

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

What is means to be a Disciple

Holy Communion
August 31, 2008

The Text: Matthew 16: 21- 26

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

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How many of you know what it means to have a "Leon Lett" moment? Most older football fans will recognize the reference. Back on January 31 1993 Dallas was playing Buffalo in the Super Bowl, and Leon Lett, who was a defensive lineman for the Cowboys, recovered a fumble and began racing toward paydirt for what appeared to be an easy touchdown.

Lett fumbled his chance for Super Bowl glory when he did some premature celebrating after picking up a Frank Reich fumble at the Dallas 35-yard line and rumbling toward the end zone. A 6-foot-6-inch, 287-pound tackle, Lett was certainly no speedster, but he didn't have to be. The entire right side of the field was clear for him, and he was ahead of everyone else, galomping toward what would be his first touchdown "since I was 10 years old playing pee-wee football."

Dallas was winning handily. The game was winding down. For Lett, the temptation to showboat was too great. He slowed a bit as he got inside the Buffalo 10, then held the football out to the side in his right hand. This provided just enough time for Don Beebe, the Bills' fleet wide receiver, to catch up to Lett and swipe at the ball, knocking it from Lett's hand at the 1-yard line. Only a Touchback. No glory. No celebratory dance in the end zone. But the play did become an NFL highlights favorite, and earned Mr. Lett a certain amount of notoriety.

A Leon Lett moment. The Apostle Peter had one in Matthew 16. You remember last week Jesus asked the question: "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus said to Peter, "That's right, Simon Peter. You are a rock and on this rock I will be build my church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it!"

I don't know what Peter's immediate reaction to Jesus' statement was, but I can guess what mine would have been. I probably would have turned to the other 11 disciples and said, "Did everyone get that? Any questions?... And just in case those in the back couldn't hear, James, would you repeat what Jesus said for the whole group? And, by the way, Thaddeus, from now on you're in charge of carrying my briefcase."

Well, hopefully, I wouldn't really have reacted that way. But Peter didn't have a chance to over-react, because he was about to have his Leon Lett moment. Here's how it happened.

After Jesus told his disciples about the future of the church, he began to explain to them that he must go to Jerusalem to die. Matthew writes...

(v. 22) Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Listen to what happened next...

(v. 23) Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Wow! Can you believe that? Talk about saying the wrong thing—Peter did it! And so, moments after Jesus told Peter he was a rock, he called him Satan. He called him a stumbling block.

Jesus then went on to tell his disciples what is the true cost of being his disciple. He said,

(v. 24-25) "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

There is a price to pay for following Jesus. There is a cost to discipleship. There's much more to being a Christ-follower than just coming to church on Sunday morning. God can take a broken life and put it back together. He can take a life that has been destroyed by sin and rebellion and heal the hurts of the past and bring you joy and peace and fulfillment. But he can do nothing with a life that is not given to him. In order to experience the fullness of God's blessings in your life, you must give him your life. He is fully devoted to you, and he expects you to be fully devoted to him. Today we're going to talk about what it means to be fully devoted to Jesus. What it means to be a disciple.

Disciple. It's an interesting word. We usually associate it with the 12 who followed Jesus—Peter, James, John, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thaddeus and the rest. They were Christ's first disciples, but not his only disciples. Actually, all Christians are disciples.

The word disciple in the Greek language means "student" or "learner." It was common in ancient times for teachers to attract followers—followers who were committed exclusively to their teaching—and these teachers would train their students on a sort of intern basis. Common practice was that the student would leave his home, move in with his teacher, and serve him in the most servile ways—treating him with absolute authority. The disciple was expected not only to learn all that his rabbi knew, but also to become like him in character. In turn, the teacher (or rabbi) provided food and lodging to the student. It was his way of insuring that his teaching was carried over to future generations. When the Gospel of Mark says that Jesus appointed 12

that "they might be with him," [Mark 3:14] Mark was referring to this custom. [Taken from Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, Lawrence O. Richards, c 1985 Zondervan Corporation.]

