



I like the video we just viewed because it tracks the life of Jesus and the response that people had to him: From those initial expectations people had, starting with a few fishermen and growing into a multitude of followers, to the harsh reality of what following him really meant. Early on, his teaching and his miracles were such that following him was like following some celebrity on Twitter. It was fun. It was exciting. It was even easy. But then he started saying things and doing things that didn't make sense and were even offensive. Quite literally, those who followed chose to "unfollow" him. By the time of his death, there were only a handful of friends and family to watch.

### We Must Understand Who Jesus Is

I think the shift began one day in a conversation Jesus had with his disciples recorded in Luke 9:18–27. He'd taken them north of Galilee to a place called Caesarea Philippi. But Luke isn't interested in geography here; he's more interested in telling us what Jesus was doing.

**Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" (v. 18).**

Luke wants us to know that this question flowed out of his time in prayer with the Father. In fact, the whole trajectory of his life and ministry will change as a result of this prayer; he'll be on that road to Jerusalem with no turning back. But it started here, praying alone with his Father. Prayer wasn't just an addendum to his work; it **was** his work. It wasn't just a crutch to lean on; it was an iron lung without which survival would be impossible.

While he prayed the disciples couldn't have been far away because Jesus asks them an important question: *"Who do the crowds say I am?"* The disciples are quick to answer.

**They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life" (v. 19).**

Like good PR men, they've listened to the buzz of the crowd on numerous occasions. Public opinion seemed to be good lately: *"Some say John the Baptist."* There was a side to Jesus that was every bit as hard core and "tell it like it is" as John was. *"Others say Elijah."* It was hard to deny the similarities between these two wonder workers. *"and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come to life."* Like modern day Muslims, many believed Jesus was a spokesman for God that deserved to be listened to.

I think the disciples were enjoying this discussion. They liked to sit around and banter about the latest fads in religion. But Jesus has had enough armchair theology, and so he asks a far more pointed and personal question.

**"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (v. 20a).**

In the Greek text the word "you" is placed at the very beginning of the sentence. He says, "YOU, you whom I have chosen and poured my life into, who do you say that I am?" I can just see the disciples begin to squirm. It was time for them to commit to something. Peter (who else), speaking for the Twelve says:

**Peter answered, "God's Messiah" (v. 20b).**

Literally he says, "You are the Christ." The word "Christ" wasn't his last name like Jones or Smith. It was a formal title, meaning "anointed one," or as the NIV translates it, "God's Messiah."

Jesus asks each of us the same question, "YOU, who do you say that I am?" It's not enough to parrot what others are saying; we must make our own confession of faith. It's not enough to enjoy armchair discussions with fellow learners; we must enter into our own uncomfortable dialogue with him. Peter says, "YOU are God's Messiah." Some of you still haven't made that basic discovery. You've been sitting in church for weeks, maybe months, but you're still not there. It's fascinating to listen and even talk about who this Jesus might be, but what he wants is for you to address him, "YOU are God's Messiah."

Yet even that's not enough. Peter and the others still had a lot more to learn about this Messiah. That's why it says:

**Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone (v. 21).**

Jesus muzzled them because even though the answer was right, their definition of what that meant was all wrong. They believed the Messiah would be a superhuman figure who would overthrow Israel's enemies, regather God's people from the four corners of the earth, and make Jerusalem the capital of the world. They're thinking, "Great, victory and power and authority are right around the corner!" Jesus knew if that word got out to the Jewish people, chafing under the control of Rome, a revolution would be imminent.

**And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (v. 22).**

So in v. 22 Jesus begins to redefine Messiah. Jesus makes an unexpected prediction about himself. He calls himself "The Son of Man," which was his favorite way of referring to himself. He predicts that he'll suffer, be rejected before the Jewish leaders, and be killed. As almost an afterthought he says after three days he'll rise again. This is the first of many predictions Jesus made of his death and resurrection on the way to Jerusalem. The cross didn't take him by surprise. He wasn't the helpless victim of cruel men. He was fulfilling a chosen destiny. This is why he says he **must** suffer. Don't miss that word. The Son of Man **must** suffer because the Father planned it, Scripture foretold it, and the world needed it.

At this point, the disciples must have been quite confused. Patrick Morely writes, "The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is." What kind of Jesus do you want? Do you want an effigy of Jesus or the real thing? Do you want a Jesus who answers every prayer just the way you think he should? Do you want a Jesus who takes away all your problems? Do you want a Jesus who is more Savior than Servant? Do you want a Jesus who is powerful, not weak? Like Peter, we prefer a Jesus who tramples his enemies over one who is trampled on. Sooner or later, we have to stop seeking the Jesus we want and start seeking the Jesus who is; the Jesus of Scripture.

I wonder what the disciples were thinking at this point? I wonder if they implicitly knew that if Jesus **must** suffer that would have implications for their own lives? I think it was dawning on them that the path Jesus took would ultimately determine their own path.

