

The Cost and Blessings of Discipleship
(Candidate weekend with Pastor Eric Nygren)
Mark 10:17-31 May 20, 2018

Good morning, church! It is wonderful to be here this morning with all of you. It has been a great weekend so far getting to know the church family here. In fact, it has been a joy for me to come back to Bemidji after having visited here with my family at the end of April.

Unfortunately, it didn't work for my wife and daughters to join me on this trip. There are a number of things happening back home that they needed to attend to this weekend that kept them from being able to come along. Lindsay and I are coming up on 19 years of marriage this August, and we have three daughters: Evelyn, Anna, and Lydia.

We had such a great time a few weekends ago when we were here. The hospitality of the search committee exceeded our expectations, and the trip gave us plenty to talk about on the 9-hour drive back to Mt.

Pleasant, Iowa. By the way, if you are unfamiliar with the geography of southeastern Iowa, I can assure you that there are no mountains in or anywhere near Mt. Pleasant. It is indeed a "pleasant" community, but the rolling hills of Iowa can hardly be classified as mountainous. Iowa has been our family's home for the last 13 years. When we moved in 2005 from Chicago after having finished my seminary work at Trinity, our only reference point to Iowa was what we had seen in the 1989 film *Field of Dreams* starring Kevin Costner. In that movie, a ghostly ballplayer walks out onto the baseball field built in the middle of a cornfield and asks Costner's character, "Is this heaven?" to which Costner famously responds, "No, it's Iowa." Things change when you drive north and cross the border between Iowa and Minnesota. On our drive up to Bemidji we noticed how the trees were different from back home. We saw that the slogan "land of 10,000 lakes" was no exaggeration. But I think what stood out the most to my kids was the unique Minnesota accent. Now, I grew up hearing this regional dialect from my Minnesota relatives. Both of my parents are Minnesotans by birth. My Dad grew up down in Austin, and my mom grew up in Minneapolis. Lindsay and I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, home of the Ohio State Buckeyes. In fact, my wife and I first met and started dating when we were in high school. We are also both graduates from Ohio University located in Athens, Ohio. And even though I had a two-year head start on Lindsay, we both finished up in 1999, the same summer we got married. Most of our family still lives in the central Ohio area. And that's where the story of my own spiritual journey begins.

As far back as I can remember, we were a church going family. We didn't make it to church every Sunday, but from my perspective as a kid we attended pretty regularly. That didn't bother me, because even though I thought the worship service was boring, I didn't mind going to Sunday school. My friends were there with me, and on most Sundays the teacher brought doughnuts. My wife Lindsay had a similar experience growing up. She lived down the road from her home church and found herself there on a Sunday morning more often than not. But for both of us growing up, and for our families, the spiritual area of life did not bleed over into the rest of the week.

All of our spiritual journeys have to start somewhere. Even if you are fortunate enough to grow up in a household where the gospel is known and lived out, we don't come into this world with faith in Christ. My guess is that in a room like this, each one of us here is at a different place on our spiritual journey.



Some of you may have been walking with the Lord for many years. Others here may still be on the early part of the journey. There may even be some here that are not even sure if they are on a spiritual journey or where that journey might be taking them. This morning I want to share a bit of my own journey of faith with you and at the same time walk you through a passage of Scripture that God has put on my heart. What I want to show you from the text this morning is this: **When Jesus calls us to follow him there is a great cost to discipleship, but there is an even greater blessing that makes following him absolutely worth it.** If you have a Bible with you or if you can look on with someone sitting next to you, go ahead and turn to Mark's Gospel and to chapter 10. The passage we are going to look at together might be a familiar one. It's an account that takes place during the ministry of Jesus that is recorded in three of the four Gospels. The story is primarily about Jesus and his encounter with a rather wealthy individual.

