrew was crucified as well.
- What about James? Acts 12:2 tells us he was killed by Herod.
- The apostle John (the author of the Gospel according to John, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation) was the only disciple not to face martyrdom. He died of old age exiled on the isle of Patmos.

A call to discipleship is a call to lose your life. You may not lose your life in martyrdom, but everyone who truly comes to Jesus Christ loses his life. Matthew 16:25 is clear: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Why follow Jesus if it is so costly? Because the cost is even greater if you don’t. The logic of this verse is not only relentless; it is stunning, if you really grasp all that it is saying.

- If you want to *save* your life, then you will *lose* it.
- If you want to *lose* your life for Christ, then you will find it.²

A call to discipleship is not just costly for a minute, or an hour, but for a lifetime. Just because you may not be called to lose your life in martyrdom does not weaken the expectation on your life. You will still lose it to Jesus everyday for His purpose.

² Daniel Akin, “What Is the Value of a Soul? – Matthew 16:21–28,” accessed September 26, 2015, <http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/matthew-1621-28-what-is-the-value-of-a-soul-manuscript-kh.pdf>.

- Are you really losing your life for Jesus?
- If you are losing your life at work, you will not hesitate to share the gospel with those you work beside.
- If you are losing your life at your house, you will not hold back from giving the Gospel to your neighbors.
- When you lose your life, it may result in inviting families over for dinner with the purpose of building a relationship and giving the gospel to them.

I love America. There is also something I love about the faith of believers in persecuted countries. Do you know what I admire about Christians in persecuted countries? Whether they have lost their life in martyrdom or not, they have already lost their life. There are no casual Christians in persecuted countries.

I am not a proponent of telling people that if they become a Christian all their problems with disappear. The Bible does not promise that. It does promise you will face persecution of some sort.

Will people still follow Jesus if they know it will cost them their life? Yes, because Scripture also promises that you will not have to face the wrath of God when you come to Christ.

Transition: A call to discipleship is a call to lose your life, and also . . .

2. It is a call to leave your love of possessions (verses 12-22).

Jesus calls two sets of brothers to be his first disciples. Simon Peter and Andrew were one set. Peter would eventually be the spokesman for the twelve apostles and was a natural born leader. He was evidently a well-to-do businessman, according to Luke 5:10. He and his brother Andrew were in a fishing business and were doing well for themselves financially. At this time, they were living in Capernaum, which was the fishing capital on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

They were in business with James and John and their father Zebedee. They were catching fish and making money. They were doing so well that Scripture indicates that they had more than one boat. Not everyone had a boat, and they had more than one. They could also afford to have hired hands. They did not live paycheck-to-paycheck.

When these men received the call to follow Jesus, they left everything. James and John left their father. They left the family business. Zebedee did not mind, of course, because Scripture gives details of his wife being a follower of Christ too.

Peter was married. He had to leave his wife for longer periods of time than he had when he was just fishing. They had to leave money, hobbies, houses, family, familiarity, a structured schedule, and—this is key—security.

Jesus' first two words summarize exactly what discipleship is: "Follow me." It is that simple.

Students in that day would follow Greek philosophers and study under them. They would meet a man that they would like to learn from and then follow them throughout their lives. If you wanted to learn from a teacher in that day, you did not buy his book, go to his seminary, or even go to his conference. You walked through life with him. The best learning does not necessarily take place in the classroom, but in life.

These philosophers showed their students how their teaching affected their everyday life and everyday situations. The goal was not only to impart truth, but to impart how that truth affects every aspect of your life.

So when Jesus calls His prospective disciples to Himself, He is not calling them to a classroom. He is calling them to follow Him, watch Him, observe Him, and implement His teaching in their lives.

The phrase "follow me" could be translated several different ways. These include:

- "Stick with Me"
- "Walk the same road with Me"
- "Accompany Me"
- "Apprentice with me"

And, if you are my apprentice, it will cost you deeply. You will have to lose your love for this world and its bells and whistles. Money, people, security, or things cannot be your driving force any longer. There is a greater force that drives you; it's a call: "Follow me."

We have been sold a lie that "Christian discipleship" means material blessing, automatic protection, bulletproof safety; but two millennia of Christian martyrs beg to differ.³

We have done everything imaginable today to make Christianity easy and Christianity fun. We have . . .

³ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 105.

- Shortened services.
- Entertained people with jokes and winsomeness.
- Said that you do not have to “really” be extreme in following Jesus; just do it casually.
- Made discipleship and evangelism an option.
- Set a low moral standard.

Our motives were fine, but the results have been terrible. By lowering our expectations, we have lowered the commitment to Christ. We have formed casual Christians.

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous quotation summarizes discipleship well: “When God calls man, he bids him to come and die.” This rings true for those in persecuted countries.⁴ It should also ring true for those living in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. If you are a disciple of Christ, your life is not your own anymore. You have surrendered every right to determine the direction of your life.

Our sermon series theme for Matthew 1–4 is “The King is Coming.” The King is found in every chapter. Last week, we saw that Jesus was champion for His people in temptation; this week, we are swearing allegiance to a King who owns us.

I am praying for a divine interruption where Jesus comes in and wrecks our comfortable Christianity.

⁴ Bruce Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 4588–4593.

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