

The Radical Rabbi Who Was Very Demanding

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds
to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

The words of Christ we're about to hear today go to the heart and soul—the very center of Christianity. Jesus never watered down his words or buttered up his audience to increase approval ratings. He never said it would be easy following him.

The Radical Rabbi is challenging us today to greatness—to be bold and courageous in tenuous times. And he never asks us to do what he himself has not done. Our Radical Rabbi is very, very demanding...because he believes in us and he lives in us.

So let's hear now from:

Scripture: Mark 8:34-38 (NRSV)

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake

of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Was Very Demanding

What will it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

This is the main question in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's legend of Faust. It's considered by many to be the greatest work in German literature. In the epic poem, Heinrich Faust yearns to gain knowledge of absolute truth and the meaning of life. To do this he's willing to make a pact with Mephisto—the devil. Faust was willing to do anything—even sell his soul if he could only be given a moment. A moment so intense and rewarding that it would banish his sense of emptiness and give him the desire to live forever. Basically, Faust wanted to become...*God*.

In the end, Faust dies a bitter and disillusioned man. He wasn't able to be God and he was forever separated from God. But in a surprising twist of the Faust legend, Goethe gives the story a new ending. In his version, Faust has a last-minute conversion, almost like the blinding Damascus Road encounter that the Apostle Paul had. Faust is blinded, banished into the darkness—but then rescued from the devil by the heavenly hosts.

Goethe seemed to be saying that by going through this blindness, this dark night of the soul, this death to self, that the human soul comes to life and matures. So by the mercy of God, Faust is admitted into heaven because he realized that life was about something and someone so much greater than himself. Life was about God—not being God.

We read that Jesus called the crowd with his disciples. The call of Jesus to follow is not just for the Twelve or the spiritually elite. Jesus summons all of us to walk in his ways. "If any want to become my followers, you've got to let me take the lead."

The way of the disciple, is the way of Christ—which is the way of the cross. This is the essential requirement, the necessary condition for being a Jesus follower. You can't have Christ without the cross. This journey Jesus calls us to isn't just a jaunt or an evening stroll. It's an invitation to a march of martyrdom. Jesus isn't talking about something that involves a few cosmetic changes or minor tweaks here and there. No, Jesus is talking about a major overhaul, a transformation. If you're going to follow Christ, you can't be a detached observer from the grandstands—way up in the nosebleed section. No, we've got to enter the arena, enter into his passion and participate in his sufferings if we're really going to get to know Christ. We can only understand Christ by following in the way of the cross.

What Jesus is basically saying to us is:

"Let me take the keys and driver's seat of your life."

"Give up your own way of trying to figure things out."

Give up your own way and stop trying to hang on to your life for dear life. Deny yourself utterly.

This word "deny" is the same word used when Peter "denied" Christ. But instead of denying Christ, we deny ourselves. Other translations put it this way:

"Renounce" yourself.

"Disown" or "forget" yourself.

But don't stop there. Jesus then says: "Take up your cross." Everyone knew what Jesus was talking about. Plutarch described the Roman practice: "Every criminal who is executed carries his own cross."

Jesus isn't mincing words: die to yourself. To be able to say "yes" to God means that you have to say "no" to yourself. Be willing to go to the point of death for Christ.

Say "no" to taking the way of comfort.

Say "no" to selfishness.

"No" to our natural inclinations.

But say yes, "YES" to Christ's commands and directions.

A "NO" to yourself, is simultaneously a YES to life, a YES to service, a YES to a rigorous, exciting, challenging, painful, and meaningful way of life—a blessed life that blesses others.



Telemachus – "The Last Gladiator Fight" by Joseph Stallaert

Telemachus was a late 4th century eastern monk who went into the desert to pray, study Scripture, and meditate in order to find his soul. He sought fellowship only with God. But one day he realized that he was being selfish with God's love—keeping it to himself. He heard Jesus' call to serve God, by serving others. Telemachus knew he needed to leave the desert and head back to the city and civilization to share God's love with others. He felt compelled to travel Rome to do this. He had no idea how he would do it or what he would say.

Rome at this time had converted to Christianity—but one pagan practice remained: the gladiator games. Telemachus found himself in the arena and was shocked to watch the violence and killing. He could not sit down or stay quiet. He made his way to the front, climbed the barricade, and entered the arena. The old man stood between two gladiators who were about to fight.

"Let the games go on!" yelled the masses.

One of the gladiators pushed the man down. He got back up again and stood between them. The crowd began throwing stones at Telemachus and urged the gladiators to kill him. The commander of the games gave the order, and the old man in the hermit robes was put to death by the sword, in front of 80,000 people.

