

The Cost of Discipleship

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[0 : 0 0] They say that genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. 99% perspiration, 1% inspiration.

Now, we all know that Heidi is a genius on the cello. She's nodding and smiling. She knows it's true, but what we don't see are the countless hours of practice, the sore fingers, and more than anything else, the self-denial. The hours that she spends practicing are hours she could spend doing something else, but she cannot be a world-class cellist and something else at the same time.

It's a beautiful day outside. She'd love to go for a walk and an ice cream with the twins, but she needs to practice. To succeed, she must deny herself and work hard.

Now, in Luke chapter 14, verse 25, we find great crowds following Jesus. These thousands of people, they may all be happy at this stage to associate with Jesus, but of them all, how many are really following Him? How many of them are really His disciples? A hundred years ago, Glasgow's churches were crowded. But of all these people, how many were really Jesus' disciples? Perhaps they were in church back then because it was a respectable thing to do, but how many of them were really Christians?

Discipleship in Jesus is costly. At this stage in His ministry, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem where He's going to be arrested and tortured and executed. If our master suffered, should we, His followers, expect any less? Just like Heidi has to count the cost of being a musician, we must count the cost of being Christians. Luke 14, verse 25 through 35 sets the bar very high. It makes serious reading.

[2 : 2 0] In our passage, Jesus tells us three things. First, the priority of discipleship. Second, the permanence of discipleship. And third, the price of discipleship.

You know, it's been many years since being a Christian was culturally respectable. Maybe some here are happy to associate with Jesus, but what we all need to realize is that being a faithful Christian is costly, and we must be ready and willing to pay the price for it.

First of all then, the priority of discipleship. The repeating phrase in our passage is, He cannot be my disciple. He cannot be my disciple, verses 26, 27, and 33. Jesus is talking about the priority of discipleship. How if we put anything else before Him in our lives, we cannot be His disciples.

If we're Christians, Jesus must come first. He must be more important to us than anything and anybody else in this world. He must come first. If we lack these anythings and anybodies, as long as we have Jesus, life will be a success. But if we have all these anythings and anybodies, but we don't have Jesus, life will be a failure. If we have Jesus, we have everything. If we don't have Jesus, we have nothing.

Well, Jesus focuses on three concerns, family, career, and possessions. Family, career, and possessions. Does Jesus come first before these things in our lives? You see, unless He comes first, He cannot be my disciple. Family, first of all. Jesus says, 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 disciple. At face value, what Jesus is saying here is inhuman. Does being a Christian require us to hate our loved ones? If so, we should be very sad when one of our children becomes a Christian because now it means they are compelled to hate us.

[4 : 42] Jesus is using hyperbole, a figurative speech where to make a point, a statement is exaggerated and not to be taken literally. Hate is a hyperbole. Jesus means His disciples are to put Him first in their own lives even before their loved ones. Jesus must come first. This is what it means to be a disciple of Christ. If our fathers command us to stop following Jesus, we must refuse them. Our children must not come between us and Jesus or before our faith in Him. Our commitment to Jesus must be absolute.

Now, in the Israel of Jesus' day, that was radical discipleship indeed. To become a Christian meant to be disowned by one's family. Alec Cowie recently told me the story of Joseph Steinberg. He is the chief executive of International Mission to Jewish People. Joseph himself, a Jew, when he became a Christian, he was disowned by his family. But for Joseph, Jesus comes first. That's the way it is for many Christians. That's the way it is for many who become Christians from Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu backgrounds today. Their families disown them. They do not disown their families because becoming a Christian actually involves a deeper commitment to one's family than one ever had before, but their families disown them because Jesus is now Lord of their lives. Does Jesus come first in our lives before even our families? Second, career. Career. Jesus continues, whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. What does the Christian do for a career? Ultimately, she's a cross-bader, a cross-bader. There's no future in bearing a cross. There's no promotion. There's no career advancement. There's no CPD involved in bearing one's instrument of execution.

In the previous passage we saw this last week, one of the people invited to share in the heavenly banquet of God refused because he wanted to check out his new oxen, his agricultural machinery.

