

Counting the Cost

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[0 : 00] Well, it was January 2003, and I'd recently applied to a particular university to do a Diploma of Education.

And I got a phone call, and this is pretty much how the phone call went. Mr Grant. So that was a good start, wasn't it? They'd rung the right person. Mr Grant, speaking.

Yes, I'm calling from the university to let you know that we are in a position to offer you a place in our Diploma of Education for 2003.

Oh, that's great. Now, we'll be sending you some enrolment information in the next few days, so please follow the instructions carefully that are there. Sure, thank you very much.

Now, I do need to tell you that there were no places available at our Melbourne campus. So your place is actually at our Ballarat campus.

[1 : 04] Okay. Now, could you please let us know in 48 hours if you will be accepting this offer? Certainly. Thanks. Bye.

That's almost verbatim how the conversation went. I really wanted to do a dip ed, a diploma of education, and I got into the university of my choice.

I've been in Victoria. They have a campus in Melbourne and also in Ballarat. Didn't get into the campus of my choice, but I got into the Ballarat campus. Now, don't get me wrong, I think Ballarat's a lovely town.

I enjoy visiting Ballarat. I didn't anticipate having to study there for a year, though. So I had to make a decision. The price of doing my Diploma of Education in 2003 was to have to travel to Ballarat. If I wasn't willing to pay that price, I would be unable to do the dip ed that year. I had a decision to make. And friends, we have to make decisions like that right throughout our lives.

[2 : 20] Some of them are weighty. That's a fairly substantial decision. Some of them are minor. But those decisions come to us daily, pretty much. And we have to weigh up the consequences of a decision one way or the other.

We have to count the cost of the options and make our choice. And friends, it's no different when it comes to following the Lord Jesus.

And Jesus, in today's Bible passage, says, Don't just come and follow me blindly. Count the cost before you follow me. What should it cost us to follow Jesus?

Because we need to factor that in before we say that we are followers of him. Well, in my example, I decided to accept the offer of a place at this university in Ballarat.

And in 2003, it did mean commuting to Ballarat twice a week and staying overnight once a week. But at the end of the year, I finished my dip ed.

[3 : 34] And it was, in the end, a very rich experience. And I can describe every blade of grass on the Western Highway between Melbourne and Ballarat. But that was the price that I had to pay.

And it was, as I say, a wonderful time. What, then, is the price that we need to pay in following Jesus? Jesus deals with this question head on in today's reading from Luke's Gospel.

I invite you to grab one of the black Bibles in the seats and to turn with me to the passage again. It's on page 850. It's Luke chapter 14, beginning at verse 25, page 850.

Let me pray for us all as we look closely at this part of the Bible. Let's pray. Thank you, God, for revealing yourself to us through your Son, Jesus. And thanks also for giving us the Bible through which you keep on speaking to us.

Help us as we open the Bible now at the book of your servant, Luke. May we have ears and hearts open to hear what you want to say to us. And help us to obey you and follow you in the way that you want us to.

[4 : 52] We pray through the Lord Jesus. Amen. Well, as we look at verse 25, we see that large crowds were travelling with Jesus.

There would have been many who were curious to see this teacher from Nazareth. And some of them would have been genuine followers, genuine disciples of Jesus. What about us? What about you? Are we like the majority in the crowd who were just sort of tagging along behind, just seeing what Jesus was up to? Out of curiosity.

An interesting bloke. A curious figure. But we don't actually throw our lot in with Jesus and truly follow him.

You know, you can be a regular churchgoer for many, many years and not be a true follower of Jesus. I've even heard of a lecturer at a theological college overseas who, after many, many years of teaching students, finally decided to actually follow Jesus.

[6 : 03] How could this be? How could this be, you may ask? Well, this person was obviously, and I don't know who it was specifically, but the person was obviously very knowledgeable about the Bible and issues of theology.

Very competent academically. But he had not actually put his trust in the Lord Jesus and sincerely followed him. Praise God that this person changed and became a true follower of the Lord Jesus. Friends, you can be heavily involved in church life. You can be a member of Vestry, our parish council. You can be a member of our synod.

You can be on lots of church rosters. You can understand all aspects of church governance. You can be familiar with the different approaches of Anglicanism in our diocese. You can know lots about church history.

