

The Uncommitted "Christian"

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Recently released from jail, a young communist disciple wrote to his fiancée, breaking off their engagement:

We communists have a high casualty rate. We are the ones who get shot and hung and ridiculed and fired from our jobs and in every other way made as uncomfortable as possible. A certain percentage of us get killed or imprisoned. We live in virtual poverty. We turn back to the party every penny we make above what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. We communists do not have the time or the money for many movies, or concerts, or T-bone steaks, or decent homes, or new cars. We have been described as fanatics. We are fanatics. Our lives are dominated by one great overshadowing factor: The struggle for world communism. We communists have a philosophy of life that no amount of money can buy. We have a cause to fight for, a definite purpose in life. We subordinate our petty personal selves to the great movement of humanity; and if our personal lives seem hard or our egos appear to suffer through subordination to the party, then we are adequately compensated by the thought that each of us in his small way is contributing to something new and true and better for mankind.

There is one thing in which I am in dead earnest about, and that is the communist cause. It is my life, my business, my religion, my hobby, my sweetheart, my wife, and my mistress, my breath and meat. I work at it in the daytime and dream of it at night. Its hold on me grows, not lessens, as time goes on; therefore, I cannot carry on a friendship, a love affair, or even a conversation without relating it to this force that both drives and guides my life. I evaluate people, books, ideas and actions according to how they affect the communist cause, and by their attitude toward it. I've already been in jail because of my ideals, and if necessary, I'm ready to go before a firing squad.

Although deceived and misguided, this young communist disciple possessed what so many professing Christians lack: commitment. We may shake our heads in pity for his deluded belief, but at least his belief was proved to be genuine by his actions, something that cannot always be said of those who claim to be followers of Christ.

True faith always manifests itself by deeds. There is an inseparable correlation between belief and behavior. As Martin Luther wrote in the preface to his commentary on the book of Romans, "It is impossible, indeed, to separate works from faith, just as it is impossible to separate heat and light from fire." [1]

How do you know a person believes what you tell him? If he acts as if he believes you. If you tell him a deadly spider is crawling up his leg, and he smiles and continues conversing with you, you can be sure he doesn't believe you. Likewise, the person who believes in Jesus acts accordingly. His faith is evidenced by his obedience.

Although many professing Christians claim to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, it's obvious by their actions that they don't believe at all. As Paul wrote, "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him" (Titus 1:16).

Jesus, CEO

Imagine that you work for a large multi-national company. One day, as you are working at your station, a well-dressed man whom you've never seen before enters through a door on the far side of the room. He walks over to your desk and says, "Smith, I'm the CEO of this company. Straighten up the mess on your desk immediately!" What would you do? It all depends, of course, whether or not you believe he is who he claims to be. The CEO yields more authority than anyone else in the company. He is the one, above all others in the company, whom you wouldn't want to displease. So, if you believe he's the CEO, you'll immediately obey him. If you don't obey him, it would indicate that you don't believe he's the CEO.

The analogy is obvious. Believing in Jesus results in submitting to Jesus. We are saved through faith in Jesus, but our faith must be a submissive faith, otherwise it is not faith at all. This is why Paul twice mentions in his epistle to the Romans the "obedience of faith" (see Rom 1:5; 16:26). The entire goal of his ministry was to bring about the "obedience of faith" among all the Gentiles (see Rom. 1:5).

"Your analogy is flawed" some may argue, "because Jesus is not a CEO to be feared."

Such an objection reveals the very heart of the problem. If the CEO analogy is flawed, it is only so because Jesus is much more than a CEO. He is the Creator of all people, the Judge of the living and the dead; He possesses a name above every other name.

In the minds of so many professing Christians, however, Jesus is Savior but not Lord. Heâ€™s a friendly neighbor, not the Head of the Church. He possesses all love but not all authority in heaven and on earth. Heâ€™s a best buddy, not King of kings. Heâ€™s a jolly good fellow, but not the One before whom every knee shall bow. Heâ€™s good but Heâ€™s not God. In reality, however, such a Jesus does not exist, and those who are convinced otherwise are the worst kind of idolatersâ€”theyâ€™ve invented a god of their own imaginations.

The apostle James repeatedly warned against being deluded by a faith that is void of the works of obedience:

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves....If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless....What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 1:22, 26; 2:14, emphasis added).

James couldnâ€™t make his point more clear. Faith without works cannot save us. What we believe is revealed by our words and deeds. Moreover, it is possible to deceive our own hearts in this matter and possess a worthless religion.

James continues:

But someone may well say, â€œYou have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.â€• You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?....You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone....For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (James 2:18-20, 24, 26, emphasis added).

