

Can Not or Will Not

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[0 : 00] We are now on this third Sunday of the season of Lent, going to read a weighty text.

We're going to read a hard text, a very weighty, really hard text. But as weighty as it is, as hard as it is, as tough as it is, it is very liberating.

Trust me. The weighty, hard text is a very liberating text. What Jesus is going to say to us, he says to set us free.

Jesus speaks these words on his way to Jerusalem, where, as he has been telling his first disciples, he must. He must be rejected by the religious authorities, be crucified on a Roman cross, and on the third day be raised from the dead.

Jesus says these words between two events that take place around a meal. Before, at a meal in the home of a lead Pharisee on a Sabbath, and after, at a dinner where he welcomes sinners and tax collectors, as Luke puts it, and eats with them, scandalizing the scribes and Pharisees.

[1 : 41] The text is Luke chapter 14, verses 25 to 35. If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of the gospel?

Spirit of God, we believe that you enabled Luke to now write down these words for us accurately. And I pray in your mercy and grace that you would help us enter into the reality of which these words speak as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, large crowds were going along with Jesus.

And he turned and he said to them, the large crowds, 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.

[2 : 51] Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which one 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's laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, this man began to build but was not able to finish. Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with 10,000 men to encounter one coming against him with 20,000?

Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So then, none of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

Therefore, salt is good, but even salt has become tasteless. With what shall 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. She who has ears to hear, let her hear. The word of the Lord.

[4 : 11] You may be seated. I warned us, didn't I?

Weighty words. Very weighty words. But not oppressive words. You see, there's all the difference in the world between weighty and oppressive.

The presence of the living God is weighty. Yes. But not oppressive. Jesus' words are weighty.

But they're not oppressive. Indeed, they are not only not oppressive, they are positively liberating. Liberating?

Unless you hate, give up all, carry your own cross, this is liberating? Yes. Deeply liberating.

[5 : 19] Why? Because much of the stress that we experience in our day is due to not following. Many of us experience oppressive stress in our time because we are not following Jesus.

We are not actually following right on the heels of Jesus. Following right after Jesus does not result in life-draining stress.

Challenge? Yes. Being stretched? Oh, my. Tribulation? Yes. Persecution? Likely. But not oppressive stress that saps vitality.

Come to me, all who are weary and who have overburdened yourselves, and I will rest you, says Jesus. Take my yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. In those more immediately inviting words, Jesus is telling us that we are stressed out because we're wearing the wrong yokes.

[6 : 33] Yokes that do oppress. Yokes that tear at the fabric of our souls. Jesus' yoke is easy. Jesus' burden is light.

His yoke is his relationship with his father, a relationship of joy and intimacy and trust. His burden is pleasing the father. He only does what he sees his father doing. He only says what he hears his father saying.

And Jesus really wants us to experience the resting, lifting power of his yoke and his burden. And so, he speaks weighty words like those recorded in Luke 14.

His weighty words are given to set us free. Set us free? Yes. Set us free.

Look more carefully at the text. Three times in the text, Jesus says cannot. Verse 26. If anyone comes to me and does not hate their own father and mother and wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, even their own life, cannot be my disciple.

[7 : 42] Verse 33. No one can be my disciple who does not give up all his or her own possessions. And verse 27. Whoever does not carry his or her own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Now, Jesus speaks these three cannots relative to three little parables. Verse 28. The parable of the builder.

Who needs to be sure he actually has the materials with which to build in order to finish the project. Verse 31. The parable of the king who is defending his reign.

Who needs to be sure he has enough resources to go into the battle. And verse 34. The parable of the salt. Salt is only useful if it keeps its saltiness.

Jesus is speaking his cannot to help us build well. He's speaking his cannot to help us win the battle.

[8 : 43] He's speaking his cannot to actually help us be salt. To be the salt of the earth he calls us to be in his Sermon on the Mount. You cannot be my disciple unless you hate.

