

Can Not or Will Not

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Date: 16 October 1994

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[0 : 00] Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 14, verses 25 through 35. If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of the Gospel?

Spirit of the living God, we believe that you inspired the physician named Luke to write down these words. And I pray now that by your mercy and in your grace, you would make these words come alive in us as never before.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now great multitudes were going along with Jesus, 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 carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?

Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, this man began to build and was not able to finish. Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with 10,000 to encounter the one who is coming against him with 20,000?

[1 : 39] Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace. So, therefore, no one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

Therefore, salt is good, but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile.

It is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. You may be seated. Thanks a lot, Pastor. That's just great. I come to a Sunday morning worship service to get a little peace of mind. I come hoping to get my spiritual batteries recharged for the coming week, and you choose this heavy text on discipleship.

I really have enough pressure in my life already. I don't need this cannot be my disciple when I'm drowning under the demands of modern living. Of course I do.

[2 : 46] Of course I want to be an authentic disciple of Jesus. But do we really have to grapple with this text that uses words like hate and give up and take up the cross?

And do we have to grapple with this kind of text today on this beautiful fall morning? Couldn't you just tell us about all the good benefits of being a disciple of Jesus? Jesus, I have enough stress without these heavy words.

I hear you. I really hear you. And I would much prefer to preach on the glorious benefits of discipleship. But they are, after all, the benefits of discipleship.

Benefits which are only experienced when we actually follow. Yes, Jesus' words in this text are heavy. But they are not oppressive.

There's a big difference between heavy and oppressive. His words are heavy, but they are not oppressive. Indeed, not only are they not oppressive, these heavy words are actually liberating.

[3 : 55] Liberating? Yes. Yes. For you see, much of the stress that we experience in our time is due to the fact that we are not following Him.

Following Him does not result in life-draining stress. Challenge? Yes. Being stretched? Yes. Tribulation? Yes.

But not stress that saps the vitality of life. Come to Me, all who are weary and have overburdened themselves, and I will rest you, He says.

Take My yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light. He is telling us that we are stressed out because we are wearing the wrong yokes.

We are wearing yokes that are oppressive, that tear at our souls. He is telling us that we are stressed out because we carry burdens, the wrong burdens, burdens we were never intended to carry.

[4 : 53] His yoke is easy. His burden is light. His yoke is His relationship with the Father, a relationship that involves trust and intimacy and joy. His burden is pleasing the Father.

And He really wants us to enter into the restoring, resting, lifting power of His yoke and burden. And so He speaks these heavy words to us.

These heavy words are intended to set us free. Let me show you how. Three times in this text, we find this word cannot.

Verse 26, Whoever comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister, yes, even life itself, cannot be My disciple. Verse 33, None of you can be My disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

And verse 27, Whoever does not carry the cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple. Now, is Jesus saying, Look, folks, unless you get with it, I will never let you be My disciple?

[6 : 02] No. That would go against everything we know about Him. That would be contrary to grace. What I think He is saying is this, Look, gang, here is the way it is.

Unless you hate, give up, and carry the cross, you will never let yourself be My disciple. He is not putting up a barrier to discipleship here.

He is not excluding anyone. He is saying that we simply will not follow behind Him unless we come to terms with all of these other claims upon our lives.

The cannot is not from His side. The cannot is from our side. We simply will not follow Him as long as we still want to follow someone or something else.

We've been emphasizing in this series that we are all disciples. Every human being is a disciple of someone or some way or some ideology.

[7 : 04] Michael Huffington is a disciple. Dianne Feinstein is a disciple. Saddam Hussein is a disciple. Norman Lear is a disciple. Shirley MacLaine is a disciple of someone.

The question is never, will I be a disciple? The question is always, whose disciple will I be? And in these heavy words in this text, the Lord of the universe is saying, look, I really, really want you to know the fullness of life that comes in following Me, but you will not get up and follow Me into that fullness, into the kingdom, unless you come to terms with these other claims upon your life.