Obviously, Jesus is the only one worthy of such loyalty. No preacher or teacher today has the right to claim absolute authority over his followers—but Jesus has the right. He proved himself to be the ultimate teacher, the ultimate authority. He's the Son of the Living God, he conquered death, and he holds the key to eternal life.

Jesus doesn't invite us to be his casual acquaintances, he invites us to be his disciples—his fully devoted followers. So, what does a disciple look like? This passage tells us. There are three things I want you to notice.

1. A disciple is committed to following God's plan, not his or her own.
2. A disciple is prepared to pay the price.
3. A disciple gives up what he or she cannot keep to gain what he or she cannot lose.

First of all...

1. A disciple is committed to following God's plan, not his or her own.

Peter, in his enthusiasm, objected to Jesus' prediction of his death. The Bible says that Peter "rebuked" Jesus—it's a strong word, it means basically that Peter was trying to set Jesus straight. I guess in the excitement of hearing Jesus say "upon this rock I will build my church," Peter had the misconception that he and Jesus were now business partners, equals, co-pastors. With a show of audacity, he corrected Jesus—and Jesus put Simon Peter back in his place. He said,

(v. 23) "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

The prevailing belief among Jewish people at this time was that when the Messiah would come, he would establish a political kingdom and rule the world. But the prevailing belief among Jewish people at that time was wrong. God had a different plan altogether. His plan was that the Messiah would come into the world, live a perfect life, die on the

cross for the sins of the world, and in three days be raised from the dead. Frankly, Peter liked his idea better. And so, he made an attempt to set Jesus straight. Jesus made it clear to Peter, "I don't need to change my way of thinking; you need to change your way of thinking." You need to be committed to God's plan, not your plan. If you want to be a follower of Christ, it works the same way for you. You must be committed to following his plan for your life, not your own.

In order to be a disciple of Jesus, you have to be fully committed to his plan for your life and not your own. But here's the good part. His plan is always better. It's often harder, but it's always better. You may have in mind for yourself an easy life; God has in mind for you a great life. Get your mind off the things of man, and focus on the things of God. Commit to following his plan; that's what a disciple does.

Secondly...

2. A disciple is prepared to pay the price.

What's the price of discipleship? Jesus said,

(v. 24) "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Three things Jesus mentions: Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. Let's look at them.

Deny yourself. The Christian life is a life of saying "no" to me and "yes" to God. "I want to get even with that guy; I want to teach him a lesson. But it doesn't matter what I want God. It only matters what you want. I'll treat him the way you want me to. I'll repay his harshness with kindness."

"I'm tired of struggling financially. I could cut just a couple of corners here and relieve some of the pressure—and no one would ever know. But God, it's not about what I want. It's about what you want. I'll do the right thing."

"God, he's not a Christian, but he's handsome and successful and fun to be with. I don't see what damage could be done by going out with him. But it doesn't matter what I want. It matters what you want. I'll be obedient, and trust you to bring the right person into my life."

Denying yourself. It's not a one-time event; it's a lifestyle—saying "no" to me and "yes" to God in every area of life.

Take up your cross . Have you heard people use the phrase: "This is my cross to bear"? They'll say, "I've got an unsaved husband, it's my cross to bear." Or, "My kids are rebellious, it's my cross to bear." Or, "My arthritis acts up on me; it's my cross to bear."

A tombstone in a cemetery in Ribbesford, Scotland contains the following epitaph:

The children of Israel wanted bread
And the Lord sent them manna.
Old clerk Wallace wanted a wife,
And the devil sent him Anna.

I guess Mr. Wallace thought his late wife was his cross to bear. That's not what Jesus meant. He's not talking about a circumstance, he's talking about an attitude.

