

Why is the Christian Life So Difficult?

July 20-21, 2019

Rev. Brian Bill

During the past three weeks away Beth and I had days of delight and days of difficulty. The delightful part had a lot to do with our grandsons Pip and Ezra and their mom Lydia as they spent about a week with us.

This time of delight came after two weeks of difficulty while we were at the Cleveland Clinic. Beth and I are so thankful for how many of you prayed for our son-in-law Matt's open-heart surgery. It was comforting to us and them to know the sweet people of Edgewood were interceding on their behalf.

One truth that sustained them through the surgery and then through two critical complications was a phrase our daughter Emily had been meditating on in the weeks prior to the operation: *He already knew!* When we heard how much this meant to Emily, Beth asked a friend to create some artwork with this phrase on it and Romans 11:33 underneath: ***“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”*** Here's a picture of Matt and Emily holding this wall hanging before surgery.

Because the Cleveland Clinic is #1 in the nation for cardiac surgery, there were many others having similar procedures that morning. They have 100 operating rooms and over the last 12 years, 30,000 people have had heart surgeries there!

After Matt and the other patients were wheeled off to the OR, a nurse educator gathered with family members to educate us on what to expect. She spent nearly 45 minutes explaining the challenges and difficulties related to the surgery and recovery and told us there would be additional classes available over the next couple days (which we took advantage of). She described the physical pain Matt would be in and what they would do about it, letting us know they would not be able to take away all the pain. She gave us information about the average hospital stay but also told us not to be concerned if it was longer than that and not to panic if the patient had to go back into the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. This information was really helpful when Matt developed complications and had to go back into the ICU. She reminded us that heart surgery is both life-saving and life-altering.

Isn't life a bit like our last several weeks? We have times of delight *and* times of difficulty. The delight of getting a driver's license can turn to difficulty when you don't know if you can make your car payment. The delight of that first job can evaporate into disillusionment. Anyone who has done a home improvement project knows early excitement can quickly turn to unexpected challenges.

We've had challenges with the Edgewood renovation and expansion project as well. The snow in the fall and the incessant rain in the spring has delayed the parking lot and caused other issues in the building. I'm delighted to report the parking lot was completed this week! Other difficulties include asbestos abatement, out of code wiring and even termites. The good news is without this project we would not have known about these issues which have now been rectified.

I hope you're planning to attend the Grow Time update next Sunday afternoon at 4 to hear about the progress, receive a financial update and go on a tour of the facility. If you'd like to come, please RSVP on your connection card or call the church office. Approximately 200 have signed up already!

As a way to continue pressing into our four values of gathering, growing, giving and going, we're repurposing and remodeling the area under the sanctuary and offices for adult Growth Group space as well as a large room for our student ministry. Special thanks to Bob Hartley for heading up this project and to Derrick Laukaitis for his design work. If you have time to help, we could use a number of servants. You can come Monday through Thursday from 8 to 8 or Fridays and Saturdays from 8 to 4. We can utilize people with experience in remodeling as well as other servants who are willing to do whatever needs to be done. If you'd like to serve in this way, please contact Marie in the church office, make a note on your Connection Card, or simply show up.

The question we're tackling today in our *Glad You Asked* series is, "*Why is the Christian life so difficult?*" We're going to see while following Christ is the most delightful decision you'll ever make, the path of discipleship is extremely difficult. Let's put it in a sentence: *While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.*

As I was listening to the nurse educator explain what to expect related to heart surgery, I realized we do a disservice to young disciples by implying once you ask Jesus to save you, life will become simple. It's far better to describe the expected

difficulties than to declare Jesus will make you happy all the time. It's more helpful and honest to admit adversity will come than to promise perpetual peace and prosperity. We need to set our expectations according to Scripture or else the difficulties of discipleship will lead to a letdown.

This reminds me of something Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: “*Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life.*”

Grab your Bibles and turn to Luke 9:23-26. While you're turning there or loading your Edgewood app, I appreciated the outstanding sermons preached by Jason Crosby, Pastor Dan and Pastor Tim the last three weekends. A person new to Edgewood sent me an email in which he said: “*I can't tell you how impressed/excited I am to see the depth of your preaching roster and the quality of the sermon preparation of all involved.*”

Let's read this text together to understand how Jesus answers the question, “*Why is the Christian life so difficult?*”

“And he said to all, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

We'll camp on four conditions to following Christ and we'll conclude with three cautions.