He put his career and his job before God's invitation to eternal life. But this cannot happen with our faith in Jesus. Before all our career ambitions, our advancements, our promotions, our discipleship in Jesus must come first. If there's a clash, Jesus must come first. And that may cost us much, for one cannot hang up on a cross and aspire to the highest career at the same time. But for all that, Christians often, but not always, make the best employers and employees because of their diligence, commitment, integrity, and honesty. In the Israel of Jesus' day, to become a Christian was career suicide. Jewish employers, upon hearing of one of their employees' conversion, would fire them. For that reason, many Christians like Paul were what we would call today self-employed, like fishermen, for example.

Now, that's not such an issue in our society, but in other places in our world today, Christians are unemployable. In highly religious societies, because of their faith, Christians are unemployable, but it's a price they're willing to pay for Jesus. Are we willing to pay that price for Jesus?

[8 : 46] When our jobs demand too much of us, what gives? Is it our faith or our career? Do we choose Jesus or the office? Of course, there's more to say about this, but from this text, Jesus is telling us that to become a Christian means more about bearing a cross than pursuing a career. What comes first?

Third, possessions, possessions. Jesus must come before our possessions. In verse 33, Jesus rounds off the section with the challenging words, so therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. He's speaking here of one's possessions, one's property, literally that which is at one's disposal. What comes first in our lives? What we have or who we follow? Is it Jesus or our cars or bikes or houses or bank accounts?

In the Israel of Jesus' day, to become a Christian often led to one losing one's possessions and one's property. They became forfeit to the state, and the Christian was left penniless and homeless.

They became refugees, fleeing persecution. Like Aquila and Priscilla in the book of Acts, they moved around the Mediterranean basin trying to find refuge and safety.

What about us in the prosperous West? What are we willing to give up in order to follow Jesus? If we take these words seriously in verse 33, the answer must be everything.

[10 : 30] But there's another way in which this phrase, all that he has, can be translated or interpreted. The word can also mean circumstances or situations. So, therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all his circumstances, all his circumstances cannot be my disciple. In other words, to become a Christian means to willingly give up control of the direction of one's life to God. I want to be in control of my life. You want to be in control of yours. But to be a Christian means to surrender control to God that we're His to do with as He wills. To be a disciple of Jesus means to willingly give control of our destinies up to Jesus. Christian discipleship isn't something we add to our families, careers, and our possessions as if it's just another feature of who we are. Our faith in Christ must come first.

And with the foundation of our family life, our career pathways, the use of our possessions, and the direction of our lives. Now, you know that we live in a world of identity politics.

From this passage, we learn that our identity as Christian fathers, mothers, employees, citizens, students, whatever, is to be found in this. We are Christians first. Our color does not define us.

Our relationship status does not define us. Our background does not define us. Our nationality does not define us. Our economic status does not define us. Our native language does not define us.

Our relationship to Jesus defines us. Jesus is challenging us today to put Him first in everything. Nothing less is acceptable. Unless we put Jesus first in our lives, we cannot be His disciple.

[12 : 35] The priority of discipleship. Well, then secondly, from verse 34 to 35, Jesus speaks of the permanence of discipleship, the permanence of discipleship. He speaks about salt losing its saltiness. Salt's good, He says, but if salt's lost its taste, how should its saltiness be restored? Now, the salt we buy from the shop is almost pure sodium chloride, so it won't ever lose its saltiness. But the salt used in Jesus' day was impure. Over time, the sodium chloride leached away, leaving a mixture of minerals, none of which taste like salt, all of which were bad for you. When that happened, the mixture could not be used to fertilize the soil. All it was good for was to be thrown away. Jesus here is speaking of how our discipleship in Him must have the character of permanence. It's not to be the discipleship of the sprinter, but that of the marathon runner. You can't be a disciple of Jesus today and go back to the world tomorrow. As a Christian, we have to be in it for the long haul. When someone chooses to become a Christian, they're making the commitment of a lifetime. It's not a temporary decision until something better turns up. It is a lifelong determination that whatever shall come our way, we shall persevere. By the grace of God, we shall not give up. There may be times of doubt. There will be times of doubt. But even though we're shaky, we won't stop. There will be times of temptation, but even though we're wavering, we will resist. There may be times of pain, but even though we're hurting, we will overcome. In a letter to the churches in Revelation, Jesus promises reward to the one who conquers, the one who overcomes. And by the grace of God, we shall overcome all that life throws at us. We shall not lose our saltiness. Jesus' warning is very stark, but then the demands of discipleship are extreme. It is to be a lifelong, whole-life discipleship. Too often in the Western world, being a Christian is made out to be a bit cozy. But according to Jesus, it is radical, costly, demands our whole life. We make a vow in marriage till death us two part. When we become Christians, we make an even greater vow to Jesus. Even eternity shall not part us, Lord. It's all by grace, and when we get to heaven, we'll realize it wasn't so much that we were holding on to Jesus, but that He was holding on to us.

