

Once again we step alongside Jesus as he continues his long, final march toward Jerusalem. Along the way, we find him apparently followed by a large crowd of people, apparently just waiting like little children for something incredible to happen. Given what Jesus says to them, it becomes apparent that they were not terribly interested in what Jesus had to say so much as they just wanted to see what amazing thing he might do next. Jesus knew their hearts, he knew their attitudes and he wanted to give them a chance to properly understand what it meant to follow him.

<read text: Luke 14:25-33>

Jesus challenges the mindset of the people trailing behind him. "You think you're just going to keep your lives as they are, follow me around and get an occasional good show or free meal out of the deal? It doesn't work that way! There's more to it than that, so let me fill you in on what it takes so you can properly count the cost before you even start!"

Jesus' opening volley comes out incredibly harsh sounding, but there's a few things we need to consider in order to understand it. First of all, on the use of the word "hate". This is not "hate" in the literal sense as we tend to use it. Yes, the basic meaning of the word in the original language does translate to "hate". But it is an idiomatic use of the word that we don't have and isn't easy to just translate. The idea here is that the things Jesus listed off, family and even the self, they cannot be the most important thing in your life. Following Jesus *has* to take priority over all of them. The word "hate" here has something of a comparative sense. We can't love them all *more* than Jesus.

Now, Jesus could just as easily have said it that way, he did at other times. But we also need to consider the group he is addressing. This is not a set of believers who were following him for the right reasons. This was a crowd of people who wanted dinner and a show, and knew nothing about why Jesus was truly there. In fact, more to the point, they did not understand in *themselves* why Jesus was there. What I mean is, they did not know Jesus was there to save them from their sins, but even more than that, they did not realize that they *needed* a savior, or how badly. So Jesus makes a statement so there can be no doubt for them; this is what it takes to be my disciple, and you have not done it.

He goes on to tell two short parables about considering the cost of ones actions. They essentially tell the same story. When you have a big undertaking on the horizon, count the entire cost carefully before you begin. Figure out if you can afford to do it before you even start and if you can't then you need to find an alternative. Naturally this is sound advice in any situation, and it would seem that Jesus is telling the people present something along the lines of this, "I just told you you're going to have to give up everything that might matter to you now in order to be my disciple. Consider carefully whether you can afford that before you even start along the path."

Now, certainly, we should enter into our Christian lives with eyes open, knowing what possible difficulties and hardships might wait for us as we are disciples of Christ. But, that interpretation, that message from Jesus is a little...off. Let me explain why. If we are to understand here that Jesus is telling us to consider the cost of discipleship before we start it, and if we don't think we can afford to give up what he asks, then we shouldn't? It would almost seem like Jesus is presenting the possibility of *not* following him as the conservative alternative. I think the message Jesus is trying to convey works on two levels, and reading only this initial one stops too short.

So Jesus is saying, "The cost of being my disciple may strike you as too high. You should not even undertake a venture that you know you cannot afford. And you do not think you can give up all the things of this life willingly. But turn around for a minute and count the cost of the alternative." Now, this one speech out of rest of Scripture does not paint the full picture of course, this was merely one section designed as a wake-up call to these few. But there's no reason to pretend we don't know the rest of the truth, so let's look at that. Jesus is the only source for full and free forgiveness. He is the only way that you can be credited with the perfect life lived to God's glory that he demands. If Jesus does not supply you with these, then you need to provide them for yourself. If you are going to say that you can't afford Jesus, then you need to count the cost of getting heaven on your own.

It's pretty obvious after all, obtaining heaven is the only project in this life that needs to be undertaken. There are plenty we can do in the meantime, but it's the only one that really matters. And so what is the cost? God's standards for heaven have never changed and there is no such thing as mitigating factors. You must live a life entirely in his will, entirely to his glory and without sin of any kind. All your actions and doings must be entirely out of love for your God and love and care for those around you. Can you afford that? Have you always been humble, kind and patient with those around you, even when they antagonize you? Has the keynote of your life been one that puts others first and your own priorities and ambitions second? Has everything you do always been first and foremost out of love for the God who created and preserves you every day?

No, of course we haven't. We've valued ourselves and our own pride more than our God. When others get to us we lash out instead of responding in humility and love. We've valued our own time, our own possessions and the people in our lives more than our relationship with our Lord. Not only have we not done what God requires for heaven, we haven't even made a good start at it. And so now, count the cost. Can we afford the cost of heaven on our own? Can all the things we feel like we have to hold onto in this life make up the difference? Will your family get you into heaven? Will your checkbook? Will your carefully organized collection of stuff? Will your own pride and ego? Of course not. You can't afford heaven. Nothing you have will make the difference.

Only Jesus can. Jesus has the cost estimated and paid for. He had the life we have not. He kept God and others first at all times. He was not attached to this world. He knew where his whole life was leading, up to the cross. And so he had no reason to build here or to acquire here. None of that would have made a difference in the end, he knew where he was going. And at the cross he made the payment. Your selfishness, your anger, your sins, were loaded on him and he paid the debt you owed.

Now he will freely give that payment to anyone. The method by which this payment is credited to us is a simple bond of trust. It's a trust he creates in us through his word by the Holy Spirit. A trust that he has saved us. By its very nature that trust looks to him first and makes him the priority in our lives, because he is the priority of our lives. He is the only one who can pay the cost we need. To abandon him would mean going back to paying our own way. We cannot afford that.

With this in mind, considering the cost of each side, look again at what Jesus states as the requirement of being his disciple. He must come first in our lives. He must be what we hold to and trust in all situations. And if even a family member should get in the way of us and our Lord, as sad as that might be, we must choose him first. We cannot afford the cost not having him. Even if our own pride should get in the way, we must put it aside and stick with him. Count the cost of the alternative and you'll see that you can't afford it. We've seen it happen. Someone is insulted in a congregation, something doesn't go the way they think it should, or the same happens to a friend or family member. And instead of sticking with God's Word, sticking with Jesus, they stick with their pride and leave. The cost on that is too high. When these things happen (and they do happen), count the cost.

There is no other choice but to be with Jesus. We cannot afford to do anything else. Only he offers full and free forgiveness and he is the only path that leads to heaven. But as we look out and look forward to a life lived in him, we should take a moment to consider the cost of following him. As he says here, those who follow him are expected to take up their cross as they do so (v27). To say that you're carrying a cross doesn't just mean you're shouldering a burden; those who carried crosses were those on their way to execution. Their lives, for all intents and purposes, were already over.

*This* is the attitude that a Christian is asked to have. That doesn't mean a defeated attitude, but an attitude that is not attached to this life or anything in it any longer. The things we have in this life were never ours, so don't hold on to them like they are. Your departure from this life is a matter of fact, it's pointless to try to collect anything here. There's no point in worrying about things like pride or status or ego when you're marching to the hill. None of those things matter. You are nothing

Now, we know we are not marching toward an execution. We are marching toward freedom. But the idea is the same until that point. It is a difficult journey toward an end. We may be asked to leave things behind, we may be asked to make difficult choices along the way, we need to understand that right now. If our devotion to Jesus is half-hearted and fair-weather, if we do not love him more than the people in our lives and the stuff we have and even ourselves, then we will choose poorly when the time comes. Count the cost on either side and know right now which choice you will have to make. It has to be Jesus. It always has to be him, he is the only one that can bring you heaven. You can't afford any other outcome. Amen.