

Follow Him

Is Following Jesus Worth It?

Matthew 10:5-33

Mark Vroegop

5 These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. 9 Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. 11 And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. 15 Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

16 "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. 19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. 20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

26 "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt 10:5-33)

When I was in Jr. High I attended an all-day summer basketball camp with about 150 other kids. Part of the camp experience was a daily "motivational talk" given by one of the coaches. On one particular day, the coach's talk was about what you aspired to be and how to get there. We were seated on the floor of gym as he began his introduction. He asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And then he began to go through various career choices and ask kids to stand up if that was their career choice. He started with the common ones: "Anyone want to be a police officer? Fireman? Doctor? Attorney? Business Owner?" And every time he asked, a few kids stood up and sat down. After about 15 different careers, he stopped and said in a mocking tone – "Anyone want to be pastor?"

Well, in Jr. High I knew that was what I wanted to be. I knew that the answer was "Yes", and I knew that I should stand. I'll never forget the flood of emotions that filled my soul in the micro-seconds that followed. The fears, the "what-ifs", the "why-nots", the uncertainty, and the potential of being singled out were swirling in my soul. Weighing the cost of going public with my commitment to Christ was powerful and immediate.

I'll never forget the look on his face and the fear in my heart as I rose to my feet and stood all alone in front of my peers. "Really," he said, "you want to be a pastor?" "Yes sir," I answered and then I sat down. For the rest of the week I was called "preacher," and I lived in this tension between knowing that I stood up but dealing with costly effects of my decision.

My guess is you can probably relate at some level with my experience as a Jr. Higher. Every follower of Jesus faces defining moments when we are called upon to identify ourselves with Jesus, to stand alone, to clearly side with Him. We face them in our families ("Will I choose to follow Jesus when my spouse or children don't?"), at work ("Will I choose to follow Jesus when an unethical practice becomes apparent?"), with friends ("Will I declare my love for Jesus when the opportunity comes my way?"), or with relatives ("Will I share with them what is happening in my life or remain silent?").

And when that day comes, when the flood of emotions hit your heart, and when you are weighing whether or not you'll stand – you've got to know that following Jesus is worth it.

Matthew 10:5-33 contains the commissioning words of Jesus. He is sending out his disciples, and he gives them specific instructions regarding the trouble that they will face and the trust that they should have. Our text helps us in two ways. First, it gives us some principles for how we are conduct ourselves in a hostile world. Secondly, it gives us seven great promises to which we must cling when following Jesus proves costly.

Principles for Ministry in a Hostile World:

As Jesus sends his disciples out, he gives them a series of instructions as to how they are to be his ministers in a hostile world. Let me summarize them for you with three principles:

1. Be like Jesus (v 5-8a)

Jesus sends out the twelve disciples with a three-fold charge: 1) Go only to the lost sheep of Israel, 2) proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and 3) relieve the suffering of the people by healing and casting out demons.

This should sound very familiar because it is exactly the kind of ministry that Jesus had. We've already heard him say "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" in Matthew 4:17, and we just read last week in Matthew 9:35 that Jesus' ministry involved "healing every disease and every affliction." Later on in Matthew (15:24-26) Jesus will clearly say that he has been sent to the nation of Israel.

So the point of all of this is quite simple: Jesus is sending out his disciples to do what he does. That's why they are called disciples. Their role is to be like him, serve like him, and preach like him. Jesus commissions his disciples to go into a hostile culture and be like him.

In the midst of all the extra stuff that we load on Christianity and Christian ministry, it is good to be reminded that the goal – the simple goal – is just to be like Jesus.

2. Be gracious (v 8b-13)

The second principle that Jesus gives them is regarding graciousness. The ESV says, "you received without paying, give without pay." Jesus reminds them that everything that they have, they received from him. He wants them to understand that everything that they have came to them by grace. And the result should be that they are gracious.

In verses 9-11, he tells them not to use their gifting to make themselves rich. They were not to be gospel-hucksters. Instead, they were to see their ministry through the lens of grateful grace, giving out what they had been given and blessing the homes that were worthy of blessing.

Once again we see here this all-important mark that is rooted in the gospel and makes you stand out so clearly the world. Graciousness, a willingness to give, or extravagant grace (as we call it here at College Park) is the natural outcome of those who have really come to see the beauty of God's grace.