But nevertheless, in this life, we will not let go of Him. There's a scene at the end of the first Lord of the Rings movie that sums this up. Frodo has taken a boat to go by himself to Mordor.

And Sam, his faithful friend, you've all seen it, wades out into the river to catch him. But Sam can't swim, and he begins to drown. And at that point, Frodo reaches his hand down and pulls Sam up from the boat. And he asks a spluttering Sam, why don't you go back? To which Sam replies, I made a promise, Mr. Frodo, and I don't means to break it. I made a promise, Mr. Frodo, an idle means to break it. Let's not ever lose our Christian saltiness. Whatever life throws at us, we made a promise to Jesus to be His disciple. And by the grace of God, we shall not break it.

Well, 30 this morning, the price of discipleship, the price of discipleship. Jesus expects radical commitment from us. It's not surprising then that in our passage, the central portion of our passage, He's calling upon His disciples to count the cost and figure if it's a price that's worth paying. A great crowd is following Him, but each face in that crowd must count for himself the cost of being a follower of Jesus. This is the central theme of this passage.

Recognize, being a Christian carries a price, and we must be willing to count the cost.

[17 : 25] Jesus gives two pictures of what it means in practical terms to count the cost. In the first instance, He talks about a man who builds a tower calculating whether he has enough resources to complete the cost. If he fails to count the cost, he'll build this foundation and round of money.

People will laugh at him and say, this man began to build and was not able to finish. In Kathmer's home village in the north, in Ruth's home village in the north, in Open Inn, there's a house just like this.

Well, the builder laid the foundation and he erected the walls halfway high, but lacked the money to complete the walls, put a roof in it, and do all the other work needed to complete the task. The house, if you can call it that, has laid derelict for decades. It's an eyesore.

What a silly man and a silly thing to do. Before he started the project, that man should have sat down and calculated, do I have the resources necessary to complete this house? And if I don't, I won't even begin.

In the same way, a person who becomes a Christian without counting the cost of discipleship, if he gives up his profession of faith halfway through, he lays himself open to the tragic mockery of the world. Huh? This man, he began to follow Jesus, but he was not able to finish.

[18 : 59] The second picture concerns a king whose country is being invaded by a superior power. He's got to work out whether he can afford to go to war against the invader. If he has an inferior military, can he hope to resist the invading power? The only reason Ukraine is able to resist Russia's invasion is because of arms being supplied from the West. If these arms are not forthcoming, Ukraine must negotiate terms of peace. Can a country afford to go to war against a superior invading power?

If not, in the cold light of day, terms of peace are drawn up. For a person contemplating becoming a Christian, can he put up with the opposition of the world, the temptations of the devil, and the hatred of his own flesh? He must count the cost. He needs to know the Christian life is not going to be easy. It will be a series of spiritual battles until the end of my life. Of course, Jesus has won the war on the cross, but we as Christians must fight every battle standing strong in the armor of God. Becoming a Christian is most definitely not the path of least resistance. So, you see, Jesus is painting discipleship in very radical colors. To be a Christian is costly. We must be willing to pay the price. In both pictures, you'll notice the main character sits and then deliberates and then takes action. We must also prayerfully sit with an open Bible, deliberate on the cost of being a Christian. In first century Israel, becoming a Christian carried a health warning, following Jesus is seriously bad. It could lead to being disowned by your family, fired from your job, made penniless, adopting a refugee status, maybe even losing your life. For us, it'll probably mean none of these things.

