

Take Up Your Cross: The Cost of Discipleship in the New Millennium

Was ever an age in more dire need of salvation than the one among which the Son of God appeared two millennia ago? The Gentile world, long adrift in the currents of human philosophy and idolatrous mythology, was jaded and skeptical. Israel had been misled by self-serving leaders, corrupt opportunists who, like their forebears, “draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:7-9). Raging storms of political intrigue, periodic upheavals of violence, floods of immoral sewage and epidemics of religious ignorance sculpted a spiritual wasteland trodden by disenfranchised multitudes “weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Mt. 9:36). The sick desperately needed a physician (Mt. 9:12).

An Invitation to Discipleship Matthew 11:28-30

So Jesus descended into this spiritual wilderness in order to reclaim His creatures and restore to them a misplaced sense of dignity and worth. To those exhausted by futility, burdened with guilt, and victimized by powers beyond their control, Jesus extends a gracious invitation: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Jesus did not author a novel philosophy, concoct a fresh psychological approach, or give birth to a revolutionary political movement. Rather, Jesus places Himself personally at the center of men’s lives and promises that He, Himself, can provide refreshment and invigoration for all.

But what kind of rest does He offer? Ironically, Jesus says true rest is not a by-product of idleness but of effort: “Take My yoke upon you ... For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt. 11:29-30). A yoke metaphorically suggests work. Jesus does not call us to ease but purposeful labor based on a cooperative relationship with Him. This yoke is easy and its burden light because it is suited to our spiritual nature. It enhances the value of our essence and affirms the purpose of our existence. Consequently, Jesus promises that those who bear His yoke will “find rest for your souls” (Mt. 11:29).

Further, Jesus counsels men to “learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt. 11:29). Here is Jesus’ call to discipleship. Learn is from the Greek word *manthano*, which is akin to *mathetes*, a disciple. Hence, a disciple is “a learner ... indicating thought accompanied by endeavor” (Vine, Vol. 1, p. 316). Jesus again unabashedly concentrates man’s hope and purpose directly upon Himself. He declares to be the source of spiritual learning, both the teacher and the example of life lived to its spiritual fullest. The disciple of Jesus comes to a gentle and patient teacher, the very antithesis of the arrogant and condescending scribes and Pharisees. His curriculum far excels that of Hillel, Shammai, or Gamaliel. Those who come to Jesus learn from the Creator, Himself, what kind of character, attitudes, and behavior establish the soul.

The Framework of Discipleship **Matthew 16:24**

Though Jesus desperately coveted the devotion and allegiance of all men, He never attempted to attract any on false pretenses. He did not emotionally manipulate; He did not foment false optimism; He did not entice with empty promises. Instead, Jesus spoke plainly and forthrightly of the rigors of discipleship. He informed men up front what would be demanded of them and what price they would be asked to pay for their loyalty to Him, and He urged them to count the cost before committing themselves. Jesus does not want a mere following; He wants a fraternity.

Perhaps the most succinct summary of the criteria of discipleship is found in Matthew 16:24: “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.’” Jesus clarified the issue on this occasion because of lingering misconceptions of discipleship among the apostles. Peter had just confessed the divinely attested truth of Jesus’ identity: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). This conviction had gradually developed as Peter and his companions witnessed Jesus’ power over the natural elements (Mt. 8:23-27; 14:22-33), demons (Mt. 12:22-30), and even over death (Mt. 9:18-26). But as Jesus begins to prepare the apostles for His own death, Peter recoils: “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” (Mt. 16:21-22). Peter cannot yet conceive of the death of his Lord as a necessary component in the founding of the kingdom.

Jesus rebukes Peter as not being “mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Mt. 16:23). Jesus’ death does not make sense to Peter because he is analyzing the situation according to human reasoning. Jesus finds this offensive, for His whole purpose in coming to the earth was to fulfill the Father’s plans. If that meant sacrificing Himself for the sake of others, this Jesus is willing to do. Peter must understand this aspect of discipleship. If Peter and the others harbor any thoughts of earthly glory, selfish ambition, or ego gratification by alliance with Jesus, then they haven’t grasped the character of the kingdom. So Jesus elaborates:

“If anyone desires to come after Me ...”. Becoming a follower of Jesus begins with desire, but desire alone is not enough. Superficial interest often lacks the discipline and dedication necessary for proficiency (learning to play a musical instrument or obtaining a college degree, for example). The one who desires to follow the Lord must learn what true discipleship entails. We cannot come to Jesus on our own terms.

