

LOGOS University
PTH102 Discipleship
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December 11, 2025

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Book Report
of
“The Cost of Discipleship”
by
“Dietrich Bonhoeffer”

“The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a comprehensive overview of the life, calling, and ministry of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Essentially, it acts as a guide, guiding the disciple through what they should expect when accepting the call to follow Jesus. In this work, Bonhoeffer not only discusses the entire concept of suffering and the literal “cost of discipleship” but also examines community, active faith, humility, obedience, and surrender. He divides his discussion into four sections titled: “Grace and Discipleship,” “The Sermon on the Mount,” “The Messengers,” and “The Church of Jesus Christ and the Life of Discipleship.” Naturally, Bonhoeffer begins with the foundational idea of grace as given to us upon receiving salvation.

Bonhoeffer introduces this idea by first defining the term “grace.” He does this by contrasting what he calls “costly grace” and “cheap grace.” He points out that “costly grace” is costly because it will cost us our lives, literally our entire being as a living sacrifice to Jesus. In contrast, he reports that many “Christians” are claiming a “cheap grace” and using it as an excuse to continue in sin rather than allowing “costly grace” to truly free them from the bonds of sin and transform their lives.¹ He follows up this argument by discussing Jesus’ call to his disciples to follow him. He affirms that this call immediately demands obedience, not so much because of the authority of the call itself, but because of the authority of the one who calls: Jesus.

After accepting the call, we are urged to cultivate a spirit of inward detachment from this world. From that point on, our hearts should be set on things above since our kingdom is not of this world. Bonhoeffer continues this idea of suffering by turning to the topic of the cross, the iconic symbol of the Christian faith, describing its significance in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. He points out that we are all given the free choice to reject Jesus or accept him. However, the disciple must understand that the cross is laid on every Christian. The old man is to die immediately upon accepting Jesus. For Bonhoeffer, “Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship.” (Bonhoeffer, “The Cost of Discipleship.” p. 91.) It is through this call of Jesus that people become individuals, that people are brought into immediacy with Christ. By accepting the call, we become “the People under the cross.” (Bonhoeffer, “The Cost of Discipleship.” p. 101) Christ separates us from the world in order to unite us to himself, yet this is only the beginning.

After Bonhoeffer believes he has adequately laid the foundation of what it means to answer the call to become a disciple, he then shifts focus to what is required of the disciple once they have accepted the call. He does this by providing an in-depth exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ first sermon. Naturally, Bonhoeffer begins this exploration in chapter five of Matthew, with a passage now known as the Beatitudes. Essentially, Bonhoeffer sees the Beatitudes as God’s comforting promise to his disciples. Though the disciples have been crucified with Christ, they have also become partners in Christ’s work of reconciliation. Thus, they are called the children of God just as Christ is the Son of God, sharing in his sufferings as well as his glory! However, amidst their heavenly mindset, Bonhoeffer affirms that these disciples also have an earthly task. Thus, the call to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world is nothing less than a call to be the visible community of Christ! Ultimately, it is the disciples who hold the highest, yet seemingly lowest position on earth. Bonhoeffer further states

that Jesus came to fulfill the old law so that we could have access to a “better righteousness.”² From there, continuing with the text from the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer confronts several real-life scenarios, including interactions with brothers, women, enemies, and unbelievers. He also addresses truthfulness and revenge, as well as the hiddenness of righteousness, prayer, and the devout life. Throughout these teachings, he urges the disciples to avoid harboring anger, hatred, or pride in their hearts toward others. He contrasts lust and love, explaining that obedience to Jesus leaves no room for desire unless it is accompanied by love, recognizing how our bodies are to be crucified with its affections and lusts. Bonhoeffer further states that a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be a light even with their words and speech. We cannot follow Christ unless we live in honesty before both God and man. He advocates that resisting evil is not the way to repay evil, suggesting that evil will only continue to grow unless we overcome it with good. Like Christ, we are called to love our enemies by blessing them, doing good to them, and praying for them. We must love our enemies wholeheartedly, making no distinction between friends and foes. We are called to serve others by standing alongside them, pleading their case to God, and doing for them what they cannot do for themselves. The Christian cannot live according to the world’s standards. They are to be “extraordinary” in every way.³ However, he also warns us to ensure that our actions do not become visible simply for the sake of visibility. “The visibility is never an end in itself.” (Bonhoeffer, “The Cost of Discipleship.” P. 158) He argues that the true Church of Jesus, or the body of Christ, cannot arbitrarily cut off all contact with those who refuse his call (the unbelievers); that is God's work of separation. It is our duty to devote our hearts and lives to Jesus and Jesus alone. God will take care of the rest.