Yet, how few Christians are willing to pursue radical discipleship in Jesus? The minute it costs us anything to be Christians, we just back away. It costs us friends. We run away. It costs us our child's sport on a Sunday. It's a price we're not willing to pay. Jesus gets pushed to the side. You know, in parts of the world where Christians are today being persecuted for their faith in Jesus, they are willing to die for Him. Here in Glasgow, to ask Christians to part with their Wednesday evenings to attend a prayer meeting, even online, is a step way too far. Don't ask this of me. It's too much.

Sorry, can't come. Kids have a club. There's football on the television. I'm tired after work, etc., etc. Radical discipleship in Jesus is vanishingly rare in today's Glasgow.

Count the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. How few of us match up to these demanding standards. It's a challenge for those of us who profess to be Christians to repentance and to renewed commitment to Jesus. We must reassess our priorities.

[22 : 38] You'll see here in this passage, He is Jesus' painting discipleship in very challenging colors. In light of it all, you may say to yourself, well, you know, it really isn't worth it.

But it is. It more than infinitely is worth it. As we close, let's consider two things about why we cannot but choose to be disciples of Jesus today.

Why it is infinitely worth it, and why being a disciple of Jesus is not nearly as costly for us as we think it is. First, back to verse 28.

Let's go back to Jesus' picture of a king deliberating on whether he can mount a successful defense against a superior enemy. Bible experts agree that Jesus is painting a picture here of someone who isn't yet a Christian.

But God is invading his life. God is challenging him with the gospel, the claims of Jesus upon his life.

[23 : 57] The Holy Spirit is convicting him of his sin and of future judgment, and pointing to a crucified Christ as the only solution to his problem. Can this man resist the powerful call of God upon his life?

Can he resist the compulsion to submit to God and put his faith and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins? The power of the Holy Spirit is altogether too much for him to resist.

It is this double grace. A life of radical discipleship makes far more sense to him than a life of misery. He freely wills to follow Jesus.

To use the language of verse 24, we saw this last week, he's been compelled by the greater power of God at work in his life. When I was dating Kathmer, she's not here, she's in the Sunday school, so I can tell the story and no one will tell her, right?

I spoke to a very senior minister, friend of mine, retired minister who's gone now to be with Jesus, and asked him, how can I know if I should marry her or not?

[25 : 11] How can I know if I should marry her or not? Ruth, don't you dare tell your sister this? And he said to me, can you live without her? I thought and said, no, I can't.

I can't imagine life without her. Marry her, he said. Can you imagine life without Jesus today? Is this you?

You're hearing the claims of Jesus calling for radical discipleship. Every word of Jesus is like a sword penetrating your heart and convicting you of your need for forgiveness.

Like the king in the parable, sit down, prayerfully deliberate whether you, with your all too limited ability, can live without him, can bear to resist his loving embrace and powerful call.

But the second reason it's worth it, consider where Jesus is at this stage of his public ministry. He's on the road to Jerusalem where he's going to be arrested, tortured, and crucified.

[26 : 22] He's going to pay the ultimate price as the sacrifice for our sin and guilt. He'll die in our place, bearing the penalty of our condemnation, which hangs on our heads. His discipleship in his father will be fatal for him.

He'll be our champion in bearing the cross, denying himself, and putting God first. He's going to walk alone, carrying his own cross to Golgotha's hill.

In this passage, he's calling upon us to walk in his footsteps, to place our feet where he has trod. He's not asking us to do anything that he himself has not done before us.

But ultimately, he's not going to that cross to set us an example of discipleship. He's going there because of his great love for us.

He gave himself for us. Why should we put Jesus first in our lives before our families and our careers and our possessions and our destinies?

[27 : 25] Because he, the Son of God, put us first in his. He is the glory of heaven, the object of the adoration of the angels, and yet he loved us first.

So we love him first by devoting our lives to him. From eternity past in the counsel of the Trinity, he counted the cost of his love for us, the infinite pain of the cross, but he reckoned it worth it because he saw your face in his eye.

Shall we not, for these fleeting few years of all too short lives, reckon anything we should suffer and deny ourselves for Jesus too much to pay?