

RADICAL by David Platt

Chapter 1

Someone Worth Losing Everything For *What Radical Abandonment to Jesus Really Means*

“The youngest megachurch pastor in history.”

While I would dispute that claim, it was nonetheless the label given to me when I went to pastor a large, thriving church in the Deep South—the Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Alabama. From the first day I was immersed in strategies for making the church bigger and better. Authors I respect greatly would make statements such as, “Decide how big you want your church to be, and go for it, whether that’s five, ten, or twenty thousand members.” Soon my name was near the top of the list of pastors of the fastest-growing U.S. churches. There I was...living out the American church dream.

But I found myself becoming uneasy. For one thing, my model in ministry is a guy who spent the majority of his ministry time with twelve men. A guy who, when he left this earth, had only about 120 people who were actually sticking around and doing what he told them to do. More like a minichurch, really. Jesus Christ—the youngest minichurch pastor in history.

So how was I to reconcile the fact that I was now pastoring thousands of people with the fact that my greatest example in ministry was known for turning away thousands of people? Whenever the crowd got big, he’d say something such as, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”¹ Not exactly the sharpest church-growth tactic. I can almost picture the looks on the disciples’ faces. “No, not the drink-my-blood speech! We’ll never get on the list of the fastest growing movements if you keep asking them to eat you.”

By the end of that speech, all the crowds had left, and only twelve men remained.² Jesus apparently wasn’t interested in marketing himself to the masses. His invitations to potential followers were clearly more costly than the crowds were ready to accept, and he seemed to be okay with that. He focused instead on the few who believed him when he said radical things. And through their radical obedience to him, he turned the course of history in a new direction.

Soon I realized I was on a collision course with an American church culture where success is defined by bigger crowds, bigger budgets, and bigger buildings. I was now confronted with a startling reality: Jesus actually spurned the things that my church culture said were most important. So what was I to do? I found myself faced with two big questions.

The first was simple. *Was I going to believe Jesus?* Was I going to embrace Jesus even though he said radical things that drove the crowds away?

The second question was more challenging. *Was I going to obey Jesus?* My biggest fear, even now, is that I will hear Jesus’ words and walk away, content to settle for less than radical obedience to him. In other words, my biggest fear is that I will do exactly what most people did when they encountered Jesus in the first century.

That’s why I’ve written this book. I am on a journey. But I am convinced it is not just a journey for pastors. I am convinced these questions are critical for the larger community of faith in our country today. I am convinced that we as Christ followers in American churches have embraced values and ideas that are not only unbiblical but that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe. And I am convinced we have a choice.

You and I can choose to continue with business as usual in the Christian life and in the church as a whole, enjoying success based on the standards defined by the culture around us. Or we can take an honest look at the Jesus of the Bible and dare to ask what the consequences might be if we really believed him and really obeyed him.

I invite you to join the journey with me. I do not claim to have all the answers. If anything, I have more questions than answers. But if Jesus is who he said he is, and if his promises are as rewarding as the Bible claims they are, then we may discover that satisfaction in our lives and success in the church are not found in what our culture deems most important but in radical abandonment to Jesus.

Puddles of Tears

Imagine all the blinds closed on the windows of a dimly lit room. Twenty leaders from different churches in the area sat in a circle on the floor with their Bibles open. Some of them had sweat on their foreheads after walking for miles to get there. Others were dirty from the dust in the villages from which they had set out on bikes early that morning.

They had gathered in secret. They had intentionally come to this place at different times throughout the morning so as not to draw attention to the meeting that was occurring. They lived in a country in Asia where it is illegal for them to gather like this. If caught, they could lose their land, their jobs, their families, or their lives.

I listened as they began sharing stories of what God was doing in their churches. One man sat in the corner. He had a strong frame, and he served as the head of security, so to speak. Whenever a knock was heard at the door or a noise was made outside the window, everyone in the room would freeze in tension as this brother would go to make sure everything was okay. As he spoke, his tough appearance soon revealed a tender heart.