James points out that even demons possess some degree of faith,[2] and their faith is manifested by actions: they shudder in fear. Yet how many professing believers demonstrate less faith than demons, demonstrating no fear of God? [3]

Jesus Called Non-Believers to Obedient Faith

Note also that James challenges anyone to show his faith without works (see 2:18). Works cannot be dissected from true faith. That is why true saving faith always begins with repentance. And that is precisely why Jesusâ€™ calls to salvation were so often calls to commitment and obedience. Jesus called people to a faith that was obedient, and to the chagrin of many who would divorce works from faith, Jesus often said nothing at all about faith when He called people to salvation. His true followers would show their faith by their works.

Amazingly, Jesusâ€™ calls to costly commitment are often shamelessly ignored by professing Christians. Or, if they are acknowledged, are explained away as being calls to a deeper relationship that are supposedly addressed, not to the unsaved, but to those who have already received Godâ€™s saving grace. Yet, sadly, so many of these â€œbelieversâ€• who claim that Jesusâ€™ calls to costly commitment are addressed to them rather than the unsaved do not heed His calls as they interpret them. In their minds, they have the option not to respond in obedience, and they never do.

First Steps or a Deeper Walk?

Letâ€™s consider one of Jesusâ€™ invitations to salvation that is often wrongfully thought to be a call to a deeper walk by professing Christians:

And [Jesus] summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, â€œIf anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospelâ€™s shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angelsâ€• (Mark 8:34-38).

Is this an invitation to salvation addressed to unbelievers or an invitation to a more committed relationship addressed to believers? As we read honestly, the answer becomes obvious.

First, notice that the crowd Jesus was speaking to consisted of â€œthe multitudeâ€• and His disciples (v. 34). Clearly then, the â€œmultitudeâ€• was not His disciples. They, in fact, were â€œsummonedâ€• by Him to hear what He was about to say. Jesus wanted everyone, followers and seekers, to understand the truth He was about

to teach. Notice also that He then began by saying, "I am for anyone...." (v. 34, emphasis added). His words apply to anyone and everyone.

As we continue reading, it becomes even more clear who Jesus was addressing. Specifically, His words were aimed at every person who desired to "come after" Him, "save his life," not "forfeit his soul," and be among those whom He will not be ashamed of when He "comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." All of these expressions indicate Jesus was describing people who desired to be saved. Are we to think that there is a heaven-bound person who does not want to "come after" Jesus and "save his life"? Are we to believe that there are true believers who will "forfeit their souls," are ashamed of Jesus and His words, and of whom Jesus will be ashamed when He returns? Obviously, Jesus was talking about eternal salvation.

Notice that each of the last four sentences in this five-sentence passage all begin with the word "For." Thus, each sentence helps to explain and expand upon the previous sentence. No sentence within this passage should be interpreted without considering how the others illuminate it. Let's consider Jesus' words sentence by sentence in that light.

Sentence #1

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34).

Again, note that Jesus' words were addressed to anyone who wished to come after Him, anyone who wanted to become His follower. This is the only relationship Jesus initially offers.

Many desire to be His friend without being His follower, but such an option does not exist. Jesus didn't consider anyone His friend unless they obeyed Him: "You are My friends, if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

Many would like to be His brother without being His follower, but, again, Jesus didn't extend that option. He considered no one His brother unless they were obedient: "Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother" (Matt. 12:50, emphasis added).

Many wish to join Jesus in heaven without being His follower, but Jesus conveyed the impossibility of such an occurrence. Only those who obey are heaven-bound: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

In the sentence under consideration, Jesus informed those who wanted to follow Him that they couldn't follow Him unless they denied themselves. They must be willing to put their desires aside, making them subordinate to His will. Self-denial and submission is the essence of following Jesus.

But to what degree of self-denial does Jesus expect? Was He speaking of giving up candy for Lent? Within the first sentence, Jesus used an expression that made His meaning unmistakable: "Let him...take up his cross." It was, perhaps, not an original expression, but a common expression of His day. What does it mean?

In Jesus' day, the only people who took up crosses were those condemned to die. Of course, it was the last thing anyone would want to do, because it was the last thing a person would ever do. When a criminal took up his cross, he lifted up the beam to which he would soon be nailed to die a slow, excruciating death. It was a dreaded moment of facing up to the inevitable.