Four Conditions

Notice this call to follow is for “**all**,” which means, “*the totality or the whole.*” While the call is to all, there are also conditions to following Christ. We see this in the use of the word, “**if**.” These difficult demands of discipleship can't be dismissed or downplayed.

1. Desire. The first condition is to have a desire to become a disciple – “**If anyone would come after me...**” *The heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart.* The phrase, “**would come**” is the idea of intentionality and involves the will. In order to walk with Jesus you must first *want* to walk with Jesus.

Notice the phrase, ***“come after me.”*** This has the idea of movement, of lining up behind the Lord, following wherever He goes. We don’t walk in front of Him and ask Him to catch up with our ways and wishes. No, we get behind Him, so we can walk where He walks.

Do you have the desire to follow Jesus as one of His disciples? Simply put, you won’t follow Him if you don’t want to. One of Beth’s sisters made a statement several years ago that we often quote in our family. It goes like this, *“people do what they want to do.”* It sounds so simple but it’s so true. Some are not following the Savior simply because they don’t have the desire to do so.

If you desire sleep, you’ll sleep instead of attending services. If your desire is for sports, you’ll find a way to play them or have your kids play them. If your desire is for hobbies, you’ll arrange your schedule and your shekels accordingly. If you desire possessions, you’ll work to purchase them. If you’re all about being popular, you’ll compromise your convictions to fit in. If pleasure is all-important, you’ll feed your sexual appetites and fuel your addictions.

Listen. Until you desire to be a disciple, you won’t become a disciple. If you long for Him more than anyone or anything else, you’ll let Him lead you. We must be able to say what Asaph said in Psalm 73:25: ***“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”***

While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.

2. Denial. The first condition is to settle your *desire*. The second is to *deny* self: ***“...let him deny himself...”*** Everything within us screams against these words. To ***“deny”*** means, ***“to refuse.”*** Jesus said it like this in Luke 14:33: ***“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”***

Denying self means I stop thinking I’m always right, I stop living in my own power and I refuse to pursue my own pleasures because I no longer belong to myself. We see this in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: ***“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”*** In short, I must give up the right to run my own life because I no longer own my own life. Born again believers have been bought with the blood of Christ and now belong to Him.

John Calvin called self-denial “*the sum of the Christian life.*” Warren Wiersbe often said, “*The Christian life is not a playground; it is a battleground, and we must be on our guard at all times.*” Or to switch metaphors, our church is to be a battleship, not a cruise ship!

Let’s drill down a bit to discover why the Christian life is so difficult. According to Ephesians 2:1-3, we have at least three enemies attacking us incessantly – our flesh, the world, and the devil.

- **The flesh.** 1 Peter 2:11 says the passions of our flesh “*wage war*” against our souls. This phrase refers to a long-term military campaign filled with relentless and malicious aggression. John MacArthur calls this an internal “*civil war*” between our flesh and our spirit.
- **The world.** 1 John 2:15-16: “*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*”
- **The devil.** 1 Peter 5:8 calls us to “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*” We’ll develop this in greater depth next weekend when we answer the question, “*Do angels and demons really exist?*”

Let’s face it. Following Christ is difficult because it requires self-discipline and often God’s discipline. We can’t fully follow Christ while living our lives any way we please. I appreciate the honesty of D.L. Moody: “*I have had more trouble with myself than with any other man.*”

While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.

3. Death. The first two conditions are *desire* and *denial*. As if those aren’t difficult enough, Jesus next calls us to *die*: “*...and take up his cross daily...*” Crucifixion was a common Roman punishment, with over 30,000 nailed to crosses during the lifetime of Jesus. Everyone knew the cross was an instrument of shame, suffering, torture and death. When a person took up his cross, he was beginning a death march.

Unfortunately, we have romanticized the cross and turned it into something we put on our walls or wear around our necks. When we do reference this verse, we often say something like, “*Well, I guess that’s just the cross I must bear*” and normally it refers to putting up with a bad boss or with an obnoxious relative or living with an illness or for many, it’s simply rooting for the Chicago Bears.

