

“Jesus Demands Total Commitment”

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Many people are committed to a cause. The most extraordinary people are the ones who are the most committed to some goal. And there are some extraordinary people out there.

A decade ago, I happened to watch two movies on Netflix in the same week. One was a documentary, and the other was based on a real story, and both movies highlighted the great lengths that humans will go to in order to achieve a goal. One was *Escape from Alcatraz*, starring Clint Eastwood. This movie was released in 1979. Maybe you’ve seen it. The story, which is based on real events, concerns a group of prisoners who tried to escape from Alcatraz in the early 1960s. They had to plan their escape for months. They slowly made holes in the wall of their prison cells that were big enough for them to crawl through. Once out of their cells, they would climb up pipes a few floors up. Then they had to cut through metal bars to get to the roof. They had to make dummy heads that looked lifelike, so the prison guards would think the prisoners were sleeping in their beds while they were actually escaping. They also made a raft out of raincoats. The planning took a great deal of imagination and months of work. But these men were committed to this cause because they were motivated: they wanted to escape the island prison. No one knows if they succeeded. They probably drowned in San Francisco Bay. But I was struck by the lengths people will go to in order to reach a goal.

The other movie I watched was a documentary called *Man on Wire*. The movie was released in 2008, but it’s about a French man who in 1974 walked on a wire that was suspended between the two towers of the World Trade Center. This man and some friends planned this stunt for months. They had to find a way to sneak up to the top of the towers with all their equipment. (I should point out that this was illegal.) Then they had to take hours to connect the wire between the two towers. Finally, the French man, Philippe Petit, walked on the wire, over 1,300 feet above the ground, for 45 minutes while holding a 26-foot, 55-pound balancing pole. He went back and forth between the buildings a few times, even lying down on his back in the middle of the wire, before he finished and was arrested. I can’t believe that someone would risk his life to do that stunt, and I can’t believe how much planning it took. Again, this shows that people will go to great lengths—or perhaps I should say great heights—to accomplish some goal.

Now, these people—the ones who tried to escape from Alcatraz and the man who walked on a wire a quarter of a mile up in the air—were unusually committed to a cause. But all of us are committed to something. We all care about certain causes. We’re all trying to reach certain goals. Some of those goals may be quite trivial, like binge-watching an entire TV series on Netflix or putting together a crossword puzzle. Some goals are a bit more productive: working hard to get a better job or a raise in pay, getting good grades, dieting and exercising to lose weight. But whatever someone is most committed to—whether it’s inventing something, breaking a record, or watching programs on TV—reveals what someone treasures most.

I think it’s commitment that shows if someone is a Christian or not. To be a Christian is literally to be a “little Christ.” Being a Christian is not merely liking the idea of Jesus, or admiring him. Real Christians aren’t just fans of Jesus. Christianity isn’t a spectator sport. Christianity isn’t just knowing facts about Jesus. James, the brother of Jesus, says, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19).¹ Being a Christian doesn’t mean believing that Jesus lived and died and rose again, in the way that we believe Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Being a Christian means having a right relationship with Jesus. Being a Christians means being committed to him. Being a Christian means being transformed by God so that one’s life is changed and continues to change. When we become Christians, we die to our old ways, and we follow Jesus. This is the type of commitment Jesus requires from us.

We see this in different ways in the Gospels. First, we see that Jesus invites those who would follow him to come under his “yoke” and rest in him. We see this in Matthew 11:28–30:

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Here, Jesus is very inviting. He promises rest to the weary, the burdened. Those who are beaten down can come to Jesus for relief. In his heart, his inner being, he is gentle and lowly. We talked recently about how Jesus is gracious and compassionate.² But notice something: Jesus says that the one who comes to him for rest must take his yoke and put it on. A yoke is a device that was put on the necks of animals to join them together so they could perform a task, like plowing a

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² For an extended meditation on how Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart, see Dane C. Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

field. Metaphorically, a yoke signified submission to an authority. Rabbis used to speak of the “yoke of the law,” which was a reference to the Mosaic law of the Old Testament. But the demands of that law were more than the people could bear, as Peter indicated when in Acts 15:10 he said, “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Because Jesus is gracious, he is a better master than the rigid demands of the law. He is a better master than anyone else because he is righteous. He’s a better master than anyone else because no one else will die for your sins. But still, he is a master, and to follow Jesus, one must come under his yoke. We can be free from sin, but we must be slaves to Jesus. We will all be slaves to something—our desires, our idols, the things we want the most, the things that dominate us—but Jesus is the only Lord who will not fail you and, if you fail him, he is gracious and forgiving.³ We will all be committed to something, but no one will be more committed to us than Jesus.