Thus, the expression, "to take up one's cross," would have been synonymous with doing that which one wouldn't want to do by natural inclination. It symbolizes a high degree of self-denial, doing what one was loathe to do. If it was a common expression of Jesus' day, one can almost imagine fathers admonishing reluctant sons, "Son, you know it's your responsibility to dig out the latrine when it's full. Now take up your cross and get to it." Or wives saying to grimacing husbands, "Honey, I know you don't want to hear this, but today our taxes are due to the Roman government, and we do have the money that is being demanded by that dishonest tax collector. We don't really have any choice in the matter, so why don't you take up your cross and visit the tax collector's office this morning?" [4]

Sentence #2

Jesus' second sentence makes the meaning of His first sentence even more clear: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it" (Mark

8:35).

Again, notice this sentence begins with "For," connecting it with the first sentence, adding clarification. Here Jesus contrasts two people, the same two people who were implied in the first sentence, that is, the one who would deny himself and take up his cross to follow Him and the one who would not. Now they are contrasted as one who would lose his life for Christ and the gospel's sake and one who would not. The one who wouldn't deny himself wishes to save his life but will lose it, while the one who would deny himself loses his life but ultimately saves it.

Clearly, Jesus was not speaking about one losing or saving his physical life. The majority of His closest followers lost their physical lives sooner than what they probably would have because they followed Him, dying as martyrs. Moreover, later sentences in this passage indicate that Jesus had eternal losses and gains in mind.[5]

The person in the first sentence who would not deny himself corresponds with person in the second sentence who wished to save his life. Thus we can safely conclude that "saving one's life" means "keeping one's own agenda for his life." This becomes even more clear when we consider the contrasted man who "loses his life for Christ and the gospel's sake." He is the one who denies himself, takes up his cross, and gives up his own agenda, now living for the purpose of furthering Christ's agenda and the spread of the gospel. He is the one who will ultimately "save his life," while the other will lose his. The person who seeks to please Christ rather than himself will ultimately find himself happy in heaven, while the one who continues to please himself will ultimately find himself miserable in hell, there losing all freedom to follow his own agenda.

Sentences #3 & 4

Now the third and fourth sentences: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-37). In these the person is highlighted who will not deny himself. He is the one who wishes to save his life but ultimately loses it. Now he is spoken of as one who pursues what the world has to offer and who ultimately "forfeits his soul." Jesus exposes the folly of such a person by comparing the worth of the whole world with that of one's soul. Of course, there is no comparison. A person might theoretically acquire all the world has to offer, but, if the ultimate consequence of his life is that he spends eternity in hell, he has made the gravest of errors.

From these third and fourth sentences we also gain insight into what pulls people away from denying themselves to become Christ's followers. It is their desire for self-gratification, offered by the world. Motivated by love of self, those who refuse to follow Christ seek sinful pleasures, which Christ's true followers shun out of love and obedience to Him. Those who are out to "grab all the gusto they can," pursue wealth, power and prestige, while Christ's true followers seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Any wealth, power or prestige that is gained by them is considered a stewardship from God and is used unselfishly for His glory.

Sentence #5

Finally, we arrive at the fifth sentence in the passage under consideration. Notice again how it is joined to the others by the beginning word, for: "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).

This again is the person who would not deny himself, but who wished to follow his own agenda, pursuing what the world had to offer, and who thus ultimately lost his life and forfeited his soul. Now he is characterized as one who is ashamed of Christ and His words. His shame, of course, stems from his unbelief. If he had truly believed that Jesus was God's Son, he certainly would not have been ashamed of Him or His words. But he is a member of an "adulterous and sinful generation," and Jesus will be ashamed of him when He returns. Clearly, Jesus was not describing a saved person.

The conclusion to all of this? The entire passage cannot rightfully be considered a call to a more committed life addressed to those who are already on the way to heaven. It is obviously a revealing of the way of salvation by means of comparing those who are truly saved and those who are unsaved. Not once did Jesus say anything about faith or believing, although the entire reason a person would refuse to deny himself, continuing to pursue the world's offers in sinful rebellion against Christ, is because he truly doesn't believe in Christ. The fruit of unbelief is disobedience. Jesus was not proclaiming salvation earned by works, but a salvation that resulted in works, born from a sincere faith. By His definition, there is no such thing as an "uncommitted

Christian.â€•

Baptism, Nepalese Style

The call to salvation is a call to commitment to Christ. In many nations of the world, where persecution is common, this is automatically understood by new believers. They know that by following Christ, there will be a price to pay.

Sundar Thapa, a Nepalese Christian who has planted over one hundred churches in his Buddhist nation, shared with me the eight questions he asks every new convert before his baptism. They are:

- 1.) Are you willing to be forced to leave your home and parents?
- 2.) Are you willing to lose the inheritance of your father?
- 3.) Are you willing to lose your job if people come to know you are a Christian?
- 4.) Are you willing to go to jail?
- 5.) Are you willing to be beaten and tortured by police?
- 6.) Are you willing to die for Christâ€™s sake if necessary?
- 7.) Are you willing to tell others about Jesus?
- 8.) Are you willing to bring all of the tithe and offering into the house of the Lord?

