

Costly Discipleship

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 14, reading from verse 25 to verse 35. Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple.

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?

For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, This person began to build and wasn't able to finish. Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king.

Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with 10,000 men to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?

[1 : 19] It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Okay, folks.

There are, in these verses this morning, there are some serious challenges, aren't there? Some significant demands that Jesus makes of those who wish to be numbered amongst his disciples, those who wish to follow after him.

And I thought that before we dig into those instructions that he gives us, I thought perhaps it would be helpful to think about the context for that, the background to Jesus saying these things.

Sometimes there's a danger, isn't there, when we take a few verses or we take a particular incident in isolation, the danger that we come away with a skewed understanding from just that little section. And what we need to remember is that these demands that Jesus makes in these verses, that these don't come to us as the authoritarian requirements of a dictator.

[2 : 23] No, they come to us from one who says, if you want to be like me, then you will have to walk the same road. Jesus says, I've been this way before.

Come with me. It's not the most traditional Christmas reading, but me, I often find myself thinking about Philippians chapter 2 around this time of year.

Paul says to the Philippian church, in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the father.

[3 : 27] Those are wonderful verses, aren't they? So much rich Christology packed in there. But do you see what Paul is doing? Paul is grounding an instruction to the church in the example of Jesus.

Here, specifically in these verses, he's urging humility, urging that we value others above ourselves. And I think that this same idea of urging something by comparison to Jesus, that that's something that we can pick up and consider back in Luke chapter 14.

We take that same principle and we say, in your willingness to take up the cross, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who came to earth knowing where his life would end.

In your willingness to count Jesus more precious even than your family, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who went to the cross knowing that as he hung there, he would cry out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And as you count the cost of discipleship, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who in eternity past knew what would be demanded of him and chose willingly to bear that burden, to come for your sake and for mine.

[4 : 40] So, friends, as we consider in these verses, these difficult expectations of us, we consider them not in isolation, but rather in imitation of the one who paid a far greater cost than we will or indeed could.

So, don't think that Jesus is unaware of or unsympathetic to the price that he asks of you here. Don't think he cannot understand your experience if you choose to shoulder this burden.

Recognize that he knows. He understands. He himself bore such a burden and has sent his spirit to stand alongside and to shoulder these burdens beside us.

And so, these words come to us from Jesus. As Luke tells us, large crowds were traveling with him. So, remember, still on this journey from the north of the country down slowly south to Jerusalem, a journey to the cross.

And in that context, we have three points as we work through these verses together. Firstly, following Jesus is costly. That is abundantly clear in these verses, isn't it?

[5 : 46] And therefore, so do not begin lightly. Following Jesus is costly, so do not begin lightly, because a half-hearted disciple is of no value.

Following Jesus is costly, so do not begin lightly, because a half-hearted disciple is of no value.

First, Jesus is clear. Following him is costly.

We thought last week, didn't we, about the parable of the banquet. And there, Jesus considered the case of those who were too reluctant, not sufficiently willing to take up discipleship. And now, if you like, he's considering the opposite case.

Those who are, if anything, too eager to be disciples to follow after him. He says, verse 26, If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple.

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. And then verse 33, In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

[6 : 55] It's pretty brutal, isn't it? Verse 26, This call to hate our closest relatives. It's brutal, but we do need to bear in mind that we can't interpret one section of God's word in a way that contradicts another.

The fifth commandment has not been repealed. We are still expected to honour father and mother. And indeed, Jesus reaffirms that in Mark chapter 7 when he rebukes the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who've found their ways to kind of weasel out of doing that.

More broadly, if we're called to love our neighbours, it's surely a nonsense to hate our brothers and sisters. So what's going on then? If we're not to interpret one passage in a way that contradicts another, how do we hold the two together?

Well, at least part of it is the same as I said last week. When Jesus says, not X but Y, it doesn't always completely exclude X so much as it denotes the primary focus of attention.

And so too here. The hatred here is not absolute, but if you like, it is a comparative hatred. The idea then is that our love for our parents and our love for our other relatives, at large though that love should be, that that large love ought to be so far surpassed by our love of Jesus, that it will seem by comparison as if that love is hatred.

[8 : 22] I mean, even if not on the basis of other passages, even just with this passage here, we have to have an interpretation something like this, don't we? Just on the basis of the last clause here, because we're called to hate even our own lives.

Now, Jesus is most certainly not advocating an active rejection of our lives, is he? But rather that we count them as not our own, that we consider even our lives a small price to pay in the service of our Saviour.

Having been redeemed at such a cost, how could we not give our all in response? So then if that's the case, well, how do we apply that to our lives, to our situations today?

