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Some of the most electrifying moments of Christ’s earthly life arose out of His many calls to discipleship. Out of every conceivable sociological and personal involvement men of all kinds were invited to follow Him. Typical of Jesus’ constant emphasis on discipleship is the incident recorded in Matthew 16:21-28. Our Lord was attempting to prepare His Apostles for the crucifixion. But Peter led the group in disclaiming any such conclusion to Christ’s life. The Master silenced the opposition with this rejoinder, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23). Realizing that even His own intimate associates needed more training and dedication, Jesus again issued His oft-urged call to discipleship! “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

This is but one of many similar situations in which Christ presented the fundamental challenge of this entire ministry – “follow me!” There remains an ineffable spark of reality in these crisis situations when Jesus confronts all kinds of men with the prospect of following Him. Rarely in our day, however, do men allow Christ’s clear and demanding call to meet them squarely and fully. In every era since the coming of Christ there have been those fortunate ones who faced this “crisis,” obediently and willingly becoming disciples of Christ.

Jesus Christ came into the world to make men followers of God. This was His deep and abiding aim. To this end He came willing not only to renounce His exalted position alongside God which He occupied from eternity, but finally to submit to the spectacle of Golgotha. He taught, lived, and died for those who would follow Him.

The fact that our Lord did call disciples is accepted without question. The manner in which these followers were enlisted does provide interesting insights.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were called at the same time. This intimate and physically related group heard the Master’s urgent appeal as they plied their fishing trade (Matthew 4:18-22). Luke has what may be considered the final and full call of these four men in chapter five of his Gospel. Here the four are working together to make a successful catch previously predicted by the Lord when a deep and troubling conception of His real power sweeps over them (Luke 5:1-11). Though we will discuss this later we cannot leave the call of these four important followers without noting the almost imperceptible manner in which the Gospels tell us that “they left all” to become disciples of Christ. Combining the accounts we learn they left their boats, their nets, their parents, their homes, their “all” to live and work with Christ.

There were also times when Christ called individuals. Levi always comes to our minds in this category (Matthew 9:9). Viewing Christ’s invitation to this tax collector or customs official through modern conceptions of discipleship one has the feeling that something has been omitted. It just does not seem right that Jesus simply said to Matthew, “Follow me,” and Matthew “arose and followed him.” Do you think the deficiency is in the Gospel records or in our superficial conceptions of discipleship???

Then there were times when Christ issued a general call for men to follow Him. Matthew 16:24 offers an excellent example. Talking with many who had already begun following Him, Christ said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Whether by small groups, individually, or in a general invitation Christ urged the disciple’s life on men.
In remembering these calls one is impressed by what Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said in his excellent work, The Cost of Discipleship. "Discipleship is not an offer man makes to Christ." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963, p. 68.) And we might add it is the call that Jesus issues man in every condition and position of life.

This insistent demand for the following of men must have had some justification. We raise the question at this point, "Why does Christ demand that men follow him?" The New Testament offers much enlightenment here because of the unusual emphasis on the subject we are considering.

Discipleship concretely reveals man's subordination to God. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his Lord" (Matthew 10:24). Man's pride and alleged self-sufficiency are two common hindrances to the godly life. With all sorts of protections, benefits, and penalties resulting from a prosperity unmatched in modern times man has finally accepted Satan's most deceptive lie, "You are strong and powerful enough to take care of yourself." Even in the theological world many successful assaults have been made on the sovereignty of Christ. But where men are willing to pay the cost of discipleship Jesus' Lordship and majesty are re-enthroned. There is no other posture that better reveals man's true position of subordination before God.

To follow Christ is to be free from spiritual darkness. Jesus states, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). Christianity points to the person and power of Jesus Christ, "the light of the world." Christ says that His disciples by that very life will find meaning, purpose, plan -- light -- for life here and hereafter.

The importance of following Christ is again established when we recognize that to be Christ-like demands that we be disciples of Christ. Discipleship has been defined as nothing more or less than Christ-likeness. Jesus says, "The disciple is not above his teacher: but every one when he is perfected shall be as his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

This age-old principle of human experience stands as one of the most compelling reasons why men must submit to "the demanding Christ." To follow Him is to be like Him as to follow any teacher is to be shaped into the likeness of that person or force. The more closely we follow Christ the more genuinely "Christ-like" we become. "When the Bible speaks of following Jesus, it is proclaiming a discipleship which will liberate mankind from all man-made dogmas, from every burden and oppression, from every anxiety and torture which afflicts the conscience." (Ibid., p. 40.)

Christ's claim for our discipleship receives heaven's highest priority. In our swift and efficient age we continually hear of projects with low or high priority. No obligation is pictured in terms of higher priority than that of discipleship. Jesus makes this clear in Luke 14:26, "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

Listed in this passage are the most solemn ties and obligations of life. Nothing stirs human emotion more quickly than the challenge to one's own family and flesh. Jesus asks, "Which is more important -- me or you, me or your closest relative?" This matter is placed in even bolder relief when one considers what he would do if placed in a position to deny Christ or lose one's wife or child! Have we really begun to understand and appreciate the priority of discipleship above all other demands of life?

No other obligation requires that a man shoulder his basic human responsibilities as does being a disciple of Christ. One can live many years with a responsible job and what appears to be a normal life without really accepting the basic duties of life. But there is one call which will not allow this -- the call to Christian discipleship. In the same context just used Christ makes this plain. Still talking of those who would follow Him He remarks, "Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

Modern man has been described by contemporary writers as "morally bankrupt" and "spiritually diseased." The abject refusal to offer help to a fellow man or woman in mortal danger, the crass concern for self only, the crippling fear of "becoming involved" in the lives and needs of others, all this is indicative of an age that refuses to bear its own cross. Jesus refuses to allow men to become His disciples who will not come to grips with their basic duties and responsibilities as human beings.

Christ's call is a demanding one in that it cannot be accepted by one who refuses to carefully examine it. To emphasize this Jesus offers an illustration in the same context used in preceding paragraphs. "For which of you desiring to build a tower, doth not first sit down and count the cost, whether he have wherewith to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). Jesus continues in the same vein as He reminds His professed followers that the man who starts a building but does not finish it because of lack of proper planning is the subject of ridicule (Luke 14:29, 30). Christ says, "Do not accept my call until you have thoroughly considered its full implications for your life."

Christ's call is a demanding one because it allows nothing short of total renunciation of self. Our text, Matthew 16:24, indicates this in the requirement that a man "deny himself" in becoming a disciple. The next two verses further explain this demand. "For whoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?" (Matthew 16:26, 27).

Probably no requirement for discipleship is less understood than this one. If Christians ever learn and accept the demand to "deny self" the world will be seized for Christ overnight! The willingness to renounce self has made Communism, Islam, and other modern forces what they are today. The one difference which makes all the difference is that as we deny ourselves we affirm -- make real -- Christ in our lives.

The life of Christ's disciple is one of joy, peace, direction, meaning, purpose, strength, and, above all, salvation. This call to each one of us is initiated by the crucified and risen Lord who says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). You will accept the privileges and responsibilities of a disciple when you become a disciple. This is the demand of Christ overnight! The willingness to renounce self has made Communism, Islam, and other modern forces what they are today. The one difference which makes all the difference is that as we deny ourselves we affirm -- make real -- Christ in our lives.

Listen to the voice of the one who died for you! "Come ye after me..." (Matthew 4:19), "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9). "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Listen! and become Christ's disciple.
John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13-week Herald of Truth television series.

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He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.