

Lifestyle Evangelism and the Cost of Discipleship

Brooks A. Kanski

M.A., Christian Apologetics

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Grace through faith: a gift from God that no good deed or work of our own can earn. It's the divine beauty of what our perfect and eternal Creator and His one and only Son have done for us, despite our brokenness and sin. It would be fascinating to poll other modern day, western world Christians about what they think we owe to God – aside from our faith – in thanks and gratitude for His immeasurable grace. The results would most likely reflect what we see in the day-to-day lives of most Christians today: corporate worship on Sunday for one hour (most likely online?), weekly small group that hopefully leads to more than a weekly social hour with one another, 10% tithing to our already well-capitalized megachurch (and not a penny to spare elsewhere!), participation in one to two charity events throughout the year (and the even most likely has an entertaining spin to it, because what fun is charity without pleasing ourselves while we do it), and hopefully a prayer or two here or there that extends beyond the things we want and need for ourselves in life.

Now obviously, this is a bit of a facetious and exaggerated list of what we could expect to find. But then again, answers like these may not surprise us given the self-righteous and ego-centric culture we live in today. From the relentless pursuit of self-ambitions and enrichment in our corporate America careers, to self-idolatry on TikTok and Instagram, to total self-amusement and self-indulgence in our free time (which, by the way, consumes the lion's share of our disposable income). We live in a culture that is fixated on maximizing pleasure and minimizing 'pain'. So, the question this begs, which we each must ask ourselves, is: *do I consider myself a disciple of Christ and does my lifestyle reflect such in Jesus' eyes?*

We already acknowledged that grace through faith is a gift from God that cannot be earned, but the Synoptics make it clear that discipleship is a paradox that demands our willingness to sacrifice everything and to 'take up our own cross' daily to follow Jesus. But *following* Jesus means more than just being a fanboy or fangirl of Jesus. As exegetical analyses of the Synoptics illustrate,

to truly *follow* Jesus requires us to deny our autonomy and self-sufficiency¹ as a submission to God, and to pursue our own self-sacrificing mission in the Lord's name, as Jesus Christ – the God-man – did himself when he was given the opportunity here on earth.

Where us modern day, American Christians typically fall short in our discipleship is in that single word “sacrifice”. We're usually game for the call to action if what's required of us doesn't conflict with or get in the way of our other personal pursuits and commitments – workaholism, friends, Netflix, sports and entertainment, our standing tee time at the golf club, use of vacation time for 5-star resort travel, etc. But when we take a closer look at how Jesus conducted himself throughout his ministry, and what he taught his disciples about discipleship for their own ministries, our culture today clearly has it very wrong. Discipleship is not convenient. True discipleship is a commitment of undivided loyalty to Jesus Christ that requires us to go out and have an impact on the world, *even if that means changing ourselves and our lifestyles* in the face of cultural norms and social practices². A call to discipleship of Christ is the most supreme religious calling any of us can receive and as such, following that call (i.e., following Jesus, in action) is the most supreme religious commitment any of us can make³. We should treat it as such! But to know how to do so, we look to a selection of Jesus' teachings on discipleship throughout the Synoptics.

Saving One's Life to Lose One's Soul

Referring first to Mark 8:33–9:1, Jesus delineates how disciples are to lead their lives and what the ultimate consequences are for a disciple who chooses instead to pursue a life of worldly ambition and self-centeredness. It begins in v. 33 with Peter and the other disciples being served a stark rebuke by Jesus and is one that stands for each of us today: setting our minds on the things of

¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 548.

² Leif E. Vagge, *An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism* (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 2009).

³ David E. Garland, *Luke: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2011).

man is a sure and fast way to forfeit our souls. Jesus compares Peter to Satan for misinterpreting the role of Jesus as the Messiah and effectively tells him to get away⁴ when telling him to “Get behind me”, as observed by Arnold, both here and in Mark 4:10. When comparing Peter to Satan, exegetical analysis tells us that Jesus is not accusing Peter of being Satan or being possessed by Satan, but is making the very clear point that Peter’s rebuke of the responsibility and sacrifice that comes with Jesus’ messianic role is, as Stein puts it, of “satanic-like attitude”⁵. Then Stein goes on to observe that Jesus’ rebuke of Peter for being more concerned with the ‘things of man’ is a parallel to the ‘things of Satan’. Throughout Mark and throughout other parts of the New Testament, Satan is understood to be ‘god’ of this fallen world, so these expressions should be considered as synonymous.