When I talk about this concept, I keep hearing the King James translation in my head and an old hymn that our basketball team in the Philippines sang at half-time. The King James translates verse 8 as "freely you have received, freely give." And here's the hymn:

*God forgave my sin in Jesus' name.
I've been born again in Jesus' name*

*And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share his love as he told me to.*

*He said 'Freely, freely you have received; freely, freely give.
Go in my name, and because you believe others will know that I live.*

3. Leave the results to God (v 14-15)

In verse 14 a new theme begins to emerge that will become fully developed in verses 17-33, namely that ministering in Jesus name doesn't always fall on receptive hearts. The culture is not receptive to the ministry of Jesus, and real disciples should not be surprised when they face opposition. Jesus tells them to leave the results to God.

Jesus tells his disciples that "if anyone will not receive you or listen to you...shake off the dust from your feet when you leave" (v 14), a symbolic gesture indicating the severing of a relationship.¹

The final statement Jesus makes is regarding God's future judgment. He tells the disciples that it will be "more tolerable on the day of judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town" (v 15). Why does he talk like this? Jesus knows that their ministry, if it resembles his, is going to receive a significant level of opposition and rejection (see John 15:20). Therefore he wants them to know one day God will make everything right. Nothing suffered and no level of rejection is missed by God. One day he will bring judgment on the world, and the disciples' role is to simply go into a hostile world and declare the gospel. The results are up to God.

Effective ministry at any level in a hostile world requires a deep understanding of this principle. If you don't get this, you'll never make it in ministry or you'll quit when following Jesus becomes difficult. Here is why: because there is a natural tendency to connect results to our sense of the value of what we are doing. In other words, it is normal to think opposition, resistance, or rejection must mean that I'm doing something wrong or that the ministry isn't working.

Jesus wants us to look at ministry differently, leaving the results to God. Now, I am not suggesting that we arrogantly minister in such a way that we never consider our effectiveness in relationship to results. Such over-spiritualization of bad ministry has caused needless harm on the name of Christ. Rather, I'm suggesting that there is a balance between "Woe to you when all people speak well of you...(Luke 6:26)" and "...as it depends on you, live peaceably with all..." (Rom 12:18).

To effectively follow Christ in a hostile culture, you must have a robust and biblical understanding that Jesus calls us to be like him, be gracious like him, and then leave the results

¹ David Turner, Matthew – The Baker Exegetical Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 272.

to God. We have to develop a level of freedom from results and consequences, leaving all of that in God's hands.

Oh how valuable this orientation is! It can liberate you when:

- As a teenager your friends mock you because of your beliefs or what you won't do
- As a college student you spend some lonely Friday nights because following Jesus won't allow you to go with the crowd
- As parent when your children do not like your decisions, and they emotionally distance themselves from you
- As a person in the marketplace when your conversations or actions attract the subtle looks, eye-rolls, or outright mocking from co-workers
- Your holiday was filled with awkward moments or outright conflict because of the radical difference between you and your family

This is when you need to preach a very simple but powerful truth to your heart: "I'm a follower of Jesus; it doesn't matter what they do, God will take care of it!"

Promises for Sheep in the Midst of Wolves

Having established some basic principles for how ministry is to be done, Jesus next turns to some promises to help his disciples when opposition comes. Jesus expands on the conflict theme saying, "I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves...", calling them to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16).

Jesus wants his followers to be people of unquestionable character and great wisdom because he is sending them into very hostile territory. To be "sheep in the midst of wolves" is not to be safe.

To help his disciples, Jesus gives us a series of promises in verses 17-33. These are meant to be sources of eclipsing hope when you are asked to follow Jesus in a costly way:

1. When challenged, remember that God will give you words to say (v 17-20)

Followers of Jesus will experience opposition. They will be delivered to courts, flogged in synagogues, and dragged before governors for the purpose of bearing witness before them and the Gentiles. And when that day comes, there might be a tendency to be anxious about what they should say. But in that moment Jesus makes a promise: "for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour" (v 19). He promises that the Holy Spirit will speak through you.

Jesus is promising that his followers will not be abandoned in critical moments. The Holy Spirit will provide what followers need: "for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your

adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:15). So when you are challenged and you don’t know what to say, don’t worry. The Spirit will help you.

2. When your family attacks, remember the value of endurance (v 21-22)

The next section is very sobering. Jesus indicates that seasons will come where family members are involved in persecution, delivering each other up to the authorities – even to death. The family unit completely breaks down, and the result is that followers of Jesus are hated.

