

The Cost of Discipleship

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Luke 14:25-33

Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God

Our first allegiance is not to our people, to our possessions, to our financial holdings or even to life itself, but to our Lord who is the Lord of Life.

²⁵ *Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them,* 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.”* Those are pretty strong words, “hate your mother,” considering that it is only two weeks after Mother’s day! Ann Marie and I visited her mom just last week. I love her mom dearly. After 34 years of marriage she’s my mom too.

What is this “hate” business? Obviously, Jesus is not telling us to have negative feelings about our parents and loved ones; in fact, he affirms the Fifth Commandment to honor your mother and your father. When he says, “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,” he is clearly telling us that as our Lord he is our number one priority. Our first allegiance is not to our loved ones but to our Lord. That would have shocked the people of Jesus’ day, who saw the allegiance due to one’s parents as unbreakably number one. Our first allegiance is not to our people, to our possessions, to our financial holdings or even to life itself, but to our Lord who is the Lord of Life.

Then Jesus makes it even clearer. ²⁷ “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” When Jesus carried his cross, he was on his way to die. To carry the cross is to understand that we are to live as though condemned to death. Our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor are his. Completely.

Then, Jesus goes on to make it clear that if you want to be his disciple, be sure to count the cost. ²⁸ “For which of you intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

A few weeks ago, Ann Marie and I were in Tallahassee, Florida, to watch our daughter Shelley graduate from the Florida State law

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school. Later in the day, we dropped by a used bookstore, and at the checkout counter, Shelley saw me buying a June 30, 1972 volume of Life Magazine. She said, "Why are you buying that, Dad?" I showed her the cover picture of a young man on the shoulders of another young man with a third young man on top of the two of them. They have their index fingers pointing up, "Jesus One Way." And the title on the cover reads "The Great Jesus Rally in Dallas." I said, "Shelley, that Jesus rally is where I met your mother!" That caught her attention! Known as Explo '72, the rally was a gathering of some 80,000 college and high school students who spent a week in Dallas learning to share their faith, with evening rallies in the Cotton Bowl. It was a grand week of spiritual growth and challenge.

On the last night, Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ and Billy Graham spoke to that packed football stadium and asked us a very serious question. "If you are willing to go anywhere, do anything, at any time no matter the personal cost or inconvenience to you in the service of Jesus Christ, we invite you to stand up." You might imagine that everyone jumped up. While a great many did stand up, very few just immediately jumped up. I remember thinking about it very carefully before standing up, as did Ann Marie sitting beside me. They were asking us to count the cost of discipleship and had put it to us in the most direct way possible. The question our Lord asks each of us

very directly and very personally is the same question: "Are you willing to take up your cross and follow me? Will you go anywhere at any time, do anything, at any personal cost to yourself in your service of Me?" If that sounds a bit overwhelming, hear the words of Jesus to you, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Trust God. Trust also in me."

It is good to consider the cost of discipleship on this Memorial Day weekend as we remember and honor those who have died in the service of our country. Citizenship has its costs, whether one is a citizen of the kingdom of God and/or the citizen of one's country. As American citizens, at times we are called to place ourselves in harm's way on behalf of our country. As citizens of the kingdom of God, we are called to place ourselves in harm's way on behalf of Jesus, to be willing to go anywhere, do anything at whatever the cost or inconvenience is to oneself in the service of Jesus.

When my Uncle David died a few years ago, a career army officer, my cousins asked me to preach his memorial service. It took place in the old Ft. Myer Chapel, the place I know my uncle and aunt were married sixty years before. After words affirming the wonder of his life and the reality of the resurrection and some great hymns of the church had been sung, we stepped outside. His flag-draped casket was placed on a carriage pulled by six black horses. An army band led the way, then a company of marching soldiers in two platoons and then the color guard carrying the flags.

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Behind them walked the chaplain with me beside him. Behind us came the horse-drawn carriage and, finally, the family and friends. Now I have been into Arlington National Cemetery any number of times, always before by car to visit some grave, but I had never walked through it. Soon the busy metropolitan area we live in was hidden by rolling grassy hills covered with white crosses, and the band began to play the National Hymn we began with this morning, “God-of-our-fathers-whose-almighty-hand....” We were surrounded by the memory of those whose lives, whose fortunes, whose sacred honor had been placed in harm’s way on our behalf. With that military cadence and the power of the words of faith in that place of deepest memory and significance, it was rather overwhelming.

You and I are dual citizens. Citizens of our native country, for most of us the United States of America, and citizens of the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Citizenry in any domain always carries with it certain rights and certain obligations. I enjoy reflecting on the power of the closing words of the American Declaration of Independence: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” Indeed, what we offer our country we offer our Lord first. Citizenship in a country and citizenship in heaven both require our

lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor—and rightly so. It’s worth asking on this day, in particular, in your relationship with your country and with your Lord and his church, are you casual or committed? Are God and Country just areas of interest among a variety of “interests” that are fine as long as they don’t mess with your free time, your career, and your lifestyle, or are they life-defining passions—to which you fully commit your life, your fortune and your sacred honor?

When I think about the significance of Memorial Day, I reflect on the Old Testament story of King Saul and his son Jonathan, David’s dearest personal friend, who were killed in battle with the Philistines. Upon hearing this news, David offered a famous lament:

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, ²⁵How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me...How the mighty have fallen!” (I Samuel 1:19-27).

