

Luke 14 25-33 Count Cost – Bear Cross

In light of recent events, we have heard much about the cost of freedom, and how that cost includes bloodshed in defense of the country. The price is a costly one, as veterans among us well know-and as those of my generation are just beginning to comprehend. The freedoms we enjoy were won at great expense; they may need to be preserved with the same.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks of the cost of discipleship-the price of freedom from sin. Do you wish to be a disciple of Jesus? Many had that desire as the Lord journeyed to Jerusalem; do you desire to follow Him, too? In our Gospel lesson for this Sunday, Jesus outlines the cost of discipleship. It is a heavy price to pay, as we will discover in the first part of the sermon; indeed, if we end the sermon then, you will leave without hope. But do not be dismayed, and bear to the end; for in the second part of this sermon, we will hear some very Good News indeed.

The Cost of Discipleship

If you wish to be a disciple of Jesus, He gives you the criteria in Luke 14:26-27, and the Lord's requirements are as simple as they sound horrifying: If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. So there you go. If you want to follow Jesus, hate your family and bear your cross.

Hate your family, says the Lord. Not just the weird cousin that you always try to avoid at the family reunions; not just those who have somehow betrayed the family name. He doesn't say, "Love them, but hate the bad things they do." No, the Lord specifies: Hate your father and mother, your wife and children, your brothers and sisters. In fact, hate yourself if you want to follow Jesus.

Hate your family, hate yourself: That's hardly an effective evangelism slogan. However, it does sum up one of the costs of discipleship. The other demand Jesus makes is this: Bear your cross and come after Him. To those who first heard Him say this, the words must have been repulsive; quite literally, Jesus called upon them to suffer the most torturous death known to man, crucifixion. If you want to follow Me, get your cross and prepare to be put upon it-this is the message from the Savior.

This demand should be equally startling to us as well, though we know that our Lord does not call us to be physically crucified. We know that the cross was the price that Jesus paid for sin, as God counted Him guilty of the sins of the world. Therefore, when Jesus tells us that we must bear the cross to be His disciples, He demands that we, too, die for our sins. This demand should bother us more than it bothered the first hearers in Luke 14; the agony of crucifixion would last only a few days at most, whereas death for sin would be far more horrible.

Hate your family, hate yourself, and prepare to die: This is a summary of the Lord's demands that we must do if we are to follow Him. The cost of discipleship is unbearable, is it not? Why would the Lord make such terrible requirements if we are to follow Him? Jesus goes on to tell us why the demands are so terrible in verses 28-33:

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it -- lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten-thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."

Why does Jesus make such terrible demands on those who would follow Him? Because nothing less will get the job done. Without total commitment, you won't make it to heaven; instead you will be much like the man who builds a tower but runs out of resources partway through. A good start is good, but an incomplete building doesn't do the job; likewise, anyone who attempts to follow Jesus without counting the cost and making a total commitment will not be able to get the job done, and all will be lost. Take this warning to heart, dear Christian, and remember the Tower of Babel; it would be far easier to build a tower to the heavens than it would be to be perfectly committed to Jesus in everything.

Perfect commitment is what it takes to get the job done. If you don't have perfect commitment, then you have less-than-adequate commitment; and then you are like the king who goes against a superior army with less than adequate troops. Indeed, should you try to get to heaven by your efforts and sincerity, it will be an army of one-you-against thousands and thousands of angels led by the risen Lord. Your battle plan will not get the job done. Hate your family. Hate yourself. Prepare to die for your sins. That's the commitment that Jesus demands if you are to be His disciple.

In other words, if you are going to follow Him by your own reason or strength-if you are going to be His disciple by your efforts, then this is the level of commitment that you must have, or else you just won't get the job done. This is how Jesus concludes our text: Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. This news should indeed leave us disturbed, troubled, anxious. And before we go on to relieve that trouble and anxiety, let us point out two things.

First, this text well illustrates for you why we waste no time telling you that you are saved by your commitment to Jesus, by your decision to follow Him, by how much you love Him. We spend no time urging you on to dedicate yourself further to being His disciple by your own reason and strength, because no one can do it; we might just as well urge you to sprout some wings and fly home. No one can achieve the level of commitment necessary to hate his family, hate himself and prepare to die. Oh, someone might point to three or four isolated individuals throughout history who appeared to do this, but that's no comfort: Such an example teaches us that only three or four have a chance at being disciples, and the rest of us are lost.

Second, and far more importantly, we must point out that we have only spoken in terms of the Law so far. Remember the purpose of God's Law: It tells you what God demands of you if you are to be perfectly holy and righteous before Him; and it is also to point out to you that you cannot do it. When Jesus says these words, He is preaching the Law. He is declaring to all who hear that the cost of discipleship is extraordinary, and it is one that we, in our sinfulness, are incapable of paying. He is saying, "If you want to be my disciple by your own commitment and work, this is the level of commitment you must have to be holy and righteous before God. This is the level of commitment that you must have if you will truly be My disciple." He is saying this to tell us that we cannot do it. He is proclaiming to us clearly that we cannot pay the price, that we in our sin are incapable of the cost of discipleship.

But while He proclaims these things to make us despair of our own efforts, He does not do so to leave us in despair. No, implicit in this proclamation of Law is the sweet message of the Gospel: While we cannot and will not afford the cost of discipleship, the price has already been paid so that you might be His disciples.

