

Discipleship ... a matter of *Death* and *Life*

Luke 14:25-33

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I Jim, take you, Sara, to be my wife. To have and to hold from this day forward. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness, and in health. To love, and cherish. Until death do us part.

A year earlier, I remember making the call to Sara's dad to let him know I'd like to marry his daughter. I remember dialing ... and then, hanging up. What was I thinking! I was weighing what I was about to do. Why? This was life-changing! This was forever. Once I made this call, there would be no turning back. Did I realize what I was doing? Was I really all-in? Absolutely!

Are you a follower of Jesus? Are you considering following Him? Jesus wants you to stop, put down the phone, and think about that. What will that mean? This will be life-changing! This is forever! No turning back.

Jesus had just appeared before three of His disciples in transfigured glory on the mountain. And then it says: "*When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.*" He never took His eyes off Jerusalem after that. The cross was His goal. And He was compelled to get there!

This is Jesus, heading to Jerusalem, to die. The memo hadn't quite circulated yet. The crowds were still big, pressing in on Jesus for a favor. They were looking for celebrity Jesus! Popular Jesus. The kind of Jesus we all want. Fun Jesus. The Jesus who gives us what we want, *when* we want it. Healing? You've got it! Endless bread and fish? No problem! Raise your child from the dead? Easy as waking her up! 180 gallons of wine for a wedding party? Just fill those jugs with water and dole it out. Now there's a Jesus worth following, right?

Jesus turns to the crowd. "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciples.*" OK, so that's not so fun. Wait a minute! Hate? I thought Jesus was pro-family. What's with this "hating" those near and dear to you? That doesn't sound like the gentle, focus on the family Jesus I know. Hate your own life? I thought we were supposed to love ourselves. Take care of ourselves.

"*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*" Crosses aren't the everyday problems we encounter in life, like having to work overtime to pay the bills, or a car that won't start, or the fact that your rug doesn't match the upholstery on your couch. Crosses do what? They kill. Period. To take up your cross is to take up your death. Following Jesus means dying to self, dying to our own plans - getting things our way, dying to our own wills, living to Jesus, that *His* will be done in our lives.

Count the cost. Do the accounting. Run the spreadsheet. We do it all the time. You set out to build something, and you get bids and work out the costs to make sure you have enough money. Otherwise you'll pour a foundation, run out of funds, and your slab of concrete will stand as a monument to your shortsightedness.

When a king considers going to battle, he counts the cost of war. Can he afford it? Can his ten thousand troops match his enemy's twenty thousand? And if they can't, if he's smart, what does he do? He sends a peace delegation to negotiate terms. Count the cost. Will you be able to finish what you've started?

Count the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. What will it cost you to follow Him? Your life! Not just your money, or your fame, or your reputation, or whatever. It will cost you everything; your will; your being in control of your life. Following Jesus costs you your life; all that you hold near and dear. Can you afford it? Are you willing to pay the price?

When you ask people to join the church, they may worry about how much it's going to cost them. "I'm not going to have to give ten percent or anything like that, am I?" "You're not going to want me to volunteer for stuff, are you?" "I'm not going to have to go to a lot of meetings, am I?" "I won't have to get up too early, will I?" "Do I have to go to church every Sunday?"

Following Jesus is going to cost you a lot more than 10 percent of your income or one hour out of your one day off. It'll cost you everything. Your whole life. And unless you literally hate anything that competes and gets in the way, whether parent, child, work, friends, food, drinks, soccer, baseball, football, you name it, if you try to bring anything along, but your cross, you are not worthy to follow Jesus. (William Cwirla)

A refugee from Sudan tells his story. "Growing up as a Christian I thought when you choose to be a Christian you choose to just have a difficult life. That things would not be good for you, you may not go to a college of your choice, you may not find a job of your own choice ... That was the life that I grew up in and I thought that was normal. That was the price of Christianity.

For me the word prosecution never came across my mind because I thought it is not a prosecution, this is Christianity. This is what it takes to be a Christian. ... My biological dad was actually shot before I was born because of his faith. So to be killed because of your faith was something normal, and we expected that anybody could go through that." As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Truth be told, if you ran the cost of following Jesus, you wouldn't. If that great crowd that was following Jesus around like a rock star took stock as to where He was going, and what He was about to do, they would have nothing to do with Him. They would have turned on their heels and run for the hills. If you counted the cost, you would never come to Jesus, never decide to follow Jesus. No one would. (Cwirla)

So *why* would we ever follow Him? What would motivate us to give up everything to follow Jesus?