“Let him deny himself ...”. Human beings enter the world in a relatively helpless state; infants are totally dependent upon caregivers to survive. They instinctively and insistently broadcast their needs until they are relieved. Ideally this self-centeredness dissipates with maturity and is replaced by an appreciation for the needs of others. Unfortunately, this process is sometimes short-circuited and adults remain fixated upon themselves – their pleasures, their needs, their desires. This self-indulgence can be so powerful that even God’s laws are made subordinate to the will of the individual. But Jesus says that His disciple must fight the tendency toward self-interest. He must

completely submit himself to God, trusting that God will adequately protect and sustain him.

But what, exactly, must a man deny himself? Simply, he must sacrifice anything and everything that threatens his spiritual welfare. Jesus graphically elaborates: “And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (Mt. 5:29-30; cf. Mt. 18:8-9). Jesus does not suggest that sin originates in the fleshly body, for He makes it clear that “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries ... These are the things which defile a man” (Mt. 15:18-20). Rather, He is emphasizing that nothing is worth forfeiting one’s soul! He rhetorically asks, “For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mt. 16:26).

A disciple, then, is able to properly evaluate his spiritual essence, and he makes conscious choices to abandon whatever jeopardizes his heavenly goals.

“And Take Up His Cross ...”. The disciples knew exactly what Jesus meant when He used this figure of speech. They would have undoubtedly witnessed the gruesome sight of condemned men staggering to the site of their execution under the weight of their own crossbeam. D.G. Burke observes:

“In Roman times crucifixion was already the punishment of slaves as early as the Republic. Plautus (ca. 250-184 B.C.), the first writer to describe Roman crucifixions, considers slaves to have been crucified ‘from time immemorial’ (Hengel, p. 52), usually for rebellion, but often at caprice ... This penalty was soon extended to include foreigners and ‘robbers’ ... and was applied most extensively in the provinces ... Josephus, who witnessed many gruesome crucifixions in connection with the siege of Jerusalem ... characterized it as ‘the most wretched of deaths’ ... Throughout his writings there is a consistent picture of the excessive use of crucifixion for the ‘pacification’ of seditious provincials” (ISBE, 828-829).

Thus Jesus clearly indicates that discipleship comes with a price. Jesus is fully aware that the principles of righteousness to which He calls men will excite and agitate evil against His followers. He had previously addressed this in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt. 5:10-12). As Jesus would eventually bear His cross to Golgotha, so each disciple must bear his own cross. Satan will see to it that heaven will not be achieved without a struggle. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the

master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!” (Mt. 10:24-26).

“And Follow Me.” The disciple of Jesus must come to terms with the authority invested in Him as Lord. Peter was pointedly reminded of this when, overwhelmed at the sight of Jesus standing with the great authorities of the Law, Moses and Elijah, he suggested three tabernacles be built in honor of this illustrious triumvirate. God’s voice from heaven, however, elevated Jesus above the others: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Mt. 17:5). Later, Jesus declares consequent to His resurrection from the dead: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18). His disciples are thus obligated to “observe all things that I have commanded you [the apostles]” (Mt. 28:20).

The Christian not only appreciates the authority of the Lord, he seeks to emulate His character and example. His entire focus is upon Jesus; he intently scrutinizes Him and seeks to mimic Him in every appropriate way. Picture a military precision flying team. The leader flies on the point and establishes the speed, direction, and movement of the formation. His airplane is the point of reference for his wingmen, and every ounce of their concentration is centered upon mirroring his movements. After all, their lives depend upon it. And the life of the disciple depends upon symmetry with his Lord.

But many wish to set their own agenda of discipleship. “Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go’” (Mt. 8:19). This offer had the ring of sincerity, but Jesus apparently perceived a hollowness in it. Perhaps the man was giddy over the day’s events in Capernaum: Jesus had healed the centurion’s servant (Mt. 8:5-13), Peter’s mother-in-law (Mt. 8:14-15), and many who were demon-possessed (Mt. 8:16-17). Jesus gently pierces the scribe’s euphoria with this sharp truth: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Mt. 8:20). The implication: Following Jesus is not always a comfortable proposition.