“Some of the people in my church have been pulled away by a cult,” he said. This particular cult is known for kidnapping believers, taking them to isolated locations, and torturing them. Brothers and sisters having their tongues cut out of their mouths is not uncommon.

As he shared about the dangers his church members were facing, tears welled up in his eyes. “I am hurting,” he said, “and I need God’s grace to lead my church through these attacks.”

A woman on the other side of the room spoke up next. “Some of the members in my church were recently confronted by government officials.” She continued, “They threatened their families, saying that if they did not stop gathering to study the Bible, they were going to lose everything they had.” She asked for prayer, saying, “I need to know how to lead my church to follow Christ even when it costs them everything.”

As I looked around the room, I saw that everyone was now in tears. The struggles expressed by this brother and sister were not isolated. They all looked at one another and said, “We need to pray.” Immediately they went to their knees, and with their faces on the ground, they began to cry out to God. Their prayers were marked less by grandiose theological language and more by heartfelt praise and pleading.

“O God, thank you for loving us.”

“O God, we need you.”

“Jesus, we give our lives to you and for you.”

“Jesus, we trust in you.”

They audibly wept before God as one leader after another prayed. After about an hour, the room drew to a silence, and they rose from the floor. Humbled by what I had just been a part of, I

saw puddles of tears in a circle around the room.

In the days since then, God has granted me many other opportunities to gather with believers in underground house churches in Asia. Men and women there are risking everything to follow Christ.

Men like Jian, an Asian doctor who left his successful health clinic and now risks his life and the lives of his wife and two kids in order to provide impoverished villages with medical care while secretly training an entire network of house-church leaders.

Women like Lin, who teaches on a university campus where it is illegal to spread the gospel. She meets in secret with college students to talk about the claims of Christ, though she could lose her livelihood for doing so.

Teenagers like Shan and Ling, who have been sent out from house churches in their villages to undergo intensive study and preparation for taking the gospel to parts of Asia where there are no churches.

Ling said to me, "I have told my family that I will likely never come back home. I am going to hard places to make the gospel known, and it is possible that I will lose my life in the process."

Shan added, "But our families understand. Our moms and dads have been in prison for their faith, and they have taught us that Jesus is worthy of all our devotion."

A Different Scene

Three weeks after my third trip to underground house churches in Asia, I began my first Sunday as the pastor of a church in America. The scene was much different. Dimly lit rooms were now replaced by an auditorium with theater-style lights. Instead of traveling for miles by foot or bike to gather for worship, we had arrived in millions of dollars' worth of vehicles. Dressed in our fine clothes, we sat down in our cushioned chairs.

To be honest, there was not much at stake. Many had come because this was their normal routine. Some had come simply to check out the new pastor. But none had come at the risk of their lives.

That afternoon, crowds filled the parking lot of our sprawling multimillion-dollar church campus. Moms, dads, and their kids jumped on inflatable games. Plans were being discussed for using the adjacent open land to build state-of-the-art recreation fields and facilities to support more events like this.

Please don't misunderstand this scene. It was filled with wonderful, well-meaning, Bible-believing Christians who wanted to welcome me and enjoy one another. People like you and people like me, who simply desire community, who want to be involved in church, and who believe God is important in their lives. But as a new pastor comparing the images around me that day with the pictures still fresh in my mind of brothers and sisters on the other side of the world, I could not help but think that somewhere along the way we had missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We were settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.

Talking People Out of Following Christ

At the end of Luke 9, we find a story about three men who approached Jesus, eager to follow him. In surprising fashion, though, Jesus seems to have tried to talk them out of doing so.

The first guy said, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

Jesus responded, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”³ In other words, Jesus told this man that he could expect homelessness on the journey ahead. Followers of Christ are not guaranteed that even their basic need of shelter will be met.

The second man told Jesus that his father had just died. The man wanted to go back, bury his father, and then follow Jesus.

Jesus replied, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”⁴

I remember distinctly the moment when my own dad died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Amid the immense heaviness of the days that followed and the deep desire of my heart to honor my dad at his funeral, I cannot imagine hearing these words from Jesus: “Don’t even go to your dad’s funeral. There are more important things to do.”

