

Costly Grace by Jon Walker

Chapter 2

Becoming like Jesus through his call

It is Jesus who calls, and because it is Jesus, Levi follows at once. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

As he walked along, he saw a tax collector, Levi son of Alphaeus, sitting in his office. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Levi got up and followed him."

Mark 2:14 (TEV)

Jesus' Objective – To teach us that our obedient trust of Jesus can be measured by our need to control life.

Jesus doesn't want you to be a good person.

When he calls you to follow him, he isn't asking you to become a nice and do your best at helping others. He didn't die so you could feel good about the things you've screwed-up or so you could carry a sentimental hope of be re-united beyond the grave with the people you love but who have died.

His call is a command for you to *comprehensively* and *absolutely* walk away from the way you do life now so you can follow him down an *exclusive* path through *the* narrow gate that leads to the kingdom of heaven.

The first thing you have to let go of is the illusion that following Jesus is about becoming a good person. Otherwise, you're just going to keep trying to make yourself good by following a list of Sunday school rules that are self-righteous attempts to enter the kingdom of heaven on your own power, somewhere separate and away from the *Jesus gate*

This simply sets you up on a cycle of failure and condemnation, where you keep thinking you have to *try harder* and *do better* to please God. By following your list, you think you're doing well, but then you stumble. So you *try harder* and you actually do *do better*, but then you fail again and feel condemned for your failure. So you try harder and do better, but then you fail again.

It is a vicious cycle that we so easily slip into when we fail to grasp the grace of God or like Galatians fail to remain living in his grace. We exhaust ourselves trying to follow a list of rules related to Christian conduct – what it looks like to be good – without realizing those very rules, no matter how well intentioned, will take us further away from God rather than bringing us under the shadow of his wings. (Psalms 17:8)

Like frog in kettle, we do not see that when our relationship with Jesus is replaced by rules, the rules, then, take on an inordinate and unnatural heaviness. We end up making the rules the main thing when the main thing has always been Jesus.

But the same thing can happen when we mistake the Doctrine of Grace for the doctrine of being nice, where following Jesus is all about ‘going along to get along’ and a shoulder shrug of ‘nobody’s perfect’ becomes our response to sin.

The gospel of niceness has absolutely nothing to do with actual gospel truth and when we pretend they are synonymous, we become a people of lies, who show more loyalty to a sickly, sweet image of discipleship than to the real, sweaty, messy, honest, difficult discipleship Jesus requires of us.

Jesus commands that you abandon your life so that he can fill you with his own life. In order to help you become like him, he calls you to follow him on an intimate journey down a difficult path, through a narrow gate that leads to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus isn’t looking for good or nice from you because the kingdom of heaven has higher standards than that.

Jesus wants to infuse you with his standards, his righteousness, but you must follow him wholeheartedly. You must transfer the faith you have in your own understanding to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

The sooner you understand this and stop trying to impress Jesus, the sooner you can follow him into the realm of costly grace. Stop right here and listen – Most disciples of Jesus linger here for a lifetime and never move into spiritual maturity. They settle down somewhere outside the narrow gate and choose to live like refugees from the kingdom of heaven, unable to access the power of God, unable to shift from fallen thinking and behavior to kingdom thinking and behavior.

Worse, we declare that Jesus is inadequate to bring us into the throne room of God. Every day we reveal the reality of our faith in Jesus; we reveal whether or not we believe him and we reveal what choices we have made regarding our obedient trust in God’s Word.

The truth is - You are welcome in the kingdom. The bloody work of Jesus on the cross and his blessed resurrection paid the cost of your entry. He has opened the gate for you and you may enter by his grace.

His grace is free but you must leave everything behind as you enter the kingdom. Jesus knows as you follow him you will discover that you have no need for many of the things you now consider important.

You will begin to believe that soon, but first you must follow. The call of Jesus is a real and tangible command. It's not the beginning of a philosophical discussion or the opening of a doctrinal debate. It's not an abstract idea meant to guide us through the difficult times of life as we do our best at doing the right thing.

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When Jesus calls Levi to follow, wrapped up in the command (*akoloutheô*) is both the sense of one exclusive path and becoming now and forever connected to that path. Quite literally, it is a call to become part of the road. In his brief expression, Jesus, in a sense, says, "I am the way and I am calling you into a unique and unending union with me, the one and only way."

But it is a command and Bonhoeffer notes this forces Levi into a choice. He can obey or disobey the command, but he can't ignore it. In our negotiations with Jesus, we fail to grasp that anything other than total obedience is disobedience. There is no middle ground and our stalling, arguing, whining and ignoring are all forms of disobedience that leave us in a state of perpetual immaturity. Our passive resistance is the same as rebellion to the commands of Jesus.

