

The Cost of Discipleship

Our New Testament Scripture is Luke 14:25-35. Jesus drew the multitudes who received his ministry of healing and preaching. Most preachers would be delighted and even excited about having such large and enthusiastic congregations of listeners. But Jesus disabuses them of their false expectations and teaches them that the kingdom of God does not come by political or military power, but will come through the path of his suffering, but also through the suffering of the subjects of his kingdom. Thus, Jesus “thins out” the crowd, as we will see, by relating to them the cost of discipleship, of being his followers. We might say that Jesus turns to the crowd and gives a “reality check,” to call them to consider the hard truth of following him.

Follow as I read **Luke 14:25-35**:

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “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. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. ³⁴ “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ³⁵ It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

An organization that supports the persecuted church reports that the number of martyrdoms during the 20th Century surpassed the total of all martyrdoms throughout the previous 19 centuries of church history. And the momentum of persecution seems to be mounting in this 21st Century. 100,000,000 believers around the world are suffering some form of persecution. Christians are the most persecuted group worldwide; an average of 100 Christians around the world are killed each month for their faith, and believers are persecuted in at least 60 countries (Open Doors USA).

In Nigeria alone, many, like Pastors Sabo Yakubu and George Orjih, have died as martyrs for their faith in Christ. “These two pastors were brutally murdered amid a series of coordinated anti-Christian attacks that began in July 2009 in Northern Nigeria. When asked to convert to their radical Islam, Sabo and George

refused and were beheaded. Sabo, a father of seven, was killed with a machete. George preached to the leader of the militants about Christ before his own martyrdom. A fellow kidnap victim, who was later released, reported, "While we were lying there, tied up, George turned to me and said, 'If you survive, tell my brothers that I died well, and am living with Christ. And if we all die, we know that we die for the Lord.'" One eye witness said that George was singing and praying all through the ordeal and encouraging the believers not to give up, even unto death."

Believers like George Orjih are paying the ultimate price for following Jesus. When I read their stories and come across a Scripture passage like the one we have today, I'm forced to ask myself whether I would faithfully pay the full price for following Jesus—the price of witnessing during persecution and even unto a brutal death. I must ask myself the searching question, what's involved in the cost of discipleship for someone like me?

The people in these large crowds had different expectations of Jesus and obviously ones that Jesus refused to satisfy. We know that they wanted Jesus to be their miracle worker, who would keep them supplied with material provisions. This we see in the way the crowd followed Jesus after his miracle of feeding the 5,000 men, plus women and children. Jesus rebuked them at that time, saying that they were seeking him only because he was a possible key to satisfying their appetites (Jn. 6:26). And there are people today who see faith in Jesus as a way to securing life's provisions and even material prosperity, and tragically there are plenty of television evangelists who are promulgating this false promise.

Even after his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus encounters the false expectations of his disciples, who ask if they can expect the restoration of a political kingdom under his immediate Messianic rule (Acts 1:6). We can hardly fault these disciples for wanting relief from an oppressive outside government, any more than we could fault those in lands of persecution today. But Jesus calls us to follow him in the context of a fallen world that does not recognize him as Messiah. And Christ does not fulfill our desires in this life to be free from worldly oppression, opposition and even persecution. Jesus teaches us the only way to come to him is by the way of discipleship, a way that has a real cost involved, that begins by finding a relationship that is free but not cheap.

The crowd was "traveling" with Jesus, but Jesus turned and challenged them with the idea of *coming* to him (25f). There seems to be in these contrasting words a vital distinction. A member of the press corps can "travel with" the president of a country and his entourage, and can ask questions perhaps, but always at a distance. Only those the president or prime minister is officially meeting can actually "come to" him face to face in a personal encounter. It seems that any important relationship doesn't come without the cost of commitment. Take marriage, for example. When you don't invest your time and effort in another person you are showing disregard, if not contempt, for that relationship.

At issue here is the matter of a relationship with Jesus as opposed to just traveling alongside the Christian crowd. It's so easy and yet dangerously deceptive to be close to Christians, look and talk like them and even conform to the expected behavior of certain Christians and yet not be a real follower of Jesus. Jesus was not asking for spectators but was calling for recruits. Free grace that saves us is not cheap. It wasn't cheap for God, who paid the price of his Son (Jn. 3:16). Nor is it free for us, who are saved for a life of good works and of obediently following Jesus on the way of the cross (Eph. 2:8-10).

Jesus speaks about counting the cost of following him and says something that is very strange and even upsetting to our Western ears and minds. Jesus says, "*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* (26). How can we understand this against all we know about Jesus' teaching about love for God and others being the Great Commandment; about loving even our enemies; about the need to honor and provide for our parents, for example (Mk. 12:28-34; Matt. 5:43-48; 15:4)? Jesus is using the typical Semitic form of hyperbolic comparisons. And so he's describing counting the cost of hating, comparatively speaking.

