

September 16, 2007
Pentecost 16

"The Extreme Privilege of Following Jesus"

LUKE 14:25-33

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

Have you heard of the television show, "Extreme Makeover?" A plain faced young lady is transformed into a beauty queen with a new hair cut, new hair color, new makeup, eye shadow and lipstick. Have you heard of extreme fighting? Kicking, boxing and wrestling blend together in a vicious sport that draws lots of blood. How about extreme sports, a whole television channel devoted to extreme sports? There is even a company called "Extreme Foods" that sells hot sauce with such titles as "Blair's Death Sauce" and "Mega Death" and "High Octane." Have you heard of extreme discipleship?

In the words just read to you our Lord Jesus speaks to us about extreme discipleship. Those who read these words of Jesus are shocked to hear him tell us that we need to hate people even our parents and wife and children to be his disciples and follow him. Books have been written about the hard sayings of Jesus. This certainly falls into the category of a hard saying until we look at what Jesus is saying to us in the light of the rest of Scripture. In the rest of Scripture we learn that it is wrong to hate even our worst enemies. We also learn that Jesus always wants to be first in our lives. As much as I love my wife Jesus always comes first before her, my kids, my parents and especially myself. That is the point Jesus is making. This morning we want to speak on these words of Jesus that seem extreme at first, until we understand the extreme privilege we have of following Jesus.

Consider the challenges

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus." In the book of Matthew it says thousands of people gathered around Jesus. Not everyone in that large crowd was there for the right reason. Some were simply curious just as people will slow down on the freeway just to see an accident. Some were out to get Jesus and discredit him. Some hoped Jesus might be a king who would solve all the problems for the nation of Israel. Always in every crowd there were those who understood that Jesus was the Lamb of God who had come to take

away the world's sin and give people peace with God.

What a shock it must have been to hear Jesus say: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, ye even his own life, he cannot be disciple." Modern marketing experts would tell Jesus to cool it and not be so blunt and not risk being misunderstood. The words are clear, but as we said earlier so are other words that Jesus spoke about not hating. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that hating a brother or sister or mother or wife was murder. He also said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In the book of Matthew there is a similar passage about following Jesus. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." In the Old Testament the Lord God says to us, "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated." If you look at how God blessed both Jacob and Esau, you realize that the word "hatred" has the idea of putting someone first about another person.

The love that Jesus has for you and me this morning is so extreme it will lead us to love him more than anything else in life. Maybe a comparison will help us appreciate the extreme love Jesus has for us. A few weeks ago, somewhere in Oklahoma a dog crawled into a drain pipe that went deep into the side of hill. He was an old dog and he could not get out. He was stuck. The owner dug through 15 feet of dirt to get to the place in the pipe where the dog was trapped and he was able to rescue his dog. We thrill to stories of how animals and people are rescued.

The most extreme examples of human love or even animal love cannot compare to what Jesus did for us when we did not want him in our lives. He came into our world as one of us, subjected himself to temptation but never failed to be perfect. He took our sin upon himself at a certain time and place in history. He allowed himself to be punished in our place, was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. The punishment for our peace is placed on him (Isaiah 53). Romans 5 speaks of this extreme love that rescues people like us that want nothing to do with being rescued. "You see just at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this; while we were sinners Christ died for us."

The cross that we have in front of our church as we worship, or the crosses we have in our homes, or the crosses we place around our necks are reminders to us of the extreme love that Jesus has for us, that leads us to place him first in our lives above everyone else.

Carry the cross

For the people who heard Jesus talk about loving him more than members of their family or even themselves it was even more shocking to hear Jesus speak about carrying a cross to follow him. "And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be disciples." To use the word "cross" at this point in history was to graphically portray to people the most cruel and inhumane form of torture known to the human race. Some of the people listening to Jesus words had actually seen criminals carry their crosses through

the streets to the place of the execution. If they did not see it with their own eyes, the horrible stories passed on about extreme pain and suffering were even more graphic they tried to fathom the unimaginable.

Jesus is asking us this morning to consider how far we are willing to go in following him. Are we willing to bear a cross, suffer shame, persecution, hatred and even death to live our lives for him? We needed to understand the distinction between the ordinary sufferings of this life and bearing a cross for Jesus. There will be pain and suffering that comes to us in this life just because we live in a world with problems and troubles. There are terrorist attacks, a war in Iraq, diseases, accidents on the freeway, sicknesses, the aches and pain of old age that afflict all of us at various times of life. These sufferings and sorrows are common to all people. As the book of Job tells us, "Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward." These are not crosses that we bear. They are pains and sorrows that are common to all people.

The crosses we carry as Christians are the unique pain suffering we endure in this life because we love Jesus and the salvation we have come to know in him. We think of the Korean missionaries who were captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan and only recently released but not before several were cruelly put to death. These Korean Christians were in a Muslim country to bear witness to their Christian faith and the love that Jesus has for all people. They suffered for their witness just as you suffer when you try to tell someone about the love of Jesus and they do not want to hear a word you have to say. We just sang, "Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow you. Destitute, despised, forsaken, You on earth once suffered, too."

Part of this suffering we have for Christ involves putting to death the part of us that wants to keep on sinning even as we follow Jesus. That is a painful process for all of us and yet it is a great privilege and honor as Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." In John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." If Jesus words are true, and he is the only way, think of the burden that it places on each of us here this morning to pray for people who do not believe, to bear witness to them, and even be willing to die to bring them the message of salvation. As Paul said, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

Count the cost

Common sense says that before you do something extreme in your life you better count the cost. Look before you take the leap. Jesus used two stories or parables to picture the importance of counting the cost before we take the plunge into this extreme privilege of following him closely. The first story is that of a man who builds a tower. If he starts the project and does not finish it people will say, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish it." There is a new commercial building being built on Clark Avenue in old Orcutt. It is half finished and it has been that way for well over a year now. Did the builder run out of money? Or did he not get the right permits and the work was stopped?

Jesus used another example of a king going to war with ten thousands troops. If he faces battle against a king with 20,000 he might have to consider making peace instead of going to war. When you follow Jesus closely and meet the challenges of everyday life it is good to ask the tough question, "What will this cost me? Will it mean I cannot take a job because it says I must work on Sunday morning and I do not want to miss one week of worship? Will it mean that I have to say goodbye to a potential marriage partner because that person does not love the Lord as I do? Does it mean I will not hang around with friends who are pulling me away from Jesus instead of drawing me closer to him? Every single day we come to forks in the road that ask us to count the cost of following Jesus. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to as well." (Matthew 6:32)

A man was driving down a road in winter in the Midwest and he noticed two boys skating on a pond that had been recently frozen in the cold weather. He noticed one of the boys break through the ice, and then the other went through also. He knew that if he tried to swim to them, he would problem also drown trying to rescue them. So he took a rope from the car, tied it to a tree, and then went out onto the ice and even if he broke through he could pull himself back and the boys as well. You never have to be afraid to take the plunge to follow Jesus not matter how extreme it is. You are attached to him. He is the vine, and you are the branches. "Nothing in all creation will ever separate you from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus your Lord." Amen.