Immediately a hush came over the crowd—they realized the gravity of what they'd done: they put a holy man to death. The gladiator games that day were cut short. And the colosseum never had a gladiator game after that.

The historian Edward Gibbon, who authored *"The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"* wrote,

Telemachus' "death was more useful to mankind than his life."

Jesus gave his life, so that we might live. We live, so that we might die to ourselves, serving Christ and serving others, we die so that Christ might live in us.

The good news is that we're identified with Christ. We share the same destiny as Jesus—We're joined at the hip with him. We walk in the same path with Christ to Calvary. This is a path that leads not only to resurrection and glory, but a path that first must pass through suffering.

Christianity isn't some theoretical head trip—Christianity isn't what you think. Trust in God is about personal commitment in situations that require courage and sacrifice.

The Radical Rabbi is counter-intuitive: find your life by losing your life.

Some things are lost by being kept and other things are found by losing them. Or as missionary Jim Elliot put it decades ago:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

Jesus in another passage says, "Come unto me and I will give you rest."

But not here. It's the same Jesus. He also invites us to him, but he has a different message. Dieterich Bonhoeffer put it this way:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids come and die. That's the cost of discipleship."

What's your soul? What is your life? Your soul is "us" in our totality, the sum of both our vitality and our frailty. The very core of your being—the best of you and the worst of you. All of you.

Lose your "self" so you don't lose your soul. Don't trifle away your life on empty, meaningless things. You can be a huge success, while having an utterly empty life.

Jesus beckons us to trod another path:

Don't sacrifice your integrity for profit.

Don't sacrifice your principles for popularity.

Don't sacrifice lasting things for quick fixes.

Don't sacrifice eternity for a fleeting moment.

Be a God-pleaser, not a people-pleaser.

Trust in me—Don't place your trust and hedge your bets on wealth or your talents or your success or your looks or your number of likes or followers.

Be a leader not by just liking Christ or being a fan of Christ. Follow Christ every step of every day. Seek God's glory and God's will. Seek not your own glory and your own plans. Don't be ashamed of Christ and his words or he will be ashamed of you.

Both Matthew and Luke have Jesus also say the positive of this:

Acknowledge Christ, and he too will acknowledge you.

You see, we all have a daily choice before us:

Will we be loyal or disloyal to Christ?

Where do you put your values?

Where do you direct your energy?

Where and from whom do you draw your energy?

Each of us have to answer Jesus' question that he asked of the disciples earlier:

"Who do you say that I am?"

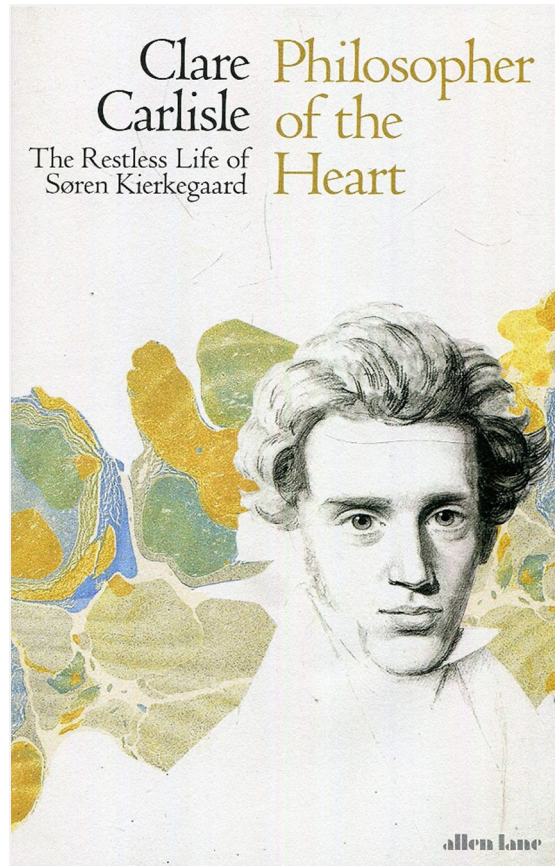
Confessing that Jesus is the Messiah is the first step.

The second step is taking the leap of faith. Taking a lifelong journey of living our confession faithfully—through a life of service and sacrifice.

This is not for the faint-hearted. With faith, you have to have some skin in the game. You can't dodge the blood, the sweat, and the tears of discipleship, and then expect to reap all the benefits. It doesn't work that way.

The good news is that God is working in us to do what we cannot do ourselves.

We are not alone.



"Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard"

In Clare Carlisle's excellent biography *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard*, she describes Kierkegaard's community of faith in Copenhagen, Denmark—The Church of Our Lady.