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2) *As the song goes, "Man of Sorrows! What a name for the Son of God, Who came. Ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah! What a Savior! Bearing shame and scoffing rude, In my place condemned He stood; Sealed my pardon with His blood. Hallelujah! What a Savior! Guilty, vile, and helpless we; Spotless Lamb of God was He; Full atonement! Can it be? Hallelujah! What a Savior!"*

"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.²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple ... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Strong words. But not to discourage them, or us. Rather to be *realistic*. Because Jesus knows what we don't know, or don't want to know, or so often forget: that He's in enemy territory, come to do battle. Battle against the old evil foe, the devil, who's not going to sit back and do nothing; who's not going to take this incursion lightly. He's going to fight. And not just against Jesus, but against you.

And Jesus knows he will use your family. Many have turned away from Jesus in some way, shape, or form because of family. Because they didn't want to offend, because they were more afraid of what their family would think than about Jesus.

He will use your own life - your sinful human nature and its desires - to turn you away from Jesus, making sin look good; making it look desirable. Making the truth seem mean and ugly, and false doctrine seem good and loving. Playing on your emotions; on your weaknesses.

He will use persecution and the cross. Threats, of not only harm, but of disadvantage at work, in school, in society have caused many to compromise and cave to the sinful ways of the world.

He will use the church. What do we say in the church? "Come to our church. It's a fun place. People are friendly. There's coffee and donuts. The music is awesome! The message inspiring. We have a great senior's program; great youth group. You'll love it!" And we think that's what following Jesus is all about. What's in it for us. Getting a return on our investment.

In short, the devil will use anything and everything in this world to undermine your discipleship. To cause you to turn back and turn away. But often, it's more subtle than that. To just make us pause and take a break. Perhaps miss a few Sundays. Fall for a few temptations. Disbelieve just some of the Word. Start thinking that we need to get with the times. But then, like the toddler who stops following Mom in a crowded mall, we soon find ourselves separated from Jesus and, left on our own, not able to get back.

That's why Jesus' words today, warning us: if you love these things more than Me, if you prefer these things and follow after these things, you're not able to follow Me. You will fall. You won't make it. Like a tower that's never finished or a king destroyed in battle. (James Douthwaite)

Jesus wants disciples. He wants this war. And he therefore warns us not to enter it with our inadequate strength, for we should then most certainly be doomed. (Lenski) Jesus wants you to consider the cost of discipleship, not to decide whether or not to follow Him, because we should all follow Him. But you need to consider the cost, so that you're prepared for the radical nature of His call. Daily repentance. Daily dying to self, your will, your priorities, to that which is nearest and dearest to you. In order to follow the One who is nearer and dearer.

As Bonhoeffer says in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ, and no more of self, to see only Him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. ... All that self-denial can say is: "He leads the way, keep close to Him."

Jesus counted the cost to build the tower, the fortress, the refuge of the Church. It would cost Him everything. And He found it worth it. Leaving His throne in Heaven, being born of a virgin, being despised and rejected by men, and then drinking the cup of God's wrath against our sin and dying our death.

He's the King who came to battle the armies of the prince of this world, asking not for peace, but warring against them, and winning the fight, we could never win. He's the One who loves you, more than His own life, and so gave His life, that you might live.

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, to love and cherish, until death do us part." Marriage isn't primarily something we choose or do. It's a gift. When I paused on making that phone call to ask for a daughter's hand in marriage, I had a *glimpse* of what that would mean. To keep that promise, it would mean death; dying to self; my will; my way. Now that I've been married for 29 years, I've come to realize it's a *daily* dying to self.

Like marriage, discipleship isn't primarily something we choose or do. It's a gift. A gift of dying to self. A gift of forgiveness. A life we are born again, born from above, into. Following Jesus is something we *get* to do. That doesn't mean it's always easy. Just the opposite. Dying to self is never easy. But it's the way of life. As Jesus said, *"Whoever tries to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life, for my sake, will find it."*

The way of discipleship, is the way of death. Death, that leads to life. Real life. The way it was always meant to be. The way it was in the beginning. The way it will be again. And on the way, He will be with you. As you die to self and follow Him, He who cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, will He not care for you as well? Discipleship ... a matter of death and life!