

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017 Series 2: Developing Spiritual Disciplines

A series by Seth Simmons

Series Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we have the privilege of deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ through spiritual disciplines.

Lesson 2.2: The Privilege of Sacrifice

Lesson Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we should exercise our privilege of sacrificial living.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Hebrews 13:15–16 (PPT)

King David’s trusted military advisor Joab cautioned him, “May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?” (II Samuel 24:3, NIV). In spite of this earnest plea, King David had already made up his mind. He would take a census of the troops of Israel.

Ironically it was David who penned this hopeful affirmation of God’s deliverance, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7, NIV). So he knew very well that to take a census demonstrated a lack of faith.

When King David finally realized his folly, he repented before God: “I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly” (II Samuel 24:10, NKJV). But it was too late. As a result of his impudence, Israel received a harsh judgement, and a plague decimated seventy thousand people before the Lord relented.

The prophet Gad came to King David again in order to give him instructions from God: “Go up, erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite” (II Samuel 24:18, NKJV). Understanding the severity of the moment and the need of the people, Araunah offered livestock and property for free to the king. “No,” King David replied, “I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing” (II Samuel 24:24, NIV). David bought the threshing floor and the oxen, built an altar, and offered the sacrifice. Then the Lord answered his prayer and the plague on Israel was stopped.

In the end, David understood that if he was to offer true worship, it would cost him something. Worship involves personal sacrifice. In the same way, we understand today that true worship is discovered in the privilege of sacrifice.

FRAME

Even a cursory observation of North American culture reveals that it is indeed **self-centered and consumer-driven**. “Contemporary culture,” Richard Foster observes, “is plagued by the passion to possess” (*Freedom of Simplicity*). It is fitting that Foster would describe contemporary culture as “plagued” because the sinful desires to please self are what drive the lust for possessions.

This plague is also observed by an unexpected source, says psychologist Jean Twenge: “**Materialism is the most obvious outcome of a straightforward, practical focus on the self: (PPT) (PDG)** you want more things for yourself. You feel entitled to get the best in life: the best clothes, the best house, the best car. You’re special; you deserve special things” (*Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before*). Possessions become a temporal measure for self-fulfillment and happiness, and people do everything in their power to pursue this false sense of happiness.

In an effort to make the gospel message more palatable for a pleasure-oriented society, some Christians have cheapened the gospel and have misrepresented the sacrificial commitment of the Cross. This is most often seen in well-meaning, but misguided, consumer-oriented or “seeker-sensitive” churches. As M. Rex Miller points out, “Most of today’s successful and growing churches are what I call celebration churches. . . . [They] follow the same script as advertisers: ‘keep the message simple, tie it to emotions . . . use the power of music to set the mood . . . make it easy to follow through . . . protect everyone’s anonymity, and finally ask for a response’” (*The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church*).

Ironically, people are actually turned off by any disingenuous presentation because the gospel becomes like a bait-and-switch sales pitch. Consumer Christians turn away when they realize the cost of discipleship is higher than the price they are willing to pay. More importantly, “many [sincere people] actually miss the chance to experience true life in Christ [when] we cheapen the message of Jesus” (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*).

This is why Jesus was painfully clear in His call to discipleship, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23, NKJV). **(PPT)** In order to live a fulfilling life in Christ, we must sacrifice our selfish desires and ambitions. That is the privilege of sacrifice.

- **What are some ways you have seen people try to cheapen the message of Christ?**
- **Why do you believe some are tempted to do so?**

When the gospel is presented as merely an exciting choice to convert with no context of commitment, however, people do not appreciate the privilege of sacrifice and do not

respond to the call of Christ with sincere life dedication. Conversion becomes nothing more than a thrilling life experience, like skydiving, and “too many of the conversions become either ‘aborted’ believers or casual Christians” (*UnChristian*). So **the way a person is attracted to the gospel is important because that will often determine whether or not that person will be a “casual” Christian or a true disciple of Christ.**

Jesus would often confront the crowds that followed Him with a call to deeper commitment. (PPT) (PDG) In John’s Gospel, for example, Jesus told the crowds who had experienced the miracle of the fish and loaves, “You are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:26, 53, NIV). Jesus directly confronted His casual followers and, as a result, many “went back and walked with Him no more” (John 6:66, NKJV).

