

## ***“Radical Teachings of Christ: Take up Your Cross”***

HVBC – Luke 14:25-33, John 6:60. 66-68 10-22-06

I want us to reflect today around the idea of the difficulty or ease in becoming a Christian or even in living the Christian life. It is always my tendency to emphasize that Jesus paid it all. It is a gift that we must accept. That is true, but what about our cost, our commitment.

Is it better for us to focus on how easy it is to be a Christian or should we focus on how hard it is to be a Christian?

Often we say – all you have to do is . . . ? What is holding you back?

Jesus, however, talked about the cost. Why don't we talk about the cost? I think we have a fear that if we focus on the cost, people wouldn't be willing to pay it. We know the importance of people being a Christian. It is literally a person's eternal destiny – Heaven & Hell, so we want to make it easy.

Today I am beginning a series on the Radical Teachings of Christ and the focus today is Taking up Your Cross. We, often want to make Jesus into our image instead of transforming ourselves into His image. (think about that). We want to make Jesus: an American & a very patriotic one. Most of us here would like for Jesus to be white, middle class or maybe even upper middle class & maybe even a Southerner. We often merge our culture into our faith. I want us to separate it all & get to the core. I want us to realize that Jesus was different than us.

We often water down the teachings of Jesus. We want to sanitize them. We don't want them to come out challenging us to be really different.

**Luke 14: 25-35** *25 Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, 26 "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*

Could you imagine a church member or a pastor making a statement like that when someone wanted to join the church? There were lots of people following him & he told them you must hate your family – the people you love the most & even your own life if you want to be my disciple.

I think that could get a pastor fired. That church would be criticized by the other churches in the community. But Jesus didn't stop there. He added:

*27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.*

We have sanitized the cross. We have polished it up. The cross means death, a cruel and horrifying death. Whoever does not bear his own electric chair and come after me cannot be my disciple. What does that mean? Would you want to follow someone that made that type of claim?

If that is not enough he then adds:

*28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace.*

Count the cost. Make sure this is something that you are ready to commit to. If you are going to build a building you will count the cost & make sure you can complete it. They didn't have banks that would loan you the money at that time. They had to have the money to complete the building or it would not be complete.

If you are going to war, you will count the cost & be sure that you will win or you will work out a peace agreement.

Jesus adds: *33 So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.* He didn't say renounce all that you have did he?

Jesus concludes by saying: *34 "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? 35 It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill; men throw it away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

We are to be salt. We are to be different. We are to add flavor to the world, but if we blend in and are not different than we are no good. We are not even fit for the dunghill or to be more plain – we are not fit to be thrown on to pile of cow manure. That is not my words. That's what Jesus said. He who has ears to hear let him hear.

This isn't the only time that Jesus said something like this. In John we find an account that is equally as strong. After the feeding of the 5,000, people were still wanting to see more signs that Jesus is the Messiah. They talked about the manna in the wilderness and Jesus started telling them that he was the bread of life. He told them that they must consume him – eat his bread & drink his blood. To us this is describing the Lord's Supper, but this was before his death & before that was a thought. He was telling them that they must fully accept him as the messiah. I don't know if the people understood what he was saying, but there was a reaction.

**John 6:60- 69** *60 Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. 65 And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." 66 After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. 67 Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*

There were lots of followers of Jesus that turned away, when the teachings got to hard. Jesus questioned if they were all going to leave, but Peter spoke up – where can we go, you have the words of eternal life.

So Jesus placed high demands & high expectations on his followers. He told them that there was a cost and lots of people turned & walked away. I must confess, I don't have the best of self esteems. If I made high demands on people and they walked away, I would be second guessing myself. I would feel like I had made a big mistake. I would be tempted to run after those people and lower the demands.

I want us to think about this. Christianity didn't fall apart because Jesus' high demands. Actually it built a strong group of fully devoted followers. A small passionate group is more powerful than a large group that is not passionate and is minimally committed. Jesus was building something & he had high demands.

Several years ago I attended a conference led by Thom Rainer. Thom had written a book and was leading conferences on High Expectations. He had studied churches that he considered to be the highest functioning churches. He had different criteria related to size, growth & other factors. He said that the growing churches have higher expectations than the declining churches. Interesting data.

When I say that we are to have high expectations, there are different types of high expectations. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had high expectations, but Jesus was extremely critical of them. Why? Because their focus was on themselves. Look at what I do – I fast twice a week. I give a tithe of everything I own. I, I, I, I. Now is it wrong to fast & tithe. No those are good things, but the focus is not to be on what I do, but on following Jesus.

Jesus had high expectations, but it began with a heart change. Christians are to be humble, honest & trustworthy. Christians are to care for others. Last week we studied Amos. The people felt that things were going great. Their worship seemed wonderful.

People contributed & made their sacrifices, but they took advantage of the poor and focused on themselves.

