

THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS

(The Implications of Discipleship for those Married or Alone)

John 1:45, Genesis 2: 18-24, Ephesians 5: 25-33, and Luke 14: 25-33

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As we come to this season of remembering the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as we prepare ourselves for gift giving, card giving, and receiving, I wonder how many of us are aware of what ought to be first on our list of hopes as a local church to give to our Lord Jesus on His birthday, and what we ought to place on our list of hopes to receive from Him as a local church at this Christmas season. Now I am uncertain whether each of you would agree with my hopes to give to Jesus, and what we as a church should receive. But this message is my hope that we as a local church and as individuals will give Jesus the promise that we will put Him first as His disciple and disciples. My hope from Jesus is that we would receive as those who live alone, God's assurance of His presence as we are the Bride of Christ. My hope from Jesus is that we would receive as those who are married, God's help, healing, restoration, and wholeness in each of our marriages. I confess, we are not ready to begin preaching on Jesus' first miracle in Cana of Galilee, unless we study the implications of discipleship for those married or alone. What was the cost for Philip in following Jesus and what is the cost for each of us?

Every pastor ministers out of brokenness, out of commitment to following Jesus, but not out of our having arrived. I tremble to speak about singleness or marriage, because I still stumble in my walk with Jesus, and in my marriage to Jinny. The apostle Paul spoke of his goal to know Christ, in Philippians 3: 10-14. He said, "(Oh) That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me His own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal/mark for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." With that in mind, I want to preach on four biblical truths necessary for building and keeping a lasting discipleship with Christ as well as a lasting marriage, and also, a fruitful walk alone with Jesus for those who are single, widowed, or divorced.

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS BEGIN BY DEVELOPING A REALISTIC EXPECTATION FOR DISCIPLESHIP, ALONENESS, AND MARRIAGE.

Notice (I.) Luke 14:25-26, "Now great crowds accompanied Him (Jesus) and He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me (follows Me) and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." As we heard it read this morning, God created marriage in the Garden of Eden, a sinless paradise, making Adam a bridegroom and Eve, a bride. Eden, in Hebrew, means pleasure and delight. That's what marriage is supposed to be, full of pleasure and delight. But as we all remember, the old serpent, the devil got involved in Adam and Eve's marriage by getting both of them to doubt the authority and truth of the Word of God, and marriage ever since has included far more than pleasure and delight, but also pain, frustration, deep hurt, traumatic experiences, and that's what marriage often is for millions of married

couples today. In 1933, 83% of adults in America were married, and today, in 2022, for the first time in history, we are hovering between 49.7-51% of adults in America are married, according to Pew Research. Many people in America have grown cynical about marriage, so that 10% of Americans, and the number is rising of couples who are cohabiting without marriage. Yet research shows that over 90% of all adults say they want a stable, lasting marriage for life. It is in our DNA to at least consider the possibility of marriage. I not only pray for all our marriages, but I pray by name for those of us who are single, widowed, and divorced, who live alone, because God said, in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper, fit for him."

When I was married in 1967, most men were married by 20-22, and most women by age 19-22. Today, the average age of men being married is 33 and for women, the age is 27. Why? Most everyone today is frightened by the divorce rate which is 50% of all marriages in 2022 end in divorce, 41% of all 1st marriages, 60% of all 2nd marriages, and 73% of all 3rd marriages end in divorce. The question for many of us years ago as we entered adulthood was, "Will I find a spouse to marry?" The biggest question for adults today is, "Will I survive marriage without becoming another statistic?" What I want us all to learn and relearn today is that developing realistic expectations for following Jesus, and developing biblical relationship skills for discipleship, for being married, and for living alone will bring success. Yet, frankly, on all counts, many of us have realistic expectations.

Now Jesus knew in His earthly ministry about the struggles we are facing today, but there were many struggles in following Jesus, being married, and living alone in His day. The setting of our text in Luke 14:25-26 was that Jesus was being followed by great crowds. He had many beginning followers, but only a few became His disciples. Seeing the great crowd, Jesus turned to them and said, "If anyone comes to Me (follows Me) and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Jesus wasn't trying to keep the crowds, but to thin them out so those who wanted to truly follow Him, would count the cost. Jesus always wants quality, not just quantity. Scripture never negates scripture, so we know God commands a husband to love his wife and a wife to honor/respect her husband. Children are told to lovingly obey parents, and Jesus said, in Matthew 15:4, "For God commanded, "Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die?"

So, what was Jesus saying in our text? He was speaking comparatively in Matthew 10:37, saying, "Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me." Jesus is speaking comparatively, "I won't compete with your father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, or sisters. If you want to follow Me, there must be no competition. Jesus is always honest up front with us. There is going to be pain, sorrow, and sacrifice involved in following Him. Look again at Luke 14: 27-33 as I read it. Jesus is honest up front about being His disciple. He doesn't want us to start and not continue. He knows we will have to give up on our wishes, our dreams, our hopes, and live to follow Him. God tells the truth. Jesus turned to the crowds and said, in essence, "To follow Me, you must put Me first, count the cost, or you cannot be My disciple."

