

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

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Counting The Cost - Part 1

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Luke 14:27 (NIV) - *And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Did you know that it is possible to be a follower of Jesus Christ without being a real disciple? To be someone who follows from a distance, but not be a real soldier of the king? By the time you finish studying this lesson you should be able to identify where you are today in your spiritual journey.

A real disciple of Jesus Christ must be able to bare up under the weight of the cross (**Luke 14:27 KJV**). At the first sign of trouble a disciple would not think of dropping the cross and disappearing from the scene. A disciple would continue to carry the cross, even over rough terrain, because of their loyalty and willingness to sacrifice personal gratification, to meet the daily challenges of sacrificial love for Christ. The sacrifice of a real disciple is never given grudgingly, because of their great joy and satisfaction in fulfilling the desires of Christ. The number one goal of a disciple is to seek [go after] a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah 29:13(NIV) - *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

What does it mean to seek God with all your heart? Jesus gives us a clue. When the Pharisees asked Jesus which of the commandments was the greatest, he told them the first great commandment is that each of us should love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind (**Matthew 22:37**). The only real reason to seek God, is because we love him. Every part of our being must first love God. If we are seeking God for some other reason, then we are simply not going to be rewarded with His presence. Our impure motives would automatically separate us from ever coming into a close, personal relationship with him. Make no mistake, only those who love God with a pure heart and keep his commandments, can ever truly know him.

Matthew 5:8 (KJV) - *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*

The pure in heart love God unselfishly, and will do whatever it takes to keep his commandments.

When we love God with all of our heart, with pure motives, we do not think of him as a distant God, who is there simply to serve us. We don't think of Him as a God whom we pray to and worship, thinking he will grant us all of our requests. On the contrary, when we love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind, our only desire is to serve him; not be served by him! Because we love God and want to please him, we seek to do the things that would bring joy and happiness to him.

We don't do things for God, nor do we make promises to him for the purpose of getting something in return. If our approach to God is with a bargaining attitude, we might say, "Now, Lord, if you will do this for me, I promise to do that for you." God doesn't need our favors. He wants our love! Bargaining with God shows our selfishness rather than our love. It shows our desire to buy God off, rather than to repent. It shows our unwillingness to face the issues of life with our God-given strengths.

If love of God is our motivation, we leave God free to love us, and either bless us or withhold blessings from us, according to his infinite wisdom. If we are not yet ready, the Lord may withhold a particular blessing from us until we have demonstrated through a changed heart, that we are mature enough to handle it. It matters little to a disciple, whether the Lord gives or withholds a blessing, because a disciple knows they are loved, either way.

I John 4:19 (KJV) - *We love him, because he first loved us.*

Distant followers of Jesus show signs of spiritual immaturity by constantly testing God's love for them. They measure his love by the blessings they receive. They say, "Now, Lord, I know you are a God of love, so I'm counting on you to bring a blessing to me. I'm counting on you, Lord, to remove these obstacles from my life. I'm taking a faith stand, Lord, that you'll make the road ahead smooth, so I won't have any more difficulties."

No, faith should not be mistaken as a kind of spiritual "formula" that we use to somehow bind God into blessing us with a life of ease. Jesus made it clear that anyone who wants to be his disciple would not be protected

from having to go through some difficulties in life; there would be a cost to following Him. A disciple must bare up under the weight of the cross. He must face the daily problems of life as a true soldier of the king. Rather than using his faith as a spoken "formula" to try and manipulate blessings from God, a disciple will use his faith in God to go *through* the storms of life. True faith words originate from a pure heart, not from a person's vocal cords!

Luke 9:23 (NIV) - *Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

Daily denial of self is the cross of a disciple. Meeting life with Jesus every day, means doing things for him others would shrink back from; but it is in doing those things, that a disciple finds their greatest blessings.

A few years ago I awoke earlier than usual, so I might talk with the Lord about a concern. I wanted to know why Christians were having as many difficulties dealing with the problems of life, as the people in the world who did not *know* Jesus. My answer came in the form of a vision. As I was preparing this lesson, the Lord brought that vision to my remembrance for the purpose of sharing it with you. The vision only lasted a few seconds, but I saw enough to understand the spiritual significance of the choices we make.

That morning, as I sat on the edge of my bed to get up, the room suddenly faded into the background. I saw a vision of Jesus portrayed as a majestic, royal figure. He was dressed in a gleaming white robe with a long flowing train, similar to the train that trails behind a bridal gown. Jesus was walking down the road at a steady pace, looking straight ahead, as if his course were pre-determined. I was in awe of the magnitude of his stature, of his holiness, as he gracefully passed by.

I quickly glanced over the entire length of the long train he was dragging, and I was surprised to see a group of small children sitting cross-legged on the tail end of his train. They were talking and laughing amongst themselves, oblivious to their surroundings, as Jesus dragged them along. It was as if they were in their own little world. It dawned on me that these small children, were not children at all, but were representative of "immature Christians" who had found shelter (on his robe) from the storms of life.

It became painfully clear to me; although Jesus had rescued them (by grace) from the darkness of the world, they had not gone on to spiritual maturity, to "seek

Jesus with all of their heart". In fact, they had no personal relationship with the one who had saved them from their plight. They were content to fellowship with one another on the back of His robe, while Jesus drug them along, doing all the work.

Jesus didn't rescue us from the world, just to give us a free ride (on the train of his robe), while we treat him as our personal valet, ordering him daily to bless us. Jesus is calling us to grow up (stand up and walk)! He is calling us to take up the cross, and become a real disciple. Are you willing to pay the cost of self-denial?



Questions for personal or group study:

1. What is the number one goal a disciple goes after?
2. How does the daily denial of self, bring the greatest blessings to a disciple?
3. Why does all of our heart have to be involved in finding God? What does the spiritual condition of our heart have to do with knowing God?
4. For what purpose do immature Christians use their faith as a spiritual formula? How do real disciples use their faith? For what purpose?
5. Analyze your prayers. In what ways do our prayers show our spiritual maturity or lack of it? How might studying the words we use in prayer, help us to grow toward greater spiritual maturity? Are we using prayer to counsel God, or to seek his counsel?
6. What is the relationship between a bargaining attitude and repentance? (See: Luke 18:10-14) Why does it matter little to a disciple whether the Lord gives or withholds a particular blessing?
7. Based on the "vision" in the lesson, what do you see as the dangers that could come to immature Christians who stay too long on the robe of Jesus?
8. Jesus Christ stands at the door of our hearts, knocking for admittance, asking us to yield our lives to him and become a part of the fellowship of his disciples. Where are you today in your spiritual journey?