You can even know your Bible backwards. But none of that matters if you do not truly follow the Lord Jesus with your whole life.

[7 : 11] Yes, following Jesus may begin with being curious about him. But it needs to become true discipleship, truly following him in every way.

Well, then Jesus makes this amazingly confronting statement in verse 26, possibly a verse familiar to us. Jesus says, you can follow with me, verse 26, Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Well, this is an example of what is known as hyperbole.

Hyperbole is exaggerated language. And Jesus often uses this device to ram a point home. Let's unpack what this verse is getting at.

We know that God would not want us to literally hate our parents. We know that from the fifth of the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20. Jesus says, God said, because Jesus had not come at that stage, God said, Honor your father and your mother.

[8 : 46] And we know from other parts of the Bible that husbands and wives are to submit to each other in love and to love and raise their children properly and in a godly way as well.

In fact, one of the two great commandments that we say at the beginning of all of our Holy Communion services was that we are required to love our neighbour as ourselves from Mark chapter 12.

Jesus even commanded us to love our enemies. So what's Jesus on about here in verse 26? Well, his point is, follow me completely.

No exceptions in our life. Have no rivals as you follow me. No one and no thing is to come between us and the Lord Jesus as we seek to follow him.

You see, the word hate here can mean something like loving less. It's a relative thing, not an absolute thing.

[9 : 49] Let me use a silly example. I might say to you, I love milk chocolate, but I hate dark chocolate. You know what I'm getting at.

I don't hate dark chocolate, really. I'll eat it quite happily, let me tell you. In fact, anyone who's prepared to give me chocolate after the service, I will take whether it's white, milk, dark, whatever. But the point is, if I say I hate dark chocolate, I'm saying my preference is for milk chocolate.

There's nothing preferential in following Jesus. He is to be number one in the sense that he is to be preferred, but nothing is to be preferred above him. Jesus is to have no rivals in our lives as we follow him.

Even those people in our lives that we care about and love dearly, those to whom we are very close, they are not to come between us and Jesus. It's ironic, isn't it, that as we put Jesus as number one, all those relationships come into their right place.

And he actually helps us love those people better and to be a better friend, a better son, a better daughter, a better father, a better mother, a better sibling, a better grandparent.

[11:12] As he is number one, everything falls into place in a beautiful way. Sometimes we hear someone speak of someone as, oh, that person is a committed Christian.

Well, in that expression, the word committed is redundant. If you are a Christian, you are by definition committed. There is no such thing as an uncommitted Christian.

It's a nonsense. And Jesus says so at the end of verse 26. There Jesus says that one's own life itself must not come before loyalty to him.

Complete commitment is what is required. It means that we must be prepared to even lose our lives as we follow Jesus. You might remember that earlier this year at one of our morning services, we met a Nigerian Christian pastor whose name is Muhammad.

And he had been a Muslim and he had become a Christian. And under Islamic law, that is an offence punishable by death. He subsequently became a Christian pastor in Nigeria.

[12:35] And he was visiting Australia and spoke just briefly at our morning services. Maybe you heard him. As he spoke, he said, look, every day in Nigeria, I'm under the constant threat of death.

I know it could come to me any day from those who are not Christians. He could be killed because of his faith in the Lord Jesus. And yet he knows that in Nigeria, where he does his ministry, that is what truly following Jesus may entail for him.

He completely depends on God every day. Where we see the wooden cross that we have on display on Good Friday, leaning here against the communion table.

And in verse 27, Jesus says, Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Crucifixion was the usual method of execution in the Roman Empire.

When the Romans led a criminal off to his execution, he was forced to carry the cross on which he would die. So if you were in Roman times and you saw a man surrounded by a little band of Roman soldiers carrying a cross, you didn't have to ask what was going on.

[14:00] You knew exactly what was happening. He was on a one-way trip. He wouldn't be coming back. Carrying his cross to death. It was a vivid example of self-denial.

And Jesus uses this picture, which would have been familiar to the people in a Roman-occupied part of the world where Jesus was doing his ministry. They would have seen this happening countless times.

And while the Christian must be prepared to love Jesus more than one's own very life, this self-denial is something that we need to be aware of and live out even as we remain alive.