As the scribe pondered Jesus’ rejoinder, “Another of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father’” (Mt. 8:21). Jesus’ response seems at first callous and unreasonable: “Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Mt. 8:22). Is this the same Jesus who had compassion upon the grieving? Jesus undoubtedly detected something in the man’s request that evidenced a weakness of conviction, for Jesus always answered appropriately. Note that the exchange does not necessarily imply that the man’s father was already deceased. Perhaps he has unwittingly allowed concern for his ailing father to interfere with his devotion to the Lord. It is not unusual for people to delay coming to the Lord with seemingly important excuses: “As soon as I get the business on solid footing ...”; “As soon as I graduate ...”; “As soon as I get my spouse to come around ...”; “As soon as ...”. Whatever the case, Jesus’ answer stresses the uncompromising importance of placing Him above all other considerations.

Peter, whose wayward rebuke of Jesus prompted this lesson on discipleship, was earlier asked to leave his fishing business and follow the Lord (Mt. 4:18-20). He did so. Peter followed Jesus from across the mountains, through the sea, and city to city. But even as

Jesus again urges His disciples to follow Him, dark clouds are gathering on the horizon. For when the time comes for Jesus to take up His own cross, Peter and the others will be challenged to follow Him through His baptism of suffering (Mt. 20:22-23). And they will stumble. Are we ready to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus through the pitfalls of our own age?

The Challenges of Discipleship In The New Millennium

The requisites of discipleship to Jesus are global and timeless. Regardless of the prevailing political, social or economic climate, a disciple of the Lord is called upon to display unchanging values and character. It is easy to become so assimilated into one's own culture that spiritual distinctiveness dissolves. Therefore, it is incumbent upon God's people to dispassionately examine the age in which they live and evaluate its potential impact upon their faith. Where is societal drift taking us? What are the underlying philosophies that trickle down to the man on the street? What insidious forces are at work which may suddenly erupt in unexpected crisis? One thing is certain: the Adversary will use one's prevailing cultural climate as a wedge between the disciple and his Lord.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," wrote Charles Dickens of nineteenth century London (*A Tale of Two Cities*). So it is in twenty first century America. A robust economy; a regressive morality. An information explosion; an educational implosion. Unprecedented prosperity; unparalleled debt. Burgeoning ethnic diversity; festering racial unrest. Freedom of speech; political incorrectness. The celebration of pluralism; the marginalizing of Christianity. Aversion to censorship; the banning of prayer. Adoption; abortion. On and on go the contradictions as our nation continues its headlong plunge into collective schizophrenia. Never in the history of mankind has a nation so richly and uniformly blessed its citizenry. And never in the history of man has a nation so swiftly abandoned its recognition of and ties to its Creator. Modern America is beginning to reap the whirlwind of its post-modern worldview. We must be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" in meeting the challenge of our age (Mt. 10:16).

Consider the following three crosses of discipleship, the weight of which is beginning to press more heavily upon the present generation of believers:

The Cross of Service

"But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave" (Mt. 20:26-27).

Thus Jesus rebukes His two hot-headed disciples, James and John ("Sons of Thunder" – Mk. 3:17), who have lobbied for seats of honor in the kingdom (Mt. 20:20-21). Such brashness understandably sparked strife among the apostles and betrayed the yet immature understanding of these men. When these same two ruffians had earlier

volunteered to incinerate a Samaritan village for its inhospitableness, the Lord upbraided them: “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of” (Lk. 9:55).

The ambition of the Lord’s disciple is that of servanthood, to render assistance to those who are needy and suffering. But such service begins internally, not with an attitude of superiority and entitlement, but of compassion and magnanimity. The Jewish leaders had lost that spirit. They had come to despise the downtrodden, equating life’s misfortunes with God’s disapproval. They failed to recognize themselves as sinners in spite of their broad phylacteries and tassels (Mt. 23:5). In their religious scrupulousness the Pharisees would rescue their sheep from the pit on the Sabbath but condemn Jesus’ effortless healing of a withered hand (Mt. 12:9-14; cf. Lk. 13:15).