**Christians should stand out as being different.** Let me ask a question – what is a Christian fast food restaurant? Anybody know of one. That is easy for me Chick Filet. What stands out? They are closed on Sunday. That is a decision they have made. If you go to South point mall on Sunday. It is business as usual. If you go to the food court, all the restaurants are open except Chick Filet. They stand out as different.

When we think of religious groups that stand out for being different from society, I hope you can name a lot of groups and for good reasons. **One group that I think of is the Amish.** Typically when we think of the Amish being different we think of their simple lifestyle. They don't accept modern technology and they dress very simple, but more than the way they dress, there is something different about them.

On October 3<sup>rd</sup> 10 girls were shot at an Amish school five died. He had taken 15 boys & a pregnant woman out of the room. Then he tied the girls up and prepared to shoot them. One of the girls Marian Fisher, age 13, stepped forward and said, Shoot me first, in an apparent effort to buy time for the remaining students. Her younger sister, Barbie, allegedly asked Roberts to “shoot me second.” The killer eventually took his own life. How have the Amish responded. They have grieved deeply. They are in lots of pain, but they also have reached out to the family of the man that killed these children. They have said that they are not to think evil of this man. An amish midwife who had helped birth several of the girls that were murdered was making plans to take food to his family's house. When questioned about this, her response was to share that “This is possible, if you have Christ in your heart.” The Amish have started two funds: The Nickel Minds Children's fund for the families of the victims and Roberts Family Fund for the surviving members of the Roberts's family – his wife and two young children. Journalist Tom Shachtman, wrote, “This is imitation of Christ at its most naked. If anybody is going to turn the other cheek in our society, it's going to be the Amish. . . . I don't want to denigrate anybody else who says they're imitating Christ, but the Amish walk the walk as much as they talk the talk.”

Every time I really think about their reaction I start crying. At times I have cried almost uncontrollably. I am not sure why. I think it relates some to the pain of the victims. I know it relates to my excitement in reading about Christians who at a critical moment acted like Jesus. That is so refreshing. I think part of the reason I cry could also be because of weaknesses in me. I don't know that I could do what the Amish are doing.

I have never experienced that type of situation. I have had painful experiences that give me a taste of what they are experiencing. When I was a child someone came to my father's office (he is also a pastor), the man shot and killed the custodian who was in the office. The custodian was like a grandfather to me, I had gone fishing with him that morning. The music minister that led the youth choir when I was a child was murdered. A

member of my former church that ran a country store was murdered. I have experienced the death of one of my children. I have had times that I felt people were deliberately seeking to hurt me. I have had some painful experiences, but I can't relate to what the Amish experienced, nor can I relate to their ability to forgive.

I am always impressed when someone is truly consistent with their faith. Correta Scott King opposed the death penalty. When her husband Martin Luther King Jr was murdered and again when her mother were murdered, she still opposed the death penalty.

Christians are to be different, but so often we aren't. There should be high expectations for Christians, but often we lower the bar. Often times I see the teachings of Jesus exemplified in the life of a non Christian more so than in the life of people that are Christians.

Last week we studied Amos & how Amos confronted a group of people that thought things were going well, but their faith was surface. It wasn't affecting their lives. God said he hated that worship.

Today we look at Jesus' call to count the cost, deny ourselves, take up our cross. We are to be different and in a positive way. Some times Christians are seen as the negative people & there are things to oppose, but even more so we should stand out in other ways. We should stand out for our love, our honesty, our humility, purity in heart and how we care for others.

When you are in a business deal are you acting Christian? If you sale your car or house are you honest and Christian about it? In the way you treat your employees are you acting like Jesus? In the way you use your money, tithing & doing for others, does it reflect your Christian commitment?

Sometimes people feel that God lets them down when things don't go well. God has done so much for us and never promised that things would be easy. We shouldn't feel let down. We should realize that God is with us in the midst of our pain & God shares our pain.

### **Conclusion**

I think we should call for a higher commitment in following Christ. Jesus paid it all. He paid for our sins and in accepting Him we are to commit ourselves more completely to Him. We can earn salvation, but our love for Jesus should lead us to be different.

Our goal should be to be like Jesus. It begins with our heart. We need to accept Jesus and allow God to give us a pure heart. What keeps you from having a pure heart: Money, pride, friends, family, a weakness – alcohol, pornography, temper; . . . Commit it all to Jesus.

I want to be like Jesus. I want to be like Jesus. I don't want to make Jesus like me. I don't want Jesus to be an American, or middle class or upper middle class. I don't want to make Jesus white or a Southerner. There is nothing wrong with those things. I want Jesus to be Jesus and my goal is to be such a follower of Jesus that I become more & more like Jesus.

The early Christians knew they were signing up for a difficult tasks. It was said that the blood of the martyrs became seeds for the faith. Are you ready to more completely follow Jesus?