If the new convert answers in the affirmative to all eight questions, he then must sign a statement as a record of his answers, and then, and only then, is he baptized. How many of us would be considered Christians in Nepal? More importantly, how many of us will be considered Christians when we stand before Jesus?

â€œBelieversâ€• Who Arenâ€™t Disciples

Perhaps the greatest example of wrongly interpreting Jesusâ€™ salvation invitations as calls to a â€œdeeper walkâ€• is the modern theological classification that makes a distinction between Christian believers and disciples. So many in the church are convinced that one can be a heaven-bound believer in Christ without being His disciple. The level of commitment Jesus required for one to be classed as His disciple is so high that many professing Christians must readily admit that they donâ€™t measure up. But, not to worry, because in their minds the step of discipleship is optional. Not understanding the nature of saving faith, they conclude that becoming a disciple is not synonymous with becoming a Christian, because there is a cost to become a disciple, whereas salvation is free.

But such an understanding is seriously flawed. An honest examination of the New Testament reveals that disciples are not more highly committed believersâ€”they are the only true believers. In the early church, the modern distinction of â€œbelieversâ€• and â€œdisciplesâ€• did not exist. Everyone who believed in Jesus was His disciple. In fact, â€œthe disciples were first called Christians in Antiochâ€• (Acts 11:26, emphasis added).

To believe in Jesus was to follow Him obediently, and it still is. Salvation is indeed an unmerited gift, but one that can be received only by a living faith. The commitment that stems from such a faith is not meritorious; rather, it is validating. The grace that forgives us also transforms us.

Jesusâ€™ Requirements for Discipleship

Letâ€™s examine the requirements Jesus enumerated for one to be His disciple and, as we do, consider if Scripture teaches that all true believers are disciples.

We read in Luke 14:25 that â€œgreat multitudes were going along withâ€• Jesus. Jesus, however, wasnâ€™t satisfied. Big crowds of fair-weather fans didnâ€™t impress Him. He wanted whole-hearted, unreserved commitment. He expected the highest allegiance and devotion. Thus He said to them,

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 (Luke 14:26).

No intelligent interpreter of Scripture would argue that Jesus meant that one must literally hate the most

cherished persons in his life in order to be His disciple. Jesus was obviously using a figure of speech we call hyperbole, that is, exaggeration for effect. He could only have meant that our love for our loved ones should seem like hate when compared to our love for Him. He must be the supreme object of our affection. His disciples must love Him far more than any other person, and they must love Him even more than their own lives, being willing to die for Him.

Jesus continued: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

Again, His words are obviously not to be taken literally. He doesn't expect His disciples to carry wooden crosses with them everywhere. Carrying one's own cross must be symbolic of something, and whatever that something is, who would conjecture that Jesus was speaking of something easy or pleasant? At bare minimum, committed self-denial is what He had in mind.

Notice also that this second requirement of carrying one's own cross is exactly what Jesus required of all who wanted to follow Him, as we learned from our earlier study in this chapter of Mark 8:34-38. In that portion of Scripture, Jesus was unmistakably laying down the requirements for salvation, offering clear evidence that the requirements for salvation and discipleship are the same.

As Jesus continued His discourse on discipleship, He then admonished His audience to count the cost before they set out to be His disciples:

For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace (Luke 14:28-32).

Who can reasonably argue that there is no cost to becoming Christ's disciple in light of such words?

Jesus concluded: "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). In order to be Jesus' disciple, we must relinquish ownership of all our possessions to His control. We become stewards of what is now His, and our material wealth will be used for His purposes. Otherwise we are not His disciples.

Clearly, Jesus wanted to convey that becoming His disciple was a costly commitment. He must be first in our lives, and we must love Him more than our own lives, our loved ones, and any material possessions.

Another Requirement

On another occasion, Jesus explained what it meant to be His disciple. As He spoke in the Temple, John reported,

Many came to believe in Him. Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:30-32).

Notice that twice John specifically tells us that Jesus' words of 8:31-32 were addressed to people who believed in Him. To those new believers, Jesus did not say, "Eventually you will want to consider becoming committed disciples." No, He addressed them immediately as disciples. To Jesus, believing in Him was equivalent to becoming His disciple. In fact, the first thing He explained to those new believers was how to determine whether or not they truly were His disciples. Was their faith genuine? They could be sure it was if they would abide in His word.

To abide in Jesus' word meant to live in it, making it your home. It implies the desire to know and obey His word, just as He said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32, emphasis added). Specifically, Jesus was speaking about freedom from sin (see John 8:34-36). This again tells us that Jesus' true disciples, those who have truly believed in Him and are thus born again, are characterized by growing holiness.

