

Have you ever watched the famous western movie starring Oscar winning John Wayne, called *True Grit* ? As a young boy I loved this gun toting western with Marshall Rooster Cogburn. Where the baddies get shot up by the goodie and the young girl saved. John Wayne was pretty old when he played the part, in fact he was seventy- still jumping onto horses. So there is hope for all of us!

“Grit” is trending these days. In a nutshell, “grit” is mental toughness, the ability to persevere and keep at it in order to achieve a long-term goal. Like calculating what it is going to take to build that big tower and then keeping after it, no matter that a storm knocked it down or that the permit got delayed or that thieves stole the materials, just keep calculating and working until it stands tall for all to see and admire. Is this calculated Christianity, this determined discipleship, about grit? Is Jesus telling us to be gritty followers?

There is a big part of me that wants this to be the case because, well, I am Welsh, and I am from born fighting, Celts. We are known for our grit, right? My parents’ mantra to me throughout my entire childhood was: BUCK UP, GET OVER IT, MOVE ON. In my family, we take pride in the stories of our ancestors who worked in the tin and coal mines, playing rugby for Wales and beating England regularly. “True Grit”.

Is that what Jesus was doing in our Gospel encouraging godly grit? Was Jesus admonishing the crowd to be determined disciples? Was Jesus calling the crowds to mental toughness, knowing all Jerusalem loomed in the distance? Was calculated Christianity all about our gut-it-out, stick-to-it, never-give-up, grit? Or could it be Jesus wanted us to make intentional choices, to be informed, and smart. Maybe this calculated Christianity is more like that popular coaching method that employs SMART goals. Have you heard of them? It is an acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely. Is calculated Christianity, small-print, full disclosure, all-in-faith about setting SMART goals and sticking with them?

Is this what Jesus meant when he said to estimate the expenditure, and figure out what it would take? Did he mean to be able to measure, quantify, and count the cost of discipleship? I hope so, because I can do this. The other parts about hating my parents, spouse, and kids, I don’t find these attainable or frankly all that specific. I mean there are moments when I feel an acute irritation, but hate is a strong word and is this not counter to all love verses in scripture? Love God, love neighbour, they will know you are my followers by your love, faith, hope, and love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love, perfect love casts out fear, God is love. Jesus was sending a mixed message here.

Could we just go with some Christian SMART goals and still be counted among Jesus’ followers? It would look great in our end of the year reports. We could even publicise them and put some of those big graphs, a thermometer perhaps in the narthex that shows where we are in meeting them. We could watch it inch up, week to week, and feel good about our progress, know exactly where we stand. Increase giving this fiscal year by 5%. Specific, measurable, perhaps attainable, relevant, of course, timely, yes. How’s that, Jesus? Intentional, informed, no one will ridicule us, they may well look to us as one of those “best practices” places; not far from here- discipleship: sorted. Success Nailed!

We can be gritty, determined, and SMART and therefore surely counted among Jesus' followers, right? But what do we do about that troublesome language about hating those closest to us, the very ones we'd lay down our life for? What about that odd call to hate our life that sounds downright pathological in a culture awash in talk and titles of self-love, life balance, and self-care? Does God really require us to hate that which we most cherish?

When Jesus turned to those crowds drawn to his healings and authoritative teachings, his compassion, and his miracles, and told them: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" he was asking them, and us, to do the impossible and perhaps that is exactly the point.

It is exactly the point because calculated Christianity is not about our brains or our talents, our balance sheets and equity. It is about surrendering to God's will, power, grace, compassion, mercy, and love. Discipleship is not about what we can attain, it is about what God in Christ does for us and through us and sometimes despite us. It is about knowing that we will try and try and try until we know we can't do it, not on our own. We will try to be faithful, try to be forgiving, try to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, try to do what we know is right but inevitably get to a place where we do the very thing we hate anyway and then we know we cannot do it. There is not enough grit and good works in the world to make us worthy to be counted among Jesus' followers, but yet, we are.

We will never be smart enough to know the mind of God because our thoughts are not God's thoughts. And yet we are promised that Christ makes his home in our hearts. We are the clay and God is the potter. Faithful discipleship is about being shaped by the most high God again and again. It is not about our righteousness or abilities, our successes or our failures, it is about trusting and seeking to follow the one who came to save sinners. Discipleship is not about avoiding the ridicule of others, but being a fool for Christ. Discipleship is not demonstrating our might and subduing our enemies, it is about sacrificial service that turns the other cheek. How do we measure the price and the impact of these things? Which one of you, of us, could possibly do them without the help of the One through whom all things are possible?

Jesus' admonishment to the crowds and to us is a call to calculate the cost so that we know only he can pay the price. Only then will we live our lives in joyous gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice, for the amazing grace that meets us where we are, but never leaves us as we've been found.

I cannot hate my parents or my spouse or my kid, and my life is far too filled with blessings for me to be anything but grateful. But I know I can only love them all rightly when I put Jesus Christ first, when I recognise and know to the marrow of my bones that I have been saved by grace, when I want nothing more and nothing less than to surrender to God's good will even though I know I will try and try and try and fail, but God will forgive and forgive and forgive and use me anyway.

The possessions I most need to surrender are not only material but the false gods; false stories, false pride, and pretences to which I cling most closely: like grit and self-righteousness, the illusion that I am smart, that my privileges are somehow earned, that I am entitled to what I have, that I can somehow accurately calculate and measure and evaluate my Christianity, my faithfulness, my discipleship or anyone else's. When I let go of these things, I yield to be shaped in ways pleasing to God and useful to others.

The truth is, I could give away all I own and still not make a dent in the debt I owe the One who went to the cross in my stead.

We can never calculate what discipleship requires, we can only surrender to the potter and be shaped in surprising ways that God will use beyond all we could ever imagine or do on our own, no matter how determined we are.

Which one of you could ever calculate the value of knowing Jesus Christ? Discipleship, both the gift and the responsibility of it, is priceless, all we can do is offer God whatever we have, in faith and humility, trusting that Jesus will take it, bless it, and shape it for the building of his kingdom and his victory over everything that could separate us from his love. That's the formula for following Jesus and, thanks be to God, the only calculation that truly matters. Amen.

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