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS MAKE REALITY VOWS WITH JESUS, AND VOW TO REMAIN SINGLE UNTIL GOD SUPPLIES A SPOUSE, AND VOW TO STAY MARRIED KNOWING MARRIAGE IS NOT EASY. (II.)

Notice Luke 14:27 states, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” This willingness for cross bearing is the way all marriage vows are written. We all said these sacred vows at a marriage altar, “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part.” Marriage is a covenant relationship. The Hebrew word, covenant is **beriyth**, meaning to bring union, not by making a covenant, but cutting a covenant. When God wanted man not to be alone, Adam was put to sleep and God cut him open and took a rib from his side, from around his heart to make for him a helpmeet, Eve. It was a blood covenant, to be a lifelong relationship. When Jesus died on Calvary for us to bring us His new covenant, He was cut, pierced for our transgressions. A covenant begins a sacrificial relationship to be committed for life. Our culture has been abandoning any covenant and setting up a contract. A contract with someone is to protect our rights and to limit our responsibilities. Pre-nuptial agreements are common today. What are they saying? In case we break up, I want to keep the car, the house, the big screen TV, and what’s in our savings account.

A covenant is just the opposite. At the altar, we say, “I am sacrificing my rights, and I assume complete responsibility to meet your needs, and to stay with you, whatever the cost.” Today, thousands of marriages end with the spouses’ sickness, dementia, loss of job, and with the charge of mental cruelty, because I have the right to be happy and to get my needs met as I want them met. You see, following Jesus, if we enter into His new covenant with Him, will teach us how to enter into a covenant with our spouse. No disciple of Jesus will die of a broken heart. Isaiah 49:23 states of God, “Those who hope in Me will never be disappointed.” Yet, what causes divorce? It’s not the children, the finances, the intimacy issue, but we go into marriage with unrealistic expectations, and the # 1 cause of divorce is a broken heart, because of unrealistic expectations, as the devil shows up to say, “You married the wrong person. They can never fulfill your dreams. Thirdly,

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS MUST ACCEPT WHETHER MARRIED OR ALONE, WE HAVE HURTS IN OUR PAST, IDEOSYNCRASIES IN OUR PERSONALITY, AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT EACH OTHER AND WE ALL NEED HEALING. Notice, (III.)

Luke 14:33, “So, therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple.” To be the Bride of Christ, we must surrender our past traumas, our quirks, idiosyncrasies, and misunderstandings about how God works as the Creator, Master, and Storyteller of our life. I encourage you to talk to Andrew Kneeland about a message he preached on Thanksgiving Eve to the adults, and he will send you an audio copy. Most of us think when we come to Jesus, He will fulfill all our dreams, when He calls us to renounce our dreams, and take up our cross, Luke 14:27 to follow Him. Whether we are married or alone, all of us are uniquely made in God’s image, each with a personality all our own. All of us become disciples of Jesus with ignorance about Him, that only following Him will cure. When we marry, we all have misunderstandings of our opposite gender that even 75 years together will never totally cure. All of us bring hurts and traumas into marriage that don’t get better with time. The older we get, the more our problems from the past bother us until we are healed. The marriage

counselor Jimmy Evans says, “Time is the worst enemy of inner hurts.” So many get a divorce to find their true soul mate. The truth is, “Your spouse, you, your soulmate, and all of us, were born in sin, and all of us are messed up. Get around anyone for long enough, and you’ll see they are quirky, but just different quirks from yours. We must renounce the romantic idea of Hollywood that there is a perfect man, a knight in shining armor out there to sweep you off your feet, or the perfect bride to fulfill all your needs. It’s not true. The longer we live together, the truer it will be that our spouse is really messed up, and he or she will learn the same thing about us. We need to marry in Christ or stay single, for the Word commands us not to be unequally yoked. (II Corinthians 6:14) Dating and courtship doesn’t reveal everything. I urge you if you are single—Don’t compromise God’s standards, nor try to help God out. It will not go well. Don’t look for the perfect man or wife. They do not exist. Don’t be idealistic—be realistic. If we marry our perfect soulmate, they are messed up, and they will soon discover; you are too. The truth sets us free—admit it to each other.

God designed for us to marry someone who could help to heal us, and we all need healed. Ephesians 5: 25 tells us, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. Read on—verses 26-27. Husbands, we are to be as disciples of Jesus, part of the healing work God has written into our wife’s story. Paul used the word Christ here which means “the Anointed One.” Jesus is His name. Christ is His title—and it means healer. Peter preached to Cornelius and his Gentile household in Acts 10:38 saying, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil...” God tells us as husbands in Ephesians 5:29, “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.” Nourish and cherish her are gardening terms. **Ektrepho/** nourish, means to bring to maturity. **Thalpo/** cherish, means to brood over, to keep warm, to soften by heat, and to cherish or keep warm by tender love. The greatest wounds women most often feel, say most counselors, are being wounded, rejected, and not special.