The Baptism of Disciples

In the Great Commission, recorded in the final verses of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus used the word disciple in a way that leaves no doubt about His definition of the word. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20, emphasis added).

We first note that it is disciples that Jesus wants, and He wants these disciples to be baptized. Yet we also know that Jesus and the New Testament authors unanimously agree that everyone who believes in Jesus should be baptized as soon as possible after confessing faith in Christ. This proves once again that all true Christian believers are disciples. Certainly Jesus was not saying in His Great Commission that we should not baptize those who believe in Christ, only baptizing those who take the step of becoming committed disciples.

From reading the Great Commission, it is also clear that Jesus considered a disciple to be one who would want to learn all His commandments, with the goal of obeying them (see Matthew 28:20). Obviously learning is a process, so no disciple is instantly obedient in everything. However, every true disciple is obviously submitted to Christ, devoted to learning and doing His will, and so is every true believer since all true believers are disciples.

John's Testimony

Further proof that believers and disciples are one and the same is found in John's Gospel and his first epistle. Compare the following verses:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35, emphasis added).

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death (1 John 3:14).

Unselfish love for the brethren is what characterizes Christ's true disciples, and it is also what characterizes those who have passed out of death into life, those who have been born again. The reason is simply because Christ's disciples are the only ones who have been truly born again.[6]

Abiding Branches in the Vine

One final invitation to salvation that is often interpreted as a call to a "deeper walk" is found in John 15. Here, again, Jesus defines what it means to be His disciple:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples (John 15:1-8, emphasis added).

How many sermons have been preached admonishing professing Christians to "draw closer to Jesus" and abide in Him so that they can bear much fruit? But Jesus does not want us to think that abiding in Him is an option for heaven-bound believers to consider. Abiding in Him is equivalent to being saved, as Jesus made so clear: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). Those who don't abide in Christ are damned.[7] Those who do abide in Christ bear fruit, proving themselves to be His disciples, just as Jesus said (see John 15:8). Again we see that truly saved people are fruit-bearing disciples.

Grapes can only grow on a branch that is attached to the vine. It is from the vine that the branch receives its flow of life and all that is necessary to produce fruit. And what a fine analogy of our relationship to Christ is pictured by the vine and branches. When we believe in Christ, we become a living, fruit-producing branch in Him. Just as the sap that flows from the vine is the source of the branch's ability to produce fruit, so it is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the source of the believer's fruit.

And what kind of fruit is produced by the Holy Spirit? Naturally, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of holiness. Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit found in the fifth chapter of Galatians begins with love, which, as noted previously, is the mark of Christ's true disciples. That list continues with joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (see Gal. 5:22). These are what the indwelling Holy Spirit produces, and these are what characterize every true believer to some degree. For example, we read that the early disciples were "continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52).[8]

Of course, fruit can ripen and mature, and so it is true for the fruit of the Spirit. Young Christians often have fruit that is still green. Nevertheless, if the Spirit indwells someone (and He does every true believer; see Rom. 8:9), it is impossible for Him not to produce His fruit.

What About the Fruitless Branch in Christ?

But did not Jesus speak of the possibility of a branch "in Him" that produced no fruit? Yes, He did. His statement must be interpreted, however, within the context of His vine and branch analogy. First, note that the fruitless branch "in Him" was "taken away" (John 15:2). At bare minimum, this must mean that the branch that was attached is no longer attached. What happened to the branch after it was "taken away" is somewhat a matter of conjecture. However, once the branch was "taken away" and no longer attached, it obviously was no longer "abiding in the vine." What happens to branches that don't abide in the vine? Jesus said a few verses later, "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6).

We, of course, must be careful in interpreting any analogy, parable or metaphor. A metaphor is defined as a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar but which share some similarities. When I tell my wife that her eyes are like pools, I mean that they are deep, dark, blue and inviting. But that is where the similarities end. I don't mean that fish swim in them or that ducks land on them or that they freeze over in the winter.

Jesus' analogies are no different. We can mistakenly search for spiritual significance in details long after the intended similarities end. For example, I would not use Jesus' "vine and branches" analogy to prove that Christians bear more fruit in the summer months, as do grapevines. That is pouring unwarranted significance into the analogy.

