

Discipleship 202: Career Counseling
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 56, Matthew 10:32-39, Hebrews 11:1-2,32-12:2

Our final Scripture reading this morning is from Hebrews 11:1-2, 32-40, and 12:1-2. Listen now to God's Word. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Maybe the most important thing a school can do for its students is career counseling. It was always nervewracking because you'd go down to the counselor's room, and the counselors were the ones who took care of all the kids who got in trouble a lot. Most of us wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. Some of us knew what we wanted to do and wanted to get out of school to do it. I remember going into those sessions already knowing what I was going to be: a disc jockey for a Christian radio station. I was going to college to study radio and television. Throughout high school and college, nobody ever questioned that decision. Maybe they didn't know enough about it. But never once did anybody say, "You know, that might be fun, but it's really hard to make a living at it." I worked at a local radio station; I had an "in"; I thought I was all set. It was only after the fact that I realized that it was a nice idea but not much of a career choice. I've become convinced that somebody saying, "Do you know what you're getting into?," before somebody starts into college, is a really good thing. Most of us don't have enough time and money and smarts to get a second chance. I am grateful that God blessed me and led me down the path to put me in front of you today, but it's only by His grace that I'm here.

In a very real sense, I believe that career counseling is an integrity issue for the modern church. We have failed to put out there exactly what discipleship entails. We focus on all the great things we receive from Jesus' death on the cross – forgiveness, salvation, joy, peace, assurance that our prayers are being answered, assurance that our suffering has purpose and meaning. Those are good and real things that we should celebrate. But they are only half of the career counseling we should receive when we become disciples of Jesus Christ.

For several months now, we've been talking about following in the footsteps of Jesus, and I think all of us along the way (myself included) have been struck by some things that God calls us to that are difficult for us. It's not always been easy to hear. But it goes even further than what we've discussed so far. This last week on discipleship, we're going to talk about sacrificial living, the kind of living Jesus called us to. We've been called to a career in discipleship, and as we decide to take that journey, we need to know the facts of what it entails.

We like to think of God as a god who blesses, and that is absolutely true. But most of God's blessings follow after significant trials. Abraham obeyed God by moving to the land of Canaan, what we now know of as Israel, but he didn't hear from God for another 20 years about fulfilling the promise. Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt only to face their disobedience in the wilderness. Joshua took the land of Israel, but not without going into battle. The judges were called to service in times of dire peril. David faced danger not only from outside, from the Philistines, but from within, from his own mad king, King Saul. When the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon, they had to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. In Hebrews this morning, we heard in vivid detail what happened to many of the prophets when they refused to bow to anyone but God. God has done great things for His people, but not without hard work and sacrifice and suffering along the way.

If it wasn't apparent from the history of Israel, Jesus made it abundantly clear in today's passage that discipleship would be a difficult journey. At first, it sounds like Jesus is simply saying that acknowledgement of faith in Him is enough to merit eternal life. But then He goes on. Jesus warns that belief in Him is going to bring war – war within families themselves. He knows that some will believe and some won't, and the conflict will put family members at odds. Jesus demands loyalty beyond family. In fact, He declares that only the one who takes up his cross and follows Him is worthy of Him. At this point in Jesus' ministry, there's no irony in these words; no one expects Him to die in such a horrific way. Jesus' words sound harsh and uncompromising. But Jesus knew that half-hearted discipleship isn't discipleship at all. The double minded disciple always has his own interests in mind, not the desires of God. Jesus calls all of us to give our whole selves. When you are someone's servant, your life is not your own. You do as your master directs. And as the old Bob Dylan song goes, "You gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the LORD, but you gotta serve somebody." Serving yourself means that you've already made your choice.

True service to God is not easy, says the author of Hebrews, but what we can accomplish when we give our all to Him is stunning. Hebrews 11, which we heard only part of this morning, is often called "The Hall of Faith." It details all the ways in which God proved His faithfulness and His people, in faith, accomplished the miraculous. God's people "through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised...[they] shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; [their] weakness was turned to strength...women received back their dead, raised to life again." We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that testify to the goodness of God and the ability we have to follow in faith if we are willing.