### **We Must Follow Him in a Life of Costly Discipleship**

Jesus confirms that in what he says next.

**Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (v. 23).**

To understand who Jesus is you have to embrace him as suffering Savior but you also have to follow him on the costly road of discipleship. This isn't an unnecessary detour in the life of faith. This is the way. This is the normal Christian life. This is God's "must," not only for Jesus, not only for the disciples, but for us. But what does this call to costly discipleship mean?

Jesus says it means to deny yourself. Don't misunderstand this. Denying yourself doesn't mean denying yourself things. I remember as a kid denying myself bubble gum at Lent and feeling very spiritual about it, but that's not what Jesus has in mind here. You can deny yourself things and still not deny yourself; still be totally self-consumed. Denying yourself may result in denying yourself things, but that's not the point. Nor does it mean denying your self worth. He's not calling us to devalue ourselves. Jesus valued us enough to die for us, so that can't be what he

has in mind. He doesn't mean deny your feelings either. Jesus isn't a stern football coach who stands above his team and says, "I don't care how tired you are. Suck it up and run another lap." Denying yourself doesn't mean you deny yourself happiness either. In some Christian circles godliness is measured by how miserable you feel, but that's not denying yourself. Denying yourself doesn't mean denying your basic human needs like your need for rest and recreation. We know that because Jesus himself took time for those things.

So what **does** it mean? To deny yourself means to deny your own right to be master of yourself. It's to say a decisive "no" to your own self lordship. It's to say "no" to the god who is me. Jesus strikes right at the heart of the matter because the one thing we covet and protect is our right to make ultimate decisions for our lives. Yet he calls us to give up that right. This will look different for each of us. For the ambitious, it will mean renouncing a life aimed at attaining success as the world defines it. For the greedy, it means refusing to live for things. For the angry, it means giving up your right to get even. For the insecure, it means giving up your need for human approval. For the adventurous, it means giving up your freedom to pick up and go whenever you please. For the witty, it means refusing to use your wit to tear others down. For the brilliant, it means humbling yourself and learning from those with half the brainpower as you. To live this way we'll have to swim upstream in a culture obsessed with self. A culture which defines itself with songs like, "I've Gotta Be Me" and "I Did It My Way" will hardly make this easy for us. A culture which at every turn encourages us to claim our rights and pamper ourselves and get what we want will have to be resisted.

But there's something else here. Jesus also says costly discipleship means to **"take up your cross daily."** Again, this is misunderstood. We struggle with some illness or with a difficult marriage or an irritating mother-in-law and we say, "This is the cross I have to bear." That's not what Jesus means. To take up one's cross evoked repugnant images of a criminal forced to carry a cross beam upon which he'd be publicly executed. In Jesus' day, if you saw a man walking down the street carrying that crossbeam you'd know that man was as good as dead; his life was done. If Jesus were speaking today he'd tell us to climb on the table and get ready for a lethal injection.

How do we live this way? Certainly, Jesus is calling us to be willing to die for him, but there's more. He's calling us to daily take the position of one condemned to death. Jesus is saying discipleship means abandoning our right to control our future; to fulfill our own earthly hopes and ambitions; to control our own destiny. To be dead to this world. To bury our own agenda and allow him to either resurrect it or replace it with his own.

That's so foreign to how I live. I still get my feelings hurt if I don't get the recognition I deserve. Someone condemned to

die couldn't care less. I still want to plan my future. I've got a church to build. I've got the best years of my life ahead of me: Retirement. Travel. Golf. Long mornings just to read the paper. Jesus says, "From now on, for the rest of your life, you're taking a walk. On your back is the cross beam upon which you'll die. I want you to live with reckless abandon for me. I want you to make **me** your foremost concern in everything you do. I want you to stand for me and the good news I came to give this world. I want your life to be defined not by your success but by your service to me."

Some of you may say, "Well, that's fine for pastors and missionaries, but that's not how the average Christian lives." Jesus doesn't give us that option. In v. 23 Luke says, "**And he was saying to them all.**" This was for all of us who want to follow him. This isn't just for hero disciples. This is for the average believer. You can't be a Christian without being a disciple. If you just call yourself a Christian, these words are for you.

We have to make the choice. Jesus says, "**Whoever wants to be my disciple...**" He gives us the freedom to choose. No one can take up our cross for us; no one can make us take it up. On one occasion, Jesus told a wealthy young man to sell his possessions. The young man walked off. Jesus loved this man, but he didn't run after him. He let him go. He didn't lower the requirements. In his love he gives us the dangerous freedom to choose whether we'll head down this path or not. There's good news in this.