Likewise, I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that Jesus was trying to convey that a true believer in Him might never produce fruit, especially when we realize that the main point of His entire analogy contradicts that very idea. The most logical conclusion is that the fruitless branch that was "in Him" represents a believer who apostatizes (cf. Luke 8:12-13). He thus becomes unfruitful and is ultimately cut off from Christ. In spite of what so many think, such a thing can happen according to Scripture (and I'll prove it in a later chapter). The only other possibility is that the fruitless branch represents a false believer, supposedly attached to Christ, but obviously dead and not drawing from His life, as evidenced by the absence of fruit. Jesus, however, did not define the branches as including those who only profess to be in Him but are actually not. Clearly, He defined the branches as being those who are in Him.

Those who do produce fruit are promised a pruning by God Himself. Perhaps Jesus was speaking about the radical pruning that occurs at the new birth once a person manifests the initial fruit of faith and repentance.[9] Or perhaps He was describing the ongoing process of sanctification that God performs in the life of every cooperative believer (see Phil. 2:13). Either way, the analogy of God as a vinedresser speaks of His cutting away from our lives what is undesirable to Him. Anything that hinders fruit from being produced by the indwelling Spirit is susceptible to His shears.

A Small Objection

Grasping at spiritual straws, a question is sometimes raised about Joseph of Arimathea, whom the Bible states was a "secret disciple" of Jesus (see John 19:38). How could he be spoken of as being a disciple if his devotion was secret? Does this not contradict all I've written about the commitment demonstrated by true disciples?

May I first say that it always troubles me when, after presenting scripture after scripture that proves a certain truth, someone will dig up one obscure verse that seemingly contradicts what I've taught. Then he proudly quotes it as if that one verse somehow invalidates all the rest that we've just considered. This objection is a case in point. Everything I've written about the costly commitment of discipleship has been based on Scripture. I've said precisely what the Bible says. So the burden of reconciling the secret discipleship of Joseph of Arimathea with all Jesus taught about the costly commitment of true discipleship falls on all of us, not just me.

Now, to answer the objection: Joseph of Arimathea was very devoted to Jesus, by the biblical record, a "good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50). However, as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, he kept his devotion secret for "fear of the Jews" (John 19:38). The Jews whom he feared must have been the other members of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Obviously, Joseph of Arimathea knew there would be some negative consequences if he revealed how he really felt about Jesus. It's quite possible that what he feared was removal from the Sanhedrin, which would have resulted in losing his opportunity before them as a positive influence for Christ. We learn from Luke 23:51 that Joseph had "not consented" to the Sanhedrin's plan and action concerning the arrest, trial and condemnation of Jesus. And after Jesus' death, he clearly risked facing what he previously feared, as we learn that "he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43). He then personally prepared the body of Jesus and buried it in his own tomb. Surely there was every possibility that his actions would be discovered by the Sanhedrin! Yet once Jesus had been crucified, it seemed that he no longer cared what his fellow members of the Sanhedrin thought.

Joseph's commitment to Christ was obvious, and the limited secrecy of his devotion was only temporary. Beyond all this, it is certainly possible to be a devoted disciple of Christ and yet be afraid of negative consequences that might result from that devotion. Joseph of Arimathea certainly had enough other fruit in his life to validate his commitment to Christ.

What About "Carnal" Christians?

Another objection that is often raised is the issue of so-called "carnal Christians." They are a modern classification of supposedly authentic believers who continually yield to the flesh, and whose carnal behavior makes them indistinguishable from non-Christians. Although they have "accepted Christ" (a very unbiblical phrase), they display no commitment to Him. Many of them have no regular fellowship with other believers and are involved in all kinds of sin, yet they are supposedly secure in God's grace, heaven-bound.

From where did this concept of carnal Christians originate? Its source is a commonly-held and very twisted interpretation of what Paul wrote in the third chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

The King James Version translates the same word that the NASB translates fleshly, as "carnal," thus the origin of the phrase, "carnal Christians."

The question is, was Paul defining a category of Christians who are indistinguishable from non-Christians due to their following after the fleshly nature? In contradiction to what the rest of the New Testament teaches, many say Yes. "Did not Paul say to these Christians," they ask, "that they were 'walking like mere men' (3:3), indicating that they were acting identically as unsaved people would?"

The answer is found by considering all Paul said about the Corinthians. As we do, we discover that the "carnal Corinthians" were certainly not indistinguishable from unsaved people, because their living faith was manifested by many outward indications of their devotion to Christ. Yes, being two-natured, as are all Christians, they faced the battle between the Spirit and flesh. Many of them, being spiritually immature, were to some degree yielding to their old nature (the flesh), not walking in love toward one another. They were arguing about who their favorite teachers were and showing inconsideration during the Lord's Supper. Some were filing lawsuits against fellow believers. They needed to grow in the fruit of love, and Paul wrote much to admonish them to that end.