In these heavy words, the only begotten Son of the Father is saying, I really want you to enter into and enjoy the intimacy I have with My Father, but you will not get up and follow Me into the Father's heart until you come to terms with all these other things on your heart.

It's not that we cannot be His disciples. It's that we will not be His disciples. Are you with me? What amazes me about Jesus' heavy words in this text is that according to Luke, Jesus spoke them to these crowds that were hanging around Him.

We would expect these heavy words to be spoken to people who are already serious about following Him, but no, Jesus spoke these words to the crowds.

[8 : 36] He spoke these words to the seekers. Jesus doesn't do what we think He ought to do. Jesus doesn't soft-pedal the cost of discipleship. He doesn't let people sort of warm up and get their feet wet and then later tell them what they're really in for.

That's not Jesus' style. Jesus never deceives anyone about the cost. He never lures anyone in with less than the full truth.

He's always up front, or as one New Testament scholar says, He is always relentlessly honest. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I will lead you into abundant life, but you will not follow Me into that abundant life unless and until you've come to terms with these other claims upon your life.

It's not that you cannot be My disciple. It's simply that you will not be My disciple. This cannot of Jesus causes us to initially bristle, especially in our politically correct era.

But what is He supposed to say? What is Jesus supposed to say? You see, we're not dealing here with a political candidate. We're dealing with the Creator and Recreator of life.

[9 : 53] Remember how He put it in His Sermon on the Mount? Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and many are on it.

The gate is small and the road is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. Yes, He invites all, and in that sense, His call is wonderfully inclusive.

But He calls us to follow, and only those who have come to terms with all the other claims upon their life will actually get up and follow. The narrowness of Jesus' call is a scandal for many people. But how can it be otherwise? How can it be otherwise? Which is why Michael Wilcock of England says that we should never apologize for Jesus' hard call.

He reminds us that the soccer player cannot score by kicking the ball just anywhere in the opponent's end of the field. He's limited to the space between the goalposts, and he reminds us that a pilot cannot land his plane on any field that he wants to.

[11:02] He has to land the plane in the limits of the airfield if he wants to make a safe landing. Whoever comes to me and does not hate his mother and father and wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, life itself, cannot be my disciple.

None of you can be my disciple unless you give up all that you possess. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Now, what is crucial to understand here is that Jesus is expressing himself in a typically Middle Eastern way. That is, he's putting things in their extreme form, in their sharp contrast, in order to get our attention.

Thus, hate, give up, carry the cross. Is he really advocating that we hate our loved ones? Does he really want us to literally give up all that we have?

Does he want us to actually carry crosses around on our shoulders? What he is calling for in this text is a deep, deep renunciation. He is calling us to renounce all those other claims in our life that keep us from the joyful liberation of his claim.

[12:15] And so he expresses himself in this extreme way, hate, give up, carry crosses. Let's spend some time with each of those three exhortations.

First, hate. Whoever does not hate his father or mother, etc. How could he possibly mean what we mean by hate in light of the fifth commandment, you shall honor your father and mother?

How can he possibly mean what we mean by hate in light of his great command that we are to love as he loves? Hate is a Middle Eastern way to say that now the scales have tipped.

Your love for me will need to be greater than your love for loved ones if you are actually going to follow me. Thus, the Good News Bible translates Luke 14, 26 this way.

Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than he loves father and mother, etc. When Matthew records this saying of Jesus, he deculturizes it.

[13:20] Matthew 10, 37. Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. Still, we must not blunt the sharp edge of the sword inherent in this word, for he is calling us to more than a relatively greater love.

He is also saying here that loved ones do not have the final authority in our lives. This was a radical word in the first century.

I'm surprised that Jesus was not stoned to death there and then that day. Middle Eastern culture is built around the authority, the absolute authority of the Father.