Therein lies another very good reminder for us disciples in today’s culture: that certain things of man remain – in God’s eyes – things of Satan. While they are here and this world is the world we live in, fixating our mind on those things over things of God will continue to draw us further away from our relationship with Creator and Savior, a potentially fatal error for our salvation.

Mark continues the passage in v. 34–35 with one of his passion triads (a common literary feature throughout his gospel), whereby Jesus: 1. Predicts his death, 2. Points out the disciples’ self-interest, and 3. Takes the opportunity to teach the disciples about humility, self-sacrifice and suffering. Here is where Arnold observes the paradoxical nature of our salvation: “The paradox of salvation is that it costs us nothing, yet it costs us everything”⁶. In v. 34 Jesus tells the crowd (i.e., in today’s world, the churchgoers and the ‘fair-weather’ believers) point-blank that if they want to follow him, they must take three steps⁷:

⁴ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 536.

⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Baker Academic, 2008), 403.

⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 553.

⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 548.

1. *Deny themselves (i.e., self-fulfilling ambitions, desires, wants and goals) in full submission to God,*
2. *Take up their own cross – a willingness to renounce it all for Christ (also see the parallel account in Luke 9:23, where Luke includes the word ‘daily’), and*
3. *Follow Jesus with action – this may mean something different to each of us, but ultimately, we are each responsible for being salt of the earth and light of the world, and expanding the Kingdom of God.*

These three steps perfectly capture what it means to totally surrender oneself for the cause of Christ and to forever exchange *your will* for *God’s will*⁸.

Then in v. 35 in a chiasmic structure, Jesus presents the consequences of either direction one could go. One could place priority on their physical life in this world, but risk giving up their soul in the process. Or one could risk their physical life in this world in the name of Jesus Christ and the Word of God, and in doing so, save their soul for eternity.

Jesus drives this point home with two rhetorical questions in v. 36–37, which should make any self-proclaimed disciple feel uncomfortable. V. 36 hits especially close to home for most American Christians, who are living a lifestyle underpinned by the fruits of capitalism. But what good does it do to lose our soul in the process of pursuing all the power, prestige and wealth in this world that we can⁹? Arnold goes on to draw a parallel between v. 36 and the temptations of Satan in Matthew 4:8–9 and Luke 4:5–6, reminding us that the rewards promised to us from our self-fulfilling, worldly pursuits are and will always be as empty as those promises made by Satan to Jesus in the wilderness. Whereas, as Ogden puts it, “those who walk the road less traveled, the road of

⁸ Paul Tanner, *The Cost of Discipleship: Losing One’s Life for Jesus’ Sake* (Journal of Evangelical Theological Society, 2013), 47.

⁹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 548.

losing everything for Jesus' sake, end up gaining everything that really matters¹⁰". Then in v. 37, Jesus affirms the magnitude of the message in v. 36, when he says that once you lose your soul, there is nothing you can pay to buy it back¹¹ (see also Psalms 49:7–9).

Finally in v. 38 and 9:1, Mark concludes the invitation to discipleship with Jesus making a pointed reminder to his disciples that he will remember anyone who denies him and his word in this fallen world, when it is their turn to appear before God and His Kingdom at the final judgment¹².

Salt of the Earth and Light of the World

Mark's invitation to discipleship in 8:38–9:1 summarizes the personal sacrifice Jesus expects from his disciples. But to better understand the specific role in this world Jesus envisions for his disciples and what the ethical standards are for recipients of the Kingdom¹³, we look to the introduction of his Sermon on the Mount – specifically Matthew 5:13–16 – where he compares his disciples to the 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world'. At that time in history, salt was used for numerous purposes, including as a preservative, fertilizer, addition of flavor to food, baking block, purifier, or even as a representative of wisdom in the Jewish sacrificial system. So given this wide array of uses, it's most likely the case that when Jesus calls his disciples 'salt of the earth', he is saying they are meant to impact a world (nonetheless, a world locked in Satan's grasp¹⁴) and it is up to the disciples to see that the world 'tastes' the goodness of God¹⁵. It's also important to note that by using "world" in this metaphor (versus directing it only at "Israel"), Jesus is inclusive of both Jews

¹⁰ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials* (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 29.

¹¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2014), 551.

¹² Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Baker Academic, 2008), 411.

¹³ Donald A. Hagner, *World Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13, Vol. 33A* (Zondervan, 2018), 97.

¹⁴ Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, *Diakonos and Doulos as Concepts of True Discipleship in Mark* (Journal of Pentecostal Theology, 2019), 82.

¹⁵ Grant R. Osborne, Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2010).

and Gentiles in the Kingdom, making this a global mission that extends well beyond the disciples' Jewish world in Israel.

Then in the second part of v. 13, Jesus warns that the danger of losing one's saltiness (as would happen to salt blocks after 15 years of baking use, or as can happen to salt in general once diluted) could yield them useless in the Kingdom's mission. Then, as useless salt gets thrown into the streets to be trampled, the fear is that a disciple of Christ whose become useless could also end up being discarded and trampled by others given their ineffectiveness. This is such a good reminder for us disciples of Christ today, who reside in a world of polarizing politics and a culture that's become very effective at suppressing Christians and their worldview. If we as Christians lose our saltiness and allow Satan to dilute our ability to impact the world around us, we are losing the battle on behalf of the Kingdom of God. This is where the second metaphor in v. 14 comes into play.

Light is an extremely common metaphor used throughout scripture, with God often being compared to light throughout the Old Testament, and Jesus often being compared to light throughout the Synoptics. Here in v. 14 when Jesus calls his disciples 'light of the earth', Jesus is telling his disciples that through their lifestyle of goodness will the goodness of God shine through to others¹⁶ and like Jerusalem at night, his disciples are to be visible in the world's darkness¹⁷. As Osborne further observes, "the Kingdom of God radiates through the lives of his children, and the light attracts the world as moths to a lamp...to fleet into invisibility is to deny the call. Any community of Jesus which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him"¹⁸. V. 14 is followed by v. 15, which draws a similar comparison between disciples and a household lamp, which isn't lit

¹⁶ Martyn Percy, *The Salt of the Earth: Religious Resilience in a Secular Age* (Bloomsbury, 2001), 362.

¹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2010).

¹⁸ Grant R. Osborne, Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2010).

to be hidden but to bring visibility and clarity to all those in its presence. Thus, Jesus makes his disciples an indispensable presence in the world, as they are the representatives of the truth of salvation and through their shining hope will the world be saved from darkness¹⁹.

Jesus' conclusion in v. 16 drives home this call to action by reminding the disciples that it is their *good works* through which others in this world will find and come to praise the Lord God. As we observed in Mark and here in v. 13, the Kingdom – vis a vis grace through faith – does and always will precede our good works. But as disciples of Christ, we cannot stop at simply accepting the Kingdom and witnessing to others all that it has offered us personally. We are called, by Jesus Christ himself, to *take missional action* in improving the world around us and in doing so, *carrying forth* the message of the Kingdom of God.

Endure the Persecution

A fact of life that we're seeing all too prevalent in today's world is the hostility towards and persecution of Christians and their worldview – an unfortunate fact, but one we shouldn't be surprised by given Jesus warns us of this in Matthew 10:16–23. In v. 16, Jesus paints a clear picture of the danger his disciples will encounter on their missions, comparing it to sending his sheep (i.e., his missionaries who were once lost and shepherd-less) out into the midst of wolves (i.e., the false prophets and ferocious wolves depicted in Matthew 7:15). But when faced with danger, the disciples are instructed to exercise two things: firstly, the same craftiness as the serpent in Genesis 3:1, but secondly, the same gentleness and innocence as Jesus²⁰. Osborn notes in his analysis of this verse that the craftiness of the serpent without the gentleness is menacing, while the gentleness of a dove

¹⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *World Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13, Vol. 33A* (Zondervan, 2018), 100.

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *World Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13, Vol. 33A* (Zondervan, 2018), 277.

without the craftiness is gullible²¹. Thus, Christians must go out into the world armed both, so that they can be effective and so that the truths of the kingdom can be delivered without hindrance.

V. 17–18 follow this by painting a similar picture to what we saw in Matthew 5. The missionaries are being sent out into both the Jewish world and the Gentile world, as is the mandate for the Kingdom of God, and so they should expect inevitable persecution in both arenas. But in v. 19–20 they are assured to not be anxious or worrisome in the moment of trial or tribulation, as the Holy Spirit will be there to divinely guide them in response. Osborn points out that the Greek used in v. 20 for “speaks” is that which was historically used for inspired or ecstatic utterance and its use in v. 20 was the first and only practical example of the Spiritual baptism promised in Matthew 3:11. This should serve as a reminder for modern day as well, that the Holy Spirit is divine and He will empower his missionaries with the power of the gospel throughout their missions – especially when they face hostility or persecution from the world.

V. 21 heightens the seriousness of the persecution the disciples will face, when Jesus tells them they will even face persecution and death within their own families. This was a mighty charge at that point in history, in which the core family was central to the way of life and the shame that came with religious conversion was the equivalent of family betrayal, which was devastating in a shame-based culture. Obviously in today’s western world culture, religion within families can be more fluid (or even non-existent altogether), but this verse still serves as a good reminder that the battlefield for us disciples may not necessarily be on the far horizon many miles from home, but could in fact be in the very living room we’re sitting in. Recognizing this and then recognizing that the Holy Spirit will empower us in those moments (v. 19) should give us the confidence we need to fight those battles when God calls us to do so.

²¹ Grant R. Osborne, Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2010).

In the context of Jewish doctrine, v. 22 is relevant because it frames the messianic woes, which were a belief that eschatological suffering by the Messiah and his followers would precede the coming of the Messiah. Thus, the disciples should know that they would not be hated for who they are, but because they represent the almighty Jesus Christ. However, those who endure the persecution – not through resistance, but through standing firm in the Lord and enduring the full trial – will experience the blessings of God’s salvation, now and in eternity. Scholars have debated²² what Jesus meant by “to the end”, whether it be until the end of his life, or the destruction of Jerusalem prior to 70 A.D., or the Parousia. Regardless, v. 22 would be applicable in each of these contexts and still serves as a reminder for us today that it is ok to suffer during mission work. We should set our sights on enduring the duration of those trials, as it is the commitment we’ve made to Jesus Christ and in doing so, how we experience the full blessings of God’s salvation.

Finally, in v. 23, Jesus concludes by telling his disciples that when they are persecuted in one town, they should flee to the next, and continue with their mission as time is finite and not all will listen to God’s calling or receive Jesus as Messiah²³. There is great debate amongst scholars as to what Jesus was specifically referencing in the second part of v. 23. Was there a priority on the mission in Israel (vs. the rest of the world)? Is the coming of the Son of Man the destruction of Jerusalem, or is it the Parousia at an unknown point in the future? Hagner argues for the former while Osborn argues for the latter. But for Christ’s missionaries in today’s world, v. 23 should just be a reminder that God calls followers to Him, and not everyone we come face to face within our mission work will hear His calling or receive His grace through faith. In those instances, we should continue on in their work as our time is limited and so is that of this passing world (1 John 2:17).

²² Grant R. Osborne, Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2010).

²³ Rachel Davies, *Suffering and the Christian Life* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 6.

Evangelism May Require a Change in Lifestyle

For the 12 disciples of Jesus, seeing him perform miracles and experiencing the power of his grace and mercy was enough for them to pick up and follow him. But as we see in their behavior and in their dialogue with Jesus throughout the Synoptics, it's clear they were still trying to understand Jesus' role as the Messiah and what their role in his Kingdom was supposed to be. One could say we the disciples of Christ in modern day aren't that much different. We've each experienced the healing power of his regenerative forgiveness, and we've each seen him work various forms of miracles in our communities, so we've accepted him and now we "follow" him. But what we've learned throughout this exegetical analysis of the Synoptics is merely following Jesus is a far cry from his expectations are of true discipleship.

There's a great ethos at Flatirons Church in Lafayette, Colorado that resonates well with this point: you don't have to clean yourself up for Jesus, but when you get here, you can't stay the same. Jesus' challenge to his disciples throughout the Synoptics is that they must take up the same mission alongside him, for after his crucifixion and resurrection, they will be responsible for carrying it forward. We the disciples of Christ in today's world should know the same applies to us and that requires us each to ask the question: *does my lifestyle reflect discipleship in Jesus Christ's eyes?* If not, then the next question we each need to ask ourselves is: *what lifestyle changes do I need to make to begin fulfilling my evangelistic role in the mission of the Kingdom of God?* To help answer that, the Synoptics give us the appropriate change framework:

1. *Deny yourself and your 'self-god'; you are not self-sustaining or self-sufficient without the grace, mercy and love of the Lord God,*
2. *Take up your own cross daily – this is a new and regenerated you thanks to what Jesus Christ did on the cross for you, and*

3. Follow Jesus with action – God chose you to be His salt of the earth and light of the world and you are as responsible as any other disciple of Christ to take action and help share the Kingdom of God with this world.