You cannot be my disciple unless you give up. You cannot be my disciple unless you carry your own cross. Now, is Jesus saying to us, look folks, unless you get with it, I will never let you be my disciple?

No. That would go against everything we know about him. It would go contrary to his grace. His extravagant, scandalous grace, which he develops in the other parables we've looked at.

Especially in the parable of the prodigal father, which he preaches after these weighty words. What I think he is saying is this. Look, folks, this is the way it is.

Unless you hate, give up, and carry the cross, you will not let yourselves be my disciple. He's not putting up any barriers to discipleship here.

[9 : 57] He is not excluding anyone. He is saying that we will simply not get up and stay right behind him unless we stop giving into the other claims upon our lives.

The cannot is not from his side. The cannot is from our side. Jesus is telling it like it is. We simply will not follow behind him as long as we want to follow behind someone or something else.

You've heard me say it many times. Every human being is a disciple of someone or something or some way of life. Every author, every filmmaker, every politician, every newspaper editor, every TED speaker, every plumber, lawyer, teacher, doctor, entrepreneur, every person in every city, in every nation of the world is a disciple of someone.

And so the question is never, will I be a disciple? The question is always, whose disciple will I be? In his weighty words, Jesus, Savior of the world, Lord of the universe, is saying to us, Look, I really want you to be my disciple.

I really want you to know the fullness of life that comes by actually following behind me. But here's the deal. You will not get up.

[11 : 30] And you will not follow me into that fullness, into the kingdom of God, unless you come to terms with all the other claims on your life. In his weighty words, Jesus is saying, Oh, how I want you to enter into and enjoy the intimacy I enjoy with my Father.

I died to make all that possible. But you will not get up. And you will not follow me into the Father's heart, unless you come to terms with everything else you're following.

It is not that we cannot be his disciples. It's that we will not be his disciples. Now what amazes me is that according to Luke, Jesus speaks his weighty words, his hard words, to the multitudes. He speaks these words to the large crowds that are starting to hang around with him. I would expect him to say such weighty words to those who have already decided to be serious about him. Wouldn't you expect him to say that? But no, Jesus speaks these words to the crowds. He's speaking these words to the seekers. Jesus does not do what we think he ought to do.

[12 : 50] He does not soft-pedal the cost of discipleship. Jesus does not let people kind of warm up to the idea, get their feet wet, and then later tell them what they've gotten themselves into.

He never deceives anyone about the cost. He never lures anyone in with less than the truth. He is always up front. Or as George Kerr, New Testament scholar, puts it, Jesus is 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 life unless and until you come to terms with all the other claims on your life.

It's not that you cannot follow me. It's that you will not follow me. Now, I know that this cannot offend the spirit of the age.

I know that. But what else is Jesus supposed to say? I mean, how can it be otherwise? What helps me is to realize that Jesus here is expressing himself in a typical Middle Eastern way.

[14 : 05] That is, he is putting things in the extreme to get our attention. He's drawing as sharp a contrast as possible to get our attention.

Thus, hate, give up all, carry your own cross. Is he literally advocating that we literally hate our loved ones?

I mean, is he literally advocating that we literally give up everything? Is he literally wanting us to literally walk around carrying crosses on our shoulders? The fact is, he is going deeper than literally.

He is speaking in such an extreme way because he is calling us to deep, deep renunciation. That's what Lent's all about.

He is calling us to renounce at very deep levels, at very deep levels, all the claims on our lives that keep us from living his joyfully liberating claim on our lives.

[15 : 16] He is expressing himself in such an extreme way to arrest us and then having to arrest us to free us. Hate, give up all, and carry your own cross.

Now, let's spend some time with each of these three exhortations and see how each of them does, in fact, set us free. Hate. Verse 26.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. Now, Jesus cannot possibly mean what we mean by hate in light of the fifth of the Ten Commandments, you shall honor your father and mother.

Jesus cannot possibly mean what we mean by hate in light of his new commandment, love one another as I have loved you. Hate is a Middle Eastern way of saying, the scales have now been tipped.