The Price Paid

We take another look at the text, then-this time to proclaim the Gospel. Jesus declares, If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes,

and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. First, we need to speak of hatred, for the word had a greater meaning in biblical times. To hate could mean to despise, as we think of it today. However, to hate could also mean to love less than someone or something else. For instance, Jacob had two wives, Rachel and Leah; and Genesis 29:31 notes, And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren (Gen. 29:31). This does not mean that Jacob hated Leah, his wife; rather, it means that he loved her less than Rachel. Likewise, the Lord declares in Romans 9:13, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

This does not mean that the Lord despised Esau; it means that He chose Jacob to be the ancestor of Christ. So when Jesus declares that His disciples must hate their families and themselves, He is not calling upon them to despise their mothers, fathers and others. He is calling upon them to love Him more than them. He is telling His disciples to keep the First Commandment, Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. But before we breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Oh! That's all He meant!", we must soberly realize that this level of commitment is far beyond our capability. Quite naturally, we place family above the Lord. Stalwart supporters of sound doctrine may find fault with a pastor or congregation when that doctrine is applied to their wayward children. Spouses and children often give in to the temptation and skip the Divine Service at the request of an unbelieving family member. And who is courageous enough to correct a false teaching when the extended family is gathered around the table for Christmas dinner? Very few qualify for even this. By nature, we believe that keeping the family peace is more important. Keeping the First Commandment is a cost of discipleship that we won't, can't pay.

Jesus can, and Jesus has. He has preferred the Father's will over that of His human family. We read in the Gospels that Jesus' mother and brothers came to see Him, and it is believed that this was likely to plead with Him to stop teaching, maybe even to haul Him away. Rather than give in for the sake of family peace, Jesus continued to do the Father's will so that He might go to the cross for us. Jesus preferred God the Father's will over Himself. We hear His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Though He does not wish to suffer, Jesus gives up His own life and well-being in order to complete His Father's plan for our salvation. At the expense of His life, Jesus has kept the First Commandment for you, and this is your salvation.

In His mercy, He gives you the credit for His obedience. By His grace, He covers you with His righteousness. Therefore, the Father looks upon you and does not see your sin. He sees His Son's perfect obedience, because Jesus has given you the undeserved credit for it. So, the cost of discipleship is hate your family, hate yourself. It is a high cost, but Jesus has paid the price; and He gives the gift of discipleship to you freely. The next cost of discipleship was, And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. Jesus called upon His hearer to prepare to die for sin if they were to be His disciples. It is true that there is a price to be paid for our sin, and that the wages of sin is death. It is also true that we deserve to die for our sin—our sin, our payment and punishment. It makes logical, legal sense. It is also true that Jesus has borne a cross that wasn't His; He was without sin, and therefore He did not have any wages to pay. However, His cross was for the sins of the world, and God the Father has judged Him in your place. Because of this Gospel, Jesus does not demand your death for your sins as a condition of discipleship. For His sake, bearing your cross does not mean that you must die to satisfy God's anger for your sin. God's anger for your sin is satisfied—it was satisfied on Jesus' cross, as He suffered and died for you.

Jesus does not demand that you die for your sin, because He has already died for it. Instead, by faith, He does call upon you to confess your sin, to acknowledge that His death is the one you deserve. And then - wondrous news! - He declares that He shares His death with you. He joins you into His death so that you do not have to die for your sin yourself. He bears the wrath, the stripes, the lies, and suffers so willingly—all so that you might be delivered from the same. What, then, does it mean to bear your cross to be a disciple? To bear your cross is to bear His cross, and your burden is light as

a feather. You bear His cross when it is traced upon your forehead with water in your Baptism, for there you are buried with Him by Baptism into death. This is the cross that you might outwardly sketch upon yourself as you hear the Invocation on Sunday morning-you will feel no greater a weight or pain of Christ's cross than that, for He has suffered all the weight and all the pain. Rather than demanding your body and blood as a sacrifice for your sin, Jesus gives you His risen body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. That is what it means to bear your cross-it means to be forgiven, for in forgiveness Jesus shares His cross with you, taking away your death and giving you His resurrection. Hear this Good News! The Law declares that the cost of discipleship is a terrible price, but the Gospel declares that Jesus has paid that price and freely makes you His disciple.

Therefore, the rest of the Gospel lesson has all sorts of Good News just underneath the surface! Left to our own efforts, it remains true that we could not sufficiently be committed to our Lord; we could not, as it were, build a tower to heaven that would ever near completion. But since we cannot lift ourselves into His presence, He brings Himself to us. St. Paul proclaims this great news in Romans 10:6-9: But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Left to our own efforts to battle into heaven, we would be a short-handed army facing annihilation, with no ambassador worthy to go and plead for peace. Therefore, the King, who commands myriads of angels, comes to us. He sets the conditions of peace-the death of a righteous Savior-and then meets them by His own death. He establishes peace with us, and then sends out His preachers to proclaim that peace, even today. St. Paul once again declares, Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:20-21). We could not ascend to Him, so He descends to us. We could not win the battle or make peace, and thus would die His enemies; so He wins the peace for us and proclaims that grace even now, lest we attack Him and be defeated.

The cost is great, but the price has been paid. Because you are forgiven, you are His disciples. Therefore, we set aside all boasts of our commitment to Jesus, for our Lord exposes what inadequate and puny rubbish that commitment is. Instead, we boast in the Lord. We confess our sins-including pride in our dedication to Him, and trust solely in His grace and His victory. We give thanks that He has made us His disciples by His commitment, by His sacrifice. We do not urge you to improve your dedication the Savior; we announce to you His dedication to you, that you might be strengthened in your awareness of His faithfulness. This is the Good News we proclaim to the world: The price of freedom from sin is the cost of discipleship, and the cost of discipleship is the shedding of blood. That cost is great, but the price has been paid by Jesus Christ, your Savior - - and you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen