

What does it take to be a disciple of Jesus? How much is required of you? The answer is: everything. You've heard the greatest commandment before, which is: **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind."** All, all, all.

I'm a pastor. Things having to do with God are supposed to be my thing, but I confess that I have not loved God with all my pinky finger, much less all my heart, all my soul, all my strength, and all my mind. In fact, I don't even know what this commandment means. It's too high for me. My love is too feeble. My imagination is too weak. This is obviously a love that is burning, fervent, aching, daring. What is required to be a disciple? All of us; everything.

To believe anything less is delusional. Delusions can be fun. Delusions can be comforting. But delusions will fail.

Suppose, for example, that I decided to build a skyscraper in my backyard. My backyard isn't very big, so it would be a very skinny skyscraper, but I'm going to build it nevertheless. I'm going to start this afternoon, so any of you who want to help are welcome to join me. I don't know much of anything about building a skyscraper. I think I'll go to Menards and pick up some of those landscape pavers. How high do you think we would get? 20 feet? 30? Somebody could get killed when that thing falls to the ground. I would be better off never to have plunked even that first paver into the ground. Why start something that could never be finished?

Let's try a different story. This one is about two brothers. The older brother was several years older than the younger, who was the caboose of the family. The younger brother idolized his older brother. He was naturally stronger, faster, cooler. But this older brother was unusual. He didn't lord it over his younger brother or shame him. He was happy to help. In fact, he wanted nothing more than his younger brother to shine with all the brilliance that he had, if not more.

One of the things the brothers would do was to go to the park. As it happened, one day the older brother found a bar that was the right height. He reached up and proceeded to do one pull up after another with ease and grace. He was wonderfully strong. The little brother looked on with awe. He couldn't do a single pull up, much less many with ease and grace. But as I said, this older brother was extraordinary. He saw that his little brother wanted to be glorious as well, and so he helped him.

They found a bar that was the right height for the little brother. He told him to give it a try, and, as expected, the little brother didn't move an inch even though he tried with all his might. The big brother said, "That's okay. We'll try something else. Jump up so that you get yourself above the bar and just try to hold yourself there." The little brother jumped up, tried to hold it, but he wasn't strong enough. Slowly he sank until his feet touched the ground. "No worries!" the older brother said. "You're on the right track. Let's do it again and give it all you've got."

Now, already you know how this story ends. If they keep working together, one day that little brother will have built up enough strength. The first time he lifts himself above the bar will be with great effort and little grace. But one day that will pass too. One day he will be as glorious as his big brother if not

more so. Because this big brother is good and not evil, he will not be filled with envy, but with love and admiration.

Here's the thing about heaven: Everyone who is there is glorious. No one gets in on a technicality or after having kept back something for themselves. Everyone in heaven loves God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their strength, and with all their mind. There are no cheat codes or short cuts. We have to learn as Jesus's disciples. We have to carry our own cross. To believe otherwise is delusional.

What I have just said can sound as though it conflicts with a very important doctrine. That very important doctrine is that we are saved by grace alone. Being saved by grace alone means that we are saved as a gift. We are saved by God's action. We are not saved because of any merit or worthiness in us. This is absolutely true and very important.

Unfortunately, because our flesh is selfish, lazy, and cowardly, we can rework this teaching in our own heads so that what we understand salvation by grace to mean is that "Salvation is easy." Show me that in the Bible. Or: "Salvation is no big deal." Or: "Salvation requires the bare minimum—perhaps nothing at all." This is patently untrue. This is not believing in Jesus. It is believing in a doctrinal distortion, a delusion, which will not end well for anyone who builds on such a foundation.

Jesus's words in our Gospel reading confirm this. His words certainly are jarring! He says, "**If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.**" Jesus does not want us to be misanthropes, hating those who should be our nearest and dearest. What he is saying is what I've already mentioned: To be his disciple requires everything. That means: No carve outs.

We can't carve out our family and say to God, "Don't touch." We can't carve out our reputation and say, "I'll be your disciple, so long as I get to keep my good reputation." We can't carve out our money and say, "I'll be your disciple so long as I stay in control of what I say is mine." That's no way to ascend into the glory of being Jesus's disciple. It just doesn't work that way. That would be like trying to build a skyscraper with pavers from Menards. It's so foolish that you might as well not even start, because it can't end well.

Discipleship is saying to God, "You lead. I will follow." "You teach, and I will learn." We don't always know where the road will go. It might take us places that make us uncomfortable. In fact, it can get quite bad. The bible is full of examples of disciples, who, in a dark night of soul, have doubts about whether it is worth it. King David, a man so near and dear to God's heart, cried out in Psalm 22: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!**" Talk about struggle! Might we understand these words as him trying to love God with more than just his pinky finger—shaking with effort as he tries to pull himself up above the bar?

So, is the struggle worth it? To be honest, probably not if we had to do this all on our own. But let's not forget about our good big brother, Jesus. You're not alone, and let me tell you a little bit about this big brother of yours: He loves you even if you haven't yet loved him. He loves you even if, thus far, you haven't wanted to go with him to the playground.

Maybe it's worse that just coldness and apathy. Maybe you've committed evil, awful, disgusting sins. So have I. With any normal, merely human relationship these sins would be too much. The relationship would have to end. But Jesus is divine. He has loved you even at your lowest—so much so that he suffered, bled, and died for you. I can declare with absolute certainty that Jesus loves you and accepts you just the way you are, like a little brother or sister. Couldn't we all use a good big brother like that?

But because you are his and he is yours, he isn't going to leave you just the way you are. To do so would be unloving. It wouldn't be good for you. He isn't going to leave you sick and weak because he doesn't keep all his glory to himself. He sheds his glory abroad to those disciples whom he has chosen. **He is the vine, we are the branches. When we abide in him we produce good fruit.** That's glory. You are bound for glory!

Now you might be saying to yourself: "I don't want to be glorious. It sounds difficult. It sounds dangerous." You're right. It is difficult and dangerous. But this is what you need to understand: You are not building a skyscraper out of pavers. You are not doing something foolish. You are doing something divine. You are being trained by the best. Your big brother is showing you the bar and saying, "Pull yourself up!" Understandably: fear. I feel it too. "I can't pull myself up!" "Yes you can. Believe in me, be patient, and don't give up."

Jesus is God's son, who has been sent to set all things right. He knows what he is doing. Just as important: he is good, not evil. He is not harming you as you carry your cross. He is training you. One day, you will be glorious, just like him.