I guess it means if our lives are not our own, then that means we hold lightly our own plans and intentions. Having planned to buy a house, if God says, no, no, don't do that, do this instead, then we go God's way.

We hold our plans lightly. Having mapped out for ourselves a career as a doctor or a lawyer, the question is, are we willing to have God say, no, not that, do this instead?

[9 : 36] Having imagined the husband and the 2.4 children and the dog in the leafy suburbs, are we willing to be called instead to a single life, to service in the grotty part of town?

Having thought that we're going to live to a ripe old age, are we willing instead to follow in the footsteps of missionaries to cannibalistic tribes? Or more likely, are we willing to risk our lives bringing medical assistance to infectious people and rescuing people from burning buildings and defending freedom against oppressive regimes and so on and so on?

Are you willing to hold your lives, your dreams, your plans, are you willing to hold them lightly, to spend yourself in service? And as for hating our parents, husbands, wives, siblings, children, or at least loving them less than Christ himself, well, what of that for us today?

It's going to be more acute for some of us than for others. But I suspect that for many of us, probably most of us, that there are family members who don't share our values and have the same priorities as we do.

Perhaps who therefore pressure us to spend time with family where we might otherwise be at church on a Sunday. Perhaps family who aren't going to understand our willingness to give up that good salary, our willingness to give up comfort, our willingness to give up their grandchildren's comfort for the sake of the gospel.

[11 : 06] I suspect most of us have family who will not understand all of these things, that there will be times when we have to choose between the affection of friends and family versus our commitment to Christ.

Well, Jesus is clear in those situations. No contest can be accepted. See, Jesus is talking in a situation when he talks about the kingdom of God, his audience assume that he's talking about a political resurgence, that the nation is going to wrest back control from the Roman Empire, back to the glory days of King David.

They assume he's going to be the king of the Jews in that practical, immediate sense. He's going to get rid of Pilate and Herod and all of that gang. And Jesus' audience want to see that triumph.

They want to be associated with that triumph. They want to ally themselves with Jesus, not so much for the sake of salvation from their sins, but rather for the sake of victory. And imagining that as they are closely associated with this victor, that they will richly benefit in that coming kingdom.

That's what they're expecting. And to them, Jesus says, take up your cross. Count the cost. This will not be easy.

[12 : 22] It will be costly. It will not be comfortable. It will be burdensome. Jesus doesn't need spectators and hangers on. Jesus wants recruits.

And so, says Jesus, do not begin lightly. Count the cost. Consider what you are really doing. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower.

Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, this person began to build and wasn't able to finish.

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he's able, with 10,000 men, to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000? And if he's not able, he'll send a delegation while the other's still a long way off and ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. So Jesus continues here with these two mini parables.

[13 : 25] The first of them drawn very much from the everyday of his own audience. This tower that they're thinking about building, this isn't a grand enterprise. This is more likely a small watchtower to keep an eye on their vineyard or a storage tower of some kind.

You know, think a grain silo or something like that. Suppose one of you at the start of the parable, this presumes this is something that they might reasonably do. The second introduced slightly differently, suppose a king, presumably not all that many kings in his audience, but still for them a familiar concept, isn't it?

One that they could readily understand. They know fine well it would be only with the most favourable of circumstances that 10,000 can oppose 20,000. The king would have to stop and consider very carefully whether to proceed.

And the carefulness of the consideration, this estimating of cost, this assessing of strength, that the care here is denoted in both cases by the fact that they sit down to consider.

This isn't kind of a casual amusing, a vague pondering. No, this is a careful calculation. Sit down and think. We, Covenant Church, we're applying for a loan from the Board of Trustees, you know, the denominational bean counters.

[14:47] We're hoping to buy a building of our own and the Board of Trustees want us to send all kinds of documentation, you know, cash flow projections for the next five years and so on and so forth, building surveys and all sorts, that they want to assess our ability to repay a loan were they to give it to us.

Why? Well, because none of us want to get to the situation where the project is half done and stalls for lack of funds. Nobody benefits from that, do they? You don't have to watch all that many episodes of Grand Designs and so on to see just how much of a mess you can end up in when you fail to realistically estimate the cost of your building project.

And Jesus says, in like fashion, you must think seriously before embarking on a life of discipleship because there will be a cost.

Bishop Ryle, we've heard from him a number of times through this series and again he puts it well. He says, it costs something to be a true Christian. Let that never be forgotten. To be a mere nominal Christian and to go to church, that is cheap and easy work.

But to hear Christ's voice and follow Christ and believe in Christ and confess Christ, that requires much self-denial. It will cost us our sins and our self-righteousness and our ease and our worldliness.

