

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #25 The Cost of Discipleship

Scripture Luke 14:25-35

In our study of the Gospel of Luke, we have become aware of the different kinds of individuals who were attracted to Jesus. There were a few individuals who left everything they had in order to be with Jesus. They were with Jesus more or less constantly during His months in Galilee and Judea, right up until His arrest. Some of these men, such as Peter and Andrew, James and John, became apostles, the special companions of Jesus who were being trained to become future leaders of Christianity after the resurrection and return of Jesus to heaven.

Some of the people who followed Jesus had malicious motives. They were opposed to His teachings and behavior, jealous of His influence, and considered Him to be a threat to their way of life. Their hatred increased as time went on to the point where they plotted His death.

In between the two extremes represented by the apostles and the Jewish religious leaders, there was a very large group of people who followed Jesus from place to place. These people did not follow Him in order to learn from Him. Rather, they followed because they were fascinated by the miracles He performed and the authority of His teaching. Many wanted to believe in His Messiahship and to benefit from His ministry, but they were not willing to forsake their existing lifestyles in order to adopt the ways of the kingdom of God. These kind of people exist today. They are attracted to Jesus for numerous reasons, but they won't make all-out commitments of their lives to Him.

In the passage we will think about today, Jesus has some strong words to say to such followers who aren't really genuine followers. He was concerned about their lack of decisiveness and commitment. The standards for being an authentic follower were very high. Jesus had previously explained the kind of behavior required for those who entered the kingdom of God. He said that His disciples would have to "love their enemies, and do good to those who showed hatred." They were to "bless those who cursed them, and pray for those who mistreated them." They were to be merciful and forgive others, and to give generously to those in need (*see Luke 6*). Jesus also taught about the denial of self and the need to put others first.

On another occasion, Jesus had explained the priority which was required of disciples: they were to put unconditional and wholehearted obedience to the authority of God at the top of the list. The demands of God's kingdom are truly radical from a human perspective, but nonetheless, the true followers of Jesus Christ are expected to meet those demands. Jesus wanted to remind His listeners of the cost of meeting His demands, so one day, as He and a large crowd were walking along, He stopped and lectured them on the subject of discipleship.

Read Luke 14:25-35

Let's begin with a definition of the word "disciple." The Greek word that we translate into the English word "disciple" (*mathētās*) describes a person who "learns by practice or experience from another person." A disciple of Jesus Christ is, therefore, someone who is learning certain principles from Jesus.

One of the best ways to understand "discipleship" is given in Luke 6:40, where Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher." The goal of Jesus' teaching was for individuals to become like Himself, or, as the Apostle Paul wrote, believers are called "to be conformed to the likeness of God's Son" (*Romans 8:29*). To be like Jesus: that is the very lofty goal that every believer should strive for.

Jesus never minced words when He talked about discipleship. He always laid out the conditions for discipleship in words which were plain to every listener. No one could mistake the meaning of phrases such as "Love your enemies" (*Luke 6:27*) or "Take up your cross and follow me" (*Luke 9:23*).

Jesus also made it clear that His demands regarding discipleship were absolute. Jesus did not want people to follow Him in a superficial way. He made it clear that following Him was a costly endeavor. It required the wholehearted unconditional commitment of a person's life.

Jesus also made it clear that whoever was unwilling to do what He said could not be a true disciple. The phrase, "cannot be my disciple," is repeated three times in this passage (*verses 26, 27 and 33*). There is a condition linked to each repetition. Unless the condition was met, Jesus said that it would be impossible for a person to become His disciple.

The first condition concerned relationships. Verse 26, “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.” Jesus is here emphasizing, in a startling way, the priority relationship of a disciple. To be a follower of Jesus meant that the person had to follow Jesus, not anyone or anything else. Disciples were to put their relationship to Jesus ahead of all other loyalties.

The word “hate” in verse 26 is used in an exaggerated comparative sense. Jesus was using a Middle Eastern form of speech to indicate that a personal relationship with Himself had to be the most important relationship in a person’s life. If loyalty to family members clashed with loyalty to Himself, the disciple was to treat his loved ones as though they were persons to be hated. This principle is stated in other passages in a more positive way. For example, in the parallel passage in Matthew 10, Jesus said “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” The main point is that disciples were expected to care more about Jesus than about family members.

After making this shocking statement to the crowd, Jesus did not elaborate on the meaning. He simply stated the principle boldly and clearly, then left it up to His listeners to think through the implications. I don’t think that anyone took Jesus’ words literally. After all, Jesus had, on a previous occasion, called attention to the Old Testament commandment to “Honor father and mother” (*Exodus 20:12*). He also quoted another Old Testament law: “anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (*Exodus 21:17*). Jesus was not contradicting Himself, nor was He disparaging love for family members. Rather He was insisting on greater love toward Himself.

Another aspect of discipleship is given at the end of verse 26 and into verse 27. The disciple must love Jesus more than he loves himself. From a practical standpoint, he must devote more attention to pleasing God than to satisfying his own desires. In previous passages Jesus had said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (*Luke 9:23*). That statement emphasized the importance of self-denial, humility, and obedience. When Jesus taught this principle in chapter 9, He explained that a disciple cannot set personal ambitions and desires ahead of the authority that He has over the lives of His followers. The follower of Jesus must live for the sake of Jesus, not for self.

