



Catalog No. 934

Luke 18:18-30

Tenth Message

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February 6, 1994

# THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

The army of Alexander the Great was famous for its deep sense of loyalty to the great conqueror. Once, Alexander led his army to a strongly fortified, walled city. He demanded to see the king and issued terms of surrender. The king laughed. "Why should I surrender to you?" he said. "You can't do us any harm. We can endure any siege." Alexander demonstrated why surrender was the only option. Nearby, within sight of the city walls, was a sheer cliff. He ordered his men to line up in single file and march toward the precipice. The citizens of the city watched with horrified fascination as the column marched towards and over the edge of the cliff. Only after several men had plunged to their deaths did Alexander order the rest of the column to halt. He then called his troops back to his side and stood silently, facing the city. The effect on the citizens was stunning. Spellbound silence gave way to terror. They realized they had no walls thick enough and no resources extensive enough to defend themselves against the kind of loyalty and commitment they had just witnessed. Spontaneously, they rushed through the gates of the city and surrendered themselves to Alexander.

This story graphically illustrates the cost and the power of unstinting loyalty. It shocks us because we are not used to hearing about this kind of commitment. Society today places little value on allegiance and loyalty. The so-called self-fulfillment ethic seduces us into believing that there is no higher loyalty than that which we owe to ourselves. Self-centeredness eats away at commitment to marriage, family, friends, and God. But the Bible calls upon us to make difficult choices, to choose Christian priorities and renounce whatever it is, things or people, that interferes with these priorities.

The Word of God is the very foundation of the Christian life. The Bible reveals insights about God that help us understand things that would otherwise be mysteries, offering us hope, comfort and encouragement in the process. But not always. On occasion we come across texts that make us squirm; they make us uncomfortable and unsettled. The parable of Jesus to which we come this morning, the story of the rich young ruler from the gospel of Luke, is just such a text.

Luke 18:18-30:

And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a

needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But He said, "The things impossible with men are possible with God." And Peter said, "Behold, we have left our own homes, and followed You." And He said to them, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:18-30 NASB)

Let's begin by making some observations. First, notice that this parable is placed between two incidents that have related themes. In 18:17, Jesus said "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all"; while in 18:43, Bartimaeus, the blind man, having received his sight, glorifies God and begins to follow Jesus. These then are the themes that bracket the parable of the rich ruler.

This young man approaches Jesus and asks a question. Interestingly, it is the same question as the one asked in Luke 10:25, the text that precedes the parable of the Good Samaritan. The only difference is the word "good." Clearly, the rich ruler wants to achieve eternal life through his own efforts. He is asking about the requirements for admission to the kingdom. The emphasis is on "self" and "doing." He wants to ensure his reward or inheritance through his own performance.

Initially, Jesus responds by opening up a discussion on the word "good." Perhaps he is saying that the rich ruler is using a term that is appropriate only for God, and therefore he is calling him God; perhaps he is telling the ruler that he is overdoing things a little. Then Jesus proceeds to answer the man's question, quoting five commands from the Decalogue. These are not quoted in their original order. Jesus' rearrangement of them places special emphasis on loyalty to family and attitudes toward property. Family is listed first and last, while property comes in the middle. The man responds by saying that he has done all of the things commanded.

Jesus then tells him that he lacks one thing. He wants him to sell all his possessions and follow him. His demand touches on the heart of the commandments, namely, family and property. The family estate, a symbol of the cohesiveness of the extended family, is of supreme value in Middle Eastern society. The young man is being asked to place loyalty to Jesus higher than loyalty to his family and his family estate, for in a very real sense these are one and the same.

He finds this to be devastating. Jesus could have said to him, "Just make sure that God is first in your life," but he doesn't. By asking him to sell his property, Jesus exposes his heart. The rich ruler wants to have both worlds—the kingdom of earth now and the kingdom of heaven later. An impossible demand is placed upon him. He hangs his head and grieves, not merely because he loves wealth, but also because he has just been made painfully aware that he cannot earn his way into God's graces. His self-confidence is shattered. His

ability to perform and accomplish no longer applies. Eternal life is beyond his grasp.

Jesus responds with a statement and then a parabolic story. The three notions “how hard,” “wealthy,” and “kingdom of God” bring verses 24-25 together in the center of the account. “How hard” corresponds to “easier,” “wealthy” corresponds to “rich man,” and “to enter the kingdom of God” is repeated twice.