Let’s remember the cross was carried by condemned criminals and ended with a humiliating and excruciating execution. Everyone knew the dead man walking was saying goodbye to everything and there was no turning back.

We’re called to crucify the cult of self-fulfillment, self-promotion and self-centeredness. We’re to die to our rights – the right to be right, the right to take revenge and the right to fight. As J.C. Ryle puts it: “*A religion which costs nothing, is worth nothing.*”

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we live in a time of “*cheap grace*” and “*easy believism*” where Christianity is more identified with health and wealth than with surrender, sacrifice and service. Listen to what Bonhoeffer said: “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*”

This is quite a condition, isn’t it? Do you desire to be a disciple? Are you denying yourself? Have you died to your self and to sin? Oh, before we move on – we’re to take up our cross “**daily.**” Dying to self and to sin must happen on an-ongoing daily basis.

While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.

4. Devotion. After getting our *desire* right, *denying* self and *dying* to sin, Jesus gives the fourth condition for discipleship – *devotion*. Look at the last part of verse 23: “**...and follow me.**” To “**follow**” means, “*to go with*” and the tense is ongoing, meaning we are to be constantly following Him. At its core, the word “disciple” means learner and follower.

Jesus fought against having false converts by making sure people knew the cost to following Him. I think of the rich young ruler in Mark 10 who came running up to Jesus to find eternal life. When Jesus challenged his idolatry of self and the pursuit of possessions, we read these sad words in verse 22: “**Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.**” I find it quite interesting

Jesus didn't chase after Him or water down the demands of discipleship. Why? Because commitment to Christ *is* costly. Discipleship *is* demanding.

I'm sure you've heard the number of Christians in the U.S. is shrinking. Actually, statistics show people are leaving liberal mainline churches but Bible-preaching churches are growing. Here's what I think is happening – so called 'cultural Christians' are fading away while 'convictional Christians' are on fire for Christ! Or as Ed Stetzer puts it: "*Christianity isn't collapsing; it's being clarified.*" Russell Moore adds, "*People turn from their idols when they stop sending rain.*"

Will you follow Christ even when things get difficult? Will you believe or will you bail? When Jesus spoke hard truth to those who were enjoying free food while marveling at miracles, we see what happened in John 6:66: "***After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.***" Will you turn back when things get tough? My mind often goes to this question asked by Jesus in Luke 18:8: "***Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?***"

It's easy to add Jesus as a friend on Facebook; it's much more difficult to be a follower. Jesus is not an app to download to your life. Because He's Lord, He wants your whole life. Are you willing to renounce every person, every possession and especially yourself in order to follow Christ? Will you put your faith over your family and over anything else that has been first in your life? What is that one thing keeping you from following Him fully?

While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.

3 Cautions

After the Lord lists four conditions for discipleship – *desire, denial, death* and *devotion*, He concludes with three cautions.

1. If you focus only on your own life, you'll lose it. We see this in verse 24: "***For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.***" *If you try to hold on to what you have, you'll miss what Jesus wants to give you.* When you settle the surrender issue and commit to follow Christ at any cost, you will end up saving your life.

Don't miss the additional clause found in the Gospel of Mark: "***but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.***" We are to lose our lives in

service to the lost as we proclaim the gospel. We are to spread the good news in this community and on all the continents as we take the gospel to our neighbors and to the nations.

2 Timothy 3:12 says, ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*** 1 Peter 4:12 calls us to not see suffering as strange: ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”***

I was struck by what Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was imprisoned for two years in Turkey, said to thousands of pastors at the Southern Baptist Convention last month: *“I don’t think we’re prepared for what is coming, especially the next generation. I fear that many of us are complacent and we’re unaware this means that the people in our churches are going to be blindsided by what comes. You are the ones as pastors and leaders of churches who have the task of preparing the next generation...”*

About a week later, David Curry, president of Open Doors USA, wrote an opinion piece in USA Today with this title: *“Global Christian persecution is worsening while American churches slumber.”* After pointing out one of every nine Christians experience high levels of persecution, he made this statement: *“Inoculated by entertainment and self-absorption, [American Christians] are completely detached from the experience of the global church. The American church is feeding itself to death while the worldwide church is being murdered...”*

Earlier this summer, Beth and I attended a retreat for Keep Believing Ministries, one of our Go Team partners. I’ve been on the Board of Directors for this ministry for 15 years. EBC members Gary and Kathy Pinger also attended because they ship Anchor for the Soul books all over the country.