As Julia Ward Howe was to write of our Lord, “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” A willingness to pay the ultimate price, to sacrifice oneself on behalf of others, was the gift of Jesus Christ to us and the gift of many of our fellow citizens to us, as well. When my mother died a year

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ago, the family all assembled at the Ott Family Cemetery, a beautiful remote place about two hours north of New Orleans. Everyone is buried there from my parents to my great, great, great grandparents, and many others besides. After a funeral there, the family always strolls down the rows of tombstones, remembering this person or that one, telling the stories of the family. Next to my mother, my father's tombstone has the inscription under his name, "Duty Honor Country," the West Point motto. It was Dad's actual life philosophy, one that deeply shaped all of us. Then my dear grandparents. At the end of that row is a tombstone with the name Serepta Ann. Now there is a name you don't hear very often in case you need one for a coming child! Aunt Serepta Ann came to visit my great grandparents for a couple of weeks and stayed thirty years!

By the time we reach the third row of tombstones, we come to a marker that is brass, level, flush with the ground. The picture of it I have is covered with pine branches knocked down by Hurricane Katrina. The inscription says, "Thomas deVecmon Ott II" Mississippi PR 3 US Navy Vietnam June 18, 1944 – July 29, 1967." Tom Ott was a Naval aircrewman on the aircraft carrier Forrestal in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam conflict. He was a parachute rigger for a pilot by the name of John McCain, and had just wiped McCain's visor and shut his cockpit when a missile on a nearby plane misfired, hit the plane Tom

was standing by and blew up. He was incinerated in front of McCain's eyes, and some 134 sailors were killed. I thought about not mentioning McCain because of the politics of our day, but he is part of the family's story. When we stare down at Tom's memorial, we think about these things. And we remember a six-foot-tall, blue-eyed young man who was the cut-up of his family, leaving behind his mother, his father, a judge in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, his brother and his beautiful fiancé. All bereft. And we know standing there that while he was the one to die, the whole family had been in harm's way with him.

Memorial Day is about remembrance and honor. It's about grief and gratitude. So, today, we remember with honor, grief and gratitude those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice. It is also a day to remember to pray regularly for those who are in harm's way on our behalf, for their real risk is that they could be remembered with honor, grief and gratitude in a future Memorial Day. I find it helpful to use the page in our bulletin that lists Intercessory Prayer requests and, specifically, the section titled, "Please keep these military men and women in your prayers." It's easy to glance at the list and think it just looks like a bunch of names, and say, "Lord, bless'm and protect'm," and get on with your day. Something happened in my life that led me to look at lists of names like that rather differently than just a list of names.

Some years after the Vietnam Memorial was built, we were visiting the area and went for a stroll

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down on the Mall. The Vietnam Memorial is striking, with its wall of black, polished stone with some 50,000 names engraved in order of the date of their deaths. We saw people touching names, some with heads bowed, many experiencing deep emotion as they stood in front of a name, some leaving flowers there or making a rubbing of a name. I thought it remarkable but was not particularly involved personally. As we strolled up the incline away from the Memorial, I saw what looked like a short podium with some kind of city phone book on it. It turned out to be the book of all of the names of those killed in that conflict and the reference telling you where to find each name on the monument.

I began to idly page through the book. A stray memory came to mind, something I hadn't thought about in years. My mom telling me she had heard that my classmate Mike Minor may have been killed in Vietnam. Mike and I were friends. We were both interested in the same girl, Lynne Newman. I can still remember the sound of Lynne breathing when I called to ask her to go to the prom and she let me hang there for two or three minutes while making up her mind, I am sure between Mike and me, before she said yes. I looked up the "M's" in the Book of Names looking for Minor. Oh my goodness! There it was! John Michael Minor. First Lieutenant. Twenty-three years old. Killed in action March 17, 1972. The reference to the location of his name on the wall. I found it, and I was

overcome. In an instant, that cold, shiny, black granite wall and its long list of names became a person, a person I had known and loved. Still do. Mike was president of his high school graduating class, a distinguished graduate of West Point. He is reported to have been the last graduate of West Point to die in action in Vietnam, leaving behind a wife and child. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Michael lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Mike, greatly beloved were you to me.... How the mighty have fallen!

That experience helped me see lists of names very differently. Every person is precious to God and to their loved ones. So, when we pray over the names in the list of Military Men and Women in our bulletin, we might not know who they all are but we know they are persons in harm's way on our behalf. And I do know some of them on this list. Staff Sergeant Jason Burnett, stationed in Afghanistan, his third tour in five years, his wife and child stateside, his mother dying of pancreatic cancer for whom he will not be permitted to return until her funeral. Or Major Christina Reyes in Afghanistan, who was a bridesmaid in my daughter Lindsay's wedding. Or Army Chaplain Mark Deiter stationed in Iraq, who was a doctoral student of mine whose wife is coping with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Real people coping with real life, all of them in harm's way on our behalf. Genuine prayer, support and honor are due them.

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Today, we remember with honor, gratitude and grief those who have died to make us free. They point the way for us to honor the One who died to make us holy by offering to Jesus Christ our own lives this day. The closing music of the morning is remarkably moving. As you listen to it, I invite you to remember those who have fallen on our behalf and pray for those who are in harm's way today. Beyond, as the music swells, I invite you to hear the Lord Jesus Christ speaking to you asking, to go anywhere, do anything, at anytime, at any personal cost or inconveniences to yourself. And from deep within in your soul answer, "YES!"