A third man approached Jesus and told him that he wanted to follow him, but before he did, he wanted to say good-bye to his family.

Jesus wouldn’t let him. He told the man, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” Plainly put, a relationship with Jesus requires total, superior, and exclusive devotion.

Become homeless.

Let someone else bury your dad.

Don’t even say good-bye to your family.

Is it surprising that, from all we can tell in Luke 9, Jesus was successful in persuading these men not to follow him?

The first time I heard this text preached, it was from the lips of Dr. Jim Shaddix. He was my preaching professor, and I had moved to New Orleans specifically to study under him. Soon after I got there, Dr. Shaddix invited me to travel with him to an event where he was speaking. I sat in the front row in a crowd of hundreds of people, and I listened to his sermon begin.

“Tonight my goal is to talk you out of following Jesus.”

My eyebrows shot up in amazement and confusion. What was he thinking? What was I thinking? I had just moved my life to New Orleans to study under a guy who persuades people not to follow Jesus.

Dr. Shaddix preached the sermon exactly as Luke 9 describes, giving potential disciples warnings about what is involved in following Jesus. In the end he invited people who wanted to follow Christ to come down to the front. To my surprise many in the crowd got up from their seats and came down. I sat there dumbfounded and began to think, *So this is just a preaching tactic, kind of a sanctified reverse psychology. And it works. Tell them you’re going to talk them out of following Jesus, and they will respond in droves.*

I decided I was going to try it.

The next week I was preaching at a youth event. Taking my cue from Dr. Shaddix, I proudly stood before the students assembled that night and announced, “My goal tonight is to talk you out of following Jesus.” I could see the leaders of the event raise their eyebrows in concern, but I knew what I was doing. After all, I’d been in seminary a few weeks, and I’d seen this done before. So I preached the message and then invited students who wanted to follow Christ to come forward.

Apparently I was more successful in preaching that message than Dr. Shaddix had been. Let’s just say I stood at the front alone for a while until finally the leader who organized the event

decided it was time for me to call it a night. For some reason I was never invited back.

Contrary to what I may have thought about Luke 9, Jesus was not using a gimmick to get more followers. He was simply and boldly making it clear from the start that if you follow him, you abandon everything—your needs, your desires, even your family.

Radical Abandonment

The events of Luke 9 were not isolated incidents in the life of Jesus, either. On another occasion, when surrounded by a crowd of eager followers, Jesus turned to them and remarked, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”⁶ Imagine hearing those words from an obscure Jewish teacher in the first century. He just lost most of us at *hello*.

But then he continued: “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”⁷ Now this is taking it to another level. *Pick up an instrument of torture and follow me*. This is getting plain weird...and kind of creepy. Imagine a leader coming on the scene today and inviting all who would come after him to pick up an electric chair and become his disciple. Any takers?

As if this were not enough, Jesus finished his seeker-sensitive plea with a pull-at-your-heartstrings conclusion. “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”⁸ Give up everything you have, carry a cross, and hate your family. This sounds a lot different than “Admit, believe, confess, and pray a prayer after me.”

And that’s still not all. Consider Mark 10, another time a potential follower showed up. Here was a guy who was young, rich, intelligent, and influential. He was a prime prospect, to say the least. Not only that, but he was eager and ready to go. He came running up to Jesus, bowed at his feet, and said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”⁹

If we were in Jesus’ shoes, we probably would be thinking this is our chance. A simple “Pray this prayer, sign this card, bow your head, and repeat after me,” and this guy is in. Then think about what a guy like this with all his influence and prestige can do. We can get him on the circuit. He can start sharing his testimony, signing books, raising money for the cause. This one is a no-brainer—we have to get him in.

Unfortunately, Jesus didn’t have the personal evangelism books we have today that tell us how to draw the net and close the sale. Instead Jesus told him one thing: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”¹⁰

What was he thinking? Jesus had committed the classic blunder of letting the big fish get away. The cost was too high.

