

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Do those words trouble you? How could they not? At the very least, carrying a cross beam around sounds like hard work. Of course, you know Jesus was speaking metaphorically here, to very vividly say that following him involves sacrifice and hard choices. Deep down, we know that this is the level of commitment that is called for when it comes to life with Jesus. You may sense that God should be #1 in your life. You may intuit that your decisions and actions ought to be in harmony with God’s Word. But all too often, we go in a much different direction. There are other concerns, other issues, other people that we honor more than Jesus. Our families are a good example, and it is no coincidence that Jesus uses that example here.

At first, the language here is extremely off-putting. When Jesus talks about hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even your own life, well, did you make a little mental deal to ignore Jesus here—to pretend that He didn’t just say that? But responsible scholarship tells us that in Biblical Hebrew, the word ‘hate’ can mean loving someone less than another. You don’t hate them in the sense that you despise them; but “hate” in this Hebraic figure of speech means that there is a pecking order. Both are loved, but there is a favorite. So it would be valid to translate verse 26 this way: “If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life.” Now that takes the weird “hate” part out of it, but it still leaves us with an extremely difficult choice. There can only be one #1. There will be a personal price to pay in your family if Jesus is your #1. It’s true. Same thing in your daily work and your friendships. Nothing can be more important than Jesus, not sports, not your boyfriend or girlfriend, not your hobbies, not your business, not your own personal comfort. It’s not hard to figure out what you love more and what you love less—just look at the decisions you make every day and where you’re spending your time. It’s not hard to tell where God is on your list.

A campus pastor tells of a visit with a young woman at the University of California in Berkely:

*She was a brilliant student, lived at International House, and had visited our University Lutheran Chapel with friends. When I called on her, she explained that she had tried to find God all her life, but without success. “Every night for nine years I read my Bible,” she told me, “and prayed for faith. But God never gave it to me.”*

*We talked some more, and finally I asked, “Did you ever pray for forgiveness?” She was silent. Then, as we talked, she made the comment that she had never broken any of the Ten Commandments. Intrigued, and not having approached anyone this way before, I went through the commandments with her, starting with the last. No, she had never coveted. No, she had never stolen. No, she had never had an adulterous thought. No, she had never sworn, etc. Finally, we got to the first commandment. “Is there anything, anything at all,” I asked, “that you would place before giving yourself completely up to God?”*

*She paused wistfully. “I will have to say...” and then she spoke firmly, “if anything—anything—would come in the way of my pursuing my diplomatic career, it would have to go.”*

*The tragedy in this instance was that this dynamic young woman was gradually going blind. But her real blindness was in not seeing the Savior, who wanted to reach out and give her faith, but only through forgiveness, which she didn’t think she needed.*

If these words have hit a nerve with you, then the thing to do is be honest. Be honest about how impossible it seems to put God at #1 in your life. Ask Him for the forgiveness that only He can offer. But your heart and mind will only be changed when you look at the commitment He made to you. Actually, first, Jesus was committed to His Father. In fact, Jesus loved His Father more than He loved Himself. That's how He could empty himself of all majesty to become truly human. That's how He could be obedient to His Father and carry out the mission that had been given Him. What's equally true is that Jesus loved you more than He loved himself. Nails did not hold Jesus to the cross. Love held Him to the cross, where His total commitment to you resulted in His suffering and death. Because Jesus loves you more than He loves himself, you are spared from having to deal with sin and death on your own; you are spared from eternal separation from God. To use the Hebraic figure of speech, Jesus hated Himself and loved you. Otherwise He would have never gone near the cross. But he did. His love for His Father and His love for you is the only explanation why He would ever carry a cross, much less die on one.

So let's take Jesus' advice: let's count the cost. What does it mean to carry a cross for Jesus?

Carrying a cross for Jesus means dying to self, meaning, I live like I'm not # 1. This is a good thing. It means freedom from selfish desire. It means freedom from a life where I have to get this or that or I'll never be satisfied. Secondly, carrying a cross for Jesus means living a life of love and sacrifice. When God is #1, you are free to commit yourself properly to relationships that are supposed to bring blessing into your life. That's by God's design. He wants us to serve and love our spouse, our children, our co-workers, our friends and everyone with whom we live. We can get those relationships right, because our most important relationship is right.

Too often, we stunt our own spiritual growth, because we're afraid of total commitment to Jesus. We're afraid that if we take this step, we'll lose something. And, in truth, you will lose old ways of thinking and acting. You lose self-destructive patterns of behavior. And look at what you gain when you carry a cross for Jesus. You gain new life in which every moment is meaningful; no work is wasted; new life in which you know you matter, you know you are loved because of Jesus; and that new life never ends. Follow Jesus. It's the hardest, best thing you'll ever do.