**For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels (verses 24–26).**

Jesus gives the rationale for living such a life. It's a well kept secret. The secret is those who appear to win really lose, and those who appear to lose really win. Like Jesus, those who die really live. Those who give up end up getting so much more. Jesus is saying, "You won't be sorry for making this decision. You may give up the world but you'll gain your very self (soul). What's more valuable than that?" You see, Jesus really does value our lives, and he assumes we do too. That's why he tells us how to save them. He assumes our soul is more valuable than the whole world. He wants our good. He wants us to find true life, but the irony is we can't find it by holding on to it. We have to let go. We have to surrender to him to find true freedom. There's a mystery in this. We can't find life by grasping it for ourselves. The tighter we hold on to our lives and our plans the more they slip through our hands. It's like trying to grasp sand; the tighter you cling the more it slips through your fingers. This is why most people today are profoundly unhappy. They're clinging to their own lives and come up empty-handed.

It's important to notice back in v. 24 he promises we'll find our lives when we lose them for him. That means throwing all that we are and all that we have into him and his kingdom. It means offering him our house, our checkbook, our career, our dreams, our time, our talents. He doesn't just say, "lose yourself." Many people do that. I think of a woman who loses herself in an affair with a man only to find he never intended to marry her. Or a man who loses himself to get that start-up company off the ground only to find himself unemployed when it gets bought out. Jesus doesn't promise that we find our lives by losing them. The promise is only true when we lose our lives **for him**.

Jesus closes his comments by challenging us not be ashamed of him and his words. It's very simple: If you identify yourself with him before men on earth he'll identify himself with you before his Father in heaven. Again, he promises not loss but gain. We may be rejected by men, like he was, but we'll be affirmed by him when he comes in glory. Are you ashamed of him? Are you worried about what people will think if they find out you're his follower? There are places where if you confess Christ you can lose your job or your family or even your life. You might just have to lose your reputation. But if we're never asked to pay a price, how do we know our discipleship is real?

So this passage brings a great challenge to us. Most of us are here because we believe in Jesus. Like Peter, we believe he's God's Messiah. We believe he died to save us from our sins and rose again to give us new life. We're thankful for that. Yet in this passage we see that's not all there is to it. There's more to being a Christian than believing in Jesus. You have to follow him in costly discipleship.

Sometimes the hardest thing about that is we have so few examples. Maybe the biggest deterrent to following Jesus in this way isn't the world but the church. If you measure your discipleship by the prevalent Christian culture in America, your Christian faith will be more about what **you** want than what **he** wants.

Years ago, J.I. Packer wrote an article called, *A View from a Hot Tub*. A student of his invited him to come hang out with some others in his hot tub and so he did. When he was in there, he began to think modern-day Christianity was much like being in a hot tub: "As I sat there savoring hot tubness, cracking small jokes and adjusting to the feel of being bubbled over from all angles, it struck me that the hot tub is the perfect symbol of the modern route in religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, floppy, laid-back: not in any way demanding, whether intellectually or otherwise, but very, very nice, even to the point of being great fun..."

"Many today want Christianity to be like that, and labor to make it so. The ultimate step, of course, would be to clear church auditoriums of seats and install hot tubs in their place; then

there'd never be any attendance problems. Many churches...are already offering occasions in which what we're meant to feel is the next best thing to a hot tub—namely, happy gatherings free from care, real fun times for all. Happiness has been defined as a warm puppy; this kind of religion projects happiness as a warm welcome to all who tune or drop in...a warm, back-scratching use of words in prayer and preaching; and a warm, cheerful afterglow... Soothing, for sure; but is it faith? Worship? Service of God? Is godliness the real name of this game?

“What, then, should we say of hot tub religion? Certainly, a rhythm of life that includes relaxation is right... Alternating hard labor with fun times is right too. Jesus so often went to banquets, the fun times of the ancient world, that he got called a glutton and drunkard... Without these hot tub factors, as we may call them, our Christianity would be less godly and less lively, for it would be less human. But if there's no more to our Christianity than hot tub factors—if, that is, we embrace a self-absorbed hedonism of relaxation and happy feelings, while dodging tough tasks, unpopular stances and exhausting relationships—we should fall short of biblical God-centeredness and

of the cross-bearing life to which Jesus calls us, and advertise to the world nothing better than our own decadence. Please God... we shall not settle for that.”

I was thinking of this in relationship to our LoveWorks ministry. In just a few weeks we'll take an entire weekend, cancel church services, and move out into the community in acts of compassion and service. This is just one of many ways we can demonstrate the call to discipleship. What we really want is for this weekend to be a catalyst for a lifestyle of getting out of the hot tub and moving into a world that is lost and hurting and broken and showing them the love of God and the truth that's in Jesus. It's a good thing to believe in Jesus. Don't stop believing. But don't be fooled either. There's more to it than that. At some point we have to stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is. He wants us not just to believe in him but to follow him; to follow him to Jerusalem; to follow him in costly discipleship to the cross.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2013 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1383-1FC