Our team from China told us how they translate Pastor Ray’s sermons into Mandarin and spread the word through blogs. Because there are now more Christians than members of the Communist Party in China, the government is determined to stamp out Christianity. In one province alone, more than 4,000 crosses on the top of churches have been torn down and thousands of Christians are being arrested.

Now some good news.

- After their crosses were torn down, brave believers gathered to worship in the ruins of their building holding crosses over their heads.
- Pastor Ray's sermons have been posted on 16 blogs in China. The government has shut down most of these sites but the few remaining have seen tremendous traffic. In the past 5 years, sermon downloads have gone from 78,000 to more than 1.8 million!
- One American pastor who visited was moved to tears when he led a Bible study and asked a group of Chinese Christians to turn to 2 Peter. He saw one woman hand her Bible to another leader and then she proceeded to recite the entire book! During the break, he asked her about it and she said they had a lot of time in prison. He asked how they got Bibles in prison and learned they smuggle in pieces of paper with portions of Scripture on them. The woman humbly said, *"That's why we memorize it as fast as we can because even though they can take the paper away, they can't take what's hidden in your heart."*
- One of our Chinese brothers at the retreat quoted a pastor from China who said these words: *"You may arrest me, jail me or kill me. I know I will be scared, feel pain and cry sadly. However, I will not give up my faith."*

Here's my response to this. Lord, forgive me for complaining about anything and acting like I have any adversity going on in my life! Whenever I hear about Christians being persecuted and holding on to their faith, I'm reminded that my problems and inconveniences are nothing in comparison.

I want to say something else that may come across as political but I can assure you it is a gospel issue. There is no place for anyone, especially Christians, to demean immigrants or minorities. We cannot remain silent when people of color are under attack or when injustices are not addressed at the border. Every human being from the moment of conception is made in the image of God and must be treated with dignity and respect. Our mission is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people from every tribe, tongue and race. We must start by loving all people.

If you want to learn more about the plight of the persecuted, we've added two resources to the Sermon Extras tab on the website. One of those is Voice of the Martyrs, our most recent Go Team partner.

BTW, when you give by cash, check or digitally, 11% of your offering goes to support ministries like VOM and Keep Believing Ministries.

2. If you focus only on your own success, you'll squander your soul. Jesus asks a probing question in verse 25: *“For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”* Jesus is using economic terms here – profit, loss and forfeit. You could gain everything and lose your very soul. You could make a lot of money and end up in the misery of Hell.

3. If you're ashamed of Christ, He'll be ashamed of you. Look at verse 26: *“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”* There is a cost to Christianity but there's an even greater cost in not following Christ. We're called to confess Christ and not be ashamed of Him, which will become increasingly more difficult in our culture in the months and years to come.

One way to confess and profess Christ is through believer's baptism. Maybe you've been too embarrassed to get baptized in front of people. It's time to jump in, step up and stand out for Christ by taking the plunge! Our next time for baptism will be on Sunday, August 18th at 4 pm. We'll be using an outdoor swimming pool.

Action Steps

Some time ago I read a post called, *“Dying to Self and Living for Christ: Why We Must Surrender and Sacrifice Daily in Order to Know Jesus More.”* The article had two main action steps:

1. Surrender Spontaneously. Each day we encounter small, unexpected invitations to surrender. These are not inconsequential or trivial because these daily invitations to deny ourselves and surrender our wants prepare us for the larger risks and invitations God may ask of us in the future.

- Will you pause to have a conversation with the neighbor you see outside?
- Will you see your work as a platform for worship and your campus as your mission field?
- Will you set aside your to-do list in order to sit with a friend through his or her pain and tragedy?
- Will you introduce yourself to someone new today instead of talking to your friends when the service is over?

2. Sacrifice Strategically. While we have daily, unexpected opportunities to stretch our muscle of sacrifice, there are also ways we can strategically place ourselves in situations that cause us to grow.

- Will you wake up early or stay up late to read the Word of God?
- If you've not yet made a sacrificial pledge to Grow Time, would you consider doing so?
- Will you give of your time to plug into a Growth Group this year?
- Will you rearrange your schedule to serve with a ministry like World Relief, Christian Care, Pregnancy Resources, Youth Hope or Safe Families?
- Will you consider helping to renovate our Growth Group space?
- Will you sacrifice your weekend worship schedule for the greater good?