Yet the kind of abandonment Jesus asked of the rich young man is at the core of Jesus’ invitation throughout the Gospels. Even his simple call in Matthew 4 to his disciples—“Follow me”—contained radical implications for their lives. Jesus was calling them to abandon their comforts, all that was familiar to them and natural for them.

He was calling them to abandon their careers. They were reorienting their entire life’s work around discipleship to Jesus. Their plans and dreams were now being swallowed up in his.

Jesus was calling them to abandon their possessions. “Drop your nets and your trades as successful fishermen,” he was saying in effect.

Jesus was calling them to abandon their family and their friends. When James and John left their father, we see Jesus’ words in Luke 14 coming alive.

Ultimately, Jesus was calling them to abandon themselves. They were leaving certainty for

uncertainty, safety for danger, self-preservation for self-denunciation. In a world that prizes promoting oneself, they were following a teacher who told them to crucify themselves. And history tells us the result. Almost all of them would lose their lives because they responded to his invitation.

What About Us?

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of these eager followers of Jesus in the first century. What if I were the potential disciple being told to drop my nets? What if you were the man whom Jesus told to not even say good-bye to his family? What if we were told to hate our families and give up everything we had in order to follow Jesus?

This is where we come face to face with a dangerous reality. We do have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We do have to love him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that he will tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor.

But we don't want to believe it. We are afraid of what it might mean for our lives. So we rationalize these passages away. "Jesus wouldn't really tell us not to bury our father or say good-bye to our family. Jesus didn't literally mean to sell all we have and give it to the poor. What Jesus really meant was..."

And this is where we need to pause. Because we are starting to redefine Christianity. We are giving in to the dangerous temptation to take the Jesus of the Bible and twist him into a version of Jesus we are more comfortable with.

A nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn't mind materialism and who would never call us to give away everything we have. A Jesus who would not expect us to forsake our closest relationships so that he receives all our affection. A Jesus who is fine with nominal devotion that does not infringe on our comforts, because, after all, he loves us just the way we are. A Jesus who wants us to be balanced, who wants us to avoid dangerous extremes, and who, for that matter, wants us to avoid danger altogether. A Jesus who brings us comfort and prosperity as we live out our Christian spin on the American dream.

But do you and I realize what we are doing at this point? We are molding Jesus into our image. He is beginning to look a lot like us because, after all, that is whom we are most comfortable with. And the danger now is that when we gather in our church buildings to sing and lift up our hands in worship, we may not actually be worshiping the Jesus of the Bible. Instead we may be worshiping ourselves.

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian struggling to follow Christ in the midst of Nazi rule, penned one of the great Christian books of the twentieth century. In it he wrote that the first call every Christian experiences is "the call to abandon the attachments of this world." The theme of the book is summarized in one potent sentence: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹¹ Bonhoeffer aptly entitled his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Based on what we have heard from Jesus in the Gospels, we would have to agree that the cost of discipleship is great. But I wonder if the cost of nondiscipleship is even greater.

The price is certainly high for people who don't know Christ and who live in a world where Christians shrink back from self-denying faith and settle into self-indulging faith. While

Christians choose to spend their lives fulfilling the American dream instead of giving their lives to proclaiming the kingdom of God, literally billions in need of the gospel remain in the dark.

Just a few months before becoming a pastor, I stood atop a mountain in the heart of Hyderabad, India. This high point in the city housed a temple for Hindu gods. I smelled the offerings that had been given to the wooden gods behind me. I saw teeming masses in front of me. Every direction I turned, I glimpsed an urban center filled with millions upon millions of people.

And then it hit me. The overwhelming majority of these people had never even heard the gospel. They offer religious sacrifices day in and day out because no one has told them that, in Christ, the final sacrifice has already been offered on their behalf. As a result they live without Christ, and if nothing changes, they will die without him as well.

