

A distinguishing characteristic of this modern age is that we like to do things the easy way. Every household on the earth that can afford them, and many that cannot afford them, are filled with so-called labor-saving devices. We have automatic dishwashers and automatic machines to wash and dry our clothes. We even have a little gadget that enables us to turn the television on and off, or change channels without ever getting out of our chair.

On our automobiles we have power brakes, power steering, and electric windows. On the golf course we have electric carts that enable us to ride instead of walk. In the office and classroom, we have computers.

And all of these devices are fine, I suppose, as long as we can afford them and find the necessary energy to operate them. But one thing troubles me, and that is the tendency to carry the same concept over into the realm of religion. With all of our love for comfort and convenience, what a temptation it is, to take our faith in Christ and make it as easy as possible.

But seemingly this trend is nothing new. Jesus warned against it long time ago. Our gospel reading tells of a time when he turned to a crowd that was following him and said, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even

his own life he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Forsaking family is not easy; denying self is not easy; carrying a cross is not easy. Jesus wanted it clearly understood that following him was not, is not, and never could be a matter of comfort and convenience. But despite his warning we persist in our effort to make out Christian discipleship as easy as possible.

Some of us do that by substituting moderate morality for the genuine goodness to which Christ has called us.

Perhaps we never state it specifically, but to many people being a Christian means paying your bills, being kind to your family, participating in community charities, avoiding sins of excess such as drunkenness or adultery, and in general being a decent sort of person. Well, no one would deny that a Christian should do those things and avoid those sins, but I think I can hear Jesus asking, “What more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?”

All around this world there are people who make no pretense of being Christian and yet lead decent, respectable lives. This we applaud, but we had better know that Jesus has called his followers to something more than that. He has challenged us to take up a cross; and then with his own death, he has planted a cross at the very center of all that he stands for.

And that cross speaks to us of his kind of goodness. It is an eternal symbol of self-sacrificing love. Jesus was a decent man, but he was so much more than that. He was a man who cared deeply about human trouble and voluntarily took upon himself the necessity of doing something about it. He got involved; he laid his own life on the line. And when that involvement led to a cross, he never backed away or turned aside, but picked up that cross, carried it to Calvary and died on it. His own words were these, “No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of myself.”

Without that principle of action, no great thing has ever been accomplished on this earth. Someone has to put his life on the line, or there is no redemption. Christ did that for the world. And if you and I are calling ourselves Christian without some serious involvement in this redemptive principle of the cross, then we are making our religion far too easy.

And then consider this: Some of us make our religion too easy by substituting love of truth and beauty for moral courage and devotion.

I love the great doctrines of our faith. I love the beauty of art. I love the beauty of architectural design. I love the beauty of great music. I live the beauty of nature. But if this is the sum and substance of my Christianity, then it is too easy.

No one ever loved truth and beauty more than Jesus. He took the eternal realities of life and put them into parables that children could understand and adults could never forget. He loved the beauty of nature with his whole heart. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field reminded him of his Father's love and provision. The night before his death, he prayed in a garden in order to fortify his soul to face the trials of tomorrow.

But let us never forget that he left that garden and faced a corrupt legal system, a cowardly politician, and a screaming, senseless crowd. He was more than a lover of truth and beauty. He was a man of incredible moral courage. When the error of sin twisted the truth, when the ugliness of evil trampled beauty under foot, he stood ready to lay his life on the line. That too was a part of his faith; and if it is not part of ours, then we are making our religion far too easy.

Finally, consider that we make our religion too easy if it concerns only our personal salvation and leaves out the needs of society.

This approach to the Christian faith is hard to deal with, because it involves a half truth. The salvation of which we read in the New Testament is an intensely personal matter. It involves a transaction of faith between the individual and God. Christ has died to redeem us, not in great groups, but one at a time.

The truth of this, we willingly admit; but, we dare not leave it there. That is not the end of the matter. What about the rest of the world? What about the needs of society as a whole? Do not Christ and his principles have application here, as well?

Personal religion is very important. Without it there can be no real religion at all. But social salvation is also important. Without a concern for the needs of society, personal religion degenerates into sanctified selfishness and becomes little more than a respectable way to cop-out on life.

Have we forgotten our Lord's concern for those who were hungry, for those who were sick, for those who were broken, disenfranchised, and oppressed? If our commitment to Christ does not include a deep concern about the need of society, and a determination to do something about them, then we have no right to call ourselves Christian. And we are making our religion far too easy.

Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." The cross has never been and can never be a symbol of ease and convenience. But I am convinced we don't really want that, anyway. We want a religion that will challenge the very best within us, and we have that in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**