In our time, we speak of a radical obedience to Christ and we mean an extreme or *fanatical* faith where someone is committed to Jesus to the exclusion of anything or anyone else. We mean someone who sacrifices everything, who irrevocably alters his or her life in order to follow Jesus. The sacrifice is so high and so extreme there is no turning back.

We are amazed by their sacrifice and we assume they are exceptional Christians, but the truth is their exceptional faith should be the norm and what passes for normal in our congregations is little more than a general focus on Jesus that allows us to remain satisfied sitting at the threshold of Christian maturity without ever entering in to the abundant life Jesus died to provide.

Bonhoeffer says we've been lulled into believing there are two tiers to discipleship – sort of like cable plans, with basic channels and a premium package for the more pious. We delude ourselves, thinking there are but a few among us – monks, missionaries, and ministers – who are called to be more saintly while the rest of us must settle comfortably into a mediocre, part-time discipleship.

Jesus, on the other hand, will not tolerate lukewarm, wishy-washy disciples (Revelation 3:16). Clearly, what we call radical obedience here on earth is *the obedience expected in the kingdom of heaven*.

In other words, our lukewarm discipleship is actually radical *disobedience*. If radical discipleship is reflected by people who intimately believe Jesus *really means what he says*, then what other choice is there? A tier of discipleship for people who *think Jesus may mean what he says* but they're not sure? A tier of discipleship for people who *sort of agree with Jesus* and sort of live according to his commands?

To become a disciple of Jesus means we move from rebellion against God to communion with God. There is no middle ground where we can still claim to be a disciple.

We may not understand all that discipleship involves or all that it will cost us, but Jesus calls us to take the first step, and then we will develop the additional faith necessary to take the next step.

Bonhoeffer says the road to faith begins with this real and tangible step of obedience. In other words, being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean simply agreeing with Jesus or even heading in the same *general* direction as Jesus. It's sort of like this, you can agree smoking is hazardous to your health, but it means nothing until you stop smoking.

We're not called to follow Jesus in principle as if we were negotiating a contract and have come to an agreement in principle. We're called to sever the ties to our current lives so we can follow after Jesus into our new lives – our real lives (Colossians 3:3).

We're not called to a confession of faith or an intellectual agreement with biblical doctrine. Those may help us understand our commitment to Jesus, but the call of Jesus is to Christ himself. Bonhoeffer teaches we adhere to the person, the only begotten son, the author and perfecter of our faith. We are called into a relationship; we cannot be servants to an abstract doctrine.

“Men pour themselves into creeds,” says Oswald Chambers. “And God has to blast them out of their prejudices before they can become devoted to Jesus Christ.” Discipleship without Jesus is no discipleship at all, notes Bonhoeffer. “It is nothing else than bondage to Jesus Christ alone,” says Bonhoeffer. “No other significance is possible, since Jesus is the only significance. Beside Jesus nothing has any significance. He alone matters.”

Because Jesus is real, our response to his call must be real. We must take a concrete step into the realm of grace. “For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience,” says Bonhoeffer.

He adds, “Only the obedient believe. And we believe only when we obey a concrete command. Without the step of obedience, faith is only pious humbug that leads us into grace that isn’t costly.”

But taking a step in and of itself doesn’t mean we obey Jesus. He is very specific in what he tells us to do. He doesn’t say “Follow some general biblical principles” or “Submit yourself to a certain doctrine.” Jesus doesn’t present a plan for positive thinking or suggest seven simple steps to becoming his disciple. Jesus says “Follow me,” and we follow a person.

“Discipleship without Jesus Christ is a way of our own choosing,” says Bonhoeffer. “Even if our choice leads us to martyrdom, it is devoid of promise and Jesus will certainly reject it.”

Jesus calls us to a level of intimacy that can only be sustained by his constant presence in our lives. He says, “Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:29-30 MSG).

“... There is only one way of believing on Jesus Christ, and that is by leaving all and going with the incarnate Son of God,” says Bonhoeffer. He says we can be enthusiastic about an abstract idea; we even can put it into practice. But we can never follow an idea in personal obedience. “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship; Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

It remains an abstract idea,” says Bonhoeffer, “a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. And a Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship. In such a religion there is trust in God, but no following of Christ.”

Jesus calls us to abandon such abstract ideas of discipleship. He won't allow us to pretend Christianity is an add-on philosophy to the life we've mapped out for ourselves. To follow Jesus means we abandon all or we abandon Jesus.