In Matthew's account he is described as a young man. In Luke's version he is called a "ruler." In Mark's account, the one that we are going to look at today, we don't learn about his financial status until midway through the passage. Even though you might already be familiar with the story of the "rich young ruler," let me invite you to look at the text with me to see what God might be saying to us this morning. Read Mark 10:17-20. Since we are just looking at one passage from Mark's Gospel this morning, let me give you a bit of context as to where this story fits in the book. Notice that in the very next chapter, chapter 11, Mark narrates the events of what we call that first Palm Sunday. That tells us that the events of chapter 10 are happening toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. So when Mark says in verse 17 that Jesus was "setting out on his journey," or as the NIV has it, "As Jesus started on his way," we are to understand that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Let your eyes skip down to verse 33 and you'll see what Jesus' trip would entail:

Jesus said, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." (Mk 10:33-34, *ESV*). As Jesus began the final leg of his journey to the cross, a man on his own spiritual journey ran up and met Jesus on the way. Think about it. How many times have the Twelve seen someone run up to Jesus in the years that they had followed him? Men ran to Jesus. Women ran to Jesus. Even children ran to Jesus. The sick ran to Jesus. The poor ran to Jesus. Others brought their friends to Jesus. Now a young man runs to Jesus and falls on his knees in desperation, hoping that the Teacher can answer his question. Showing great honor and respect to Jesus, the young man asked, "Good Teacher, ...what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This young man was asking Jesus, the teacher to help him identify what, if anything, was missing from his life. But look how Jesus responds to the question in verse 18: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Jesus seems to be answering a question this man did not ask. But Jesus knew that in order for this man to get the answer he needed, he first had to be reoriented as to the meaning of the word "good." We tend to use the word "good" when we're evaluating something. We'll talk about a good book, or a good cup of coffee, or a good meal. When asked about our weekend, we might respond, "It was good." Maybe tomorrow you'll come home at the end of the day and tell someone that you had a good day at work or a good day at school. Maybe later this afternoon you'll tell someone that you heard a good sermon this morning. But Jesus understands the word a bit differently. God alone is good. Another way to say that is that God alone is perfect. God is not only morally perfect, He is eternal, He is infinite, and He is holy. We are not. We are sinful, selfish, rebellious people. Even the best of us do not measure up to a God who is wholly good. But Jesus

offered the young man a chance at self-evaluation. Take a look at what Jesus says next in verse 19: "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" Of course, this young man knew the Ten Commandments. And as he evaluated his own life, he had managed to keep God's law. He was a good kid. That's how I saw myself growing up. I was a good kid. Even through my high school years, I was a kid who never got into trouble. If God was evaluating lives based on rule keeping, I could expect to receive high marks. But like this young man, as a student, I too felt that something was missing. And for the first time, as a 7th grade student on a middle school youth retreat, I heard what that something was: the gospel.

For the first time someone explained to me why in the midst of a "good life" it felt like something was lacking. Even though I thought I was a good kid, I came to realize that my sinful, selfish heart had rebelled against God and gone its own way. I was lost, and far more lost than I was aware of. But God was seeking me out. He was drawing me to Himself through Christ who died for me. It was then that all those Sunday school stories began to make sense. They weren't just stories about Jesus and his buddies. The story of the Bible, the story of the gospel was a story about God pursuing people like me. On that retreat weekend I began my journey of faith in Christ. I wish I could tell you that my life was radically transformed from that moment on. But much like the young man who met Jesus on the way, I too was more comfortable staying where I was. The fact of the matter is that **when Jesus calls us to follow him there is a great cost to discipleship.** Take a look at verse 21 and how Mark's account continues: "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" (vv. 21-26).