- **If you were to describe a casual Christian, what would he or she look like?**
- **How do we speak the truth in love as Christ did in order to challenge people to move beyond casual Christianity and become committed followers of Christ?**

The issue of casual noncommittal Christians is a serious matter. In fact, Paul referred to this type of people as “enemies of the cross”—people who are more focused on temporal pleasure than eternal hope. (See Philippians 3:18–19.) Dietrich Bonhoeffer criticized the same approach in his day: “Cheap grace means grace sold on the market. . . . In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

If we are to truly follow Christ and experience the blessings of His kingdom, then we will embrace the privilege of sacrifice and become champions of the Cross instead of enemies of the Cross.

- **Why do you believe Paul calls these people “enemies of the cross”?**

The significance of the Christian message is better understood in the context of covenant. (PPT) (PDG) Originally a covenant was in essence an agreement or pact entered into between two parties. Primitive clans illustrated a vivid depiction of covenant when two men became brothers by drinking each other’s blood. In this early idea, “the covenant [was] not a special engagement to this or that particular effect, but a bond of troth and life-fellowship to all the effects for which kinsmen are permanently bound together” (George Berry, “Covenant,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2). The kinsmen had great respect for the severity of such a commitment.

When God invited humanity into covenant in the Old Testament it was within the context of this momentous relational commitment. People of the time had an understanding of the significance of covenant from the primitive origins of covenant

kinship between fellow humans. God then used this custom to evoke an image of the undivided devotion and love He desired of His people. “The basic principle is love,” Peter C. Craigie explains, “it was in love that the covenant was initiated by God in the first place, and by love the people were to maintain their close relationship to God” (*The Book of Deuteronomy*). This was not a Disney-fairytale or Hollywood-hot-pink love, but a selfless, loyal love established in the context of covenant.

- **What contemporary cultural examples of love remind you of a covenant?**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus Christ introduced the New Covenant to the apostles at the Last Supper. (PPT) (PDG) “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20, NIV). (PPT) The Jewish apostles and other first-century Jewish readers of Luke’s Gospel would likely be reminded of the covenantal commitment in Exodus: “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exodus 24:7–8, NIV). When Moses read the Book of the Covenant, the people affirmed the covenant with a commitment to obedience, thus taking up their part of the contract. The sacrificial blood of the animals ratified the contract.

Thus, “Christ, by speaking of His blood in this connection,” Archibald M’Caig explains, “plainly indicates that His death was a sacrifice and that through that sacrifice His people would be brought into a new covenant relationship with God” (“The New Covenant,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 2*). This is the essence of the gospel—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, as Timothy Keller beautifully illustrates, “God becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us” (*The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*).

- **What are some of your favorite worship songs and hymns about the blood of Jesus Christ?**
- **What sort of emotions and images do these evoke?**

If the words of Christ recalled the covenant promise of God in Exodus, it would also draw implication to the obedience and commitment required of the people. “This new covenant,” David deSilva reveals, “would succeed where the old covenant had failed, namely, enabling people to be obedient to God from the heart so that the divine-human relationship would rest secure” (*An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*).

Accordingly, **throughout the New Testament, the metaphors used to describe the New Covenant symbolize significant life changes that are unthinkable to reverse.** Jesus spoke of the New Covenant in terms of a new birth (John 3:3–5), (PPT) and Paul spoke of the New Covenant as a marriage (II Corinthians 11:2) (PPT) and an adoption

(Romans 8:14–15). (PPT) All of these metaphors suggest a permanent transition and are focused on a new dedicated relationship, because a faithful, loving, devoted relationship is what God has desired with humanity since Creation.

