

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Cost of Following Jesus**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 8:18-22, 9:9-13

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On April 18 Pastor Dick got the following email from Tim Vessey, our missionary in Turkey:

Dick.

Breaking news is that three Christians were murdered today in Malatya by nationalists at their Christian publishing house. They apparently had their throats slit. One German worker and two Turks. These are close friends of Aydin and Nesrin and friends of ours as well. Tim

Two days later Shige Nakazawa confirmed the news with a long email about the terrible ordeal these three Christians endured at the hands of five young Muslim radicals. The initial reports were that the men had been tortured, mutilated, and brutalized in almost indescribable fashion. Later the Christian leaders there apologized for some exaggerations regarding the torture, but nevertheless these three Christian brothers were all brutally murdered.

Here's how it came down. Just ten days earlier on Easter Sunday these five young Muslim men had attended a Bible study at a hotel conference room and were invited back to a Bible study at the Christian publishing house. They pretended to be "seekers" interested in the Gospel, but in fact, they belonged to a Muslim fraternity that preaches hatred and violence against all Christians. They arrived and apparently the Bible study began, but the young Muslims had brought guns, bread knives, ropes and towels ready for their final act of service to Allah. They knew there would be a lot of blood. By the time the police were called, two of the Christians had been slaughtered and the third was barely alive.

This is not a unique event in Turkey. Since 2001 there have been many attacks and threats on churches, pastors and Christians. Bombings, physical attacks, verbal and written abuse are only some of the ways Christians have been targeted.

In an act that hit front pages in the largest newspapers in Turkey, Susanne Tilman, the wife of one of the martyrs, expressed her forgiveness in a TV interview. In a country where blood-for-blood revenge is as normal as breathing, she told reporters that she did not want revenge. "Oh God, forgive them for they know not what they do," she said, repeating the words of Christ on Calvary. One columnist wrote of her comment, "She said in one sentence what 1000 missionaries in 1000 years could never do."

Pastor Fikret Bocek asked believers around the world to pray for the Church in Turkey:

"But don't pray against persecution, pray for perseverance. And we urge you to pray that at least one of those five boys will come to faith because of the testimony in death of Tilman Geske, who gave his life as a missionary to his beloved Turks, and the testimonies in death of Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel."

The persecution, as a matter of fact, is not stopping. We received another email this week indicating that the media is stirring up even more hatred toward Christians and many have had to flee.

Keeping that fresh news account in your mind, I want to read our Scripture text for today, Matthew 8:18-22:

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

(Then from the parallel passage in Luke 9:61, 62) Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Jesus has just given His greatest sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount. Then on the way down from the mountain He has done some of His greatest miracles—healing a leper, a paralyzed man, Peter’s mother-in-law, and then a number of demon-possessed and sick people. The crowds are steadily growing larger, and volunteers are coming out of the woodwork to join His entourage. The opportunity is ripe for a recruitment drive that will supply the critical mass of disciples needed to overthrow Rome and generate a tumultuous welcome from the citizens of Jerusalem.

But Jesus blows it! Right here on the threshold of success He blows it! First He orders His disciples to escape from the crowds by crossing to the other side of the Lake, and then when the eager followers discover His whereabouts, He talks about the high cost of discipleship. Here He is, faced with an enormous task on the one hand—to reach the world with His message—and a huge crowd of potential disciples on the other, and He chooses to thin out of the ranks, to separate the strong from the weak, the whole-hearted from the half-hearted, the true from the false. Like Gideon of old, he prefers a small, hard-core band of completely dedicated followers to a large, unwieldy army of unpredictable pretenders.

What is the message the church is sending today? I fear too often it is a message of “easy believism”—just believe in Jesus and all your problems are over. No more guilt, no more depression, just peace and satisfaction! You don’t have to give up anything—just add Jesus to your lifestyle. Not only that, but health and wealth are your promised inheritance.

Friends, that message isn’t true and it isn’t honest. We tend to extrapolate from our own experience and to assume that what we have experienced (peace, health, wealth, lack of persecution) is the norm for the Christian life. The fact is our experience is unique in the history of Christianity. We Americans are perhaps the most blessed and the least persecuted group ever,

and there are no guarantees that our blessings will continue. We have an obligation to be honest with people like Jesus was—to tell them of the trials, sacrifices, and obligations that are often entailed in being a disciple of Christ, in addition to the blessings, joy, and fulfillment. Besides, I’m convinced that most people in their heart of hearts are not looking for Easy Street, but for a challenge—something to live for, even something to die for.

Well, believe me, Jesus offers that. In our Scripture text for today it seems to me that Jesus discourages followers who would be recruited by anyone else and calls followers who would be rejected by anyone else.

