

Reading the Fine Print

Matthew 10:24-39

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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Do you want to “Discover the Champion in You?” That’s the invitation from one popular TV preacher. He invites us into a Christianity that will make us happy and successful.

Friday afternoon I took a look at some of his recent sermon titles:

Enlarge Your Vision

Holding on to your Dreams

Financial Prosperity

Developing Miracle-Working Faith

Believe God for the Greater Works

Do All You Can to Make Your Dreams Come True

Living a Life of Excellence

Developing Your Potential

Sounds good. Sounds really good. From reading the Bible, though, I would encourage you, before you

accept all these wonderful promises that come with following Jesus, you better read the fine print.

We all know what’s in the fine print. That’s where they put the disclaimers. The best example of this is in the prescription drug commercials that are always on TV these days. These commercials are on constantly. And sometimes they don’t even say what the drug is for.

What I think is funny though, is that you will have this wonderful, soothing ad that talks of relief and healing and great benefits—maybe shows an older couple walking hand in hand on the beach at sunset—, and then there comes this jarring litany of terrible things that may happen to you if you take this drug.

One of the recent commercials I’ve seen is for a drug called Boniva. The commercial is about how great this drug is for osteoporosis. And then it says: *Don’t take Boniva if you can’t sit or stand for 60 minutes.* Then it mentions things like painful swallowing, chest pain, heart burn, upper digestive problems, diarrhea, pain in the arms or legs.

The disclaimer actually includes the line: *Risk factors include Caucasian, Asian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and other races....*

Have you seen the commercial for one drug where it says at the end, *May cause a strong urge to gamble?* What is that? Another mentions the possible side effect of driving in your sleep.

The weight loss medication “alli” actually gives a warning that includes a recommendation to wear dark pants and bring a change of clothes to work until users have a sense for the drug's gastrointestinal effects.

My point is that sometimes in these commercials I think the disclaimers—or the fine print—actually overwhelm or overshadow the potential benefits taking the drug might bring. It's as if the ads say: Take this drug. It will shrink your prostate, and it also just might make your life miserable in every other conceivable way.

Great promises and benefits are touted. And then there is this jarring litany of terrible things that might happen to you. That sounds a little like our scripture

today. Jesus invites people to come follow him. Two weeks ago we read about him inviting the tax-collector Matthew to be one of his followers. He puts forth this invitation. And then he follows it up with the fine print.

By the way, don't think I've come to bring peace. I've come to bring a sword. And I've come to set a man against his father, daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it. Only those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Those statements wouldn't work as popular sermon titles. They are more like the fine print for following Jesus.

Jesus has called his disciples, and they have responded. He is now sending these twelve out in to the world with his message and mission. The authority and the mission of Jesus have been transmitted to these twelve; now, in today's scripture, the consequences are transmitted as well.

Jesus tells those who want to follow him that they should expect opposition because, he their leader, faced it, and the servant is not greater than the master. Expect no exemptions. Jesus says here that his followers should expect to be called names and to be misrepresented.

He says something about not fearing those who kill the body, and while I guess that was meant as some comfort, it had to make them a little nervous about they may have gotten themselves into. What Jesus says is basically that if you're going to be afraid of somebody, don't waste your fear on people who can only kill your body. Fear God instead. If God is the only one you fear, you won't be afraid of anyone or anything else.

Rebecca Manley Pippert says in her book *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World: Whatever you fear the most is what you will serve.*

If you fear losing the approval of other people, getting and keeping that approval will rule your life. If you fear losing all your stuff, keeping your stuff will rule your life.

If you fear losing your family most, keeping your family will rule your life. If you fear making a mistake, trying to be perfect will rule your life.

So Jesus says, *Fear God the most, and serving God will rule your life. Don't fear those who may try to hurt you.*

Jesus does offer them the encouragement that in all of these difficult things that they are going to experience, God will never abandon them. God is concerned about the fall of a sparrow, worth only a half-penny. God is so attentive to their lives that even the number of hairs on their head is known to God.

And then it's back to the fine print. *Don't think I've come to bring peace, Jesus says. I've come to bring a sword, to divide.* And then Jesus speaks these hard words about division in families:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Scholars help us understand what Jesus is saying here by pointing out that Jesus' words reflect the reality of what was happening in Matthew's community of believers. Families were being divided over commitment to Jesus. Matthew wrote out of this reality of pain and division.

One commentator points out that Jesus' words reflect the ancient Semitic perspective that views result as purpose. In other words, the result of the action is then stated as having been the purpose of the action.