Jesus’ comment, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” is outrageous. Some truth can be conveyed only by humor. The largest animal in Mesopotamia was the elephant; the largest animal in Palestine was the camel.

Now the bystanders speak up. If the ruler found the demands of Jesus too hard, so too did they. They ask, “Then who can be saved?” If a rich man who is capable of doing much good cannot earn eternal life and secure his future, then what hope is there for ordinary people? Jesus responds, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” There is a way, one that does not depend on human effort.

Then the question of the new obedience is raised. The crowd may well be wondering, “Has anyone ever done this?” Peter’s statement affirms the possibility: “Behold, we have left our own homes, and followed You.” The phrase, “we have left our own homes,” could refer to both people and property. Obedience is possible through the miracle of God’s grace.

Jesus now returns to the commandments. Again he emphasizes property and family; and compares the old and new requirements. In the old obedience, the faithful were told not to steal another’s property; in the new, one’s own property may have to be left behind. In the old obedience, one was told to leave his neighbor’s wife alone; in the new, the disciple may be required to leave his own wife alone. In the old obedience, the faithful were to honor father and mother. Popularly understood, this meant (and still does today) that children are to remain at home and take care of their parents until they die and are buried. In the new obedience, the disciple may have to leave his parents in response to a higher loyalty.

The words of Jesus would have shocked his hearers. To the Middle Easterner, family and home are considered more important than life itself. Jesus is making a higher, an impossible demand. This is why he introduces his words with the phrase, “Truly I say to you.” This phrase occurs only six times in the gospel of Luke, and each time it introduces a saying of awesome proportions. Jesus is not demanding that people dissolve their marriages and break family ties. What he is saying is that there is a new arrangement of loyalty: Giving honor and priority to God comes before marriage, brothers, race and relatives.

Jesus’ closing remarks return to the themes of eternal life and rewards. He gives a word of assurance. The one who obeys him and abandons other loyalties to follow him will not be left out. He will receive rewards in the present and eternal life for the future.

Now I want to offer for our consideration three principles from this text.

Here is the first one: *Salvation is beyond human reach; it is possible only with God.* The rich ruler is seeking to guarantee himself a place in heaven—to save himself a seat, in effect. What strikes me about this man is that he typifies everything we would aspire to be. He is not a rogue or a scoundrel. On the contrary, we would regard him as a positive example for our children. He is living a good, moral,

successful life. He is honest, ethical, committed to his family and respected in the community. The problem is, he imagines that all of these good character traits are building up a retirement account for him in eternity. He thinks that he is capable of achieving eternal life; that eternal life is a matter of “doing,” of works. Jesus places one last demand on him, and both he and the crowd are thrown into bewilderment. Heaven is not gained by human effort. People protest, “Surely those who are good and honest and moral will go to heaven, won’t they?” But to this, Jesus would reply, “No. Not if that is what they are depending on to get there.”

Salvation is a work of God. It is outrageous, laughable, to think that we deserve and can earn eternal life. The story reveals that we are helpless. We need a Savior. Eternal life is a gift, not an earned right. No one enters the kingdom of God unaided. No one achieves great things and inherits eternal life. No one has rights in the kingdom, not even rich men with all their potential for good works.

Wealth, possessions and ego can be major obstacles in this respect. If we think we have something to offer; if we are striving to be godly without God; if we try to save ourselves from despair, unfairness, injustice, frustration and hell itself in order to gain eternal life, then we are not savable. It is only when we come to the place where we recognize and confess that it is impossible for us to save ourselves that we become savable; for it is only then that we will cast ourselves upon God. Jesus said, “The things impossible with men are possible with God.”

Our penchant for trying to save ourselves is well illustrated by how men respond when they are trying to find someplace. Commonly, a man who is lost and trying to find his way will rarely ask for help. He will try to figure things out on his own, preferring to spend 45 minutes looking rather than asking directions. It is the same with salvation. We find it hard to admit that we are lost and we need the help of another.

