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Luke 14:25–35

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THE PRICE IS RIGHT

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

When I was thirteen I began my illustrious career as a caddy at the Omaha Country Club. There was no advance interview, I simply showed up one morning and introduced myself to the caddy master, Kevin O'Connor, a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy, a man of few words that drove around the caddy yard in a golf cart with his black lab sitting next to him. On that first day Kevin simply told me to take a seat and wait. And so I sat around all day. Nothing happened. The same thing happened the second day. I sat around with all the caddies, watched them get loops, but Kevin never said a word to me. But I didn't give up and came out again a third day. Again, I sat around all day and then finally late in the afternoon Kevin called to me and gave me my first loop. He wisely put me with an experienced caddy that could begin training me. I pocketed \$1.50 for nine holes of work.

What I realized later is that Kevin wanted to know if I was serious, if I would stick, if I was committed to being a caddy or whether it was a passing fancy. Jesus did the same thing with those who said they wanted to follow him. We come to a challenging passage today in Luke's gospel, not because it is hard to understand but because we do understand. Jesus' words challenge us to consider whether we are really serious, because following Jesus is anything but glamorous and easy. Our text marks a significant transition in the book of Luke as Jesus turns from confronting the Jewish leadership to teaching his disciples. Let me read the bulk of today's text.

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25–27 ESV)

Luke reminds us that Jesus is still on the move towards Jerusalem and informs us that a great number of people are going with him. In chapter 12 Luke tells us: "so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another" (Luke 12:1). Thus, it seems that Jesus continues to attract great crowds and is a person people want to follow. And so as they are going along, he turns to the crowd and tells them what it means to follow him.

Clearly Jesus is more concerned with commitment than numbers, the opposite mentality of many churches.

Jesus talks to the crowds about being a disciple, building on the themes you might recall from chapter 9. The Greek word for "disciple" is "learner." A disciple is a student or pupil. Darrell Bock writes: "In ancient culture a disciple sat at the feet of great teachers like Socrates or Plato, served as an initiate in a mystery religion, or sat at the feet of a great rabbi. In the pagan world, the disciple had a master who taught about the gods and the cult into which one was entering. In the Jewish world, one learned about the law and God."¹

Jesus was called "rabbi" and "teacher." People wanted to be his disciples. But for Jesus discipleship involved a great deal more than what people bargained for. He was letting them know that up front.

What is required to be a disciple? Jesus makes three statements that all end with the same exact phrase: "cannot be my disciple." In between the second and third statements Jesus gives two illustrations that encourage one to assess the cost of discipleship prior to starting out on the journey. Let's talk first about the three requirements or essential marks of a disciple and then we will address the illustrations.

The first requirement is that one must hate father and mother, brothers and sisters, wife and children. Wow, this is a drastic statement for sure. We are thrown off guard immediately by the idea of hating people we love. We are to honor parents and even love enemies. How do we make sense of this?

Well, the word "hate" here does not carry with it the emotional feelings of hostility that we usually associate with hatred. Jesus is using Jewish hyperbole. His statement is rhetorical, not literal. "Hate" implies comparing two things and loving one less than the other or choosing one over the other. For example we see this in Gen. 29:

"So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Genesis 29:30–31). Jacob didn't emotionally hate Leah; he just loved Rachel more.

Jesus is not saying we are to be insensitive or uncaring. He is not giving us an excuse to abandon our family or neglect our responsibilities. What he is saying is that we are to put him above family, to be committed to him above all else, to give him the highest priority, to put him first in our life, above every other relationship. All other concerns take second place.

The main issue is rejection by family members for one's faith. In Jesus' day a person who followed Jesus would run the risk of being alienated, rejected, or disowned by the family. The same thing is true today in many Eastern European and Moslem countries or in tight-knit Asian families. Perhaps your belief in Jesus has been met with a great deal of hostility in your own family. Jesus is saying that a disciple can't use family as an excuse not to follow him. In chapter 9

one man wanted to go bury his father. Jesus told him to let the dead bury the dead. Another wanted to say goodbye to those at home. Jesus told him that once you put your hand to the plow and look back you are not fit for the kingdom of God.

I was baptized in a church with one of those little pools up on stage. I remember sitting in the pew and feeling a great deal of tension as I waited for my name to be called. I wasn't nervous about confessing my belief in Jesus. I was conflicted because I knew that what I was doing was rejecting or devaluing the baptism my parent's had given me when I was a baby. I was discounting my parent's religious ritual. Later when I told them about my baptism I knew it hurt them. But I also knew I had to choose Jesus and place him above my parent's feelings.

For many of us choosing Jesus over mother and father or sisters and brothers might not be that hard. We don't really get along with them anyway. But wife and children is another matter. And just to make it clear, Jesus says that we have to hate our own life. Jesus is not promoting self-hatred, but we are to love Jesus more than we love ourselves.