Hate is a way to say, your love for me is going to need to be greater than your love for your loved ones if you're actually going to follow behind me.

[16 : 23] That's why the Good News Bible renders Luke 14, 26, whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than he loves father and mother. On another occasion, Matthew records Jesus saying, whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me.

Yet, we must not blunt the sharp edge inherent in this word hate. For Jesus is calling us to more than a relatively greater love for him.

He is also saying that loved ones no longer have the final authority in our lives. A very radical thing to say in the first century.

A very radical thing to say in any Middle Eastern context. A very radical thing to say in many of the places of the world that many of us come from. You know, I'm surprised that the crowds did not stone Jesus right there and then.

In first century Middle Eastern culture, everything is built around the absolute authority of the father. The father virtually dictates how and when the children live until the day the father dies.

[17 : 35] In other cultures, it's the mother who has that role. While living in Manila, I walked closely with a young Filipino man who was wrestling with a call to pastoral ministry.

And over a period of months, we came to discern that, yes, in fact, Jesus was calling him to this ministry. But he told me he was not able to respond. And I said to him, why?

We've gone through this discernment process. Clearly, Jesus is calling you to this. Why can you not? And he replied, because my mother has not yet given me her permission. The young man was 33 years old.

In such cultural settings, Jesus' weighty words are wonderfully liberating because Jesus is saying, the only permission you need to follow me is mine.

So too in North America. Jesus' words puts us all in our places. It's so easy to have loved ones and close friends put in a place of almost idolatry, to take the place in our lives that only the living God can occupy.

[18:45] Boy, I know this keenly on a number of levels. I love my dad and my mom. My dad is now gone, enjoying fellowship with the risen Jesus in ways he never imagined.

My mom is still living in this world, but she suffers from severe dementia. She no longer knows who I am. Although my dad is gone, and my mom is not there anymore, I still hear their voices.

Anyone know what I mean? But as important as those voices are, they have to give way to the voice of Jesus. My dad is my dad, not my Lord.

My mom is my mom, not my Lord. I look to them for guidance, but they do not have the final word. Jesus now has the final word, right? Now turn the tables.

I am my son David's dad, but I am not his Lord. I'm my daughter Christy's dad, but I'm not her Lord. I'm my daughter Marissa's dad, but I'm not her Lord.

[19:54] The only one worthy of their unqualified allegiance is Jesus. My job as a parent is to introduce them to Jesus. My job as a parent is to prepare them to follow Jesus when he calls them.

I have dreams for their lives, and now I have great dreams for their kids' lives. But so does Jesus, and his dreams take precedence.

His dreams are better than my dreams, and I have to relinquish my dreams to his, even if such relinquishment of my dreams means the death of my dreams. I have to be ready for Jesus to disappoint my dreams for them so he can fulfill his dreams for them.

I'm their dad and their grandpa, but I'm not their Lord. Now when I embrace Jesus' weighty words, I actually lighten up, and I become a better dad.

I'm less demanding, less controlling, less and more open, and I'm more sensitive to the stirrings of the Spirit in their lives. I'll always remember the day that I left for university.

[21:06] Just as I was about to board the plane, my father put in my coat pocket a small package. After I'd taken my seat on the plane, I opened the package, and it was a little pocket New Testament.

And on the inside of the little pocket New Testament, my dad wrote the words, this is a story about a man who can do more for you than your dad. I think something like that is what Jesus is getting at when he uses this word hate relative to the claims of others.

Jesus now has the last word. My dad was loving me by relinquishing me to Jesus. He had no idea of what those implications were.

My dad was loving me by calling me to love Jesus more. And that's what we do in the body of Christ. We love one another by freeing one another to go Jesus' way.

Yet again, we must not blunt the sharp edge. Jesus' weighty word hate goes even deeper because I think he's also saying to us, you're going to need to break with all the dysfunction of your family system if you're going to follow me.

[22:16] Well, now we're talking liberation. How all that stuff keeps us from following, right? Am I right? You're looking there stoically like you don't know what I'm talking about.