The solution is to remember the spiritual value of endurance. The word for endurance (hupomeno) means to abide under or to bear up courageously. So how is this comforting? First, Jesus is reminding his followers that endurance until the end is a central part of being a true disciple. So he’s calling them to bear up courageously before it happens. Secondly, he’s telling them that everything – including persecution by family – has an end that leads to deliverance. It all works out for our good. Even betrayal by your family.

3. When persecution comes, remember that Jesus has been there too (v 23-25)

The disciples are to go from town to town expecting persecution.² And he encourages his disciples by telling them that their suffering is directly connected to his. He, as their teacher, received persecution so they ought to expect it as well.

In other words, some level of opposition is an affirmation that you really are a follower of Jesus. There is comfort in persecution knowing that it serves as a validation. To be liked by everyone, never facing any level of opposition, and to be affirmed by the world is not the calling of disciples.

4. When you are afraid of people, remember that one day everything will be revealed (v 26)

The fear of man is a powerful emotion. Opposition doesn’t need to be active or specific for it to grab a hold of your heart. The anticipation of opposition can be enough to lock you up emotionally and spiritually. Proverbs wisely says that the fear of man is a snare (Prov. 29:25). What is Jesus’ remedy?

Again he points to the final judgment as the source of hope and strength. One day everything that is hidden or covered will be revealed. In other words God sees it all, knows it all, and he will make everything plain. All motives, words, and actions of those who opposed the followers of Jesus will be made plain and clear. Judgment and vindication is guaranteed.

² The meaning of “you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” is challenging. It cannot mean Jesus’ second coming, and it likely refers to his post-resurrection appearance.

5. When you tempted to be timid, remember that eternity is on the line (v 27-28)

Jesus calls his followers not to conceal who they are or their message. They are to take the message of the gospel and declare it openly. Timidity should not be their norm. Jesus wants bold messengers for a bold message.

And when there is a temptation to be concerned about what people can do, what they can take away, or the punishment that they can produce, Jesus wants his disciples to keep in mind that eternal issues are at stake.³ Their view of life, sense of fear, and motivation for boldness needs to be different because of what it at stake.

6. When you are filled with anxiety, remember you are valuable to God (v 29-31)

Moments of opposition can create a high degree of anxiety where we worry about the future. There is a temptation to doubt God's care or to be fearful as to what will happen. In some respects this is a normal and natural initial thought. But when anxiety begins to control our thoughts or behaviors, new beliefs need to kick in. What are those?

Basically, there are three. First, God cares for the slightest and smallest of creatures. Even sparrows are loved and cared for by God. Secondly, God knows every person intimately – "even the hairs on your head are all numbered." Third, God loves you greatly.

So anxiety is battled, not by denying the reality of the situation at hand, but by an eclipsing belief. Namely that God loves me, cares for me, and he will meet my needs.

7. When following him is costly, remember that nothing is greater than the affirmation of Jesus (v 32-33)

The final promise is the capstone of all the promises. Jesus tells us that there is direct connection between our acknowledgement of him and his acknowledgement of us. Denial of Jesus equals denial of us. Affirmation of Jesus equals his affirmation of us.

Why is the affirmation of Jesus listed as a motivator? The reason is that his affirmation is directly connected to one's eternal destiny. To be a sinful person in the presence of holy God means judgment and certain punishment. You can hardly imagine the fear associated with this kind of situation.

³ Jesus' words – "who can destroy both body and soul in hell" – should not be taken as a statement endorsing annihilationism (a belief that people cease to exist in the after-life). Rather he is speaking about the destruction of all that makes for a rich and meaningful life.

The only hope of standing before God is the advocacy of Jesus. If Jesus doesn't affirm you as one of his, then you stand unforgiven, guilty, and damned. To have Jesus say, "He's one of mine" is not just the difference between the A-Team and the B-Team. It is the difference between life and death, heaven and hell, eternal joy and everlasting punishment.

So when things get tough, you've got to remember that following Jesus is not just an option among many. It is the only path because there is nothing more important than this. Nothing.

The apostle John in the sixth chapter of his gospel records a conversation between Jesus and Peter. After many disciples left, Jesus asked Peter if he was going to leave him too. Peter's response captures well the reality of what is on the line any time that following Jesus becomes costly. I pray that his response would be yours and mine:

"Where are we going to go? You have the words of eternal life, and we know that you are the Holy One of God."

Following Jesus is certainly worth it because there is no one like him!

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