Notice something else in that passage: Jesus invites us to learn from him. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (verse 29). This is not an optional part of following Jesus. Earlier in Matthew, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that there are two types of people: there are people who will enter the narrow gate to salvation and others who will go down the broad road of destruction (7:13–14). There are two types of trees: those that produce good fruit and those that bear bad fruit (7:15–20). There are people that Jesus knows, and those whom he doesn’t (7:21–23). Then, Jesus says these words (Matthew 7:24–27).

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Notice that in this little parable, there are two types of people. There are those who build houses on a foundation of rock, and those who build houses on sand. Notice that for both groups of people, the rain falls, there is flooding, and there is powerful wind. This storm represents Judgment Day. All will stand before God one day. The difference is that some will have built

³ This thought comes from Tim Keller. I’m sure he presents it in either *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008) or *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

their lives on a solid foundation, while others didn't. So, who are the people who built on the solid foundation, those who will survive judgment? Those who not only hear Jesus' words, but also put them into practice. The one who hears Jesus' words but does not obey will not stand.

Before I continue, think about this for a moment: what kind of person would say such a thing? If you or I were to approach a group of people and say, "If you build your life on my teaching, you will survive Judgment Day," what would people think of us? They would think we were crazy or delusional. But Jesus isn't those things. He has the authority to say such things because he's not just gentle and lowly, he's not just a great teacher or a wise man or a spiritual guru. No, he is God incarnate, the Son of God, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, yet also a human being. There is no one like him.

Jesus demands that we listen to him, learn from him, and do what he says. That's why that passage comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The one who enters through the narrow gate, the one who produces good fruit, the one who is known by Jesus—he or she must do what Jesus says.

Jesus also demands us to follow him. We are not to wait until later. We must not delay. When we hear the call to follow Jesus, we must respond immediately. We see this in Luke 9:57–62:

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."⁶⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."⁶¹ Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus lived as if this world—at least this world as it now stands—was not his true, permanent home. He asks his followers to do the same. When Jesus asks a man to follow and the man says, "Let me first go and bury my father," Jesus says, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead." He's probably making a play on words. He probably means: "Let the spiritually dead—the ones who won't follow me—take care of your father, who is now gone. Now is the time to follow me." There is no looking back when we follow Jesus. We don't necessarily have to leave all family and friends to follow Jesus, but we do have to leave our old way of living. And we must not delay when Jesus calls. We must follow. There can be no excuses.

Now, some of this language—words like “yoke” and “obedience”—can make it seem that following Jesus is a matter of duty. But elsewhere, Jesus makes it clear that doing what he says isn’t about joyless duty, or grim subjection to a master. No, it’s a matter of love. The ones who love Jesus will obey him. We find this in John 14:15–24. Notice that Jesus makes this point three times: the one who obeys him loves him.

¹⁵ “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ *Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.* And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” ²³ Jesus answered him, “*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*” ²⁴ *Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me”* (emphasis added).

Those who love Jesus will obey. This isn’t a hard concept. If your spouse asks you to do something, and if you love your wife or your husband, you will do what they ask. Imagine, men, that your wife has given you a shopping list. She says, “Honey, can you pick up such-and-such at the store on your way home?” Now, men, if you love your wife, you will do it. If she asked you to do that, and you ignored her requests, but then came home empty-handed and said, “I love you, dear”—well, I don’t imagine that would go over very well with her. I don’t think she would feel loved, and I don’t think you’d be in for a good night.

So, how much more should those who love the God who became man obey him? Those who love obey, and those who love Jesus will be loved by the Father and by him. And what of those who don’t love Jesus? “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” What’s more, Jesus claims that these words are not his own, but those of God the Father.