If our goal is to be like Jesus, then we need to remember the example set for us by Jesus. He voluntarily gave up His personal rights and privileges as a member of the Godhead in heaven in order to serve the purposes of the Father on earth. The incarnation was possible only because Jesus submitted Himself to the will of the Father. Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated His love for humanity by submitting Himself to the hideous death by crucifixion on the cross. Obedience and submission to God and love and self-sacrifice for others — people who want to be like Jesus must manifest these same characteristics.

When Jesus said, “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,” He was once again presenting His demand concerning discipleship in a shocking way, just as His first demand concerning family relationships was shocking. The cross represented the end of personal aspirations and desires. The members in the crowd understood that the person who was carrying his cross was on a one-way journey, and that he could not turn back to his former way of life. In somewhat similar fashion, the follower of Jesus was expected to voluntarily bind himself to the purposes of God, and to move ahead with Jesus, and not want to turn back.

A disciple can only truly follow Jesus when he has made and put into practice the radical decision to “deny” himself the pursuit of worldly ambitions in order to submit himself to the authority of Jesus. Following Jesus requires self-denial, complete dedication, and willing obedience.

I think it is remarkable that Jesus set such rigorous conditions for discipleship. He wanted all His listeners to have a personal relationship with Himself, but He clearly did not want people to have a casual and superficial allegiance to Him. The cost of discipleship was so great that He wanted His listeners to think carefully about their commitment to Him. He wanted each person to make a thoughtful, sincere, rational, deliberate, unconditional, and irrevocable decision about becoming a true follower.

Jesus illustrated the need for intentional deliberation by presenting to His listeners two thought-provoking scenarios. These two scenarios highlighted the importance of counting the cost before taking action. The first scenario involved the building of a watchtower. What is necessary for a building project to be successful? A successful building project requires careful planning, especially in regard to available resources. Failure to finish the project for lack of resources would make the builder the laughingstock of neighbors. He would be known as the “fellow who began something he was not able to finish.” Foolish man. He had begun something without thinking through the requirements.

The second description is of a king who was facing an invading army. Kings, like builders, need to plan their strategies and assess their resources. If the king of the smaller army did not have the potential to overcome a much larger force, it was obviously more prudent for him to seek terms of peace rather than engage in battle. In this scenario, the king counted the cost and then acted appropriately.

The main point that Jesus was communicating concerned the need for thoughtful and careful evaluation before commitment. Both the builder and the king had to “sit down” to consider the cost of the task facing them. They had to determine if they were able to accomplish their goals — to bring their endeavors to a successful conclusion. The application to Jesus’ listeners is in verse 33: “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” The word “cannot” (*verses 26, 27, and 33*) can also be translated “is not able,” as in verses 29 and 32.

According to Jesus, the cost of discipleship was “everything” a person had. Jesus insisted that His disciple had to give up “everything.” So far in this passage we have learned that the cost of discipleship included family relationships, personal aspirations, and, here in verse 33, possessions.

Verse 33 does not mean that the follower of Jesus must sell all his possessions or give away all his money or desert all his family members and become a monk or beggar or wanderer. The underlying requirement is that the true follower of Jesus will yield up to the Lord Jesus all personal rights. The disciple must have the attitude of a steward, someone who is entrusted with things which are, in reality, the property of, and under the authority of, another person. The true disciple yields full control of possessions, relationships, and personal aspirations to Jesus, and allows Jesus to be Lord over all.

In some cases, this has meant that a person will take leave of family and worldly possessions in order to serve the Lord Jesus in a special distant location. In most cases, however, it means that a disciple will live an ordinary life, but with the willingness for all relationships and ambitions and possessions to be under the authority of the Lord Jesus. The important principle is that whoever wants to be a genuine follower of Jesus must be inwardly free of human and material attachments and worldly-mindedness in order to be completely devoted to Jesus. Jesus' words were shocking, comprehensive, absolute. Only a wholehearted commitment to His Messiahship and Lordship qualified a person to be a disciple.

This passage concludes with a warning. Jesus used salt as an illustration. He talked about two kinds of salt — salt that was pure and useful and salt that was flavorless and useless. The listeners knew that, in its pure form, salt was useful for many things. It added flavor to food. It kept food from spoiling. It promoted the healing of wounds. But when the salt had lost its saltiness, it could not do any of those things. Salt was valuable only when it was salty. When it no longer had its unique property of saltiness, it was thrown away. In a similar way, Jesus informed His listeners that a disciple was of use and a blessing only when he possessed the appropriate character traits which made him a true disciple.

How does this passage apply to us? We are all here because we have an interest in following Jesus. If we are to qualify as His disciples, we must put Him first in our thoughts, seek His guidance, and obey His instructions. We must be people who eagerly and consistently allow Jesus to be the Lord of our lives.

The person who does not meet the requirements set forth by Jesus is useless for kingdom purposes. He does not honor Jesus as Lord. He is not a witness to Jesus. He is not suited for the world's purposes, and he has forsaken God's. He may profess to be a believer, but, like savorless salt, the person who is not a genuine and faithful follower is actually an object of ridicule and judgment.

Churches today are filled with people who claim to be followers of Jesus, but it is obvious that many church attenders don't meet the strict conditions of disciples. Jesus demanded that His followers carefully evaluate their attitudes, their ambitions, their circumstances, and, above all, their desire to be like Him before they declared their intentions to be one of His disciples. And then He wants them to live like Him in the world.

Jesus closed his statements with words we all need to take to heart: *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*