This is how I behaved in my own spiritual journey. Looking back, I can see now how desperately I was trying to save myself. It was hard for me to admit I couldn’t do it on my own. I kept thinking that if I could take care of this or that area of my life, then I would be all right. I wouldn’t have called it salvation back then, but just the same I was trying to save myself from despair and meaninglessness. In other words, I was trying to find eternal life. But I was trying to satisfy my eternal longings through my own efforts. I failed miserably. It wasn’t until I gave up trying that God could save me.

The older I get, the more clearly I see this principle still at work in my life. I recognize my weaknesses, my foibles, and I have to acknowledge that I have not dramatically improved upon these in my own strength. All my best efforts still cannot breathe God’s Spirit into my heart. I cannot manufacture eternal life. I haven’t been able to accomplish my desires through my efforts in the first forty years of my life. What then drives me to think that I will be able to get there in the next 10, 20 or 30 years? Salvation, eternal life, is possible only with God.

Here is the second principle: *Discipleship is costly; it demands a renunciation of previous loyalties.* Jesus’ statement about selling and following points up the real reason behind the rich ruler’s desire to earn his way to heaven: The man does not want to give his whole heart to God right away. He thinks eternal life is some future state. He has wealth in this life and he wants to enjoy it. If he can earn his way to heaven, there will still be time in his schedule for living for himself. He wants the best of both worlds.

The story does not end with salvation; it goes on to talk about costly discipleship. Jesus says, "Follow Me." In the story, following Jesus is integrally related to being saved, entering the kingdom, and receiving eternal life. There is not a Plan A (you are a Christian) and a Plan B (you are a disciple). Becoming a Christian demands becoming a disciple of Jesus. It means renouncing former loyalties. Christianity is a new arrangement of priorities that builds on the old and surpasses it.

Jesus' demands seem harsh, even rude. They produce conflict and tension. The listening crowd is uncomfortable with the negative that seems to be at the heart of the gospel. They were being drawn to Jesus by his wisdom, love, and kindness, but now he is turning them away one by one. The obstacle that stands in the way of salvation is the same one that stands in the way of our following Jesus and entering into eternal life in the present: it grieves and saddens us to give up on the world.

This parable of the young ruler hearkens back to the words of Jesus in 9:57-62:

**And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." And another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."**

These verses set out three different responses to Jesus' command to men to follow him. One man is worried about safety and a place to sleep; another wants to bury his father; another wants to say good-bye to those at home. "Follow Me," Jesus commands. But our immediate concerns are taking care of ourselves, family and home. Jesus speaks a harsh word: You may not have a place to sleep; let the dead bury their own dead; you are not fit for the kingdom of God. But his seeming harshness gets our attention at a fundamental level, forcing us rethink everything. He is not saying that we should never speak to our family again; rather, he is saying that there are new priorities.

This is difficult truth to hear, isn't it? It is hard to think about renouncing, giving up this world. The past few days have been tough for me. Between certain disappointments and not feeling well, I have had a difficult week. Thinking about this passage didn't help. Why did I have to teach this passage? I asked myself. I could lay this truth on heavy, but I know that most of you are a lot better off in this regard than I am. I have to be honest and tell you what this text is saying to me. I can say all kinds of things about following Jesus, going on a ministry trip to Mexico, giving up my free time to study and teach the Bible, etc., but I want the world to love me, too. I want things to work for me. I want financial security. I want the best education for my children. I'd like to have a retirement plan. I love buying clothes at Nordstrom. I drool when I think about having a 4-wheel drive vehicle. I fantasize about moving somewhere and building my own house. I want Nebraska to win a national championship. To be honest, I want everything the world can offer, or at least what I think it can offer. I want to be at home here for a bit and then, after I have enjoyed this life, turn in my tokens and claim eternal life.

The parables of Jesus have a way of shattering our comfort zone. If we think we can rearrange our schedules, reformulate our priorities and then bring Jesus into the equation, we have missed the point. He is not talking about sprinkling our lives with God the way we sprinkle spices on our food. He is talking about a whole new kingdom. He isn't suggesting that we follow him to Africa, although that might be involved. He isn't telling us to sell everything, although that might be involved. He is asking us first and foremost to follow him into the kingdom of God. Let go of this world, he asks. Walk with him through the wardrobe closet into Narnia.

In Galatians, Paul says we have been delivered from this present evil age; we have been crucified to the world and the world has been crucified to us; we are separated from it. We don't become Christians so that we can be free to enjoy this world. We become free to enter into eternity, another kingdom, the new heavens, another dimension, the invisible, not the visible.