Speaking of love, Jesus tells us that that the greatest commandment of God is to love him with everything. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says this (12:29–30): “The most important one is . . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” What this means is Christians should love God—Father, Son,

and Spirit—with everything. We will love God with all our affections. We will love God with our very being. We will love God with all our mental and intellectual abilities. We will love God with our bodies, through work and service and obedience. Jesus doesn't say, "Love the Lord your God with a third of your heart and a quarter of your brain, and a few fingers and one leg." No, he said to love God with everything. Loving God this way is part of following Jesus.

Jesus calls us to more than just learning from him and obeying his words. Jesus asks us to do something far more radical. He bids us to come and die. Consider what he says in Mark 8:34–38:

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

What does this mean, to take up one's cross? I think Don Carson, one of my favorite theologians, explains it well:

This expression "to take up one's cross" is not an idiom by which to refer to some trivial annoyance—an ingrown toenail, perhaps, or a toothache, or an awkward in-law: "We all have our crosses to bear." No, in the first century, that sort of interpretation would have been impossible. In the first century it was as culturally unthinkable to make jokes about crucifixion as it would be today to make jokes about Auschwitz. To take up your cross does not mean to move forward with courage despite the fact that you lost your job or your spouse. It means you are under sentence of death; you are taking up the horizontal cross-member on your way to the place of crucifixion. You have abandoned all hope of life in this world. And then, Jesus says, and only then, are we ready to follow him.⁴

I think "taking up one's cross" and denying oneself means that our old selves have to die. Paul, the messenger Jesus appointed to spread his message across the Roman Empire, writes about this several times in his letters (Rom. 6:4; 8:13; Col. 3:5–10). We have to give up the parts of our lives that didn't align with God's will: our ungodly ways, desires, and agendas, whatever they were. We must allow God to reshape our lives, giving us new direction. He is the potter; we are clay. Those who are pottery made for noble purposes—to borrow Paul's language from Romans

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 25.

9—will allow God to mold them as he sees fit. The stubborn and hard-hearted, who refuse to give up control over their own lives, will be objects prepared for destruction.⁵

Denying oneself and taking up one's cross means that Christians are also prepared to follow Christ even if it leads to persecution and death. Being a Christian is the best option for anyone, because it gives us the greatest reward: a relationship with God, forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life with God in a new world that isn't broken because of the effects of sin. But becoming a Christian may not make this life easier. In fact, it might make it harder. Graeme Goldsworthy, another one of my favorite theologians, acknowledges as much: "Conversion does not remove us from this world but rather puts us into conflict with it. . . . The Christian not only does not escape the woes of this sinful world, but he must also be content to lose favour with the world through non-conformity to its standards."⁶

I suppose that's why Jesus says that if we are to follow him, we must love Jesus more than anyone else, even our own family members. We must be willing to take up our cross to follow him. But before we decide to do this, we must first count the cost. That's what Jesus says in Luke 14:25–33:

²⁵ Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "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. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Now, Jesus doesn't mean we literally have to hate our family members. (After all, this would be against his commands to love everyone, whether neighbor or enemy.) This is an idiom, meaning "to love less."⁷ We have to love Jesus more than our family members, and more than anyone one

⁵ See Rom. 9:21–22.

⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation* (originally published in 1984), in *The Goldsworthy Trio* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 184.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1284.

or anything else. But we must also count the cost. If we are unwilling to abandon our old ways, our old goals, and everything else, we cannot follow Jesus.

We need to recover this message. This is very important for evangelism. Christians have adopted a lot of wrong ways of telling people the gospel. In fact, I think we have lost what the gospel truly is. The gospel is that even though we are sinners, who have rejected the God who has made us for his purposes, God has provided a way for us to be made right with him. God the Father sent God the Son to become a man, to live a perfect life that we can't live because we have disordered desires that cause us to disobey God. And Jesus, God the Son, died on the cross to take on his Father's perfect, holy judgment against sin. Jesus died a real death, but he rose from the grave on the third day, showing he paid the penalty for sin in full and that he has power over death. All who count the cost, decide it's worth it, put their trust in him, and follow him will be forgiven all their offenses against God and will have their own future resurrection, to live in a perfect world with God forever. That's good news. But the person who would receive that good news must first know what they're getting into.

C. S. Lewis, in his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, asks the question, "Is Christianity Hard or Easy?"⁸ He observes that most of us try to be good while also trying to maintain control over our lives. We try to meet God's demands without giving him all of ourselves. But this only makes us miserable, because we can never meet those demands. It's like coming under the "yoke of the law" again. So, Lewis's answer is: "The Christian way is different: harder, and easier."⁹ It's harder because God demands so much of us. He wants all. But it's easier because Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light—he's gracious and forgiving. And Jesus offers us not just goodness, but something better: transformation.