Jesus discourages followers who would be prime recruits for anyone else. (Matt. 8:18-22)

Three potential disciples are addressed in our Scripture passage.

The hasty disciple and the uncounted cost (8:19-20). A teacher of the law, a scribe if you will, comes to Jesus all gung-ho and says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Now it would be quite a coup if one of the scribes were to land in Jesus’ camp, because they are among Jesus’ most vocal opponents. But Jesus doesn’t do any cartwheels; instead He acts skeptical and responds not by signing the man up but by delivering a strong dose of truth-in-advertising. In effect Jesus reminds this hasty disciple that His followers cannot count on luxurious living. After all, Jesus Himself came into this world in a borrowed stable and went out in a borrowed tomb. And during His earthly ministry He had no permanent home and no financial security.

Foxes and birds have their definite dwelling places, their homes to which they return again and again. But for Jesus things are different. As His life and ministry unfold,

Judea rejects Him (John 5:18),
Galilee casts Him out (John 6:66),
Gadara begs Him to leave its district (Matthew 8:34),
Samaria refuses Him lodging (Luke 9:53),
earth will not have Him (Matthew 27:23),
and finally even heaven forsakes Him (Matthew 27:46).

I don’t think Jesus is promising that His followers will necessarily suffer homelessness or hunger or persecution. But He is acknowledging that such things are possible, and any potential disciple needs to come in with his eyes open. No one can ever say he was induced by Jesus to follow under false pretenses. Maybe by some of His spokesmen, but not by Jesus!

The hampered disciple and the unburied corpse (8:21-22) This time the would-be disciple says to Jesus, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Now that seems reasonable enough, and none of us would be inclined to deny such a request. Especially was it reasonable in Jewish circles where burial took precedence over the study of the Law, over temple service, over the observance of circumcision, etc.

But there may be more going on here than meets the eye. Since Jews always buried their loved

ones quickly—within 24 hours—I doubt this man’s father is even dead yet. Otherwise the man would right then be tending to the burial instead of following Jesus around. He may be requesting permission to stay home until his ill father dies. In fact, for all we know his father may still be middle-aged and in good health. In other words, this is likely a put-off, an excuse to avoid serving.

Jesus’ response is, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” In other words, the spiritually dead can bury the physically dead. This sounds pretty harsh, but I wonder if Jesus might perhaps be stretching a point to make a point. The real message is that Jesus will not play second fiddle to anyone else. True discipleship is not something we fit into an already crowded calendar. Luke’s version adds a phrase: “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60). More important than caring for the physically dead is offering eternal life to the spiritually dead, and if you can’t do both, choose the one that is more important.

Our best friends in Bible College days were Jim and Diane Brower. They were preparing to go to France as missionaries when Diane’s father, a wonderful Christian man, became very ill, and it was apparent he would not live long. Jim and Diane needed to be in France for an orientation session that was only held once a year, so they said good-bye to her father, to whom she was very close, knowing that they would not be able to return for the funeral, since international airfares 35 years ago were very expensive. And sure enough, within a couple of weeks he died and she missed the funeral. I personally think that is a beautiful illustration of the kind of commitment Jesus asks for here, but I wonder how many of us would make the decision Diane made if we were in her shoes.

The hesitating disciple and the unforsaken circle (Luke 9:61, 62). Listen to the parallel passage in Luke’s Gospel: “Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family’” (Luke 9:61). This man is a willing volunteer but he has a condition attached that seems, if anything, even more reasonable than that of the hampered disciple. After all, saying good-bye should take very little time, and it seems only right. But perhaps Jesus knows that in returning to say good-bye, this individual might very possibly be distracted and change his mind. It has been said that in everything there is a crucial moment. If that moment is missed, the thing may likely never be done at all.

Jesus replies to the hesitating disciple, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Have you ever wondered how farmers get their rows of corn so absolutely straight? When I was a teenager I worked on my uncle’s farm in Northfield, Minnesota. He taught me that the key to planting straight rows was looking way into the distance at a certain spot on the horizon—usually a fence post—and driving straight to that spot. If you look down or back or sideways, even for an instant, the row will be crooked. The key to discipleship is likewise keeping our eyes on the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, as Paul so aptly put it in Philippians.

I think if we’re honest, all of us would admit that all three of these potential disciples look pretty

good to us. If we were trying to accomplish a great task and needed help, these are the kind of volunteers we would accept or even recruit. But not Jesus! He discourages followers who would be recruited by anyone else.