Do you know what the cross symbolized for the early Jews? Same thing it symbolizes for us—death. They were familiar with the image of a convicted walking through the streets of the city on his way to his execution, carrying the cross on which he was to die. Of course, the disciples realized that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. He is saying that to follow him, one must be willing to pay any price at all—even the price of death. Taking up the cross means that you're willing to risk embarrassment, criticism, rejection, persecution, and, if necessary, your own life for the sake of following Jesus.

Luke's Gospel adds another word to this phrase. He says that we must take up our cross DAILY. [Luke 9:23] Taking up your cross is a mindset; it's an attitude; it's a lifestyle.

Follow me. When you were a kid did you ever play "Follow the leader"? The leader touches his nose, and everyone else has to touch their nose. The leader stands on his head, everyone else has to stand on their head. Or did you ever play the game "Horse" on a basketball court? One guy makes a certain shot, and the others have to make the identical shot. If they miss, they get a letter. The key to these games is that you had do it exactly the same way the leader did it or you were out.

That is the same objective of the Christian life—to do things exactly the way our leader would do it. The WWJD slogan may no longer be the marketing sensation it once was, but let's not remove the words

from our vocabulary. You may have misplaced your bracelet; but let's not misplace the concept. The Christian life consists of following Jesus—of doing what he would do as best we can in each and every situation. You may not be able to open the eyes of the blind, but you can show compassion. You may not be able to feed thousands with a little fish and bread, but you can be sensitive to people's needs.

Following Jesus means making an effort in every situation to do what Jesus would do, and that comes down to treating people as Jesus would treat them. It's not always easy. There's a cost involved. But a disciple is willing to paying that price. What's the price? Self-sacrifice. Giving up what you want for what God wants.

Thirdly...

3. A disciple gives up what he or she cannot keep to gain what he or she cannot lose.

Jesus said,

(v. 25-26) For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

The Christian life involves taking risks. If all that being a Christian meant was to come to church and put a little something in the offering plate, then all you would risk is a few hours of time and a small amount of money. But that's not what being a Christian is. The Christian life involves giving your life—all of your life—to Jesus. All your dreams, your desires, your hopes, your plans—everything that is within you. Being a Christian makes a difference in the way you approach your career, the way you approach marriage, the way you approach child-rearing, the way you approach your free time, the way you handle your finances, the way you choose your friends, the way you react to strangers, and on and on and on. It encompasses every aspect of your life, every minute of every day. Therefore, if the Christian life is nothing but a sham, then we are the world's biggest fools—because we've given ourselves to lives of self-sacrifice and obedience instead of building our own little kingdoms and living for our selfish desires.

Jesus says that if you hold on to your life and live completely for yourself and your own selfish dreams—you'll end up with nothing. But

if you give those things up, and surrender your life to him, you'll end up with everything.

There are two roads you can take: Living for yourself, which leads to eternal death; or living for Jesus, which leads to eternal life. The self-made road may include some success and acquisitions and pleasures along the way, but Jesus asks, "Are these things more important than your soul?"

(v. 26) What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?

Following Jesus is a life of risk, because you give up everything to be his disciple. But, as I've said before, it's a calculated risk, because he has proven that he can do what he promises to do.

The disciple recognizes that without Jesus his life is meaningless, and the best he can hope for is to acquire some things that will ultimately slip through his fingers anyway. And a disciple realizes that if he will give up his meaningless life, that God will give him life far beyond his wildest dreams. A disciple gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. How does he do it? Self-sacrifice. He gives up what he wants for what God wants.

CONCLUSION

There is a cost to discipleship. Clearly, the return is exponentially more than the investment—but the investment is required nonetheless. What's the investment? Your life. Your all. Your money. Your time. Your hopes. Your dreams. Your desires. Your goals. Everything that is you. You surrender them all to Jesus. Not to the church. Not to the preacher, but to Jesus. What it means to be a fully-devoted follower of Christ is to live with the attitude, "Not what I want, but what God wants."

Do you remember when I said the word disciple means "student" or "learner"? That's what it is: it's a learning process. Whether you've just become a believer or whether you've been one for 30 years, the process is the same. Take up your cross daily and follow him.