Some of Jesus’ disciples had been tainted with such callousness, and Jesus repeatedly addressed their lack of humility and concern for others: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3-4); “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones ... for the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost” (Mt. 18:10-11); “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mt. 19:30; 20:16). Lacking compassion for the unfortunate, the Pharisees confronted Jesus’ disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt. 9:11). Jesus ate with sinners because He came “to save that which was lost” (Mt. 18:11). This would never occur to a Pharisee, whose very appellation meant “separate.”

Serving the Lord is inseparable from serving the afflicted who belong to Him. Ponder the implications of the following statement of Jesus:

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me’” (Mt. 25:34-45).

Christians today face considerable impediments to serving others. Perhaps the biggest one is the growing isolation in which many people live their lives. Ours is a society barricaded behind peep holes, answering machines, and caller ID – that is, when people are at home at all. Harried and harassed by cell phones, beepers, sales calls and other unwanted intrusions, many crave privacy. Our electronic servants, designed to liberate us from the shackles of inconvenience, have imprisoned us to accessibility. The rebound effect is that we are swiftly becoming an introverted society, resistant even to the overtures of those concerned about our souls. Perhaps Arthur C. Clarke's premise in *2001: A Space Odyssey* wasn't as farfetched as first thought.

The frantic pace of life is also interfering with our ability to serve one other. Hospitality appears to be on the wane due in part to over-committed lifestyles. Funerals and weddings are often sparsely attended. Bleary-eyed brethren frequently drag themselves into Bible class unprepared to offer anything useful. The worship's final "Amen" triggers the buffet stampede, and woe to the poor preacher whose overtime sermon gives our religious neighbors the jump. Even our family can be shortchanged by our schedule. Outrageous statistics indicate that the average parent only shares a few minutes of meaningful interaction with their children in the course of a week. And when Dad does make it to the soccer game, he misses Junior's goal because he is talking on the cell phone. We are a society too busy, too tired, too obligated.

Have we forgotten the warm glow that washes over us when we have made a meaningful contribution to someone's life? We often fail to serve because we don't know each other. It takes time to build bridges of trust and communication that open new avenues of service. And serving doesn't take some flashy production or a boatload of talent: "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (Mt. 10:42). Ironically, the more available we are via machinery, the further God's people seem to be drifting apart.

The Lord's disciples must deny themselves a measure of privacy and leisure, take up their cross of service unto others, and follow Jesus who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28).

The Cross of Affluence

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).

The latter part of the twentieth century gave rise to a bustling economy and an unprecedented level of personal wealth. By nearly every economic standard Americans are richer per capita than at any other time in history and vastly more prosperous than most others in the world.

So, why is this a problem? In what sense can affluence be considered a cross for the disciple of Jesus? First, because prosperity breeds dissatisfaction with what one has. Each financial increase brings a new level of want. Patience and foresight are trampled by an impulsiveness that has to have it now. For example, in spite of our abundance personal debt is soaring. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of credit cards increased from 213 million to 458 million. In 1990, outstanding credit card debt was \$154 billion; in 2000 it had risen to \$486 billion. Home equity loans have also boomed as indebted Americans seek to pay off their credit card debt. How can we be so wealthy and so indebted at the same time?

The devil can be very generous, especially if he sees that it will fuel greed and covetousness. The signs of materialism abound: The young couple who had to have it all in their first years of marriage and who must now work two jobs and bone-wearying overtime to make ends meet; the teenager who misses Bible study because he has to work a fast food job to pay for his new truck; the restless sense that everyone has gotten rich in the bull market but me; the seething envy over the good fortunes of others; accepting a lucrative promotion in an area of the country where churches are scarce.

Secondly, our attachment to material things can be very deceptive. There is often a fine line between possessing the things of this world and idolizing them. A wealthy young man once came to Jesus inquiring, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Mt. 19:16). The young man was confident that he had lived a godly life and that he had proper respect for the commands of God, yet he perceived that something was still amiss (Mt. 19:20). Jesus, of course, knew the man’s weakness and deftly exposed it in one simple directive: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Mt 19:21). Once again, Jesus replies to an apparently honest seeker in a way that seems too harsh. But look again at Jesus’ offer: “and you will have treasure in heaven.” Jesus promised treasure in heaven in exchange for material divestiture. “But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mt 19:22).