Additionally, Bonhoeffer describes the messengers themselves. As outlined in Scripture, the fields are ready for the harvest. Jesus is seeking laborers, but few are to be found. Only those who share his love in their hearts have been given eyes to see. Jesus calls his disciples and makes them his apostles, his messengers and fellow workers. Their task is to do Christ's work, entirely dependent on Jesus' will. The remaining instructions are given in the Great Commission.

Bonhoeffer urges the rejected disciples to hold on to the Word and their Savior; despite the suffering they will undoubtedly face. The final decision must be made here on earth. Therefore, the messengers have no reason to fear man. Man can do them no harm. It is Jesus who holds the keys to both death and life! Again, speaking allegorically, he encourages these messengers to bear the fruit of the Spirit. As Christ's fellow workers, we should aspire to be like him in all things. The goal of our labor should be the salvation of the Church, as the body of Christ. Thus, our actions must reflect the life of the one living inside us.

Bonhoeffer begins his closing section on "the Church of Jesus Christ and the Life of Discipleship" with several thought-provoking preliminary questions. Following these questions, he describes the disciple's role within the larger community of the Body of Christ. The initiation into this community, of course, is none other than the sacrament of baptism. Baptism, being an offer made by Christ to humanity, is grounded solely on the will of Jesus Christ, as expressed in his gracious call. In baptism, a person becomes Christ's own possession. In baptism, a person dies along with their worldly attachments for the sake of fellowship with Christ. Baptismal death signifies justification from sin. After being "crucified in Christ" through baptism, we are raised or resurrected to a new life in Christ, becoming part of the larger Body of Christ. This body of believers is to actively proclaim the Word in the community and bear witness to their faith. This Body makes a deliberate intrusion into secular life through their testimony alone. They are the

Church, the set apart, the Ekklesia—those who have been called out. These justified Saints are part of a disciple community torn from the powers of the world, even while they still live within it. This justification is made possible because God Himself became man. In essence, the Lord Jesus is our righteousness! However, this justification should be accompanied by sanctification—separation from all that is unholy, namely, sin. Finally, Bonhoeffer concludes his discussion by turning to the image of Christ, a concept present in the earliest verses of Genesis. Those who truly follow Christ are destined to bear His image. We are heirs with Christ, standing alongside Him as co-heirs! God intends to recreate His image in humanity—the image that was lost at the Fall. The incarnation was part of God’s plan for reconciliation. Therefore, to be conformed to the image of Christ is not merely an ideal to pursue; it is Christ Himself who seeks to be formed within us! When we are conformed to His image through His incarnation and crucifixion, we will also share in the glory of His resurrection! He is the only “pattern” or example we are called to follow, shaping our lives after His. Thus, Bonhoeffer concludes that becoming Christlike sums up the entire life work of a disciple!

In the end, “The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a detailed explanation of what it means to follow Jesus and be his follower. In this work, Bonhoeffer truly examines what discipleship really costs the disciple of Jesus. While he emphasizes the significance of the grace offered to us through Christ’s fulfillment of the old Law, he also stresses the importance of continuing as a visible community, as an actively working, functioning Body of Christ. He describes not only the cost, but also the call, the individual, and the community of Jesus Christ!

“Endnotes”

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, 1995) pp. 43-45.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, 1995) p. 124

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, 1995) p.153

“Works Cited”

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. “The Cost of Discipleship.” Touchstone, 1995.