You know what I'm talking about. Hate. This word hate captures the intensity to which Jesus frees us to break with all that stuff. Hate expresses the resolve to which he frees us to break all those tapes in our minds, those tapes that tell us who we are.

Jesus is saying, oh, it's so liberating. I will now tell you who you are. I will now be the source of your security and identity. It goes still deeper.

He is saying that in order to follow right behind him, we need to come to terms with our fear of rejection. Oh, do I know this one well. There are times when I cannot bring myself to do what Jesus clearly is calling me to do because I fear that I'm going to be judged by others.

He wants the best for me and the best for you. I know that. But I do not choose the best because I'm afraid of being criticized by others.

[23 : 36] The apostle John tells us about these Pharisees who came to believe in Jesus, who came to believe that Jesus was indeed Messiah. But John says they would not say so because, quote, they would be put out of the synagogue for they loved the approval of humans rather than the approval of God.

You see? It is not that we cannot be his disciples. It's that we will not. So he calls us to come to terms with the fear of rejection.

He calls us to come to terms and renounce in our souls the lordship of other people. He calls us to die to the fear of being judged so that we can enter into the joyful freedom of his lordship.

Hate. Weighty words but so liberating. Ready for the second one? Give up all.

Verse 33. None of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your own possessions. Yikes. All?

[24 : 47] Give up all? Hold a huge garage sale? Sell the furniture, the television, the computer, the iPhone, the car, the condo, my books? Cancel the savings account and give it up?

Give it up. Give all of it up is Jesus' extreme way of saying renounce the claim of. Our possessions put tremendous claims on us.

Right? Claims which can keep us from actually living Jesus' call. Right? Give up. Renounce the claims your possessions have on you and place them under my claim.

That's the key. Place them under my claim. While he was serving as a pastor of a large church in Buenos Aires, Juan Carlos Ortiz wrote a fabulous little book entitled Disciple.

Now, Juan Carlos Ortiz is famous for the move he made at the beginning of his pastoral ministry in Argentina. He preached a barn burner message the Sunday he candidated.

[25 : 59] It was so good the people all voted for him to be the pastor. The next Sunday he preached the same sermon. People loved it and thought, okay, it's worth hearing again.

The next Sunday he preached the same sermon. The people said, yeah, this is really a good sermon, but they were a little bit concerned now. The next Sunday, the fourth Sunday, he preached the exact sermon.

The deacons asked Juan Carlos to meet with them for an emergency session after worship. The lead deacon said, Pastor Ortiz, we really like your sermon. It is very good, but we're wondering, do you have another?

Juan Carlos responded, yes, I do, and I will preach it once you've acted on the first one. In his book, The Disciple, Ortiz reminds us that Jesus has everything we could ever want.

Joy, peace, healing, meaning, fullness, everything we'd want, but it will cost us. And so, Ortiz imagines this following conversation.

[27 : 11] I shared it with you a couple of years ago. We say to Jesus, okay, I want what you have to give. How much does it cost? Well, he says, it's very expensive.

But how much, we ask? Well, a very large amount. Do you think I could buy it? Of course, says Jesus, everyone can buy it. But didn't you say it's very expensive? Yes. Well, how much is it?

Everything you have. After wrestling, we make up our own minds. All right, I'll buy it. Well, says Jesus, what do you have? 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. \$30,000, \$40,000, \$60,000, \$80,000, \$100,000.

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 down the house. You mean I have to live in my camper?

[28 : 10] You have a camper? That too. What else? I'll have to sleep in my car. You have a car? Two of them. Both become mine. Both cars.

What else? Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What do you want? Are you alone in this world? No, I have a wife and two children. Oh, yes, your wife and two children. What else?

Now I'm left with nothing. I'm left alone now. He exclaims, you yourself too. Everything becomes mine. Wife, children, house, money, cars, and you.