In Semitic language, when someone made comparisons she would say something like, "I love the Packers, but I hate the Vikings," using the language of preference and comparison. Jesus in effect was saying that our love for him should make our love for all others, including our most precious human relationships, appear as hatred by comparison. Here "hatred" is not an emotional animosity but is a comparative disregard. Matthew translates the meaning of Jesus' words in our text thus: "Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (NIV 10:37). It's a comparison and even a contrast that says that our love for Jesus must be superior to all other loves and our commitment to him be unrivaled and un-compromised.

"Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple." (33, *The Message*)

Whenever I think about Jesus' words on the cost of discipleship, I think of the classic book of that title, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This young German pastor and theologian paid the ultimate price of following Jesus, being martyred by the Nazis just days before the Allied Liberation in 1945. In his chapter on Luke 14:26, Bonhoeffer speaks about the immediacy of Christ in the life of his disciples. By this he meant that our relationship with Jesus is the only immediate relationship and that all other loyalties are now secondary for the disciple. Christ is not only the Mediator between us and God but also between us and everyone else, including family members.

Didn't Jesus say that following him would bring a sword that would divide us from our immediate family members? Severed family ties and rejection can cause deep hurt. Jesus may come between you and your closest friend. Following him may lead to a moral decision that gets you fired from your job, or having to cancel plans to marry the one you love, because she or he doesn't choose to follow Jesus.

Jesus says that if we would be his followers we must accept the way of the cross, which means to identify with him, to share in his sufferings, and to die to the way of self and the world. Death by crucifixion was a shameful execution. To follow Jesus means we must share with him in his shame. The fallen world will look at us as followers of Jesus in the same way they regarded a crucified, condemned man as worthy only of contempt and mockery. The cross was an instrument of torture as well as execution. And we must be willing to share in his sufferings, which Paul considered a worthy ambition (Phil. 3:10). To follow Jesus is to be willing to share with him the disdain and hatred of the fallen world. If we faithfully follow Jesus, we'll remind others of Jesus and just as they persecuted him, they'll persecute us (Jn. 15:18-16:4). Persecution for the godly is not only a possibility but a given (2 Tim. 3:12).

The cross is a portrait of weakness. Had he exercised divine power and prerogative, Jesus could have called for angelic intervention to deliver him from the cross (Matt. 26:53); but instead, Jesus chose the path of weakness and surrender, by which he brought us salvation. To take the way of the cross is to relinquish self-assertion and the exercise of willful power and control, and to trust the Father to give us the weak power of the cross for witness, living and serving.

Crosses were instruments of death. We're to live as though dead to the attraction and influence of the fallen world. And we're to live as though under the sentence of death to the power of sin and self-centeredness. A prisoner on death row is no longer interested in long-range plans for retirement. To carry a cross is to remember that we are dead to personal plans and ambitions that would hinder us from being free to follow wherever and whenever Jesus would lead us.

As Dr. Samuel Johnson said, "being hanged in a fortnight wonderfully concentrates the mind." If we're mindful of the cross, we'll be focused and concentrated on the presence and work of Christ this very moment, and severed from whatever would hinder us from freely and fully following Jesus. And we're free to concentrate on the cruciform life of sharing Christ's sufferings for the world. We can no longer live in detached indifference, but we're compelled by Christ's love within us to involve ourselves in the sufferings of others.

In our text Jesus tells two parables about counting the cost before making a commitment to follow him. These were not told to deter those who would follow him sincerely but rather to ward off those who wanted the benefits of the kingdom

without giving thought to the cost of commitment. One parable was taken from farm life, perhaps in reference to a watchtower over a vineyard. Such was an ambitious building project, and in Jesus' parable the farmer was unable to finish and thus brought ridicule and reproach on himself.

In my neighborhood, a new structure began to emerge a few years ago; but then, after a couple of months, work on the project ceased. The foundation and exterior and interior walls were completed, and even the utility companies connected lines to this double home. But the project came to a halt, and the insulated siding began to look weather-worn and weeds grew up in what should be a landscaped yard. This unfinished double house, with all of the wasted material and hours of labor, was somewhat of an embarrassing monument to poor planning. Just as we looked at that unsightly unfinished home, so people look at the lives of those who identify themselves as Christians but lack the depth of commitment.

And so Jesus closes with a reference to salt, the good substance so essential in the ancient world, for flavoring and preserving. Jesus called his followers "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). My fiancée, Jan, who's trying to get me to eat more healthily, gave me a shaker of "Real Salt." All along, I've been using phony salt! Those who pay the cost of discipleship will show themselves to be "the real deal," whereas pretenders will be shown for what they are. As my New Testament theology professor Dale Moody was fond of saying, "Faith that fizzles at the finish was faulty from the first." This is another way of saying that Jesus is not looking for spectators but for recruits, for the real deal.

Sabo Yakubu and George Orjih paid the ultimate cost of discipleship. What would I give to follow Jesus? Christ *is* my life and he calls me to pay the cost of discipleship. To know him and to be with him now and forever is worth what brothers Sabo and George and even what I might have to pay. And even now, I must pay and get rid of whatever keeps me from following Jesus