The second requirement is that we must bear our own cross, meaning that not only do we die to self but we also must be willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus. We are to put Jesus first over comfort and approval of others. The cross is the symbol of death, suffering, and the world's rejection and hatred of Jesus.

This reinforces what Jesus said in chapter 9, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die".²

The early church suffered greatly because they aligned themselves with Jesus. Paul told the Galatians, "from now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17). Paul had his own tattoos because of the lashings he had endured. Throughout church history at various times and in various places Christians have suffered greatly for their faith.

In the U.S. we don't face the kind of persecution that many Christians do in other places of the world. But we still face rejection from family and friends and co-workers all the time. The more we are publicly known the more likely we are to encounter some sort of hostility. At some point in your life you will be mocked and ridiculed.

My wife had a reunion with several of her high school friends this last summer. She had not seen some of the women for a long time. One of the nights while they were at dinner, one of Liz's best friends growing up just lit into her about God. Out of the blue this friend just starting venting. The incident was deeply hurtful to Liz. But this is what is required of a disciple—a willingness to suffer for the name of Jesus.

Of course, we must realize that it was the suffering of Jesus that brought us life and we suffer with the same potential for others. Through our suffering others see the presence of the life of Christ. We are:

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Corinthians 4:10–12).

It is interesting to note the phrases "come to" as compared to "come after" in the first two requirements for being a disciple. It is the same Greek word followed by a different preposition. While they may mean the same thing, there is also the chance that "come to" implies entrance into a relationship and "come after" implies the ongoing nature of the relationship. The phrase "come after me" means to follow in Jesus' path instead of following after idols. Coming to Christ always involves a leaving and rearrangement of priorities while following after Jesus involves a lifelong willingness to stay the course no matter what happens. There is a start and there is a journey.

The third requirement is to renounce all that one has. The word translated "has" is usually translated "possessions," meaning money or material goods. The word "renounce" means to say goodbye or farewell. In chapter 18 Jesus will have a conversation with a rich ruler who enquires about inheriting eternal life. After telling Jesus that he has kept all the commandments Jesus tells him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22).

We saw in chapter 5 that Peter, James, John, and Levi left everything and followed Jesus. This is what characterized the early church as well: "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44–45).

What does this mean for us? Are we all to go and sell everything we have in order to be a true disciple? Some, like Francis of Assisi and the Desert Fathers, have literally done this. But not having any money or possessions doesn't necessarily change us or make us a genuine disciple. What is important is to detach ourselves from all things and attach ourselves completely to Jesus. Again we see that Jesus must come first and take center stage. The only tether we have is being tied to Jesus.

There are many things in this world that we can be attached to in an unhealthy way, things that we fear losing, things that we think give us life and meaning—material possessions, home, career, family, security, health, addictive ways of living and so on. Darrell Bock writes: "attachments are potentially the most destructive thing for discipleship".³ David Benner says, "I am that to which I am most strongly attached".⁴

Everything we have been given is a gift from God to be used for his purposes. If we are too attached to these gifts or think we own them they have power over us and rob us of interior freedom. Unhealthy attachments can control our life, our moods, and our actions. The goal for the disciple is to be free in order to serve the Lord in any way that he calls us to do so. And so we renounce or say goodbye to unhealthy attachments by releasing, letting go, holding loosely. We remind ourselves that God owns everything and there is no sense of entitlement.

St. Ignatius writes:

"We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening his life in me".⁵

Well so much for becoming a Christian and having a wonderful life filled with constant blessings. Maybe that has happened for you, but for many of us life gets more difficult once we commit our life to follow him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "We must face up to the

truth that the call of Christ does set up a barrier between man and his natural life".⁶

I notice three things. First, notice what is not required to be a disciple—age, gender, race, intelligence, education, physical ability, success, charisma, personality, good looks, etc. etc. etc. In other words being a disciple is about heart, desire, willingness, and small choices we make every day.

Second, notice that Jesus never gives different categories for disciples. There are not categories for serious disciples and casual disciples. Either one is a disciple or one isn't. To have a relationship with Jesus is to be a disciple. Therefore, we are all his disciples.

Third, notice how important it is to put Jesus first. Three times he says if you don't do this, you cannot be my disciple. What does that mean? The word "cannot" comes from a word usually meaning to be able, to be strong. That verb then is simply negated—not be able, not be strong. Maybe Jesus is saying "you're fired," you're off the team, but part of what he is saying seems to be that if we don't put Jesus first over family, self, comfort, possessions, and relationships then we will not have the ability to be a disciple. In other words, we will lack power and vitality. It simply will not work. Trying to have a relationship with Jesus and still being attached to the world won't serve either you or God. If one is compromised it isn't possible to follow Jesus in the way he desires.

These are challenging words. So what do we do? We do what Jesus suggests; we count the cost of being his disciple before we set out on our journey with him. Jesus gives two illustrations.

