

## COSTLY DISCIPLESHIP

In 1937 a German theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer published a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was one of my reading assignments when I attended seminary.

It's important to know that, at the time the book came out, Adolf Hitler and Nazism were in the early stages of taking power in Germany; and one of the institutions that was falling under the influence of this authoritarian political movement was the Christian church.

After the Nazi party took the reins of leadership and Hitler became the supreme leader of Germany, pastors were being coerced to preach and teach a brand of Christianity that was favorable to the Nazi party. Any minister who spoke out against the party risked being arrested and possibly executed.

During this time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer became involved in what you might call an underground church movement that was determined to remain true to the Christian faith and be led by Jesus Christ rather than Adolf Hitler.

Although the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, was published a little before the Nazi party took full control of Germany, the same principles Bonhoeffer wrote about were utilized by this illegal, secret Christian Church.

Bonhoeffer wrote about what he called "cheap grace."

Cheap grace, he wrote, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer said, is to hear the gospel preached as follows: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." The main deficiency of such a proclamation is that it contains no demand for discipleship."

Many Christians tend to believe, or at least they live as though, once they have accepted Jesus into their lives and have been forgiven and saved, not only are all their past sins wiped away, but their future sins are, as well—so they can pretty much behave as before.

In that sense, cheap grace is a divine get-out-of-jail-free card. And the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way he talked about is hardly even heard.

In contrast to cheap grace was what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “costly grace.”

“Costly grace,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a [person] to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

I believe every Christian should take some time on a regular basis to do some serious reflection and ask themselves, “How much is it costing me to be a Christian?”

“Have I made any real sacrifices for my faith?”

“Have I had to give anything up—anything of significance, I mean—to follow Christ?”

“Is there something in my life that’s causing me to stumble, to fall short of the goal of being faithful to Jesus? And if so, am I willing and able to “cut it off?” to use Jesus’ words.

It could be argued that the world itself is a stumbling block to our Christian faith. Our present culture does everything it can to accommodate us and gratify our desires, which is totally contrary to Jesus’ way of self-denial.

The world lives by the attitude, “If it feels good, do it.”

Jesus wants us to live differently: “If it helps someone in need, do it.”

The world tells us, over and over again: You deserve it, so don’t let anyone or anything stop you from getting it.”

Jesus tells us: “You don’t deserve it, but God in His love gave it to you anyway. So, live with deep gratitude and love.”

The world tells us, “Grab all the pleasure you can.”

Jesus tells us, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.”

The world says, "Be what you want to be and take as much as possible, because the one who dies with the most possessions wins."

Jesus says, "Be what God created you to be, and lose your life giving yourself away, and you will find your life. Possessions have nothing to do with who you are."

According to Jesus, following him is supposed to be costly. On the level of cutting off a part of your own body. Christians are called to deny themselves and the things they love if it interferes or inhibits our being his disciple.

So, what does it look like, to lose our worldly life of self-gratification and self-fulfillment and take up a life of denying ourselves and our own desires for the sake being faithful to Jesus Christ?

Perhaps it looks something like this:

When she was a young girl, Sue Freshour and her sister Marjorie were walking along a lake road in Chrystal Lake, Michigan, discussing the events of their day. Marjorie noticed something sticking up out of the sand, and she stopped for a closer look.

To her amazement, it was a crumpled up \$20 bill.

Sue was a bit jealous. She silently wondered what Marjorie would do with the money. But she didn't have to be jealous very long, because just a few yards away she found another \$20.

"What a lucky day!" Sue thought.

She and her sister continued the rest of their walk together, celebrating their good fortune. They laughed and talked all the way home about their "found money."

When Sue arrived home, she couldn't stop thinking about how she was going to spend her \$20. She decided that she would buy something absolutely impractical. She would use it to get something that was just for her.

"Yes indeed," Sue thought, "this is my lucky day."

Sue carefully tucked her stash into a corner chest of drawers, where nobody would find it. Her mind was spinning with ideas about what she would purchase that she didn't need. Fun money!

But at church the next Sunday, Sue was humbled. When the collection plate was being passed around, she saw Marjorie take out her crumpled \$20 bill and drop it in.

“That day,” said Sue, I noticed a big difference between me and my sister. That became clear when I did what I wanted with my \$20s, and Marjorie did what Jesus wanted with hers.”

Then Sue said, “The irony is, I don’t even remember what I bought.”

The difference between Sue and Marjorie is the difference Jesus talked about—the difference between the way of the world and the way of Jesus.

It’s the difference between cutting off that part of us that’s self-serving and follows our own ego and replacing it with the kind of selfless giving that serves Christ.

Every day of our lives we find ourselves having to make decisions that involve our faith as Christians.

Do we do what we want, or do what Jesus wants?

Is our goal to serve ourselves, or to serve Christ?

The world says, “You need to be richer.”

Jesus says, “I came, not to make you richer, but to make you better.”

Better disciples.

Better people of God.

Living not to glorify ourselves by the things we have, but to glorify God by the things we do.

Such a life of Christian discipleship doesn’t come cheap. In fact, it may cost us an arm and a leg.

But Jesus says that the cost of discipleship is worth it, so we can enter the Kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.