So in our final study of discipleship, what are we to do with all this? How are we to carry our cross to follow Jesus? In my study this week, I found a few ideas to share with you. First, *count the cost*. Second, *fix your eyes on Jesus and throw off all that hinders you from servanthood*. Finally, *don't settle for less than what God asks or promises in our discipleship*.

It might seem petty to count the cost of discipleship, that it's not very "spiritual" or shows a lack of trust in God, but it's exactly what Jesus tells us to do. In Luke 14, Jesus tells a parable about discipleship. He says it's like a man planning to build a tower who figures how much it will cost before he starts; otherwise, he'll look like a fool when the foundation is built but the tower comes to nothing because the funds ran out. He also compares it to a king who before going to war contemplates whether his troops can win the battle. In essence, Jesus is saying, "Before you commit to following me, know what it is you are committing to."

The modern church and many of us within it, myself included, are being called to repentance about this very issue. The American church has played a numbers game to make ourselves look better. We gave up teaching true discipleship. We taught that praying a prayer accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior was the only thing necessary for salvation. We traded in the true gospel with its call to come and die to ourselves for one that was easier to stomach, even if it wasn't true. We left out the hard work of discipleship because we were afraid people would leave if they were called to a life of service rather than a life of ease. But the gospel calls us to give our lives away in service to Christ.

In the new book called *Renovation of the Church*, the story of Oak Hills Church unfolds. They were geared to appeal to everybody possible with a huge light show and rock music and comforting sermons. They quickly grew to 1700 people. But they eventually realized that they weren't actually becoming Christ-like. The church's leaders dedicated themselves to teaching the church what it meant to be faithful followers and not just religious consumers. They counted the cost, but they never expected it to be so dramatic. They went from 1700 to 700 as those who weren't interested in becoming disciples left. Yet the ministry that church now has is stunning. Many who remained have been transformed and are genuinely seeking after God with their whole hearts. They have less numbers but far greater biblical discipleship.

We need to determine if we are willing to go the distance with Christ or not. There are no guarantees. Our nation is heading down a path toward unbelief. An article in USA Today on January 3rd reported that roughly 45% of Americans don't think about God or eternal wisdom or their eternal destiny. It isn't atheism; it's apathy. Many still go to a church on Sunday for personal reasons – a relative in the choir or family expectations – but many just don't care. The signs of this apathy are everywhere. And that apathy is beginning to turn ugly in slow but sure ways. When you leave the US, it's far worse. Our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and Egypt and Somalia face violence and even death for the faith. Just last week, on its opening day, a Bible school in Sudan was bombed by government forces. We do not face those kinds of challenges to our faith yet. But we can no longer expect that we will be able to be faithful believers and live our lives unscathed.

I urge you, then, as followers together of our great LORD and God, let us count the cost. Let us commit to nothing less than daily carrying our cross, giving up our own selfish desires, and following Jesus. Let's not be lukewarm or half-hearted but do this all the way. If we do, I believe that we can reach Macomb Township for Jesus Christ in a way that will surprise us all.

Second, as servant disciples, we are told to *fix our eyes on Jesus and throw off all that hinders*. The author of Hebrews tells us all about the great heroes of the faith, then says, "since we have such a great cloud of witnesses," let us follow faithfully. There are many commands here – throw off the sin that entangles, run the race before us with perseverance – but fixing our eyes on Jesus is the core of it all. If our eyes are focused on Christ, then we will succeed.

When we are called to throw off everything that hinders, we aren't just talking about sinful things. We're talking about things that distract us. We've talked about distractions a lot during our discussions on discipleship, but one of the biggest distractions to living a selfless Christian life is all the lies we've been told about what Jesus supposedly wants for us.

I believe that God wants us to live lives that are deeply fulfilling and joyous. But I also believe that deep fulfillment and joy only comes through intentional, sometimes painful discipleship. When I was coming through the airports a few weeks ago, I saw Joel Osteen's book *Every Day A Friday* being sold by everybody imaginable. I've read excerpts of it and I know that Joel believes God wants you to be happy, and you have to choose happiness. God just wants to pour blessings down on you, but to get those blessings you've got to be upbeat through the tough stuff.