Lastly, remember that in the face of hostility and persecution, you will be guided by the Holy Spirit. As it was for Jesus' 12 disciples, persecution will also be inevitable for disciples in today's decaying world. Nonetheless, carry on with the mission God has called you to pursue and remember that those disciples who endure until the end will receive the full blessings of the Kingdom of God.

My Attempt at Lifestyle Evangelism

The conclusions of this analysis hits hard for me personally as someone who grew up a follower of Christ, but then made a series of decisions in my early adulthood that were underpinned by the self-ambitious, self-righteous, self-glorifying and self-enriching motives Jesus warned us against. At 33 years old, I can say: yes, it's been a beautiful life and I'm so thankful for all that I've gotten to experience in life; but God was not lying in Proverbs 3 when He taught us that leaning on our own understanding would lead us straight into darkness. Well, I succeeded at doing just that, and I put the most beautiful parts of my entire world as I knew it at extreme risk. But then God in all His miraculous grace looked down into the darkness and called me by name and offered me the opportunity to find regenerated life through Him and His one and only Son, Jesus Christ. I accepted that call on the spot and wasted zero time cleaning myself off before coming back to Jesus. I know that by accepting that call and acknowledging the price Jesus paid for my sins in that moment very well saved my soul. But I also knew that with the grace through faith came the requirement for a complete overhaul of my lifestyle and who I was in Jesus' eyes.

Since then – nearly one year ago – I've been trying to pick up my own cross daily and enact the lifestyle changes Jesus wants me to enact, so that I can help deliver his Kingdom to the ones who

also hear God's call. To date, the journey has been incredible, and I am so blessed for the new lifestyle I live, which is very Christ-centric and set on the right course. But I also know that this is just the beginning of my mission and despite the facetiousness and sarcasm in this paper around modern day Christians and all that they lack, I know that I am as guilty of these things as anyone else reading this paper. But therein lies the growth for us as disciples with a mission and herein presents an opportunity for us to find creative and collaborative ways in which we can carry out the mission of the Kingdom together.

As I look forward to the next twelve months of my evolution as an evangelist and think about where or how I can begin advancing my missional work in line with Jesus' discipleship teachings throughout the Synoptics, there are five key opportunities I see before me:

1. Missional work in New York City and the surrounding communities or populations who need Jesus Christ the most. It is a huge privilege of mine to maintain a corporate career on Wall Street and physically be in a corporate office on Park Ave. on a regular basis. Although that career enables church tithing and is teaching me a skillset that I will someday harness for the Kingdom of God, it is otherwise right now a self-ambitious and self-fulfilling role. Supplementing my time in NYC (i.e., one of the cities of America that need God the most) with discipleship and local mission work could help fulfill God's mission,
2. Proactive engagement with the leadership at Flatirons Church in Lafayette, CO and with the leadership at City Chapel in New York City to conduct missional outreach and help grow the church's congregation,
3. Harness my endurance races for a bigger, missional cause in the race venue's local communities. I am incredibly blessed to have the physical and financial means to train for and compete in these events. Structuring future races around local mission work could be a

creative approach to sharing the Kingdom with others, and is a potentially great way to engage disciples who are not necessarily competing in the events themselves,

4. Continue to engage my family and friends in this conversation and encourage one another to approach those hard, ‘in the living room’ conversations we referenced in Matthew 10:21, which Jesus warned we would each face at some point in time, and
5. Continue to develop my apologetic toolkit and scriptural knowledge base at Denver Seminary; continually sharing the gospel with others is a critical component to effective lifestyle evangelism.

God’s grace and mercy have been the biggest blessing to me and my life. It is my duty, but also my privilege, to get to share His love with others in hope that they hear the same calling that I did and receive the same forgiveness that we all have. How to go about doing that will be an ongoing learning process throughout my ministry, but as I journey through this process, reflecting back on this analysis will continually help me frame true discipleship (and the cost thereof) as it was intended in Jesus Christ’s eyes.

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