In the first illustration a man wants to build a tower. This is a private tower to guard a vineyard or protect a house. The mention of a foundation means it is a significant structure. The wise person assesses the expense and makes sure they have the resources to finish the project. If one is foolish and doesn't assess the cost to complete, he runs the risk of not finishing. If that happens then the unfinished project stands as an embarrassment for all to see and exposes his folly. As a result people will mock and ridicule him. I don't know the history of the vacant shopping mall in Sunnyvale and perhaps no one is to blame. But it is rather embarrassing and perhaps it is an indication of someone's folly.

In the second illustration a king is going to war against another king. This is an armed conflict that could be a single engagement or ongoing battle. The king is outnumbered two to one. A wise king would assess the situation carefully. If he doesn't think he can win the war then he would wisely send a delegation to make a peace treaty. A foolish king would not make any assessment and risk losing his men and his kingdom.

The meaning is clear. One is encouraged to count the cost before beginning the journey with Jesus. The journey is not easy and will cost you everything. Are we willing to make that kind of commitment? Are we in it for the long haul? When the going gets tough will we quit and give up on God?

There are several corollaries to this in our human journey. For those of you who are married you know that marriage is often hard. It is easy to get married, but the journey is anything but easy. When we do pre-marital counseling and become aware of difficult issues in the relationship we will often encourage couples to count the cost ahead of time so that the couple will not get discouraged once they get married. Likewise, the arrival of a new baby is cause for great joy, but any parent will tell you that the long road of parenting is

anything but easy. A new promotion is a reason for celebration but the task ahead might be very demanding. It is wise to count the cost ahead of time and make sure that we are totally committed.

When early missionaries would leave home to go to a foreign country, they packed their belongings in a coffin, because they knew that they were never coming home again. To be a missionary in those days one had to count the cost ahead of time so they could finish the course. Jesus is encouraging us to set our expectations correctly by counting the cost of being a disciple, making sure we are all in.

Not only does Jesus encourage us to count the cost, he now encourages us to stay fresh and vital by using the metaphor of salt.

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Luke 14:25–35)

In Jesus' day, salt functioned as seasoning, fertilizer, or preservative. Salt that is salty is good and has value. But once salt loses its saltiness it is of no value and is thrown out. One example of how salt could lose its saltiness was in baking: "Bakers covered the floor of their ovens with salt to give a catalytic effect on the burning fuel, which was usually cattle dung. After a time, the effect wore off and the salt was thrown away".⁷

The meaning of the illustration is that a disciple that stays the course and does not run out of gas continues to be valuable and useful to God. However, a disciple that gets distracted by the world or loses heart because of suffering becomes useless. The disciple is urged to hear this salty word from Jesus. The word might sting but it also cleanses and purifies. We are to continue responding to Jesus, to center our lives on him, to put him first in our lives. We are to stay salty, my friends.

In closing, let me give two thoughts to this challenging word of Jesus. First, the price is right, the price for being a disciple. Paul says in 1 Corinthians: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). These were the words that were etched in the front of the auditorium at PBC Palo Alto for many years, and became etched in the minds of those of us who attended there as well. God's son sacrificed his life and died a death we deserved so that we could have life. Now we give him back the life he purchased with his blood. "It is not how little one can give that is the question, but how much God deserves."⁸ Knowing God's grace means knowing that he deserves everything.

The second thought is that if we consider the human resources that we have to complete the task and finish the course, we will come up woefully short. The twelve disciples heard all these words of Jesus and in the end failed miserably. But after Pentecost, they had completely different results. What was the difference? The Spirit of God. As disciples of Jesus we count the cost but we depend on God's resources for God's work. Our ability to follow Jesus comes through God's empowering presence.

Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3:4–6)

As we prepare for communion, use this time to talk to Jesus about anything he has brought up to you today. One suggestion is to think through your attachments and release anything that you hold too tightly to the Lord.

“Let the Holy Spirit probe the activities, the relationships, the habits of head and heart that shape your life.”⁹ Are there areas of your life that you have not brought into relationship with Jesus, places where Jesus isn’t first, places where you want to be autonomous, areas of entitlement? Release these things to Jesus and center your life on him. Our prayer becomes, “Lord, free me from care for myself; help me to have you as the sole content of my life today”.¹⁰

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20–21)

1. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 2*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 1285–1286.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, cited February 2014. Online: <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2723088-nachfolge>.
3. Bock, 1290.
4. Dr. David G. Benner, “Transformation, Christ Consciousness & Identity–2”. cited February 2014. Online: <http://www.drdavidgbenner.ca/transformation-christ-consciousness-identity-2/>
5. Saint Ignatius, “Selected Prayers”. cited February 2014. Online: http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/prs/stign/prayers.html
6. David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2012), 187.
7. Bock, 1290.
8. Bock, 1290.
9. M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *The Deeper Journey, IVP*, (Downers Grove, IL, 2006), 146.
10. Mulholland, 146–147.

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