Every aspect of our lives must be subject to the lordship of Jesus. Not a single thing must be left unturned in submitting ourselves to Jesus. Now sometimes we hear people say, oh, well, that's the cross that I bear.

And often we use that expression in referring to maybe a grief or a sickness or an illness or some other burden that we tolerate. And I'm not making light of those burdens.

[15:12] Often they're substantial. But they're burdens we wish we didn't have and we wish we could get rid of. This is not what Jesus is talking about.

Carrying the cross in verse 27 means a willingness to submit to Jesus and to follow him in everything. Not simply putting up with whatever problems or vagaries come our way in life.

And I think that there is a danger that we can become selective in those areas of our lives that we submit to Christ's lordship. As a new Christian in my early 20s, I became a little confused when I met and rubbed shoulders with other Christians on camps and at other events.

For some of these young people, their behaviour really puzzled me. Some of them swore like troopers. Some of them seemed to have no problems getting drunk.

I mean, they had no problems getting drunk and they had no ethical problem with getting drunk.

And frankly, some believed that it was okay to sleep around. And some of them did. And as a new Christian, I thought, well, hang on, I didn't think Christians did that sort of stuff.

[16:26] I didn't think that was the sort of behaviour of someone who says they're a follower of Jesus. And of course it is not. And clearly they had to learn a lot more about complete self-denial that comes with following him.

And I hope they have and I hope I have as well. But what about us? Do we compartmentalise our life and only allow Jesus to rule certain compartments?

There are certain bits we want to keep to ourselves and not let him get his hands on them. Not submit to him. Jesus says that's not enough. He must be the Lord of everything.

More on that later. Let's keep going through the passage. And Jesus uses two mini parables, very short parables, beginning in verse 28.

I'll just read verses 28 to 30. Jesus says, Jesus is saying, Don't just say you're going to follow me.

[17 : 55] Count the cost. Work out if you've got what it takes. To keep going with me to the very end of your life. Or would you give up before the end because it's just too hard?

I remember a very large warehouse frame that stood on the corner of Stud and Wellington Roads in Far Eastern Melbourne.

I don't know if you're familiar with that fairly big intersection, corner of Stud Road and Wellington Road. About 10 years ago, there stood there for some time. A big warehouse frame.

I think there was a couple of them. And I'm not sure of the whole story, but they stood there for a couple of years. And every time I drove past, and at that time I drove through that intersection fairly regularly, I was sort of waiting to see progress on this building each time I went past.

And nothing seemed to be happening. Now, you might know the story, but to me it looked like someone had started building and had run out of money. Because these frames just stood there for about two or three years.

[18 : 57] No progress being made at all. I wonder if that's exactly what happened as Jesus describes it. Maybe you know the true story. I haven't driven through that intersection for some time now, but I believe the frames have gone and there's some other development there.

Maybe someone had not properly counted the cost. The second of Jesus' two mini-parables is in verses 31 and 32.

And it's a military situation. Jesus says, Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000?

If he cannot then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. Once again, Jesus is saying, Can you follow me your whole life through?

Can you keep going? Have you counted the cost? Don't say that you follow me if you haven't counted the cost. One commentator on this little mini-parable says that Jesus is actually asking us to work out what the cost is of not following him.

[20 : 18] Because there is a price to be paid in choosing not to follow Jesus. So in responding to Jesus and his call on our lives, we might come to the conclusion, Well, Jesus, you're a really interesting guy, but I don't want to follow you.

I'm not prepared to pay the price and give over parts of my life to you. No, thank you. I'm not going to follow you. And that's our choice, if we have made that choice. But the question needs to be asked, What is the price to be paid in not following Jesus?

In choosing not to be his disciple? And yes, there is a price for that choice. A very, very high price, in fact.

This is how Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians in the New Testament states how high that price is. It says, Jesus will punish those who do not know God.

Let me just say, not meaning those who have not heard about God, but those who have heard of God and who refuse to recognize God and accept him for who he is. So Jesus will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

[21 : 29] They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

And that's from the second letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 8, 9 and 10. So, to summarize that, the price for choosing not to be a follower of Jesus is to be separated from God forever.

Separated from his love. Separated from his glory. Separation is the essence of the word hell. Separation from God and all of his goodness.