Then we are even further surprised:

Jesus calls followers who would be rejected by anyone else. (Matt. 9:9-13)

We're only going to look at one example this morning—Matthew—but when we get to chapter 10 we will discover that all the Twelve Apostles pretty well fit the mold of societal rejects. If you will turn with me ahead one page, I want us to read Matthew 9:9-13:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus seeks those with potential rather than proven ability. When schools or businesses or even churches recruit employees, they virtually always go after the cream of the crop. They check GPA's, GRE's, references, degrees, work history, honors, awards, etc. But not Jesus. He goes after a man named Matthew, who is sitting at the tax collector's booth. There is nothing in Matthew's life up to this point that appears attractive or useful. In fact, there is much that could be a decided detriment to Jesus' cause—like Matthew's career, his friends, his reputation.

You see, Rome farmed out taxes; i.e. they assessed a district at a certain figure and then sold the right to collect the taxes to the highest bidder. So long as the collector handed over the assessed amount at the end of the year, he was entitled to retain whatever else he could extract from the people. The reason toll booths were set up is that duties on trade were a key type of tax. A tax collector would force a man to stop on the road, unpack his ox cart, and charge him duty on everything he was hauling, plus a tax on each wheel of his cart, plus a tax on the ox. If he could not pay the tax, the collector would offer to lend him the money at an exorbitant rate of interest.

The result is that tax collectors were hated both as collaborators and as extortioners. As a class they were regarded as dishonest and the Talmud speaks of them as robbers. They were not allowed to attend the synagogue. One Roman writer says that he once saw a monument to an honest tax gatherer. So rare was such a specimen that he deserved a statue.ⁱ

But Jesus recruits Matthew, a tax collector, also known as Levi because he was available and eager to follow. The man's readiness seems remarkable, for it meant considerable sacrifice. Not only were tax collectors normally very wealthy, but for Matthew there was no trial period was

available. If following Jesus did not work out for Peter, he could return to his fishing trade with little difficulty (in fact, he did for a short time after the death of Jesus, as recorded in John 21). But when Matthew walks out of his job, he's through. Rome would surely never take back a man who simply abandoned his tax office.

Obviously something must be missing from Matthew's life to cause him to leave his livelihood and follow Jesus. Maybe he is tired of being hated. Maybe he is tired of going to bed at night with a guilty conscience regarding all the people he has ripped off. Whatever his need, in Jesus he seems to have found an authority greater than Rome and a love greater than money.

Furthermore, he takes this critical step of commitment, not in a spirit of grim resignation but with banners flying. He throws a party for all his partners in crime. Some are tax collectors and others are just called "sinners," a technical term for those who either could not or would not observe the intricacies of the Jewish law as elaborated by the traditions of the scribes.

Matthew is unlike a lot of Christians who break all their relationships with non-Christians as soon as they are converted. But notice what his purpose is—it's not to have a last fling. This is not Mardi Gras before Lent or a bachelor party before the wedding. This banquet is for the express purpose of introducing these fellow sinners to Jesus. And what does Jesus do with this motley crew?

He enters their world in dramatic fashion. He attends the party, apparently unconcerned about the negative reaction He knows will be forthcoming from the religious bigwigs. You see, the Pharisees never could distinguish sin from sinner. They avoided sinners in order to avoid the suggestion that they endorsed their sin. Isolation and separation was their reflex response. But Jesus knows that excessive separation destroys outreach. And He knows it is possible to build bridges to the lost without compromising moral purity. Notice I said "it is possible," not "it is easy." Not everyone can do it the same way, but we can all do it in some way.

A few years ago I was talking to a man in our church in St. Louis and he shared with me that he stops at a tavern regularly after work. I was rather surprised at this information, because this man had a solid reputation and had volunteered in some pretty significant ministries. When I asked him why he did so, he responded, "That's where my friends go after work, so if I want to reach them I have to go where they are." Well, I suppose there are limits to that sort of evangelism, and perhaps this man's answer is not best for *everyone* to imitate, especially for someone with a weakness for alcohol.

I think it is legitimate to ask the simple question, "How are you or how am I entering the world of those around us? If we wouldn't be caught dead in a tavern, what is *our* point of contact?" Would we feel comfortable in Matthew's house? Would we be there for the right reason? Or would we be criticizing Jesus, along with the Pharisees?

He clarifies His purpose: to call sinners, not the righteous. You'll notice that the Pharisees complain about Jesus' behavior, but not to His face. He, however, responds directly to

them with a theological rationale for His *modus operandi*. That rationale is found in an analogy from everyday life: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” A doctor who advertised, “Well patients only, I don’t want to be exposed to anything contagious!”, would not have a very large practice. But sometimes that’s what religious people do.

I saw a church sign once that read, (and this is the honest truth!)