The man chose to keep his possessions, but Matthew notes that “he went away sorrowful.” Why? Because the allure of materialism is such that we continue to cling to our things at the expense of our souls, even while admitting that those things cannot make us happy. This prompts Jesus to lament, “And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24).

Thirdly, preoccupation with the material element of life produces anxiety that undermines contentedness. If we could only be satisfied with the necessities of life, and then trust that God will supply those things as He sees fit, how much stress would we save ourselves! How more carefree our lives would become!

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your

heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Mt. 6:31-34).

But our worries are often not concerned with necessities but investments, college tuition, exorbitant house payments, buying and maintaining multiple vehicles, slow computers and other amenities of a wealthy society. We are frustrated when our vocational success is measured by salary and found wanting. Affluence confuses wants and needs, luxuries and necessities. The things that promise ease of life have robbed us of peace of mind.

Jesus’ disciples must learn to deny themselves immediate gratification and things they cannot reasonably afford, take up their cross of humble lifestyle and follow Jesus who owned the universe but lived as a pauper.

The Cross of Confession

“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32-33).

The first two-thirds of the twentieth century were basically favorable to the profession of Christianity. Though the majority may not have lived by the precepts of Christ, there was at least an acknowledgement of the fundamental connection between Judeo-Christian ethics and social well-being. Not anymore. The last third of the twentieth century saw an ominous shift from begrudging tolerance of Christianity to growing disenchantment and, lately, to open hostility against its tenets. Christians are being gradually and steadily marginalized by a vociferous minority. We are witnessing an alarming increase in the premium on confessing the name of Christ. Note the following three threats against Christ and His followers:

The Battleground Of Jesus’ Identity. When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Mt. 16:13), their answer reflected the controversy and confusion of the day: “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Mt. 16:14). But when He inquired of their own conviction, Peter spoke for all disciples forever: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16).

Controversy over Jesus’ true identity still rages today. Radical special interest groups co-opt Jesus for their own deviant purposes: homosexuals make Him a queer, Mormons make Him a polygamist, feminists make Him a chauvinist, militias make Him a guerrilla, PETA makes Him a vegetarian, libertarians make Him non-judgmental. Note the ongoing debate over His atoning death:

“Clearly the cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus. In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a

criminal as Jesus did. In Islam, the story of Jesus' death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself. Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into peaceful samadhi, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death. The figure of the crucified Christ, says Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, 'is a very painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus.' There is, in short, no room in other religions for a Christ who experiences the full burden of mortal existence – and hence there is no reason to believe in him as the divine Son whom the Father resurrects from the dead." (Newsweek, 3/27/00, p. 60)

While there has always been disagreement about Jesus' identity, He is presently being impaled afresh on the cross of pluralism. So as to offend no one, His name and symbolism are methodically being expunged from the public arena. Crosses and creches are disappearing from municipal property. "In Jesus' name" has been dropped from many public prayers. School children cannot do reports on Him (or other Biblical characters, for that matter). Candidates in the last presidential election were roundly criticized for mentioning His name during their campaign. Even the calendar is changing: "B.C." (Before Christ) is being replaced by the more politically correct "B.C.E." (Before the Christian Era). About the only public approbation given to Jesus is from some athlete thanking Him for victory. His Jesus, of course, winks at his drunkenness, condones adultery, and excuses him from worship. The devil is quite happy for people to believe in a Jesus who approves such debauched lifestyles.

The Lord's disciples must know Him. They must know who He claimed to be, what credentials He displayed, what His expectations are. How well do you know Him? I mean really know Him? We must be intimately acquainted with Him, first because our eternal welfare depends upon Him, but also because we must defend His true identity before our increasingly skeptical countrymen.

The Flood of Immorality. It is a fatal mistake to underestimate the aggressiveness of evil. In spite of efforts to insulate our children and ourselves from exposure to wickedness, it infiltrates our defenses. The music, profanity, violence, pornography, and liberalism of our culture insidiously invade through friends, toys, television (commercials are especially effective), movies, newspapers (lingerie ads in the front section?!), magazines, books, the internet, universities, and various other assault vehicles. Which of our major cultural institutions rest on a solid base of moral conservatism? The news media? Hollywood? The educational elite? The judiciary? If one concedes a grass roots conservative majority in our nation, are they the ones with the loudest voice in shaping our cultural mores? Absolutely not.