Now, I don't want to have to tell you that. It gives me no pleasure or joy. It's what God says in the scriptures. It's the cost of choosing not to follow Jesus.

What an awful price to pay for simply choosing not to be a disciple of Jesus. And friends, there are people who choose to pay that price. Why would you choose to pay such a high price?

[22 : 51] I think it must only be because you don't believe that God's warnings in the scriptures are real. That God is not fair dinkum. In any case, we need to work out if we can really afford to refuse Jesus' demands and not follow him.

It's a rhetorical question, if you like. We can't afford to do it. The price is too high. The choice is obvious. It's to follow Jesus. It's a relatively small price to pay.

And I haven't even begun to tell you the wonderful benefits of being his friend, his disciple. Sins forgiven. Christian brothers and sisters the world over.

God helps us as his spirit works in our lives to become truly the people he intended us to be. A place in heaven prepared by Jesus. A living hope to look forward to.

A life forever with God that begins now. To name just a few wonderful benefits as we follow Jesus. Literally out of this world.

[23 : 59] Okay, so how does the rubber hit the road with all this? As we leave today and go through our week and the months and years ahead, we're not a church and we're in our communities and our workplace, in our place of education, wherever we might be in our neighbourhoods.

What's going to happen in our lives? What difference will there be as we seek to be true followers, truly following Jesus in every way? How do we apply all this in our life? And Jesus begins to address this in verse 33.

He says, So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. There's another one of these double take verses.

None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. Possessions, possessions. We all probably have stacks of them.

Even our material things must be at Christ's disposal. Now, we may not need to sell them or even part with them as we follow Jesus. And for most people, we probably won't.

[25 : 13] But we need to be ready to relinquish them for his service. Maybe some of us do need to sell some stuff, to offload some stuff, so we can follow Jesus better.

All of us present here today are relatively wealthy when we look at the perspective of the whole world's population. I'm not saying there are people here who do not struggle financially.

But compared to many people in the world, we are all relatively wealthy. All of my wife and I felt quite convicted about such relative wealth as Christians last year.

And we decided to pray and seek God's guidance and direction in our monetary giving as Christians, as we chose certain Christian ministries to give to. We set up some direct debit arrangements with different Christian organisations to ensure that our giving to them continued unimpeded on a regular basis.

I think we need to, as a family, we need to review that and examine that again. I'm not saying, aren't I good? I'm just saying, this is just a practical example in my life where I need to do more work.

[26 : 27] But something that I've done to be a good steward of what God's given me and under Jesus, trying to follow him and be his disciple with my money. You need to ask God to guide you as you seek to make all your possessions, including your money, available to him.

Remember, it probably won't mean parting with everything, but leaving everything available for God to use for his glory and in service to others.

Think of how you could use your home for the service of God and others. Your car, your food, your hospitality, your time. How can you use all these things and others as you seek to serve God?

Your children's toys. Could another child that doesn't have some of those toys benefit from your child's toys? You can tell I've got young children, can't you? Well, our final two verses are verses 34 and 35.

This is about salt. Salt. Salt is good, Jesus said. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile.

[27 : 42] They throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen. Most of us know that salt is the chemical compound, sodium chloride, used in Jesus' day and now as a preservative and for flavouring in food.

The salt that was used in Jesus' time was not at all pure. It would have been just sort of a substance which contained sodium chloride and often that real genuine sodium chloride may have leached

out.

So the residue that was left was just bland and tasteless and useless. And Jesus says in verse 35, they throw it away. Well, the quality of true discipleship that we have been describing is that which must characterise the true follower of Jesus.

Just the same way that saltiness is that which characterises what is truly salt. I'll say all that again. We know the distinctive taste of salt.

In the same way, do people see true discipleship of the Lord Jesus in those of us who declare ourselves to be followers of him?

[29 : 19] Can they point to us and say, yeah, there's something about him. They might not even be able to articulate that it's Jesus. Have we as Christians lost our saltiness?

As a school chaplain, I'm aware that in God's strength, I'm to make a positive difference in my community at school, to be salty.

I'm not the only Christian on staff or in the school community. But whoever we are, wherever we are, you don't have to just be a school chaplain. You can be salt wherever you are.