Here is where we learn that this young man was rather wealthy. We don't know how this young man made his money. It wouldn't be fair for us to conclude that this man had acquired his wealth sinfully. He's not described in this passage like Zacchaeus the cheating tax collector. In fact, in his culture, wealth was considered to be a measure of blessing. But that was part of the problem. Jesus' answer to the man's question came with an action point. The young man needed to be released from the hold that his possessions had on his heart. It wasn't that this act of charity would somehow earn his way into the kingdom. He wasn't exchanging the currency of earth for the currency of heaven. This man needed to be set free from the thing that ruled his heart so that he could give his heart to the only one who could provide him with what he was truly lacking. But his wealth had too great a hold on his heart, and he walked away from the one he had just run to. Mark tells us that the man's face fell and that he walked away sad. But he wasn't just sad, he was full of sorrow, or as the KJV translates it here, he was grieved. Did you notice what Jesus did at this point in verse 23? The Lord grabbed a hold of this teaching moment and made eye contact with his disciples. Once he had their attention he made his point: it's impossible for those with great wealth to enter the kingdom of God. How hard? Jesus paints a ridiculous picture for his disciples to imagine. Famously, Jesus says that it is in fact easier for one of the largest creatures they knew of in that part of the world--a camel--to pass through the smallest opening they could imagine--the eye of a needle, than it is for a rich man to enter the

kingdom of God. Don't overthink this. The disciples get the point and respond with amazement. If a guy with so much going for him in this life can't enter the kingdom of God on his own, if even he is lacking what is needed to inherit eternal life, if his earthly treasure has nothing to do with treasure in heaven, then what hope does anyone have? "Then who can be saved?" (v. 26). Yes, says Jesus, humanly speaking this is impossible. But not with God. All things are possible with God.

Folks, do you know what the "this" is that Jesus is referring to here? It's the call to follow him. It's the call to discipleship. God has to grab a hold of our hearts through Christ and turn everything upside down in order for us to be able follow as Jesus' disciples. How upside down? Well, according to Jesus, in verse 31, those who (according to this world) are first will be last, and those who are last (from the perspective of this world) will be first. At the end of this story, Peter speaks and says what perhaps all the disciples were thinking at this point. He says, "We have left everything and followed you" (v. 28). Jesus replies, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (vv. 29-30). As we reach the end of this passage and our time together this morning, I want you to hear this: **When Jesus calls us to follow him there is great blessing that makes following him absolutely worth it.** Friends, this is my story. As a college student, as I began to grow in the Lord, as I gave over more and more of my life to Christ I found this to be true. The blessings of discipleship far outshined the cost of following Jesus. In time, for me following Christ meant a significant change in the plans I had for my career. It meant embracing a call to ministry where I could teach others God's word and point them to Christ on their own path of discipleship. Following Christ meant putting miles between my growing family and the family I grew up in back in Ohio. Even now as God is calling us into a new chapter of our lives in following Christ, we are having to count the cost again. When we began to sense God stirring things in our life, sensing that He was leading away from life and ministry in southeastern Iowa, we initially prayed that God might draw us closer to family in Ohio.

And then an email from a Pastor Jerry in Bemidji, Minnesota showed up in my inbox. A quick Google Maps search showed us that God might have other plans for our family as we again must count the cost of discipleship. And yet, we wholly believe Jesus' words in verses 29-30. As the Lord has brought us from Ohio, to Chicago, to Iowa, and now perhaps to Bemidji, Minnesota, we can testify to the fact that in leaving home, family, and fields, we have received a hundred times more than what we ever expected through the experiences and relationships the Lord has granted to us in our years of ministry. And that's what drives me in ministry. What a privilege it is for me to share God's word with you this morning and to declare the joy of knowing Christ and to follow him as his disciple. I don't know what the cost of discipleship will be for you. When Jesus calls you to follow him, the cost of discipleship may indeed be financial as it was with the rich young ruler. Maybe there will be a career cost or a family cost. Maybe Christ will call you to leave behind the comfortable or the familiar to follow him. For some, the cost of following Christ may even be your life. But I can promise you, not only from experience, but more importantly from Scripture, whatever the cost may be, a life of discipleship following Christ is worth it. **When Jesus calls us to follow him there is a great cost to discipleship, but there is an even greater blessing that makes following him absolutely worth it.**

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