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IF ANYONE WISHES TO COME AFTER ME

Jesus was no doubt a master of hard sayings. While they are not hard to understand, they *are* hard to obey. Each one of them strikes at the very core of our self-centered, fallen, human nature and leaves us bristling up in the same way I imagine His listeners also bristled up when they first heard them.

These hard sayings are all part of a great spiritual paradox where salvation is free, yet to follow Jesus will cost you everything. Jesus' hard sayings shatter our ability to enjoy the kind of easy and convenient relationship with our Savior where He does all the giving and we do all the receiving–the perfect man-made savior! Dietrich Bonheoffer called this kind of salvation "cheap grace."

To the contrary, Jesus' hard sayings demand one of two outcomes: either we make radical changes in how we live, or we choose to ignore them—justifying our choice by convincing ourselves that they don't really apply to us. It is as if we view the hard sayings as some advanced graduate class on Christian living reserved only for the few whom God calls to some higher level of service and ministry, when, in truth, they are actually part of the freshman orientation class for all incoming followers.

For example, one of Jesus' hard sayings is found in Luke 9:23 (NASB): *He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.'* The parallel passage in Mark 8:34 tells us that prior to expressing this hard saying, Jesus had *summoned the crowd with His disciples.* Jesus is telling *them all, If anyone wishes to come after me…* The words *them all* and *anyone* really prevent us from thinking Jesus wasn't talking to *all* his followers.

Jesus then goes on to tell the crowd that if they want to follow Him they *must* (1) deny, (2) die, and (3) comply —easy enough to understand, but excruciatingly difficult to live out. And since we already have this particular hard saying before us, let's go ahead and complete this freshman orientation lesson on following Jesus.

*If anyone wishes to come after me…**he must deny himself***

The English understanding of the word *deny* can be a bit misleading if we understand it to mean that we are to resist and say no to ourselves and our desires. A fuller understanding of this Greek word would be "to refuse to even pay attention to what one's own desires are." In other words, a follower of Jesus is to "ignore" himself. Our desires and our interests have been relegated so far down the list that we no longer even give them any thought. So it is not that we are to resist and refuse our desires. It is that we just stop thinking about them all together.

This is what Jesus says we *must* do if we want to follow Him. We must be willing to totally abandon our own personal agenda for a much greater agenda—His agenda. Is this kind of laser-focused devotion to Christ a

characteristic of your relationship with Him? Is He such a supreme priority in your life that nothing else matters? After more fully considering this *deny himself* requirement, do you still want to follow Jesus?

*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must…**take up his cross daily***

For the Jews in Jesus' day, the imagery of a cross was extremely graphic. They likely had all seen, at one time or another, Rome using the cross as a cruel instrument of torture and death. If they did not already carry this image in their minds, it would soon be indelibly seared into their consciousness as they watched Jesus himself take up His own cross to voluntarily yield to a brutal and bloody death.

The cross is such a striking image that it leaves no "wiggle room" to negotiate anything but absolute commitment. Jesus is, in every sense, inviting us to come and die with Him. The fact is, there are actually *three* different kinds of death a follower of Jesus must be prepared to accept as part of the "deal." The first two are mandatory for all believers. The third is a "privilege" that millions of His followers have experienced through the ages. Here are the three deaths.

Death to Sin: Death is the entry point into the Kingdom. Paul makes this clear in Romans 6:6-7 (NIV)*, For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.* Baptism symbolizes this death (Romans 6:3) that provides us the way of escape from an even greater eternal death later.

Death in Surrender: Those who are spiritually raised from the dead must also die in a second way. This death comes in allowing someone outside of ourselves to take possession of our lives. Paul says it this way in Galatians 2:20 (NASB), *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.* Can we say with Paul, *it is no longer I who live?* We must recognize that this is a daily surrender. Each day, we awake to acknowledge that we do not live, but Christ lives in us.

Death by Martyrdom: In our insulated world, even the thought of being put to death for our faith seems unfathomable. However, a new book entitled *The New Persecuted* reports that in the two millennia of Christian history about 70 million believers have been martyred for their faith. And now the shocker: of these 70 million martyrs, 45.5 million of them—a full 65%—have been martyred in just the last 100 years.

Persecution and martyrdom of Christians is on the rise. In anticipation of what may someday happen even here in America, we ought to heed the words of the Apostle John in Revelation 2:10, *Do not fear what you are about to suffer….Be faithful unto death.* For many decades, I understood this phrase *be faithful unto death* to mean that I needed to be faithful for the rest of my life—until I grew old and died. But that is *not* what John is talking about. He is telling us that we need to be faithful even to the point of being put to death for our faith.

The disciple Thomas unfortunately had one moment of weak faith in his following Jesus, and for the rest of time he has sadly been labeled "Doubting Thomas." But there is another story about Thomas that should encourage and inspire us to want to follow Jesus like he did.

In John 10-11, Jesus and the disciples had just fled Jerusalem and Judea because the Jews were trying to kill Jesus. While they were away, word came to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, so Jesus told the disciples that He needed to return to Judea to see Lazarus. The disciples pleaded with Jesus not to go, reminding Him that they

had just fled Jerusalem because of the Jews' death plots. To go back now could be life-threatening for Jesus. But Jesus insisted on returning. And then Thomas made a statement that I wish had been the one he was remembered for. He said, *Let us also go, so that we may die with him* (11:16).

Thomas' statement needs to be our clarion cry as well. "Let us go with Him: Let us die with Him!" Let me just say as plainly as I can: If Christianity is not worth *dying* for, it is not worth *living* for. So, after more fully considering this *take up your cross daily* requirement, do you still want to follow Jesus?

*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must…**follow me***

In this final requirement for coming after Jesus, this verb *follow* is in the present imperative tense, impressing on us that this following is commanded and is to be consistent and continual. Not on again, off again. Not just one day a week, but seven days a week. Not just when life is easy, but also when it is hard. Not just when it feels good, but also when you feel nothing but pain. Not just when the sun is shining, but also when life is as dark as it can get.

One of the most striking comments Jesus ever made was after His resurrection when He was on the beach grilling both fish and Peter. *Peter, do you love me?* You know the story. After that interchange, Jesus reveals to Peter the details of his death. Here is Jesus and Peter's exchange:

'Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, 'Follow me.' Peter turned and saw [John] and said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!' (John 21:18-22, ESV)

Jesus' stern response to Peter could be viewed as cold and insensitive. Peter has just heard that he is going to die a martyr's death to glorify God and he, with some degree of panic, looks around for some company. *What about John? Him too?* Jesus simply says, *Peter, it doesn't matter about John. You follow me.*

I can't help but be reminded of the old invitation hymn (remember back when we used to have those?), entitled "Where He Leads Me." The last verse ought to be our mantra: *Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back. No turning back.*

After more fully considering this *follow me* requirement, do you still want to follow Jesus? Can you see why I call this a hard saying of Jesus? All you need to do is totally ignore yourself, take up your cross and die daily, and follow Jesus without question to who-knows-where! Simple, right? The road we are called to travel will be very hard, but take heart! The ultimate destination is going to be glorious—*abundantly beyond all that we ask or think* (Ephesians 3:20, NASB). In the end, it is all going to be worth it. How about you? Are you coming?

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