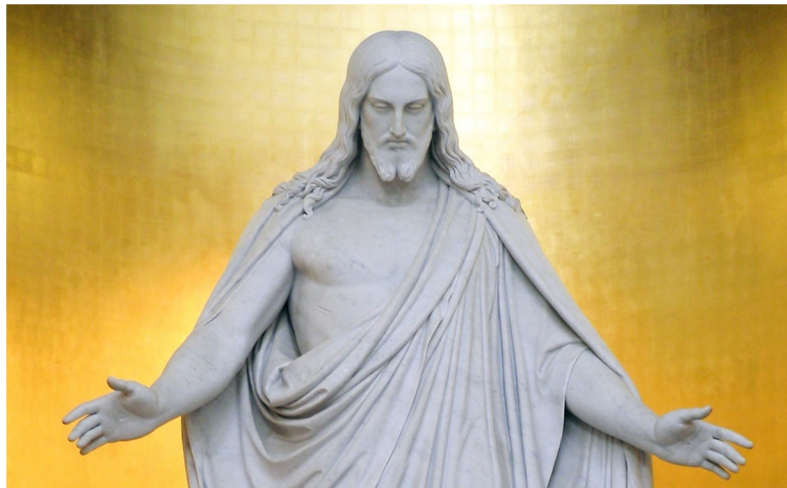
"Church of Our Lady" Cathedral, Copenhagen

With his family as an adolescent, Kierkegaard walked through the newly refurbished church building, first passing through the columns on the front of the building and then into the sanctuary.



"Interior view-Københavns Domkirke" Copenhagen

Inside, along the sides of the sanctuary, you can see the twelve apostles along the wall. They were larger than life and muscular, surveying the congregation. Six on one side, six on the other. Each of them carry the symbols of the ways they were martyred for their faith.



Thorvaldsen's "Christus" Church of Our Lady, Copenhagen

As you walked down the center aisle, you would be led to the front of the church, where there was an enormous statue of Christ, exalted above the other statues and above the altar. Under the statue are chiseled the words of Christ in Danish: *KOMMER TIL MIG*—"Come unto me." Many in the Western world deem Thorvaldsen's *Christus* the best statue of Christ ever chiseled.

"Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Kierkegaard over the next twenty-plus years each Sunday would worship in this sanctuary and gaze upon this statue. Kierkegaard also looked inside his heart as he gazed upon the image of Christ:

What is this heavy burden I carry in my heart? Why is it so difficult to be human when it seems effortless for so many? What does it mean to follow Christ in this world, when most paths seem to lead away from the truth and the peace he offers?

Who would choose this difficult, thorny path of following in Christ's path, when there were much easier, much more comfortable paths to take?

Yes, the comforting Christ offers a gentle rest—but Kierkegaard warned against becoming comfortable and complacent. Don't gloss over the duplicity of the human heart. Don't sugar-coat our self-evasion, self-deception, self-destruction that avoids true surrender to Christ.

You see, for Kierkegaard, following Christ was not only inviting—it was disturbing.

Preaching a sermon in this sanctuary, Kierkegaard pointed to the outstretched arms of the Christus statue:



"Soren Kierkegaard" watercolor portrait by LAUTIR

Christianity has been taken in vain, made too mild, so that people have forgotten what grace is. The more rigorous Christianity is, the more grace becomes manifest as grace and not a sort of human sympathy. Following Jesus must never be made too easy or too comfortable in our complacent age.

Jesus doesn't say "Admire me," "Observe me," or even "Worship me," but "Follow me."

Come to me—give me your burdens. But also give me your self—that you may die, that you may carry your cross, so that you might no longer live, but I live in you.

The Radical Rabbi comforts the afflicted. But he also afflicts the comfortable. He jars us awake from the dangers of security and certainty that tranquilize us and lull us to sleep. Jesus' call to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and follow me is a radical call. It's an alarm clock, a wake-up call, to turn and learn, to have your heart changed and your mind renewed. Lose yourself to find yourself.

It's scary, it's stinking hard, and it's right where real life is, right where abundant life is, right where eternal life is.

Amen.

Telemachus - "*The Last Gladiator Fight*" by Joseph Stallaert (Wikimedia Commons)

"*Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Soren Kierkegaard*" by Clare Carlisle (book cover)

"*Church of Our Lady*" Cathedral of Copenhagen (Copenhagen Architecture 2017)

"*Interior view-Københavns Domkirke*" Copenhagen (Wikimedia Commons)

Thorvaldsen's "*Christus*" Church of Our Lady, Copenhagen (Wikimedia Commons)

"*Soren Kierkegaard*" watercolor portrait by [LAUTIR](#) (artist permission)

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