As I stood on that mountain, God gripped my heart and flooded my mind with two resounding words: "Wake up." Wake up and realize that there are infinitely more important things in your life than football and a 401(k). Wake up and realize there are real battles to be fought, so different from the superficial, meaningless "battles" you focus on. Wake up to the countless multitudes who are currently destined for a Christless eternity.

The price of our nondiscipleship is high for those without Christ. It is high also for the poor of this world.

Consider the cost when Christians ignore Jesus' commands to sell their possessions and give to the poor and instead choose to spend their resources on better comforts, larger homes, nicer cars, and more stuff. Consider the cost when these Christians gather in churches and choose to spend millions of dollars on nice buildings to drive up to, cushioned chairs to sit in, and endless programs to enjoy for themselves. Consider the cost for the starving multitudes who sit outside the gate of contemporary Christian affluence.

I remember when I was preparing to take my first trip to Sudan in 2004. The country was still at war, and the Darfur region in western Sudan had just begun to make headlines. A couple of months before we left, I received a Christian news publication in the mail. The front cover had two headlines side by side. I'm not sure if the editor planned for these particular headlines to be next to each other or if he just missed it in a really bad way.

On the left one headline read, "First Baptist Church Celebrates New \$23 Million Building." A lengthy article followed, celebrating the church's expensive new sanctuary. The exquisite marble, intricate design, and beautiful stained glass were all described in vivid detail.

On the right was a much smaller article. The headline for it read, "Baptist Relief Helps Sudanese Refugees." Knowing I was about to go to Sudan, my attention was drawn. The article described how 350,000 refugees in western Sudan were dying of malnutrition and might not live to the end of the year. It briefly explained their plight and sufferings. The last sentence said that Baptists had sent money to help relieve the suffering of the Sudanese. I was excited until I got to the amount.

Now, remember what was on the left: "First Baptist Church Celebrates New \$23 Million Building." On the right the article said, "Baptists have raised \$5,000 to send to refugees in western Sudan."

Five thousand dollars.

That is not enough to get a plane into Sudan, much less one drop of water to people who need it.

Twenty-three million dollars for an elaborate sanctuary and five thousand dollars for hundreds of thousands of starving men, women, and children, most of whom were dying apart from faith in Christ.

Where have we gone wrong?

How did we get to the place where this is actually tolerable?

Indeed, the cost of nondiscipleship is great. The cost of believers not taking Jesus seriously is vast for those who don't know Christ and devastating for those who are starving and suffering around the world. But the cost of nondiscipleship is not paid solely by them. It is paid by us as well.

A Call to Treasure

Did you catch what Jesus said when he told the rich man to abandon his possessions and give to the poor? Listen again, particularly to the second half of Jesus' invitation: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, *and you will have treasure in heaven.*"¹² If we are not careful, we can misconstrue these radical statements from Jesus in the Gospels and begin to think that he does not want the best for us. But he does. Jesus was not trying to strip this man of all his pleasure. Instead he was offering him the satisfaction of eternal treasure. Jesus was saying, "It will be better, not just for the poor, but for you too, when you abandon the stuff you are holding on to."

We see the same thing over in Matthew 13. There Jesus tells his disciples, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."¹³

I love this picture. Imagine walking in a field and stumbling upon a treasure that is more valuable than anything else you could work for or find in this life. It is more valuable than all you have now or will ever have in the future.

You look around and notice that no one else realizes the treasure is here, so you cover it up quickly and walk away, pretending you haven't seen anything. You go into town and begin to sell off all your possessions to have enough money to buy that field. The world thinks you're crazy. "What are you thinking?" your friends and family ask you.

You tell them, "I'm buying that field over there."

They look at you in disbelief. "That's a ridiculous investment," they say. "Why are you giving away everything you have?"

You respond, "I have a hunch," and you smile to yourself as you walk away.

You smile because you know. You know that in the end you are not really giving away anything at all. Instead you are gaining. Yes, you are abandoning everything you have, but you are also gaining more than you could have in any other way. So with joy— with joy!—you sell it all, you abandon it all. Why? Because you have found something worth losing everything else for.