A quote I listened to was, “Every little girl wants to know from her father “she is worth fighting for, you are significant, you are so valuable and so special you are worth fighting for. Every wife wants to know she is significant, from us especially as her husband. Jesus said, “love her as Christ loved the church and gave His life for her.” To help to heal our wife, we must give up our life for her. A good solid marriage is not two perfect people who live happily ever after, but two imperfect spouses who accept God’s assignment to help to heal each other. We don’t love Jesus because we have to, but because He died on the cross for us, we were worth it. He forgave our sins, and He made something out of us, out of nothing. Ladies, if you are called into a marriage, God said in Genesis 2: 18, “I will make a helper who is fit for him.” Helper is the same word for the Holy Spirit. The greatest needs of a man are insignificance. The greatest need a man has is for honor/respect, and men, like women, have many wounds that we don’t even know how to talk about. Women can cry far more easily than we can. When my first cousin died in Loveland, I felt like crying. Four hours later, on Monday night, the tears came. Women are natural born by God’s design to be healers who help their husband to open up to them, so we can cry, weep, and be healed. Our wife is our partner to help heal us as her husband. The marriage altar doesn’t heal our relationships. God has a plan of redemptive love for us as His instruments to bring healing to each other. With a gardener mentality in marriage, we

take care of little seedlings (neighbor down the street) – we water, fertilize, put a little fence around it, not a consumer mentality, if the little seedling dies, no big deal, I'll get another one, little trees are replaceable—"I am not responsible for it to grow."

We are God's agents in each other's lives to prove each of us is worth fighting for. Husbands, we need to say, "I'll do anything to the point of death to provide for you." Couples and singles looking for marriage, do you have a renter's or an owner's mentality? If you are renting, and the house needs fixed, will you invest thousands to fix it? Never! But if you own it, you'll deal with the mold, the termites, the structural damage, the plumbing problems, and the electrical issues. Cohabitors start out with a rent to own idea. The cost is too high, and such a view of marriage is cheap. A renter mentality is "keep your foot by the back door." When the marriage needs you the most, the devil says, "Start looking around!" An owner's view of marriage is "let's roll up our sleeves and make this happen. It's our marriage until death. No, we see what separation and divorce does to the heart of God, to each other, and to our children. As is discipleship, the cost of following Jesus is worth it. Fourthly,

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS KNOW THAT AS DISCIPLES, LIVING ALONE, OR AS MARRIED COUPLES, WE ALL FACE OUR UNSEEN ENEMY WHO HATES COMMITMENT TO JESUS AND TO OUR VOWS. (IV.)

Notice Luke 14:28-32 speaks of the battle for discipleship, for living alone, or for living in marriage. We have an enemy who hates us and marriage. We must not focus only on what we are currently facing because Satan will change our naïve optimism into hopeless pessimism. Only triumphal realism through Christ wins the battle. Photographic thinking and speaking wants out of the bad scenes. Secular studies (recent Univ. of Chicago research) show that those who are the unhappiest in marriage now, five years later will be the happiest if they stay together. The only turnaround they could find was their fighting the race toward divorce, and being willing to stick it out. The devil loves photographic thinking. At the worst moment in your marriage, the devil takes a picture and says, over and over to you. "Have a good day. It will never get better than this." God loves prophetic thinking. At the worst moment in your marriage, with the help of God, we learn to say, "This is truly a bad day, a bad moment, but I know in Christ, better days are coming. I refuse to believe on this dark day there is no hope on the horizon. It's faith versus hopelessness with the devil laughing in our face. Naïve optimists give up on the Lord and on their vows. Hopeless pessimists give up on the Lord and on their vows. Only triumphal realists succeed. So, what do triumphal realists—more than conquerors do? Turn to Matthew 18: 18-20. We agree on keeping our commitments and we bind Satan from taking our marriage. When we agree together to pray together and stay together, the devil's scales fall off our eyes. We need to hold hands and pray. We must open our eyes to the devil's lies.

Our unseen enemy is roaring in our living rooms, in our dining room, in our bedrooms, in our bathrooms, and in every room of our house, trying to split us apart. (I Peter 5: 7-8) Satan hates you as a single person, and as a married couple. He has every possible scheme against you. He wants to tear you apart, your marriage apart, your children apart, and he wants to keep your heart broken, bleeding, and dying for the rest of your life, for he won't relent because he hates God, and he hates marriage. Pray, "Father, protect our marriage from the devil, and stand together that we have authority over our enemy—Luke 10:19. May God help us all to follow Jesus today.