This is by design. When Jesus refuted the accusations that He was casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, He observed: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?" (Mt. 12:25-26). By implication, Jesus is teaching that Satan is rational, methodical and deliberate in his attempt to subvert faith. He is neither incompetent nor

contradictory. He is presently eroding the levees of moral restraint and unleashing the floodwaters of ungodliness upon our society.

The Lord's disciples in twenty-first century America face an onslaught of immorality like never before. Granted, other eras may have equaled or surpassed ours in depravity, but never has iniquity been more ubiquitous. And it is having its effect. The pool of marital candidates for our children is becoming muddier. The reservoir of potential elders is shrinking. Congregations are drying up as the median age of membership rises. The devil has siphoned many from a generation which failed to detect his presence among them. We must sandbag our families and brethren against the rising tide of immorality.

The Charge of Intolerance. To a society bent on deconstructing the family, retailing violence, drugging itself into a stupor, and otherwise reveling in rebellion, Jesus and His disciples are a nuisance. In fact, the current spin asserts that such things are not detrimental at all; the harm lies in the prejudice and intolerance exhibited against them. Christians are increasingly portrayed as so narrow, inflexible, and judgmental that they are considered a threat to the public welfare. Theirs is a religion of hate, so the allegation goes, and hate is the nouveau cause celebre of the not-so-loving political left. Perhaps it should be remembered that one of the charges brought against Christians in the first century was, according to Tacitus, "hatred of the human race" (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1, p. 388). As the wag said: "It's déjà vu all over again."

One cross that disciples of Jesus always have to bear is the inability to compromise with the world. As Angus and Renwick noted of early believers:

"The Christians contravened the tolerant eclectic spirit of the empire by the absoluteness of their religion and the exclusiveness of their society. Christianity admitted no compromise, and was intolerant to all other systems. The Christians could not deviate from the teachings and commands of their Master ... To maintain their own life and mission they had to be intolerant. Many would gladly have accepted Christ along with Mithra and Isis and Serapis, but Christianity demanded complete separation. Christ could have no rival, His religion claimed to be absolute, and worshipers of Jesus had to be separate from the world. This spirit was at enmity with that of the day, which enabled rival cults to coexist with the greatest indifference ..." (ISBE (Bromiley), Vol. 4, p. 214).

This cross is getting heavier in modern American society. As societal drift continues in the direction of atheism and relativism, there is less margin for tolerance. This will inevitably produce a backlash against the Lord's people. And as that backlash becomes more severe, how shall Christians react toward the perpetrators of it? With yet another cross to bear:

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love

those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ... Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:44-46, 48).

Our confession of Jesus is more than just a precursor to baptism, a mumbled "yes" in answer to a preacher's leading question, "Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" Confession is a comprehensive profession in word and deed that Jesus is our Lord and that He holds sway in every facet of our character and in every circumstance of life. Jesus rebuked His enemies (Mt. 15:1-9), cornered them (Mt. 22:41-46), and held their feet to the fire (Mt. 23:1-36). But He also healed them (Mt. 26:51; cf. Lk. 22:51), forgave them (Lk. 23:34), taught them (Mt. 22:15-40), and loved them (Mt. 23:37-39). He was able to separate their treatment of Him from the fact that they were lost souls in need of salvation. He exemplified His own universal ethic: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 7:12). And so we must.

Conclusion

One should not construe the above analysis as pessimism. It is not intended to be so. Rather, it is an attempt to identify the dangers of our day and sound a warning that, in my judgment, opposition to the free exercise of discipleship to Christ is intensifying. At present that opposition varies from state to state and region to region, much as it did during the early Roman persecution. But I believe that the overall trend is unfavorable toward Christianity. If that judgment is wrong, I shall not regret my ignorance but rather celebrate it. However, if God closes the door of religious freedom, He will open another door of opportunity. We must rise to the occasion and let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16).

Jesus plainly stated His expectations of His disciples: "And he who does not take up his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Mt. 10:38). And what is our reward for bearing the cross of Christ? Peter, too, wondered about that: "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Mt. 19:27). Jesus replied to him and to all of us, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit everlasting life" (Mt. 19:29). Jesus Christ promises far more to His disciples than He demands from them.