The Father virtually dictates how and where the children live until the day He dies. This is true in Asia. On Tuesday morning in Manila, I was invited to play golf with one of the leading Chinese businessmen of Manila.

When I got there Tuesday morning, he couldn't come and so he had his oldest son, who was about 45, come to play golf with me. He was dictated by his father. He had to come and play golf with me.

[14:28] That's just the way it is. In the Philippines, by the way, I did very poorly. In the Philippines, although the pastor of Union Church of Manila who played with me got a hole in one on the sixth hole.

In the Philippines, it is the mother who holds that absolute sway. Over a period of time, I was meeting with a very bright young Filipino who was wrestling with the call to enter full-time ministry. After we had together discerned that indeed the Lord was calling him to ministry, he told me he was not able to respond to the call. Why not? I asked.

I cannot, he said. Why not? My mother has not given me permission yet. The young man was 33 years old. In the Middle East or Asia, Jesus' heavy words in this text are wonderfully liberating words.

So too in ours. They put us all in our place. It is so easy to make idols out of our loved ones, to put our loved ones in places which only the living God rightly occupies.

[15:40] I love my mom and my dad. They love me. They're going to hear what I'm about to say because they receive copies of the tape in the mail. My dad whom I love is my dad, but he is not my Lord.

My mom who I love is my mom, but she is not my Lord. I can look to them for support and advice, but they do not have the final word in my life. Turn the tables.

I am David's dad, but I am not his Lord. I'm Christy's dad, but I'm not her Lord. I'm Marissa's dad, but I'm not her Lord. I'm Alex's dad now, but I'm not his Lord.

The only one worthy of their ultimate allegiance is Jesus. And my job as a parent is to help make Him known to them and help prepare them to be able to follow Him when He calls.

I have dreams for their lives. I think David would make a great politician. I think Christy would make a great teacher or principal. I think Marissa would make a great gymnast or nurse.

[16:43] And I think that Alex would make a great translator for the United Nations. But Jesus likely has other dreams for them, better dreams. And I have to be ready to let my dreams for them die so that He can fulfill His dreams for them.

I am their dad, but I am not their Lord. When I embrace Jesus' heavy words here, I actually lighten up and I become a better dad.

Less demanding, less controlling, more open, more attentive to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in their life. When I first went away to college, my dad gave me a pocket New Testament.

And in the inside leaf, he wrote these words, this is a story of a man who can do more for you than your dad. I think something like that is what Jesus has in mind here.

My dad was loving me better by calling me to love Jesus more. Again, we must not blunt the sharp edge of these words because I think Jesus' heavy words go even deeper.

[17:51] I think He's saying to us something like, you're going to need to break with the dysfunction of your family system if you're going to follow me. We all know how that stuff from our family system keeps us from freely following Jesus into fullness.

This word hate captures the intensity to which Jesus frees us to break from all that stuff. The word hate expresses the resolve to which He frees us to break from all those tapes that we got, those tapes about our self-esteem.

Jesus is saying, I will now tell you who you are. I will be the one who will be the source of your identity and security. I think His words go deeper still.

He is saying that in order to follow, we're going to have to come to terms with the fear of rejection. Boy, do I know this one well. Many times, I do not do what I know Jesus wants me to do.

I do not say what I know He wants me to say because I fear that the people who are going to hear are going to reject me. He wants the very best for me. But I often do not choose the best because of the fear of what people are going to say to me.

[19:04] The Apostle John tells us that many of the Pharisees who came to believe in Jesus would not openly follow Him because, quote, lest they should be sent out of the synagogue, for they love the approval of men rather than the approval of God, close quote.

You see, it's not that we cannot be His disciples. It's that we will not unless we come to terms with this fear of rejection. We have to keep on renouncing the lordship of other people so we can experience the freedom of His lordship.

Hate. Give up. None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. All. Literally.

Hold a huge garage sale and sell all the furniture, the cars, the house, and my books. Where would we live? How could I do my work without my pencils and paper and my books?

