

WHY FOLLOWING JESUS IS HARD ... AND EASY!

Scriptures: Matthew 7:13-23; Matthew 11:28-30

The Bay Area Fellowship in Corpus Christi, TX, has found the secret for getting people to church. This year over 23,000 people attended their worship services on Easter. What brought them? Prizes! Big prizes! Every person attending their church that morning was entered into a drawing for prizes totaling more than \$4 million. The prizes included two BMWs, a Jaguar, an Audi A4, a Jeep and an assortment of other cars. Also given away were flat-screen TVs, bicycles, guitars, furniture, and 1,500 gift bags each with goodies and gift certificates worth over \$300. One of those who attending was a woman named Cynthia Garcia. She won a 2002 Volkswagen Jetta. After the service she said, "I have never had so much fun in church" (quoted in *The Wired Word*, April 11, 2010).

That would probably fill the pews here at Hamblen: giving away cars and televisions. But what would we do with Jesus' words in Matthew, chapter 7: "Enter through the narrow gate, ... for the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it"?

It would be easy to bring people into church if I could promise that you will win the prize, that you will be successful, healthy, and popular, that you will get a great job and that your children, as Garrison Keillor would say, will all be above average. But Jesus never promises that. In fact quite the opposite. He says that the way to life in Christ is hard and those who find it are few.

I think our scripture reading suggests three things that make it particularly hard to be a follower of Christ. First, it is hard because following Jesus makes us a minority. Those who find it are few.

If you think about it, popularity has never been a good measure of quality. My proof for this is the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Tampa Bay is currently tied for the best record in baseball, but do you know where they rank in home game attendance? 23rd! The best team in baseball ranks in the bottom third for home game attendance. They are below the Seattle Mariners, for heaven's sake. Popularity is not a good measure of quality.

That is one of the challenges of following Jesus. It is not necessarily the popular thing to do, especially if it involves giving up your Sunday morning or Wednesday night to go to church, or giving up some of your time and money to help the poor, or refusing to do something you know is wrong even though the other kids at school are doing it, or the other people at work. The way to life—the way to the eternal life that God wants us to have—is not a popular road.

That is the first problem. The second problem is in verses 15-16. Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." Following Jesus involves not how you look but how you act.

This is not how our culture always looks at things. This week, after looking at Major League Baseball attendance, I looked at the list of the top ten movie rentals on Netflix. The

number one movie rental on Netflix is *Crash*. In the movie *Crash*, Matt Damon plays a cop who acts like a racist and Sandra Bullock plays a wealthy socialite who abuses a Hispanic who works for her. Number four on the list is *The Departed* where Matt Damon again stars, this time as a mobster who infiltrates the police. Rounding out the top ten is a movie called *The Proposal* where Sandra Bullock plays a power hungry boss.

What I glean from this is that the most popular movies are about beautiful people acting like jerks. There are exceptions, but often what people pay to see in movies are beautiful people acting in ignoble ways.

The extreme opposite are some people I meet down at the House of Charity. For example there is a guy that I will call Sam (not his real name). Sam is overweight, has buck teeth, eyes that don't quite line up, and hair that looks like it was cut with the aid of a mixing bowl. But Sam is amazing. Every week when he comes for my Bible study, he first goes into the kitchen and brings back coffee, cups, and even cream and sugar for everyone who comes to the Bible study. At some of the downtown meal sites, he serves food to those he calls the "less fortunate," and he is forever trying to help the dysfunctional people who live in his low-income apartment building downtown.

Who are people more likely to come to church to see—Sandra Bullock or Sam? Do you see the problem? According to Jesus what counts is not how you look but how you act. Following Jesus is difficult first because it makes us a minority and second because it operates on a different value system than much of our culture.

The third problem is highlighted in verse 21. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." This one is tricky, because these people are clearly Christians. They call Jesus Lord. In fact they not only claim Jesus as Lord, but they do great works in his name. Verse 22: "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in you name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'"

It is hard for me to figure out what these people did wrong. How can people who preach in Jesus' name and cast out demons in Jesus' name and do great works of ministry in Jesus' name and not be doing the will of the Father? Answer: If they are doing it only for themselves and their own advancement instead of for God.

Here is where Jesus has me right in his cross hairs. How much of my ministry is about satisfying my own ego, making myself look good, fulfilling my own needs rather than God's purposes for the world? It is a tough question.

That is the third hard thing about following Jesus: confusing God's will with our own needs. Sometimes they go together. It is God's will that we have food to eat and a place to sleep and that we earn money to provide those things. Many times doing God's will and meeting our human needs go together, but not always. And when they don't, that is when following Jesus becomes difficult.

Ah, but there is good news in our first scripture lesson. In Matthew 11 Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Let me close with a story. I have adapted this from a piece sent to me several years ago on the internet called “The Burden.” One night a woman went to bed wishing she would never wake up. She felt exhausted and totally overwhelmed by the needs of her family and the expectations of herself and other people. But during the night she had a dream. She dreamt that she was carrying a heavy pack and was just about to collapse under its weight when she suddenly encountered Jesus. He was standing in front of a cross with dozens of other backpacks scattered around his feet. He asked the woman if she would like to trade her backpack for one of the others.

The woman took off her pack and saw one belonging to a woman named Joan. She knew Joan. Joan was married to a wealthy businessman and lived in a sprawling estate. The woman thought, “Joan has everything; how heavy could her burden be?” So she put on Joan’s backpack, but her knees buckled under the weight. “Why is it so heavy?” she asked Jesus. “Look inside,” he said. Inside was a figure of Joan’s mother-in-law, and when she lifted it out the mother-in-law began to speak: “Joan, you’ll never be good enough for my son. He never should have married you. You’re a terrible mother to my grandchildren.” She quickly put the figure back in the pack and gave it back to Jesus.

Next she tried lifting the pack of a woman named Paula. But Paula was raising four small boys without a father. Paula’s pack was even heavier than Joan’s. So she put it down and tried a pack belonging to Debra. But inside Debra’s pack was a history of childhood sexual abuse, and its weight was overwhelming. So the woman tried a fourth pack belonging to Ruth. But inside Ruth’s pack was degenerative arthritis and a husband in a nursing home with Alzheimer’s. She put it down and picked up her own pack thinking, “Maybe mine is not so heavy after all.”

But then Jesus said to her, “Let me see what is in your pack.” He pulled out a brick and said to the woman, “What’s this?” “That,” she said, “oh, its money. I know I’m lucky to have food and a place to live, but my job doesn’t pay much, and we always have to worry about money.”

“And what is this one?” Jesus said pulling out another brick. “That?” the woman said, hanging her head. “That is my son Andrew. He is so hyperactive. He just can’t sit still like the other kids, and he is always getting into trouble.”

“And these?” Jesus said, holding three rocks. “That’s my hair,” the woman said pointing to the first, “and that one is my clothes, and the other one is my body. I hate the way I look.”

Jesus put the rocks and bricks back in her pack and said, “You may leave your pack here with me, if you wish. I will put it next to Joan’s and Paula’s and Debra’s and Ruth’s. They all traded their packs for mine. You can do the same, if you wish.”

The woman tried on Jesus' pack and was amazed at how light it seemed. "Why is it so light?" she asked. Jesus said to her, "To follow me you don't have to be popular, you don't have to be beautiful, you don't have to be successful. To follow me you don't have to be admired by everyone for your hair or your home or your kids. Following me is not dependent on what other people think of you. To follow me, all you have to do is love."

That friends, is what makes following Jesus so easy, and so hard.

- Ken Onstot
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