Jesus says two things about this life of discipleship. First, we have to sell before we can follow. We have to let go of this world, to let go of the hope of finding a home and finding comfort here. This is often our problem. We are trying to build two homes at the same time. We want to get squared away first, then, we promise ourselves, we will follow Jesus completely. But the sequence is important. We must give up before we get back. We may not be financially independent yet, we may not have met that perfect marriage partner, but we have to take a step of faith. We must let go, give up, renounce our loyalties and not look back. Paul Winslow, who was a pastor here for some years, said that once he took the pink slip of a car that he owned and signed it over to God. He wanted to free himself from it, because in his heart he placed too much value on it. Selling means to yield ownership, to sign over the title of all our property and all our relationships to God.

If you were to ask Jesus today the same question that the young ruler asked him, what would he ask you to sell? What keeps you from following him with your whole heart and entering into his kingdom? Your comfort? Your family? Your home? When you hear him say, "Follow Me," do you grieve like the rich young ruler, or are you ready to follow him without looking back? These are uncomfortable questions. Jesus meant it to be that way. He said, "where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

Secondly, none of this is possible with man; it is possible only with God. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us to give up this world. The same truth that saves us permits us to renounce the world and follow him. Like the unjust steward in his crisis, we are to throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of our Father.

Peter is the source of encouragement in this passage. He and the other disciples stand as examples in the text that we can leave behind other things and follow God. We are not alone in facing this difficult obedience. The men and women in every generation who have done this are our models. That is why it is helpful to read biographies of people like Hudson Taylor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa and others. That is why it is helpful to hear from our missionaries, Rich Carlson, Rich Benson, Don Burgess and others. They encourage us to follow Christ; they help us to learn the cost of obedience. We know these people, and we know that they could not have done this on their own. We know, too, that the same grace that works in them is available to us.

Obedience is costly. Renunciation is painful. Yet this is the path of true discipleship.

The third principle in our text has to do with a promise: *Renunciation does not result in impoverishment*. The rich ruler came to Jesus with a question about eternal life. Despite his good efforts, he knew he still lacked something. The story closes with the promise of eternal life to those who follow. Jesus says that we will receive many times as much, not only in the future, but now, in the present. The result of renouncing, of dying to self, is paradoxical: We become free—free from our need for comfort, free from family manipulation, free from domestic routines. We receive rewards as gifts rather than acquisitions. We gain in the present much more than we give up—quite the opposite of what we expected. Life will not be without pain, conflict and difficulties, but Jesus says that no one who follows him will be left out; they will become rich instead.

Jim Foster, our missionary in Romania, in a recent letter describes the difficulties of living in that country. Changing money, building a house, learning the language, all of these things present enormous problems. Yet his letter is filled with joy. He writes of the joy of seeing Rich Carlson in Vienna; of sharing the gospel with people; of the work that God is doing in his marriage, etc. He says, “There is so much more that could be said; so many experiences, so many rejoicings, so many frustrations, so much to be thankful for. But I want you to know that I love it here in this crazy place. If I could slightly misquote Eric Liddell, I would say that I was made for Romania.”

My grandmother wrote the following in her Bible: “If He is not first in your life, you do not know the first principles of joy. If He is first, He can make up for anything you have lost.” This was written by a woman who was abandoned by her husband and had to raise her four children on her own.

One by one He took them from me  
All the things I valued most;  
’Til I was empty-handed,  
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth’s highways, grieving,  
In my rags and poverty.  
Until I heard His voice inviting,  
“Lift those empty hands to Me!”

Then I turned my hands toward heaven,  
And He filled them with a store  
Of His own transcendent riches,  
’Til they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended  
With my stupid mind, and dull,  
That God cannot pour His riches  
Into hands already full.

The rich ruler was consumed with three things that could be summarized in the words: I, doing, and future. Renunciation, as harsh as it may seem, is the only path that allows Jesus to replace I; being to replace doing; and present to replace future.

Renunciation, said Emily Dickinson, is the “piercing virtue.” Jesus forces us, just as he forced the rich ruler, to choose our kingdom. Will we let go of the world? This is impossible for us, but, Jesus assures us, “the things impossible with men are possible with God.”

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