Give up is a dramatic way to say, renounce the claims of. Renounce the claims of. Our possessions put tremendous claims on us which keep us from living out Jesus' claim.

[20:20] And the more we have, the more claims there are. The lawns need to be mowed, the house needs to be cared for and maintained, stocks need to be watched carefully, cars need to be repaired and repaired and repaired and repaired.

While missionaries on the field wonder where their next paycheck's going to come from. Give up. Give up means to renounce the claims that our possessions have on us and to place our possessions under His claim.

That's the key. To place all our possessions under His lordship. While he was still serving as a pastor in Buenos Aires, Juan Carlos Ortiz wrote a book entitled Disciple, which helped me

immensely.

Ortiz reminds us that Jesus has everything we'd ever want, joy and peace and healing and security and eternity, everything. But he reminds us that it's going to cost us.

That's the thunder coming from another place, isn't it? You know what that is, Ron? No? Not here? Okay. We'll just go on, all right? Ortiz reminds us that it's going to cost us and then he imagines the following conversation.

[21 : 38] We say to Jesus, Okay, I want what you have to give. How much does it cost? Well, Jesus says, it's very expensive. But how much, we ask? Well, a very large amount.

Do you think I could buy it? Oh, of course, everyone can buy it. But didn't you say it was very expensive? Yes. Well, how much is it? Everything you have. After wrestling a while, we make up our minds.

All right, I'll buy it. Well, what do you have, he asks. Let's write it down. Well, I have \$10,000 in the bank. Good, \$10,000. What else? That's all. That's all I have. Nothing more?

Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket. How much? Well, let's see. \$30, \$40, \$50, \$60, \$80, \$100. \$120. That's fine. What else do you have? Well, nothing. That's all. Where do you live?

In my house. Yes, I have a house. The house, too, then. He writes that down. You mean I'm going to have to live in my camper? You have a camper? Let's write that down, too. Then I'll have to sleep in my car.

[22 : 33] You have a car? Two of them. Both become mine. Both cars. What else do you have? Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What more do you want? Are you alone in this world?

No, I have a wife and two children. Oh, yes, your wife and children, too. What else? I have nothing left. I'm left alone now. Then he exclaims, You yourself, too.

Everything becomes mine. Wife, children, house, money, cars, and you. Then he goes on to say, Now, listen. I will allow you to use and enjoy all these things for the time being, but don't forget that they are mine just as you are mine, and whenever I need any one of these things, you must give them up because I am now the owner.

Is this on now? Are we having trouble the other way? We're okay? All right? How can I know that I have done it? How can I know that I have done this internal renouncing of possessions and placed them under his lordship?

It's a very personal thing, and I wouldn't want to put any particular form on any one of us, but Scripture does give us an objective indicator that we are renouncing our possessions, and it is the tithe, giving away the first 10% off the top.

[23 : 54] I think Scripture teaches us that if, in fact, we can tithe, we are probably renouncing the rest. Tithing is a powerful way of declaring to our possessions and to our resources, you are not my lord.

Here's the way I like to put it. We tithe not only because of all the needs around us. We tithe not only because we want to play an active role in the advancing of the kingdom.

We tithe not only because it is commanded. We tithe because we need to do it for our own soul's sake so that we will not make an idol out of our possessions.

That's the big reason I tithe. I don't want to become a slave to my possessions and money, which is why, for many of us, tithing is not enough.

We need for our sake to give more away. According to a recent survey, the average Presbyterian gives less than 2% to the work of Christ.

[24 : 56] The percentage is significantly higher in this church. And interestingly, this report showed that contributing households that make \$100,000 or more a year give 2.9%, whereas households that make \$10,000 a year give 5.5%.

Russell Chandler, who was of the Los Angeles Times, in his book *Racing Toward 2001*, makes this amazing statement. If church members were to boost their giving to an average of 10% of their income, the tithe, the additional funds would eliminate the worst of world poverty, which UNICEF says requires \$65 billion.