Then Jesus says, now, listen, I will allow you to use and enjoy all these things for the time being, but don't forget that they are now mine just as you were mine. And whenever I need anything of

them, you must give it up because I'm now the owner.

Give up all. All Jesus wants is all. That's all. Very simple. You don't have to do any calculating.

[29 : 10] All. All. That's all. And he's saying that we will not follow him right on his heels into the joyful fullness of his lordship unless we renounce those possessions and the claim they have on our lives.

I love that line in the Palm Sunday story. The Lord has need of it. Some unnamed disciple apparently had placed all of his possessions at the feet of Jesus and said, anytime you need anything, just send the word.

The Lord has need of it. The time had come. Jesus needs the donkey. He sends the messenger.

The Lord has need of it and the unnamed disciple lets the donkey go. That's the way it works. Hate.

Give up all. Weighty words, but also liberating. And the third word. Carry your own cross.

Verse 27. Whoever does not carry their own cross cannot be my disciple. Literally, walk around with a cross on our shoulders?

[30 : 20] No. Although, you might know, in some parts of the world, people take this literally. On Good Friday, this year in Manila, 10 to 13 men will walk on the highway north of Manila and they will go to this hill and they will be nailed to a cross and will suffer for three hours.

to what is Jesus calling us in this weighty word? I think he's calling us to be prepared for some sort of suffering as we stay close to him.

I think he is calling us to be prepared to suffer the hostility he himself suffers. If we're going to follow him, for instance, into the ministry of peacemaking in the city, we have to be ready to meet resistance and some ridicule.

And if we're not willing to take those hard knocks, we're not going to do the work. I think Jesus is also saying that we have to be willing to suffer with him as he suffers with the world.

We cannot get close to the heart of Jesus without getting close to what's on his heart. And the further we go into his heart, the further we discover that he has taken all the pain and suffering of the world into his own heart.

[31 : 29] And if I'm not willing to go into that pain with him, then I'm not going to follow him. But I think that Jesus is mostly saying that we have to renounce our own claim to self-lordship.

That's what he's getting at. Someone's pointed out that in the first century, if you saw someone carrying a cross, you know what's happening. They're going to their own death. To carry the cross means choosing to die, to die to being Lord, to die to being my own Lord, to carry the cross is to declare that I'm no longer in charge.

To carry the cross is to say, I no longer have to have things my way. If I insist on having things my way, if I insist on having life as I've designed it to be, how can I possibly follow close behind Jesus? How can I possibly seek first the kingdom? That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer regularly reminded people, when Jesus calls a man, come, follow me, he bids him come and die.

When Jesus calls a woman, come, follow me, he bids her come and die. Carry your cross. Brothers and sisters, this is a liberating word.

[32 : 42] Liberating? Yes, because we were never intended to bear the weight of being Lord. We were never intended to bear the weight of being the Lord of our own lives.

Jesus' weighty words free us from the crushing weight of being our own masters. Carry your own cross.

Resurrection, after all, only takes place in graveyards. I've been crucified with Christ, says the Apostle Paul. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Hate, give up all, carry your own cross.

Does Jesus really need to speak in such extreme ways? Yes. For like the builder in his parable, Jesus is building a grand building, a new creation with a new humanity.

And like the king in the parable, Jesus is engaged in a great battle for the soul of humanity. And like salt, it needs to remain salty.

[33 : 51] And Jesus knows that we will not join him in the building project and in the battle. Jesus knows we will not be healing salt for the city if we keep giving in to all those other claims on our lives.

We simply will not do what he tells us to do. Once more, it is not that Jesus is saying, you cannot be my disciple. He's saying, you will not.

Jesus is not saying, well, phooey on you if you can't come to terms with the claims on your life. He's saying, you will not actually follow me into what I have for you unless you come to terms with all those other claims.

Missionary Jim Elliott is right. He is no fool who gives up what he can never keep in order to gain what he can never lose.

Before we sing, I invite you to simply sit before the Lord Jesus and say back to him the one big thing he said to you in the last 30 minutes and then to say to him what you plan to do about it.