This is the picture of Jesus in the gospel. He is something—someone—worth losing everything for. And if we walk away from the Jesus of the gospel, we walk away from eternal riches. The cost of nondiscipleship is profoundly greater for us than the cost of discipleship. For when we abandon the trinkets of this world and respond to the radical invitation of Jesus, we discover the infinite treasure of knowing and experiencing him.

Is He Worth It?

This brings us to the crucial question for every professing or potential follower of Jesus: Do we really believe he is worth abandoning everything for? Do you and I really believe that Jesus is so

good, so satisfying, and so rewarding that we will leave all we have and all we own and all we are in order to find our fullness in him? Do you and I believe him enough to obey him and to follow him wherever he leads, even when the crowds in our culture—and maybe in our churches—turn the other way?

In this book I want to show you that, with the best of intentions, we have actually turned away from Jesus. We have in many areas blindly and unknowingly embraced values and ideas that are common in our culture but are antithetical to the gospel he taught. Here we stand amid an American dream dominated by self-advancement, self-esteem, and self-sufficiency, by individualism, materialism, and universalism. Yet I want to show you our desperate need to revisit the words of Jesus, to listen to them, to believe them, and to obey them. We need to return with urgency to a biblical gospel, because the cost of not doing so is great for our lives, our families, our churches, and the world around us.

As I mentioned previously, I have more questions than I have answers. And every day I see more disconnects between the Christ of Scripture and the Christianity that characterizes my life and the church God has entrusted me to lead. I have so far to go. We have so far to go.

But I want to know him. I want to experience him. I want to be part of a people who delight in him like the brothers and sisters in underground Asia who have nothing but him. And I want to be part of a people who are risking it all for him.

For the sake of more than a billion people today who have yet to even hear the gospel, I want to risk it all. For the sake of twenty-six thousand children who will die today of starvation or a preventable disease, I want to risk it all. For the sake of an increasingly marginalized and relatively ineffective church in our culture, I want to risk it all. For the sake of my life, my family, and the people who surround me, I want to risk it all.

And I am not alone. In the faith family I have the privilege to lead, I am joined by wealthy doctors who are selling their homes and giving to the poor or moving overseas; successful business leaders who are mobilizing their companies to help the hurting; young couples who have moved into the inner city to live out the gospel; and senior adults, stay-at-home moms, college students, and teenagers who are reorienting their lives around radical abandonment to Jesus. I'll introduce you to many of them in the course of this book.

There's nothing special about us. But we're proof that ordinary people who are naturally drawn to the comforts of the American dream can be converted to a radical faith in a radical Savior. Why not join us?

If you are serious about taking this journey, though, I believe a couple of preconditions exist. This goes back to the two big questions I started asking myself when I realized I was a megachurch leader trying to follow a minichurch leader.

First, from the outset you need to *commit to believe* whatever Jesus says. As a Christian, it would be a grave mistake to come to Jesus and say, "Let me hear what you have to say, and then I'll decide whether or not I like it." If you approach Jesus this way, you will never truly hear what he has to say. You have to say yes to the words of Jesus before you even hear them.

Then second, you need to *commit to obey* what you have heard. The gospel does not prompt you to mere reflection; the gospel requires a response. In the process of hearing Jesus, you are compelled to take an honest look at your life, your family, and your church and not just ask, "What is he saying?" but also ask, "What shall I do?"

In the pages to come, we will together explore the biblical gospel alongside our cultural assumptions with an aim toward embracing Jesus for who he really is, not for who we have created him to be. We will look at the core truth of a God-centered gospel and see how we have

manipulated it into a human-centered (and ultimately dissatisfying) message. We will see a purpose for our lives that transcends the country and culture we live in, and we will see our desperate need for his presence to fulfill that purpose in us. We will discover that our meaning is found in community and our life is found in giving ourselves for the sake of others in the church, among the lost, and among the poor. We will evaluate where true security and safety are found in this world, and in the end we will determine not to waste our lives on anything but uncompromising, unconditional abandonment to a gracious, loving Savior who invites us to take radical risk and promises us radical reward.

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