The 10% would provide that \$65 billion plus another \$17 billion for domestic need, all the while maintaining activities at current levels in churches.

There's \$82 billion in the American church untithed. You and I can recite all the creeds we want, but our true creed is found in our checkbook stubs.

Give up all. We will not follow Him into the fullness of life. We will not follow Him into intimacy with the Father unless we renounce the claims of our possessions and place them under His Lordship. [26 : 21] Carry the cross. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Literally? Literally? Walk around with crosses on our necks?

Of course not. Though in some parts of the world people take it that way. On one Good Friday in the Philippines, 13 men carried crosses on the highway that goes north of Manila, went out to a place and nailed themselves on the crosses and hung there for three hours.

What is Jesus getting at in this heavy word? I think He is saying that we need to be prepared to receive the same hostility He received.

If we follow Him in the work of peacemaking, for instance, we just might experience the same resistance and ridicule He experienced. And if I'm not willing to take a few knocks, I will likely not walk with Him in the way of peace.

It's not that I cannot walk that way. It's that I will not. I think Jesus is also saying that we need to be prepared to suffer with Him as He suffers for the world.

[27 : 27] You know, we cannot get close to Him. We cannot get close to His heart without getting close to what is on His heart. As disciples move into His heart, it means that we then move into the pain of the world, which He has made His own pain.

And if I'm not willing to feel that pain, I'm not going to follow Him. But chiefly, I think that Jesus means, by carry the cross, renounce self-lordship.

As we noted a few weeks ago, the only persons in the first century who carried crosses were those who were on their way to their own death. To carry the cross means to declare that I'm no longer Lord of my life.

It is to relinquish this need to always have things go my way. If I'm going to insist, that my agenda must always be fulfilled, how in the world am I possibly going to seek first the kingdom of God, carry the cross?

Does Jesus really need to put it so strongly in this extreme way? I think He does. For like the contractor in His parable, He is building a grand tower.

[28 : 36] And like the king in His parable, Jesus is in a battle. And He knows that we will not join Him in the building and the battling if we are going to clutch to our own lives. We will not do the things that He says make for peace in the world.

We will not bless those who curse us. We will not love our enemies. We will not confront the structures of evil unless we let go and risk losing our lives. Again, it's not that Jesus is saying, you cannot come.

It's that He's saying, you will not come. You just won't do it. Again, I think then that we can see that over the past few decades, we have been living with an erroneous model of the Christian life.

It seems to me that most of us think like this. We're walking down the road, a road for the most part which we have chosen for ourselves. Jesus Christ comes along, offers us joy and peace and healing and security and meaning and eternity.

We're grateful for what He gives us. We accept the offer and we continue down that road expecting to experience the joy and the peace and the security and the meaning on that road.

[29 : 49] And for a while we do, but eventually it ends. And then we conclude that discipleship doesn't work. But here's the accurate model. We are walking down the road.

Jesus Christ comes alongside us. He offers us joy and peace and security and meaning and eternity. And He calls us to turn around and says that all of these blessings will be experienced on a different road.

He tells us that we will experience all of that on a road that He chooses for us. Another way to say that is He will never give us power to serve other lords.

The only power He will give us is to serve Him. Whoever comes to Me and does not hate father or mother or wife or children or brothers or sisters or even life itself cannot be My disciple.

None of you can be My disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple. Again, He's not saying, well, phooey on you folks if you won't come to terms with us.

[30 : 53] He is saying, this is simply the way it is. You will not get up and actually follow Me unless and until you come to terms with all those other claims.

There is no doubt at all that the cost of discipleship is great. But there is also no doubt at all that the cost of non-discipleship is even greater.

I think that missionary Jim Elliott said it best when he said, He is no fool who gives up what he can never keep in order to gain what he can never lose.