Berean Church (I’ve changed the name to protect the guilty)

Independent

Fundamental

Premillennial

Pretribulational

Baptistic

Non-ecumenical

Non-charismatic

Needless to say, this was a pretty small church. They might as well have put up a sign saying, “Stay home if you’re not just like us!”

Jesus applies the analogy about the doctor in verse 13: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” His business is sinners. He does not intend, of course, to leave them in their sins; He calls them to repentance. When He forgave the woman taken in adultery, He added a very important command that is almost always ignored by those who talk about this woman: “Go and sin no more.” By the way, the term “righteous” here really means *self-righteous*, not truly righteous. Jesus has no interest in wasting His time with self-righteous people; they are far from the Kingdom. But those who know and admit they are sinners are definitely within the reach of God’s help.

Let’s admit it. If Matthew’s resume had come to us, we would have wrapped the garbage in it, but Jesus chose him because Matthew knew he was a sinner and wanted a Savior.

Jesus is looking for apprentices, not just tag-alongs.

I suspect there are many of us here today who are a lot more like the hasty disciple, the hampered disciple, and the hesitating disciple than we care to admit. But do we realize what it costs us to remain in the place of a half-hearted disciple? German pastor, Helmut Thielicke, wrote,

When we are only half-Christians we often feel a kind of envy of thorough-going worldlings. They have no inhibitions about brushing aside an undesired competitor. They get over a bit of tax chiseling or a little adultery without too many bumps and bruises on their conscience. But we half-Christians have our inhibitions, scruples, and troubles in our conscience with such things. We can no longer be tough, red-blooded sinners like these others, but we also are not saints and that is why we feel so uneasy. . . .

The man who wants only a bit of God always finds God to be only a brake, an impediment, a pain. But he who wants God wholly learns that he is the source of power, that he gives a man freedom and verve, that following him is the most joyful thing in the world because he frees a man from all the things that tempt and torment the half-

*hearted.*ⁱⁱ

Jesus wants followers, disciples, apprentices whose goal it is to become like Him!

Conclusion: Now the passage we have studied this morning is not, as you might be tempted to conclude, a suggestion to fear failure and thus back away from the claims of Christ. When a pastor says to a young couple at their wedding, as I did on Friday night, “It is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God,” he is not trying to discourage them from getting married. He’s just challenging them to face marriage realistically. And Jesus is just challenging us to face discipleship realistically. Ultimately, friends, it is costly to follow Jesus, very costly, but it is even more costly not to.

Let me challenge you this morning to seriously examine the level of your discipleship. The way it is demonstrated will be different for each person. Some will be called to use some of their vacation time to go on short-term mission trips, as a number of our families have done. Others will give their summer to work in Sunday School in order to spell the teachers who work year round. Still others will take the opportunity to defend the cause of the weak and fatherless by volunteering at the Pregnancy Crisis Center. Others may throw a party for sinners in order to introduce them to Jesus.

Nor are there any guarantees that it will always be easy or safe. Shige Nakazawa, wrote very honestly regarding the murders in Turkey, where he and his family serve,

Some of you have asked how we are doing with this news. To tell you the truth, we were shaken as this is not something that cannot happen to us as well. More than once in Turkey I personally have encountered people who are very angry about what we are doing. Just a thought of leaving my wife and children behind in this kind of way is unbearable. The question I have been asking to myself is, is the Gospel still worth dying for? Do I still want to keep proclaiming it even though it may put my own family in jeopardy? I don't want to say yes to this question quickly, just because we are missionaries. This is a question that we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, must answer after some honest thoughts. Only with a mind and heart filled by the Word and ignited by the Holy Spirit can we gladly say YES to these questions each one of us must answer, and freely and happily lose our lives for the Lord Jesus and the Gospel. O for grace to trust Him more.

A few weeks later Shige had answered his own questions, and he wrote,

We can no longer deny the possibility of being killed on account of Christ here in Turkey. But the Lord has also taught us that the Gospel is still worthy even if such a thing should happen. God has blessed both Luann and me with a desire to follow our Lord wherever He might be pleased. We do not mean to be of a bravado spirit, almost inviting martyrdom. We will certainly use all our wisdom and means to protect our family. We, however, are simply rejecting a naive assumption that physical persecution will never happen to us. We rest assured that nothing, even martyrdom, will be allowed to happen unless by the will of our sovereign and loving Father.

Friend, I challenge you today to follow Jesus, to become a disciple of him, an apprentice. It will

not be a bed of roses, it will not be an endless run of health and wealth. But it will be fulfilling, meaningful, adventuresome, productive, joyful, and the trip will last for eternity!

i. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 61.

ii. Helmut Thielicke,