I came across a post recently with a provocative title: *“You Need to Be Inconvenienced for Your Church.”* After describing a revival that broke out among some of Scotland’s rural churches in the 1800s, the author pointed out how those who lived in the middle of nowhere would travel treacherous paths for long distances in winter months to gather for worship.

Meaningful participation in the life of the local church wasn’t easy for these believers. Nevertheless, they were faithful and God visited them in a powerful way as one pastor from that time noted:

“It was often a stirring sight to witness the multitudes assembling during the dark winter evenings—to trace their progress as they came in all directions across moors and mountains by the blazing torches which they carried to light their way to the places of meeting. The Word of the Lord was precious in those days; and personal inconvenience was little thought of when the hungry soul sought to be satisfied.”

The author concludes:

“As we look to the example of these believers, let’s make one crucial observation: those who are hungry for Christ consider it their joy to be inconvenienced for the sake of His church. Unfortunately, this is in stark contrast to the way many people treat the church today. Countless multitudes attend church regularly, but view it as a commodity—a conveniently located provider of spiritual goods and services for which they make no real sacrifice.”

In light of that, I want to call each of us to inconvenient sacrifice for the sake of reaching more people with the gospel. Let me remind you of Luke 9:23: “*And he said to all, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*”

About three years ago, the staff began researching the most strategic way to schedule our Sunday mornings for greatest gospel impact. We discovered that worship service hours between 9:00 and 11:00 am better utilize ministry space by increasing our ability to serve families with children.

As a natural outflow of our Grow Time emphasis to grow our faith, our family and our future while maximizing our 4G values, we will begin a new Sunday schedule ONCE we move into the remodeled worship center later this fall. This will enable us to reach, teach and equip more people. We’ll be sharing more specifics in the weeks to come but here’s a snapshot.

9:00-10:15 Worship Service, Growth Groups and Children’s Ministry
10:15-10:45 Connection Time
10:45-12:00 Worship Service, Growth Groups and Children’s Ministry

Our Saturday evening service at 5 will continue with no changes.

Please note we are rescheduling our Growth Groups so they will now be offered *during* both Sunday morning services. This schedule will allow us to use our newly renovated spaces repeatedly rather than have them sit empty most of the weekend. More importantly, this will help us fulfill our 4Gs...

Gather

1. A new schedule will give us Sunday morning worship services at ideal times (9 and 10:45)
2. This will leverage the increased seating capacity in our new worship center (approximately 620)

Grow

1. Having larger rooms under the sanctuary will allow our individual Growth Groups space to grow during both Sunday morning worship services

2. The new schedule will allow for more teaching and fellowship time for our Sunday Growth Groups (75 minutes instead of 60 minutes)
3. This will put us in position to offer various electives during the adult GG hours (parenting, grandparenting, finances, how to study the Bible, evangelism training, etc.)

Give

1. We will need to staff children's ministry only three times each weekend instead of four
2. This will help us incorporate additional adult teachers to offer new Growth Groups and electives during the Growth Group hours

Go

1. These service times will make it easier for us to invite our family members, neighbors, co-workers and classmates
2. Having additional lobby space and time will allow us to better connect with our guests before and after services

Benefits

1. This will allow more people to hear the gospel
2. Moving to a new service schedule was something Pastor Brown wanted to do for many years but parking challenges prevented this
3. Change opens up unknown possibilities
4. Having 30 minutes between services is important for connecting, for not rushing people, and to provide ample time for turnover in the parking lot

While some of us will find this new schedule delightful, others may find it to be difficult. The staff and deacons unanimously believe this will help us accomplish all that God has for us in the next season of ministry. If your concern is how this new schedule may inconvenience you, could I ask you to be OK with being inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel?

While salvation is delightful, discipleship is often difficult.

The Christian life is not only difficult; it's impossible without a new heart.

I wonder if anyone needs heart surgery today? Maybe you need a tune-up or a repair. Or perhaps you are not saved yet and you need a heart transplant.

It's time to surrender your all to the One who died in your place and rose again on the third day.

Closing Song: Surrender