But that's not biblical. When Job lost everything, he wanted an answer from God as to why. The prophet Elijah asked to die out in the desert rather than to face off again with the wicked Jezebel. An entire book of the Bible records the laments of the people in exile, and the book doesn't have a happy ending. Jesus quoted the psalmist on the cross, stating, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

I don't want to pick on Joel Osteen too much because he just follows in a long line of pastors who've taught the power of positive thinking instead of the full gospel. My point this morning is not to attack them but for us to realize the truth – a gospel that promises health and wealth and prosperity and happiness isn't the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In our hearts, many of us know this. We've seen friends and family members suffer. We've seen disease take our loved ones from us. We've known the pain of being rejected by those who do not want to follow in the path of Christ. But when we see some people living beautiful lives and we see our own struggles and pain, we think, "Have I done something wrong? Is God punishing me?" We get distracted by the ease of others and think the path of following Christ must be easier than the path we're on.

This morning, I want to encourage you, do not let the ease or difficulty of anybody else's journey get in the way of your total discipleship. God has unique plans for each of us. He will use each of us for His glory if we allow Him to do so. Fix your eyes on Jesus, not the guy to your right or to your left. The sacrifices you make for Christ are your own, no one else's.

For you, there may well be other things that keep you from fixing your eyes on Jesus – a sin that you like more than you want to admit, a hobby that draws you away, or something else entirely. For all of us, we must daily ask, “Am I focused on Jesus? Is what I’m doing really what He would desire? Is what I’m doing a death to self or a fulfillment of my own desires?” We need to honestly ask this of ourselves because our vision is often in need of correction. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means constant course correction as we work to see Him more clearly.

Last one: *don’t settle for less than what God asks or promises in our discipleship.* Our lives are busy, every last one of us. Even if we’re not working, we make them busy with all sorts of appointments and plans. That can be a good thing if Christ is at the center of them. But we often find ourselves too busy for God, and that’s incredibly dangerous to our souls. Christ wants to rule every part of our lives, and if we’re too busy for Him or too stressed or too tired, that’s not going to happen. Sometimes we settle; we assume that what we do is “good enough” for God. But in my own life, “good enough” was never the same thing as “actually good.”

As my friend Jim Rizer, the pastor over at Grosse Pointe Woods, often says, God asks for our “faithful best.” And I have to ask myself in all areas of life, am I doing my faithful best? Am I giving my faithful best in writing my sermon and leading the church with my eyes focused on Christ? Am I doing my faithful best in spending time with my family and leading them closer to Christ with my example? Am I living out my faithful best in my leisure, not just letting TV shows or music wash over me but paying attention and bringing every thought captive to Christ? Those are hard questions, but they center our discipleship in Christ. As we close out this series on discipleship, I think that if we keep that one question in mind – “am I giving my faithful best for Christ?” – the rest of discipleship will fall into place. Our faithful best brings together all the other aspects of discipleship and keeps us on our toes, keeps us on notice that we are a servant of the living God, always on call for Him, ready to serve Him as He served us. Don’t settle for less.

Also don’t settle for less than God’s promises. We often live in the “good enough” zone with God. But remember the hall of faith! Remember those who slew giants, who conquered kingdoms, who healed the sick and confronted the unjust and triumphed over evil. Many of God’s people – Abraham, Jacob, David, and others – got in serious trouble when they tried to work out “good enough” solutions to their problems rather than waiting on the LORD and trusting in Him. Don’t settle for “good enough!” If God has put the salvation of a family member or friend on your heart, don’t settle for, “Well, they go to church.” Talk to them about faith and see where God will lead! If God has put you in a place where you don’t see a way out, don’t try to scheme a way out – trust in God and let Him show you the way. He doesn’t promise us earthly victory, but He promises us eternal reward. Don’t settle for less.

We’ve spent a good chunk of time since September looking at discipleship. We’ve learned a lot, yet we’ve only scratched the surface. Next week and running through Lent, we’re going to be starting a series called “So What?” focusing on the core principles of our faith. It would be a great time to invite someone to hear for the first time who God is and what God is all about. It will be a great time for all of us to be refreshed by the basics of what we believe. And we will have the opportunity to put what we’ve learned together about discipleship in action. May we focus on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and serve others as Christ served us. Let us settle for nothing less than becoming true disciples of our risen LORD. Amen.