This is how Lewis describes Jesus' demands:

Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think

⁸ This is the title of Book Four, Chapter Eight, in *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: HarperOne, 2001).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.’¹⁰

That’s a very difficult thing to give Jesus, our whole selves. But Lewis says this is better than what we are trying to do. He writes,

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call ‘ourselves’, to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be ‘good’. We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centred on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

If we want to be Christians, we need to have that kind of deep change. We need to be transformed by God. And that is what God can do. Later in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes, “God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature.”¹¹ We need to be turned into new types of creatures, ones who can love and obey Jesus.

Now at this point, you may be thinking, “This is all too hard. How do I deny myself and give up my life to Jesus?” You may wonder if you’re even a Christian. I think there are two things we need to consider, and these things should encourage us and give us hope.

The first thing we need to consider is that Jesus denied himself and literally took up a cross. If we are to follow Jesus, we can expect that on some level, our life is going to follow the pattern of his life. Of course, we may not die for our faith, but we will die (unless Jesus returns before our lives are over). And we can’t die for the sins of others. But we will face some level of persecution if we’re truly living as Christians. Yet Jesus didn’t just die. He also rose from the grave and was exalted. And Christians will experience that, too. All Christians will be resurrected to new life in a perfect body in a perfect world where there is no more pain, hunger, disease, or even death. So, the difficulties of this life are temporary, and what follows after that is

¹⁰ Ibid., 196–197.

¹¹ Ibid., 216.

a glory we can only imagine. The other option—a refusal to die to self now—is no good, for not only will you face a physical death, but a later spiritual death, condemnation, an unending, miserable existence. It will be God’s way or your way, and your way will eventually lead to an existence stripped of everything good. Who would want that?

There’s a second thing we should consider. When the disciples heard that an upright, rich and apparently law-abiding young man couldn’t enter into the kingdom of heaven, they became dismayed. They asked Jesus, “Then who can be saved?” And Jesus answered, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:26–27). God has the power to make us into new creations. God can give us the Holy Spirit, who comes to indwell in us, who generates faith in us, who helps us to kill our old selves and turn from our self-destructive ways. The Holy Spirit is the key to our lives as Christians, from start to finish. So, another part of the good news is that God can transform us into new creations. God can give us the strength we need to follow Jesus.

If you’re here today and don’t know Jesus—or if you don’t know that you know Jesus—I urge you to follow him. Today. Don’t look back, don’t wait for a better time, don’t think you have to be all cleaned up or have your act all together before you follow Jesus. But count the cost. Becoming a Christian is not adding a little Jesus to your life. It’s not being a fan of Jesus. It’s listening to him, learning from him, and following him. As Jesus said of his people, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Being a Christian will involve persecution. This may just be being called names. It could mean not getting hired for a job, or getting fired for your beliefs. It could mean losing friends, or even having family members distance themselves from you. It could mean even worse. But it’s worth it. It’s the only way to have eternal life, a life beyond the grave. It’s the only way to have hope.

If you don’t know where you stand with Jesus, just call out to God. Pray that he would transform you. Pray he would give you the Holy Spirit, so that you will be able to confess that Jesus is Lord. You can pray something simple like, “God, I believe you exist. Please give me everything I need to follow Jesus. Please change me. Give me your Spirit. Give me faith. Help me repent of my sins. Please forgive me.” There are no magic words to pray. God wants your heart, along with the rest of you. And if you want God, pray to him. If you need to talk to me, I’m here to help.

If you are a Christian and you've become a bit complacent, a bit lazy, or lacking direction, it may be a good time to examine yourself. What are you committed to? What are your goals? What are your plans? Does your life revolve around Jesus, or are you trying to make Jesus revolve around you? Do you follow the true Jesus described in the Bible, or a Jesus made in your image? If you've gotten off track a bit, you can also pray that God would get you on the right path. We all need to repent continually of our sins. Repentance and faith are not one-time affairs. They are the whole of the Christian life.

Let us commit ourselves to Jesus. We may need to recommit to Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Let's follow him.