The primary reason for their problem was their own ignorance of what God expected of them. Because they were babes in Christ whom Paul had only fed with the milk of God's Word rather than the meat (see 3:2), their knowledge was limited. That was why Paul wrote to them and addressed their various wrongs. Once he told them what God expected, he expected them to line up.

The Spiritual, "Carnal" Corinthians

What were some of the works of the Corinthian Christians that identified them as possessing a devoted faith? What characterized them as distinct from non-Christians? Here are some that are revealed by Scripture:

First, when Paul initially preached the gospel at Corinth, he met with great success. God Himself told him that there were many people in Corinth who would be saved (see Acts 18:10), and Paul stayed there for a year and a half. Many "were believing and being baptized" (Acts 18:8). Baptism was their first act of obedience to Christ.

Describing some of the Corinthian Christians, Paul wrote that they had previously been fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards and swindlers (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10). But now they have been washed and sanctified; they had been transformed. This, by itself, disproves the foolish notion that the Corinthians were indistinguishable from non-Christians.

Additionally, Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians "not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler" not even to eat with such a one" (1 Cor. 5:11). Obviously, the Corinthian Christians were not guilty of these things themselves, otherwise Paul would have been telling them not to associate or eat with themselves.

Paul's first Corinthian letter was, in part, a response to a letter he'd received from them concerning several issues. They had asked him questions regarding what was right and wrong, indicating their own desire to do what was right. Was it wrong for single people to get married? How about those who had previously been married? What about eating meats that had been sacrificed to idols? Many of the Corinthian Christians, out of devotion to Christ, refused to eat such meats lest they offend the Lord, an indication of their living faith.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:2: "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." Are these people then indistinguishable from non-Christians?

The Corinthian Christians regularly partook of the Lord's Supper (albeit somewhat inappropriately), obedient to Jesus' command (see 1 Cor. 11:20-22). They also regularly gathered together for Christian worship (see 1 Cor. 12, 14), something not done by unbelievers in their day.

They were zealous of spiritual gifts (see 1 Cor. 14:12).

Just the fact that both of Paul's letters to the Corinthian Christians are so full of exhortations to holiness indicates that Paul believed they would heed what he wrote. He instructed them to excommunicate a hypocrite (see 1 Cor. 5:13) and receive monetary collections for poor Christians in Jerusalem (see 1 Cor. 16:1-4), something they had already been zealously doing (see 2 Cor. 8:10; 9:1-2). In this way, they displayed their love for the brethren, exactly what Jesus said would mark His true disciples (see John 13:35).

Paul's second letter indicates that many, if not most of them, had heeded the instructions of his first letter (see 2 Cor. 7:6-12). Between the two letters, Titus journeyed to Corinth and returned with a good report of their obedience (see 2 Cor. 7:13-16). The babes in Christ were growing up. Yes, there were still some problems in Corinth, and Paul would soon be visiting them personally to resolve what remained.

The conclusion? When Paul wrote that the Corinthian Christians were "walking like mere men," he obviously did not mean that they were completely indistinguishable from non-Christians in every respect. They were acting just like non-Christians do in one way, but in many other ways they were acting like devoted disciples of Christ.

What About Works That Will Burn?

Another argument that is often used to support the idea of a special class of carnal Christians is based on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. In that passage, did not Paul assure the Corinthians that they would be saved even if all of their works were burned at the judgment? Does this not indicate that a person can be completely fruitless yet still be saved?

The context of that passage reveals the error of this argument. Clearly, Paul was writing about rewards that individual ministers will receive or forfeit, based on the quality of their works. Comparing the church to "God's building" (3:9), and stating that he had laid a foundation "which is Jesus Christ" (3:11), Paul wrote that every minister should "be careful how he builds upon" (3:10) that foundation. It is quite possible to build wrongly. Paul then figuratively mentioned six different building materials that could be used: "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay [and] straw" (3:12). The first three are of great value and incombustible, whereas the last three are of much lesser value and combustible.

According to Paul, the type of material being used by individual ministers to build God's building is not necessarily evident now. One day, however, it will be very evident, because "each man's work...is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (3:13). Paul continued:

If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:14-15).

It has been debated as to what kind of works constitute "gold, silver and precious stones works," and what kind constitute "wood, hay and straw works." It is undoubtedly true, however, that ministers who "build" God's building with bricks of phony Christians and the mortar of a false gospel will find this passage to be very applicable when the Lord tests the quality of their work. Many unholy people who presently are within the church will ultimately find themselves in the fires of hell, and the minister who "won them to Christ" or assured them of their salvation by means of proclaiming a false grace will realize that all his efforts amounted to nothing in building the true "temple of God" (3:16). What he built will burn, and he shall "suffer loss" (3:15), receiving no reward. Yet he himself, if he is a true believer, "shall be saved, yet so as through fire" (3:15).