For example, in Isaiah 6 the result of Isaiah's preaching was the hardening of hearts, and so Isaiah 6 says that Isaiah preached *in order to* harden hearts. So here in our text, commitment to Christ had divided some people from their families, so Matthew says that the purpose of Christ's call was to divide families.

I think there is actually a sense in which Jesus' words here are an encouragement to those in the early church who were divided from their families because of their decision to follow Christ.

Those who had been rejected by their families received assurance that following Jesus was more important, more life-giving, than family ties.

And so Jesus singles out the family as the place where feelings and loyalties run the deepest and says, *Do you want to follow me? You better read the fine print. You might even have to put me above your family.*

It does happen, sometimes—that answering Jesus' call creates conflict in a family. Sometimes those in your family are not the most excited to hear that you are following Jesus.

Frederick Buechner says that when he announced he was going into the ministry, a family member asked him at the dinner table, *Did you make this decision by yourself, or were you poorly advised?*

I heard a college chaplain say that he rarely received a phone call from parents that said, *Help! My child who is a sophomore is sexually promiscuous* or *Help! My child is addicted to alcohol.*

Instead the most consistent call he received was *Help! I sent my child to the university to be a doctor, and she has become a religious fanatic. She is going to go to Haiti with the Catholics to teach reading.*
[www.adventures-in-revland.blogspot.com]

For a lot of us, we certainly don't want our lives, and the world we inhabit most of the week, to be too upset by the things we hear on Sunday morning. Sure, it is the Bible, but there is no reason to get all worked up about it.

Being a good Christian is not all that different from being a good citizen, you know. You just stay out of trouble and be nice to your neighbors and say your prayers at night. No reason to go make a spectacle of yourself.

If that's your version of Christianity, then you haven't read the fine print.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way:

The gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn.

The gospel is not a table knife but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. The gospel is not pablum. It is powerful stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties, but as frightening as it is, it is not finally to be feared.

If you want to follow Jesus, you better read the fine print.

These are hard, challenging words from Jesus today. If we are looking for a way to be more comfortable with Jesus' words today, there aren't any easy solutions. But we can remember that the same Jesus who makes us squirm in our seats also speaks to us with such great compassion about God's great love for us, talks about noticing even the sparrow and knowing even the number of hairs on our heads.

Always challenging, and always comforting. Because Jesus loves us, Jesus wants us to not settle for what is less than the best God has called us to. And because we are precious and counted as loved, Jesus wants us to experience the life of discipleship that promises rewards nothing else offers.

For those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it.

[www.bethquick.com, Lectionary Notes, 6/19/05]

I came across somewhere a little piece called "Three-Dollars-Worth of God." It was written over twenty-five years ago. Listen to what it says.

*I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
but just enough of Him to equal a cup of warm milk or
a snooze in the sunshine.*

*I don't want enough of Him to make me love a
black man or pick beets with a migrant.*

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

*I want the warmth of the womb, not a new
birth.*

I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack, please.

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.

I think that just may describe me more than I want to admit. I want just enough of God to make me comfortable and secure, but not enough to change my life and not enough to follow Jesus down the difficult

roads. I want the benefits but not the potential side effects.

I will say, and I hope this is some comfort to you, that if you find yourself wanting only three-dollars-worth of God, I am here to tell you, you are not alone. Even the twelve who followed Jesus on earth fumbled and failed and broke when the going got tough. Peter denied even knowing Jesus. The others fled out of fear when they had the opportunity to take a stand and be crucified along with Jesus.

But Jesus didn't give up on the twelve, and the day came when each of them faced the decision where they would have to choose between God and those whom they loved the most. Each of them in their own way and in their own time, chose God's path and for some it meant suffering and even death.

Maybe Jesus is saying to those of us who follow him, here's something you need to know. *You need to know that somewhere along the way as you are following me, there may come a time when, in order to be faithful to me, you may have to walk a different path than your parents and grandparents, your*

friends and family. You may have to rethink your values, redirect your life, change your ways from everything you have believed and been taught your whole life, and it will be like breaking the family ties. Go ahead, walk the path. Take up your cross. Follow me.

And what may seem like an impossibility at the time, we will discover is not impossible with God.
[Frank Lybrand, St. Paul United Methodist Church, Spartanburg, South Carolina, June 22, 2008]

Missionary David Livingstone was once asked, *Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you.*

Livingstone responded, *If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.*

That is the kind of call that Jesus offers to all of his would be followers today. It is grace, but it is costly. It is costly, but it is grace.

As we prepare to respond to the call of the gospel today, think about these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In 1937 Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he says,
Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.