We must see the kingdom of heaven like the man who finds hidden treasure in a field. He resorts all of his priorities because nothing is as important as buying the field. We must become like the shopkeeper who finds a rare pearl and realizes everything else he has pales in comparison and so he never looks back to the things that once were important (Matthew 13:44-50). Where we have been loyal to many things, now we must be loyal to one thing: the person, Jesus Christ.

As they went on their way, a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest."

(Luke 9:57-58 TEV)

The Son of God himself commands obedience from his disciples, but he also expects us to count the cost of our commitment (Luke 14:28-30). Bonhoeffer says disciples with a romantic view of following Christ volunteer to go anywhere at any time, but romanticism withers when the commitment becomes inconvenient – or when it collides with the full cost of discipleship.

Discipleship means we give up any thought that there will be bits and pieces of our lives that can remain unaffected by our relationship with Jesus. We no longer have the choice to serve where we want in the way we want and still be home in bed by 10:00. We no longer have the luxury of deciding our future based upon a 401K and a dental plan.

Can you imagine the apostle Paul deciding where to go next based on the cost of living in a particular town? Why should we be any different? We serve the same Lord; we're infused with the same Holy Spirit? Are the standards of discipleship different now than they were the first century A.D.? Are we called to a lesser (2nd tiered) discipleship? Do we serve a lesser Lord?

When we have a romantic view of discipleship, we may imagine ourselves giving up everything for Jesus as the world admires our faith and people express their heartfelt gratitude for our sacrificial service.

But the cost of discipleship will likely be the scorn of a world that sees you throwing away your future to help people who can give you nothing in return. Discipleship may mean sacrificing for others who will have no appreciation for what you have done – much like Jesus, who was ridiculed as he died on a cross.

The grace to go wherever Jesus tells us to go comes only through the call of Christ and the power of God infused into our being. Grace only comes to us as we obey Jesus, regardless of the circumstances or consequences.

How much of your service to Jesus is based upon what is convenient for you and how much of it is based upon you doing what Jesus tells you to do?

He said to another man, "Follow me." But that man said, "Sir, first let me go back and bury my father." Jesus answered, "Let the dead bury their own dead. You go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:59-60 TEV)

Bonhoeffer says, "When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all the bonds of legalism. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It transcends the difference between the law and the gospel. Christ calls, the disciple follows: that is grace and commandment in one."

In other words, we're called to focus on Jesus, not the law. Yet, like this disciple, we often say to Jesus, the Law-Giver, "Let me do what I'm supposed to and then come follow you." Jesus replies, in a sense, "Don't use the law as an excuse to not follow me. Don't put the law above me." We follow the law by following Jesus (Luke 14:25-26).

Someone else said, "I will follow you, sir; but first let me go and say good-bye to my family." Jesus said to him, "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:61-62 TEV)

When we follow Jesus, we cannot stipulate our own terms. Discipleship is not, Bonhoeffer notes, like a career we map out for ourselves: "I'll do this for Jesus after I get the kids through school and build my retirement fund." We cannot arrange things to suit ourselves; otherwise, Bonhoeffer says, we end up serving Jesus "in accordance with the standards of a rational ethic."

This still leaves us in control, deciding our service on what makes sense. We may accomplish good things but that doesn't make us disciples of Jesus. Jesus says, "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:61-62 TEV)

Looking back is double-mindedness. It makes us unstable and uncertain and that's the exact opposite of the focused following Jesus expects of us. It means there are moments in our relationship with Jesus when we say, "I'll get back to you, Jesus, just as soon as I finish with my priorities." It is the creature putting the Creator on hold.

Jesus calls; we follow

The call of Jesus is a real command and it requires that we take a real and tangible step in response. Bonhoeffer says this first step of obedience places us in a position where faith becomes possible. Before the call, we are able to live life without faith. It may even be a good and admirable life, but it is *a faithless life*.

To follow Jesus, we must have faith – a confident intimate trust in him. We cannot follow Jesus and try to remain in our faithless life. We cannot get to where Jesus is taking us unless we have this faith in him.

For example, Peter was in a storm-tossed boat when he saw Jesus walking on the water. Peter thought that if Jesus would just call him, he would be able to walk on the water too. Jesus calls, but Peter still had to decide to step out of the boat.

Thinking Jesus might give him the ability to walk on water is one thing, but it was quite another matter for Peter to actually trust Jesus *would* give him the ability. But the only way Peter is able to know is to step out of the boat. If his trust is well-placed, he will know for certain Jesus can do it. If his trust is ill-placed, then he will end up floundering in the water.

Peter's step from the boat – the moment he put all his weight on the water – was a moment of no return. He would either sink or, not swim, but walk with Jesus. But note that Peter didn't just jump out of the boat; he waited for Jesus to call him out of the boat. And then his obedience put him in a place where his faith became real.