Clearly, Paul's intention in this passage was not to assure so-called "carnal Christians" that they could be completely fruitless and still be confident of their salvation. He was writing about the rewards that ministers will receive or forfeit based upon the quality of their work that will be revealed at the judgment.

Yes, true Christians may sometimes act carnally. Any time they yield to the flesh, they can be said to be acting like "mere men." However, there is no special group of "carnal Christians" in the body of Christ, heaven-bound but yielding completely to their fleshly nature. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans,

For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die [or "perish" as the NLT says[10]]; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Rom. 8:13-14, emphasis added).

And as he wrote to the Galatian Christians, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).

What Would You Have Done If...

The story, probably fictitious, has been frequently told of a small church in a remote village of Central America. One Sunday morning, just as the regular service was about to begin, the doors into the back of the sanctuary burst open, and two unshaven men trooped in, wearing combat fatigues and brandishing machine guns. Belts of machine gun bullets were draped across their chests.

Fear gripped the hearts of the congregation. Communist guerrillas in their region had been known to unmercifully slaughter Christians. Was this their time?

One of the men called for silence and then spoke. "You Christians are always talking about going to see your Savior, the One you say is the Son of God. Well, today is your lucky day, because in a few minutes you are going to find out if your God really exists! Line up along the walls on either side of this church!

The congregation quickly moved through the pews to either side of the sanctuary.

"Now, before we kill you, we want to make sure that it is only true believers who die. Anyone here who really doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God may exit past us through the rear doors of the sanctuary. Move quickly!"

Many didn't hesitate. Within a minute, half the congregation was gone.

When the last person filed out, the doors were locked shut. The one guerrilla watched through a side window as those who exited the church ran from the premises. Then, as he laid down his gun, a smile filled his face, and he spoke once more: "Brethren, please forgive us. We wanted to worship the Lord with you this morning, but we only wanted to worship with true Christians. Now, let's praise the Lord together!" And what a church service they had that morning!

This story is usually told to provoke professing Christians to consider what they would have done if they had been present that morning. However, believing this story to be authentic requires us to overlook the fact that two machine-gun carrying Christians acted deceitfully while breathing murderous threats and denouncing Christ, just to worship God among true believers! By their actions, did they not deny Christ every bit as much as those who ran from the church that morning?

This being so, I would like to alter this fictitious story just slightly, changing the ending. Although my alteration is also fictitious, it is the way similar stories have ended thousands of times:

Within a minute, half the congregation was gone.

When the last person filed out, the doors were locked shut. The one guerrilla watched through a side window as those who exited the church ran from the premises. Then, as he aimed his machine gun at the remaining group of devoted disciples, an ugly grimace filled his face, and he spoke once more: "Prepare to meet your God." With those words his finger pulled the trigger. And what a church service they had that morning, in the presence of their Lord!

Footnotes

[1] John Dillenberger, ed., Martin Luther (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 24.

[2] Demons, of course, cannot possess saving faith because salvation has not been offered to them.

[3] How enlightening it is to examine what Scripture says about the fear of the Lord. For example, the psalmist wrote, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments....How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments" (Ps. 111:10; 112:1). In the New Testament, we are commanded to fear God (see 1 Pet. 2:17), and are admonished to "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1, emphasis added).

[4] If the expression of taking up one's cross was not a common expression, but one that Jesus coined, then at bare minimum, it still must represent a high degree of self-denial. Some commentators suggest that it represents taking the first step in a determination to live the rest of one's life on the journey to death to self. Others think Jesus meant that His followers must make a commitment of willingness to die for Him. Regardless, the remaining sentences in this passage expand on what it means to take up one's cross.

[5] Also note a similar expression by Jesus recorded in John 12:25: "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal" (emphasis added). Clearly, Jesus was referring to eternal life, not physical life.

[6] Note also that unselfish love, expressed by meeting pressing needs of Christ's brethren, was what characterized the saved people at the Matthew 25:31-46 judgment, considered previously in chapter 3.

[7] Note that it was not their works that are burned, as some want us to think. The branches themselves were burned.

[8] The first believers of Acts were also noted for their love, peace, kindness and goodness; see Acts 9:31, 36; 11:24.

[9] This idea is supported somewhat by the fact that Jesus told His disciples that they were already pruned because of the word He had spoken to them (see John 15:3). The word translated clean in this verse in the NASB is the same word translated prune in 15:2.

[10] Obviously, Paul was not warning them about dying physically, because everyone, no matter how he behaves, must die physically. Rather, Paul was warning about spiritual and eternal death.