

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 18, May, 2002

Counting The Cost - Part II

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

Jesus spoke the essential quality of discipleship in this one verse. Anyone who does not, cannot become. In *Counting The Cost - Part I*, we learned the difference between a real disciple of Jesus Christ and a distant follower. Distant followers sit back and expect God to do everything for them. Real disciples want to do their part to help. They will bear up under the weight of the cross (**Luke 14:27 KJV**). When trouble comes along, a true disciple continues to carry the cross, not considering it a hardship, but a joyful opportunity to fulfill the desires of Christ. Jesus told his disciples in **John 16:33**, “...*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*” (NIV)

Jesus, the one who overcame the world, is calling us to step out with him, that we, too, will overcome the world. Are we ready for the task? To help answer that question, consider once again the vision I shared with you in the previous lesson.

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. 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, 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 predetermined. 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 Christ’s robe from the storms of life. It became painfully clear to me; although Jesus had rescued them 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 dragged them along.

In thinking about my vision I wanted to know what type of fellowship these distant followers were having with one another. What were they so caught up in? The Lord revealed that the children sitting on his train are like many Christians who are busily engaged in their religious studies. They are so absorbed in their studies that they fail to see the living Christ in front of them. Study about Jesus becomes an end in itself, rather than the means to developing a personal relationship with Him. While they are busy studying, they are ignoring the real Jesus. They make a religion out of studying the Bible.

“Wait a minute,” you say, “I’m confused! Aren’t we supposed to spend lots of time studying our Bibles? Didn’t Jesus say we are to continue in his word?”

John 8:31-32 (KJV) - *Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*

Without considering the spiritual significance of that scripture, we could read it with our intellect, believing that all we have to do to prove we are true disciples is to continue studying the word. I sometimes hear new Christians say, “I’ve got to study the Bible to show myself approved!” My question is, who are you seeking approval from, for what purpose? If you are seeking approval from God, does God approve of you simply because you are spending a lot of time in your Bible? Is God keeping score of how many times a week you study your Bible? Does He put guilt trips on Christians when they go a few days without picking up their Bibles? No, He is not! If you are seeking approval from fellow Christians, however, you can expect some guilt trips over your Bible studies. One inmate told me of being stopped

in the hall and criticized by other professing Christians because he only attended two or three of the four Bible studies held during the past week.

There is significant spiritual insight into what Jesus meant when he said, *continue in my word*. He was referring to much more than religious study of the written word. It's not how many Bible studies you attend each week that makes you a disciple. The real question is, "Have you allowed your Bible studies to bring you into an intimate relationship with Jesus?"

The Amplified Bible translates **John 8:31** this way, "So Jesus said...If you abide in My word [hold fast to My teachings and live in accordance with them], you are truly my disciples."

Studying the written word is crucial, but our studies must take us beyond the Bible, into a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. The Bible should never be a substitute for that encounter, no matter how much we study. The purpose of the Bible is not to give life, but to point to Jesus, the one who can give life. Not until we are living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus are we truly His disciples. For disciples to *continue in His word*, they must do their best to live in such a way that they do not bring shame upon Jesus by their conduct. The apostle Paul told Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV) - "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

God's approval comes when we study our Bibles for the right reason. Bible study is not to gain intellectual knowledge, so we can impress other Christians with how well versed we are in the scriptures. There is only one good reason for disciples to study their Bibles; to find out what God desires for them to do! Disciples learn so they might do what the Master says. God's approval comes when what we study in the Bible shows up in our good conduct. Jesus does not want the truth he brought to be kept in a classroom. It is intended for action! Jesus would rather we know the truth in one book of the Bible and act on that truth, then to know the entire Bible and not act on any of it. In fact, Jesus would be highly honored if we knew the truth of just one verse in the Bible, John 3:16, and acted on it! Why? That one verse, believed and acted upon, is enough to get us connected up with Jesus!

When we are connected up with Jesus, we are connected up with the truth. In the person of Jesus, truth will set us free!

In considering my vision, the recurring question that keeps coming to mind is, "What fellowship does Jesus have with distant followers who religiously study about him, but *who do not continue with Him*?" I don't know about you, but I'm not content to just study what the Bible says about Jesus, while riding on the back of His robe. That doesn't satisfy my longing. I want a better view of Jesus than the back of His head. I love Him and I want to see His face.

Psalm 27:8 (NIV) - My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

I want to be a workman who does not need to be ashamed of my conduct as I carry the cross of Christ. I want to be like Him in this world, living completely free of sin and Satan's power. As Paul proclaimed, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection!" **Philippians 3:10 (NIV)**

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants more from us than to be students of the Bible. He is calling us to stand up with the written word, move over to the edge of his robe, and with faith in Jesus, *the living word*, step back out into the world. But why do we need to go back out into the same world we've been rescued from? Because, it is in the world where disciples ultimately learn to carry the cross, not in the comfort zone of his robe. It is in the world where disciples walk with Jesus Christ in the full power of his resurrection. If you are an inmate, your world may be just outside your prison cell. Nevertheless, it is in the world where lost souls are won for Christ. Will you *continue with Jesus, the living word*, by taking up the cross and following Him?

Questions for personal or group study:

1. What is the one good reason a true disciple studies his/her Bible?
2. How does this reason (the answer to number 1) strengthen our brothers and sisters in the church?
3. Can you righteously judge another person's study (time, quantity, intensity, devotion, motive)?
4. What is the most important lesson you have received from your own studies of the scriptures?