In your community, your street, your neighbourhood, with your next-door neighbours and others, in your shopping centre, as you shop. Do we just blend in with everyone else?

Or is there something distinctive about us that people see and say, there's something about that person I'm really drawn to. Not us, but the one we follow.

[30 : 31] Let people see that you're onto something good. You're onto God, onto the Lord Jesus and his wonderful love. That you're a child of God and that they can be too.

Or as Christians, are we bland and flavourless, tasteless? Are we like the tasteless salt, good only for throwing away?

So do we seek to follow and trust Jesus completely, whatever our circumstances are in life? And I know for some of us, life is full of challenges every day for various reasons. But do we still try and follow and trust Jesus?

Do we follow Jesus in filling our minds with all things pure and wholesome? Do we follow Jesus in shunning all that is impure and compromising?

Do we follow Jesus in avoiding impure speech, actions and thoughts? In avoiding telling or listening to lewd jokes? Do we follow Jesus as we seek to be good stewards of our time?

[31 : 40] Are we following Jesus as active members of our church as much as we can practically be? Do we follow Jesus in reading his word, the Bible, and talking with him in prayer?

Do we follow Jesus in seeking to live as good stewards of the world that God has given us? And I would argue that being a Christian means being green, to use a common expression, and seeking to live in such a way that has minimal impact on the environment.

I don't think as Christians we can say, well, yeah, there are some people who like caring for the environment. I'm not one of those. I think that's part of being a good steward of God's world. As we read in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, we are given the job of being good stewards of God's world.

It's part of the deal of being a Christian. We need to care for what's out there. And this is being heightened more and more in the media. It's not an option, I believe. Do we seek to follow Jesus in loving God with our whole being?

Do we seek to follow Jesus in loving others in the same way that God calls us to, and not taking others for granted, especially those that are very close to us, that we often can take for granted?

[32 : 49] Do we forgive others that have hurt us, remembering that Jesus has forgiven us when we confess our sins to him? Do we follow Jesus in endeavouring to share in word and deed the love that God has for everyone, especially in what Jesus has done in dying for us on the cross and rising to new life?

Do we follow Jesus by trying to use the gifts that God has given us in service to him and to others?

Do we follow Jesus in seeking to be godly husbands, wives, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, friends, sisters, brothers, grandparents, employers, employees, students, citizens, drivers?

I'm serious. Customers. I used to work at David Jones in the Manchester department when I was a student. And some of the customers think they've got a right to treat you like rubbish.

I hope you're not one of them as you seek to be a Christian in the shops. Do you seek to follow Jesus as a resident wherever you might be, as a neighbour, as a carer?

One of my most frequent prayers is that I would be a godly husband and father. A true disciple of Jesus as I seek to relate to my wife and raise my sons.

[34 : 20] And I fall short often. I fall short in so many areas of my discipleship. Discipleship as I seek to follow Jesus. I hate those sinful aspects of my life.

I hate it when I let him down. I really hate it. And I let him down all the time. But I don't let it debilitate me because I know God's wonderful forgiveness.

He's liberating forgiveness. Always available. Every minute of every day. Available through this same Jesus. So when we muck up, we can, to quote a song, pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, pick up our cross again and continue to follow him.

Knowing his forgiveness and his empowering Holy Spirit to keep going to the end of our lives, whenever that may be. Friends, we are called to be distinctive and different and salty as we follow Jesus in this broken, tragic world in which we live.

To make a difference. To point people to him through our words and our actions. We are commanded to be uncompromising as we follow Jesus.

[35 : 39] Jesus' final words. Simple sentence. He says, Let anyone with ears to hear, listen. Implying, act on what you've heard me say.

Lord God, help us to follow you truly and without compromise. Please stir up your Holy Spirit in us so that we will do this more and more each day. We declare ourselves and all we have completely available to you to use as you see fit.

We leave no part of our lives hidden from you. Lord Jesus, may today be the start or the continuation of our adventure as true disciples of you.

We praise you and thank you for your forgiveness when we let you down. Help us to keep going following you until our final breath. When we see the hope that you have promised to those who follow you.

We make our prayer through our Saviour and our friend, the Lord Jesus. Amen.