This is the simple yet profound message of Christianity: **God restored covenant relationship with humanity by His own blood**. (PPT) (PDG) (See Acts 20:28.) (PPT) And just as the primitive clans were permanently bound together in kinship and the Israelites were called to an obligation of unconditional loyalty, the people of the New Covenant would be permanently bound together with God in unconditional love. “The recognition of grace does not justify remaining in a sinful way of life,” as Mary L. Vandenberg explains, “it entails moving to a whole new life. The call entails discipleship; it entails moral change” (“Bonhoeffer’s Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 44).

Casual Christianity is a far cry from the covenant Jesus Christ desires with humanity. “A Christian is, literally, Christ’s one, someone who is not just vaguely influenced by Christian teaching, but who has switched his or her most fundamental allegiance to Jesus. Christians understand the all-or-nothing choice that is forced upon us by the magnitude of Jesus’ claims” (Keller, *The Reason for God*).

- **How can we encourage one another to be committed Christians in light of the New Covenant?**

Peter held the distinct privilege of preaching the first sermon of the New Testament church in Acts. After the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, onlookers were baffled and amused as unlearned men and women began to speak in the various languages of the onlookers. The onlookers began to mock them and say they were drunk until Peter addressed the crowd and took the opportunity to explain the significance of what was happening. Peter referenced a prophetic psalm of David and explained that the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit both testified Jesus was the Messiah.

When the onlookers asked what this meant for them and what they should do in response to such a message, Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38, NIV). (PPT) “Acts 2 is critical,” David S. Norris underscores, “it is the marker and sets the standard for what it means to be initiated into the New Covenant” (*I AM: A Oneness Pentecostal Theology*). Peter preached about the conversion experience within the context of the cross and a true life commitment that begins with repentance.

In the same way, we should become champions of the Cross. Through the Cross we have the privilege of entering into covenant relationship with God through faith in the atoning work of Christ. “We first apply the death of Jesus to our lives,” as David K. Bernard explains, “when we exercise enough faith to repent from our sins. . . . Water baptism, then, applies Christ’s burial to our lives. . . . [and] the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes effective to give us new life when we receive the Holy Spirit” (*The New*

Birth).

We become champions of the Cross when we embrace our new life in the family of God and give ourselves wholly to a life of holiness. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1, NKJV). (PPT)

- **What does a “living sacrifice” look like practically?**

FINISH

In the work *The Revolutionary Communicator: Seven Principles Jesus Lived to Impact, Connect and Lead*, Jedd Medefined and Erik Lokkesmoe share the remarkable story of Father Maximilian Kobe. Father Kobe was a kind Franciscan monk who served during the time of the Nazi Holocaust. He worked diligently to make the friary, where he and fellow monks lived, a place of hope for Jewish refugees as they fought the atrocities of the Nazi regime. It was this work that eventually led to him being imprisoned at the infamous concentration camp of Auschwitz.

Yet even in the deplorable conditions of the concentration camp, Father Kobe showed kindness and continued to serve others. He would share his food, pray, and comfort the afflicted. At night he would often go bunk to bunk asking, “Is there anything I can do for you?” He continued to shine hope in darkness.

Then one night the alarms went off. Soldiers rushed into Barrack 14 and began to drag prisoners out to the yard. “Line up!” the Nazis shouted. A prisoner had escaped, and now the other prisoners were going to pay for it. “Ten of you will die in the starvation bunker,” the Nazi commander ordered.

One man chosen for the starvation bunker pleaded, “What about my wife, my children? What will they do without a father?” And that’s when Father Kobe stepped up to the Nazi commander, “I want to die in place of one of the men you have condemned. I want to die in place of that pleading father.”

That pleading father later recalled, “I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live, and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me - a stranger.”

This remarkable act of grace reminds us of the Cross that Jesus Christ would bear for us. The difference is that He died for us while we were His enemies. (See Romans 5:6–10.)

In view of the unimaginable love of Christ, there is no cost that is too high and no sacrifice too great, to show our love, appreciation, and worship to the One who has redeemed us. “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Hebrews 13:15–16, NKJV).