[16:14] All, all must be given up. It's a serious cost, isn't it? We've considered already the risk to life, the risk of a fractured family relationship.

What else may it cost? Well, for sure. For sure it will cost you that precious sin that you think you can hang on to. That's going to fall to a life of serious discipleship.

And your pride, your belief that you deserve the good regard of others, like those oh-so-holy people we were talking to the children about earlier. Your pride, your belief that you deserve the good regard even of God himself, that will fall.

your comforts, they may well be taken away. There is a cost to discipleship and it requires serious consideration.

Now, I don't think that Jesus' intention here is to deter a serious candidate for discipleship because Jesus welcomes all who call on his name.

[17:20] No, the idea is to warn, to go in with eyes wide open to recognize what's happening, to warn you that becoming a disciple is the most important decision you could possibly make, that it therefore deserves at least as much consideration as you would give to any other enterprise.

You don't build a tower on a whim, nor do you follow Jesus casually. You can't, you can't be swept into God's kingdom on a wave of emotion.

No, you walk in with calm deliberation, with careful consideration. much may be taken away from you. This is true. But friends, it does also bear saying that what you gain thereby is of inestimable value.

Matthew 13, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

friends, a life of discipleship may cost you everything, but that is a price worth paying considering what you will receive.

[18:35] Now, Jesus says that the consequence of failing to adequately estimate the cost of building a tower, that the cost of that is to expose yourself to public ridicule, to fail to assess the odds as a king in battle, it risks destruction, to fail to reckon the cost of discipleship.

Well, verse 34, salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It's fit neither for the soil nor the manure pile, it's thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Salt, which is not salty, has no value. A half-hearted disciple has no value. The cost of beginning to follow without serious commitment, the cost of that is you turn out to be of no use at all.

Now, some people have protested that there's no such thing as salt that loses its saltiness, so what on earth is going on here? Well, I think we could understand the point that Jesus was making as valid anyway, but actually it's been pointed out by a number of commentators that actually the salt that was in use at the time was not pure salt by any stretch of the imagination, and given that, it's actually perfectly possible for salt to lose its saltiness.

Granted, sodium chloride does not become unsalty, but if you have a mixture of a whole bunch of different crystals, some of which are sodium chloride, then it's entirely possible that those crystals, the actual salt, is eroded away, is dissolved, or whatever, and the other crystals are left.

[20 : 14] And thus you have in your bowl of salt salt which is not salty and is in fact of no use, not even as useful as a rotting vegetable or animal dung.

It's not even that level of usefulness. You can't even make compost from it. Disciples who do not stay the course are of no value.

Those who merely come to Jesus but do not follow Jesus, who are not truly his disciples, there is no value in that at all. Now, this sounds perhaps at one level, this sounds rather baffling, doesn't it? Like the politician who says, vote for me, I'll double your taxes, I'll halve your wages, and I'll give you nothing in return. Vote for me, and you'll lose your house, and your family, and everything you have.

Vote for me. It sounds a bit like that but it isn't really like that. It's more like the recruiting sergeant who says, give up your home and your comforts, and come and put your life on the line.

[21 : 30] Why? To save your family and countless others. Come and risk everything for a cause that is worth fighting for. And suddenly the idea of counting the cost makes more sense.

Is it worth that? Will I stay the course? Because the soldier who abandons his fellows in the thick of the battle, it is worse than the one who never signed up in the first place.

Jesus' challenge to us in these verses is significant. His charge is serious. My friends, Jesus has paid the price of your redemption.

And the question is, are you willing to pay the price of following him? to sit down? Consider. Take this seriously.

Because it might cost you everything. And yet you are certain to receive something far better. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for your willingness to pay the price.

[22 : 44] That having counted the cost, having considered what it would demand of you to put into practice your plan of salvation. That we might be redeemed.

Thank you that you willingly shouldered that burden, paid that price. Help us to consider soberly. Help us to think seriously. Help us to recognise the challenge of your call to us.

Lord, may we not be half-hearted disciples. May we not be those who are unwilling to pay the price, but rather those who will do whatever is asked of us in your service.

Even to the point of seeming to hate family and friends. Even to the point of giving up everything that we have. Even to the point of picking up our cross and following you even to death.

Lord Jesus, grant that we might be willing to love you to the very end. Because what we have gained in you is of such great value.

[23 : 53] What joy there is. What hope we have. Lord Jesus, we look forward to that day when we will know your blessings in all of their fullness.

When we will see you face to face. When we will feast in your presence. Lord Jesus, bring that day near, we ask. Amen.