Jesus calls us to step into a new life – a life of faith. Bonhoeffer says, "The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus), from a life which is observable and calculable (it is, in fact, quite incalculable) into a life where everything is unobservable and fortuitous (that is, into one which is necessary and calculable), out of the realm of finite (which is in truth the infinite) into the realm of infinite possibilities (which is the one liberating reality)."

When Peter stepped out of the storm-tossed boat and onto the water, where was the safest place to be? In the boat or in the arms of Jesus? The answer, of course, is Jesus, and for a brief time, Peter saw that. Right then he got a glimpse of what it is like to intimately trust Jesus and what it is like to operate within the realm of costly grace as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

And we get a glimpse of that too. We see that following Jesus requires us to step into apparent insecurity in order to find true security. In the *alleged* insecurity of discipleship, we experience the gift of Christ and are enveloped in the grace of God.

It's a paradox of faith: Our first step of faith places us in a position where faith becomes possible. By our obedience, we learn to be faithful. If we refuse to follow, we never learn how to obediently believe. We stay stuck in the shallow end of faith, trusting in ourselves, living by sight and not by faith.

Bonhoeffer notes the step we take is itself inconsequential. We are saved by faith, not any action, even our step of faith. Jesus commands; we obey. You do not become a child of God through obedience, but by faith (Romans 1:17). The essence of discipleship is Jesus constantly pushing us into new situations where it is possible for us to intimately believe on Jesus as God incarnate. "It is the impossible situation in which everything is staked solely on the word of Jesus," says Bonhoeffer.

He adds, "Had Levi stayed at his post when Jesus said "Follow me," Jesus might have been his present help in time of trouble, but not the Lord of his whole life."

It is the fallacy of cheap grace to think we can live life without faith, a faith that is founded on the truth that Jesus is the Lord of everything, large and small in our lives. And it is the fallacy of legalism that we can reduce faith to standardized steps that allow us to follow mere rules rather than immersing ourselves in the presence of Jesus and seeking our Lord's guidance constantly throughout each day. Most of the time when we are *struggling with faith*, we are actually *struggling with obedience* to Jesus.

Why is grace costly if it is a free gift from God?

Grace is a sanctuary surrounded by sin as well as God's law. Outside the sanctuary, the law must destroy sin. Outside the sanctuary, the law demands perfection. No matter how good you are, if you slip just once, you have violated the law. You have sinned. Outside the sanctuary of grace, the wages of sin is death.

When you step into the sanctuary of grace, you are no longer pursued by the law. You are safe within the righteousness of Christ. You are free to live boldly, free of the fear that you might sin.

But that doesn't mean that the law no longer functions. The law continues its work outside the sanctuary. You can enter the sanctuary of grace for free; however, you cannot bring anything into the sanctuary with you. You must leave everything behind and begin a new way of living within the sanctuary of God's grace.

Inside the sanctuary, you can continue to live as if you are on the outside under the law, but that is a denial of your current reality. And it is a misunderstanding of the gift God has given you.

The Apostle Paul rebuked the Galatians for thinking they still owed allegiance to the law:

“Tell me this one thing: did you receive God's Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it? How can you be so foolish! You began by God's Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power? Did all your experience mean nothing at all? Surely it meant something! Does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you because you do what the Law requires or because you hear the gospel and believe it?” Galatians 3:2-5 (TEV)

Cheap grace is assuming you can live under God's sanctuary away from the law while remaining independent of God's desires:

“You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) Ephesians 2:1-5 (NLT)

The Cost of Discipleship –

You must stop seeing Jesus as an *add on* to your life and begin seeing Jesus as the *reason* for your life. You must give up serving Jesus on the basis of common sense and begin the hard task of listening for his specific direction. You must give up sentimental thoughts of Christian goodness and service and live from the vision Jesus provides of the Christian life.

Fallen Thinking –

- “I decide for Christ” instead of “I submit to Christ.”
- I follow the teachings of Jesus, but common sense has the final say for each step I take along the way. I won’t take a step unless it makes sense.
- I have brought Jesus into my current life and am in general agreement with the direction Jesus is taking me.

Kingdom Thinking –

- “I submit to Christ” instead of “I agree with Christ.”
- I have abandoned my current life and followed Jesus into a new way of thinking and behaving. I will no longer automatically decide things based on common sense. I will ask Jesus to give me his wisdom.
- I am taking specific steps to follow Jesus. I cannot take these steps without Jesus.

Your Choice?

Will you follow Jesus into a new life or will you try to attach Jesus to your current life?
Will you take steps that require faith or will you take steps that are *faithless*?