

I bought a cup of coffee at a shop in the city one morning this week. The cashier handed me a lime green receipt and asked, "Do you know what this means?" I said, "No." He said, "It means you can bring this receipt to any one of our shops any time after 2 pm today, and you can get a large iced coffee for only \$2. But it has to be today. It gives you a chance to buy a coffee you might not otherwise try." I said thanks, but I thought of a different explanation he could have given me. Something like this: "We think you did not spend enough money here today, and our business needs more of what you have in your pocket. We're willing to discount your next purchase, but we want you to pay more than you intended to pay, to drink more than you wanted to drink, and to get into the habit of making multiple trips to our shops within the course of a single day." The cashier was really asking me for a sacrifice, but he framed it as a benefit for me because if he gave me the company's reason for the special receipt, he knew I would say, "Thanks, but no thanks."

Jesus never hid the bad news. He wants us to be his followers, but he doesn't try to trick us into it. He doesn't say, "If you follow me, everything will go your way." Instead, he says, "If you wish to come after me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." The disciples must have wondered what on earth they had gotten themselves into.

Many of our relationships work this way – whether it's in business, research or love. We start out with someone thinking this is just going to be great, and then we learn the sacrifice it will take. People are not always as lovable as we first think they are; their ideas don't always seem as sound as they first do; and the inconvenience they cause makes us wonder if this relationship is really worth the cost of time, emotional energy, and finances. Sometimes it's not. But other times, it is. It is worth the effort. Jesus is the best example. To follow him is going to mean sacrifice, but when we add up the pros and cons, we keep coming to the same conclusion. He is worth it. His way of life brings inner peace, practical wisdom, confident direction, and final rest. Yes, it will cost something – we do with less; we share our possessions; we compromise our preferences; we put up with the rebuke of others because our relationship with Christ is the center of our lives.

Anything worth having takes self-denial. Students have to work hard not just to make good grades but to have answers for the challenges of life. Employees get more skilled at their jobs not just to have a better salary, but to build self-esteem and to improve society as a whole.

Marketers are very good at tempting us with the personal benefit we will receive by buying their products. They know we are weak; we respond favorably to the short-term pleasures that caffeine and other seductions will bring. But Jesus is thinking about a long-term relationship. Following him is not easy. It involves sacrifice: buying less and giving more; choosing good friends and abandoning bad relationships; loving instead of hating; giving time for prayer; and – because he's worth it – taking up whatever cross he gives.