

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY--DISCIPLESHIP

Luke 9:23-24

Grace For The Journey Message Series

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This morning I have a personal confession to make. It is difficult for me to admit this to you yet I believe it must be done. I need to confess that even I have tried some of the fad diets that have circulated throughout the years. I even remember back in my first parish in Maynard, MN eating so much cooked broccoli that I thought I might actually be turning green.

In fact, for a significant amount of time after trying that diet the smell or even thought of cooked broccoli made me sick. I literally struggled through a few weeks of this prescribed diet which I believe was called the Dolly Parton diet. Needless to say I didn't lose any significant weight and the size of my chest, and figure, didn't improve anything like hers.

Over the years I have dabbled with a few other of these fad diets yet have never stayed with them for very long. The truth is that everything I have ever read on this subject always states that the only safe and lasting way to lose weight is to discipline oneself to eat less calories and to exercise regularly; it's as simple (or I should say as difficult) as that.

The truth is that discipline is very difficult for most everyone of us. We would rather take a pill, eat as much protein as we want, drink a shake, clean out our system with some fad concoction, rather than discipline ourselves to eat right and exercise. Therefore many of us struggle with our constant battle of the bulge.

In looking at the word disciple and discipleship, the root word of both is the word discipline. As a disciple of Jesus (as one who first of all surrenders our lives to Jesus) we want to be like him; yet to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ takes discipline. It takes following God's word of truth, the Bible, along with God's plan and purpose for us. It takes a commitment to daily growth and renewal in our faith; to a life of moral values, worship and service to others.

Jesus himself said in Luke 9:23-24, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."*

The call to follow Jesus is never an easy one. It is never as simple as popping a pill; simply joining a church; simply telling someone we are a Christian. To be a disciple of Jesus means that we follow him and his call; it means we strive to be like him. To do that takes discipline; it takes developing practices and habits which enable us to better follow God and to better serve him.

One thing I realize concerning this idea of discipleship is that many of us as Lutherans have a difficult time with this. We may say that since we are saved by God's grace alone and not by our

good works, that that means we should not talk about daily faith practices or any spiritual habits we should follow.

We may say that people touched by God's love and grace will automatically be motivated to regular worship, study, giving and service—at least that is what the theologians, professors and pastors have often taught.

Yet as the result of our sinfulness we need to admit that even with our best intentions we can't do it on our own—we need the saving power of Jesus Christ in our lives. Just like with our efforts at dieting and trying to tone up our bodies it is easy to try to take the easy way to follow Jesus.

It is pretty common for us church people to want all the blessing of being a disciple without the commitment. Yet a “slim-fast Christian” and “Christianity light” is really pretty empty in regards to spiritual power and leadership.

At Messiah Church our mission is for every person to undertake the spiritual journey of seek, connect and impact as disciples of Jesus; it is to empower each of us to confidently and lovingly live our faith and witness in this world. Yet to do this takes a deeper level of discipline; a giving over of our lives to Jesus and his will; it means taking up our crosses daily and following him.

Many years ago I attended the Purpose Driven Church Conference at the Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA. Our main teacher and lecturer for this conference, of course, was Saddleback's well known Senior Pastor Rick Warren. It was a great learning opportunity.

I remember that one thing Rick Warren said about growing as a disciple (and feeding our life from Christ) is that it takes developing three spiritual habits. First of all, it means committing ourselves to a daily time with God. Mark 1:35 says, *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”* To grow as a disciple means that we need a personal time of meditating on God, reading the Bible if we are able, and prayer.

The second spiritual habit we need to follow, says Rick Warren, is a weekly tithe of 10% (of percentage growth giving) to God. 1 Corinthians 16:2 says, *“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come.”* A growing disciple is one who dedicates their lives through giving.

The third spiritual habit is to be a committed team for God, to commit to fellowshiping with other believers in a small group. Hebrews 10:25 says, *“Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another.”* A disciple knows they need the support of other believers in order to live their faith in Jesus.

The great thing about developing these spiritual habits is that they enable us to put our good intentions into practice. They also call us to a level of commitment where we truly invest our time, our money, and our service to Jesus—our life becomes about God, not us. It is out of that commitment that our faith and discipleship can really grow.

Over the years of my ministry I have come to the conclusion that our problem as Lutherans is not that we ask too much of people; the truth is that we ask way too little. Have you noticed how we often apologize and say, “Oh, you can join our church and you don’t have to commit to anything at all. You can worship as little as you like; give only if you think of it or if you have a little money leftover; volunteer only if and when you want to.”

In the attempt to make people happy and avoid putting on too much pressure we have often been afraid to talk about money lest we offend someone. We have avoided talking about Christian discipline and commitment for fear that someone might get involved for the wrong reasons. We have resisted having people covenant to worship, study, pray, tithe, and serve—and by doing that we have cheated people out of the glory and wonder of living a Christian life.

Yet today only 28 to 38% of members of Lutheran churches worship at least once a year. The average giving of Lutherans is about 1.5% of our income; 20% of congregation people often give 80% and more of a church's mission budget. Very few members are actually involved in Bible study, small groups, in daily study and prayer. Less than 10% of a congregation are involved in a service or ministry area of a congregation.

The truth is not that we have asked too much; rather we have often asked way too little. In doing this we have then pretty much apologized for our church's ministry and mission. The result is, of course, that many churches are making very little impact on people’s lives or on their community around them. It's about pursuing God, not becoming “better Christians.” As we are available to him God will fill us with his love and power.

I remember a few years ago when we at Messiah took some major steps forward—we added a projection system and lots of new technology; raised significant funds for missions and helped start the food shelf; called Charis as our Youth & Worship Pastor and grew her position to 30 hours per week.

Some thought we were crazy thinking our Messiah people would never stand firm in support of the leadership and changes such a bold move takes. Some thought that Messiah people would never give with the kind of commitment needed. In fact, a few years ago some even made a wager that Messiah would not survive financially.

Yet we found that when God’s call and vision is big enough. When people are asked to be involved in a ministry that matters. When people are asked to give to something big enough that will make a difference in the hearts of adults, youth and children they will respond with a new commitment of faith. Our problem is that we have too often not called people to; have not empowered them to be disciples of Jesus.

In the months and years to come our vision and mission at Messiah is to empower more and more people to be growing disciples for Jesus; to empower more and more individuals to be ignited and connected in their faith so they will covenant to develop positive spiritual habits. Our vision is to develop Messiah's small group's ministry and opportunities for connecting, people support, discipleship growth and development, and mission for Christ.

Our mission is to empower disciples who commit themselves to faithful worship; spiritual learning and growth; committed giving and tithing; dedicated service and ministry to others. It is true that a church that is growing and empowering disciples of Jesus is a church that is on fire with the Holy Spirit; it is a church where miracles and great blessings are all around.

Jesus said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* It can’t happen, my friends, on a fad diet of faith or church membership. It rather calls us, you and me, to give our whole life in following him. Will you, my friend, answer his call?