

The Cost of Discipleship

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Luke 14:25-35

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

He [Jesus] understands that discipleship is challenging, and he wants to help people count the cost of following him.

Studying this passage this week reminded me of adopting our son Nate, almost six years ago. When we started announcing this wonderful news to people, they would congratulate us but then quickly add words such as, “I hope you are getting lots of sleep,” or “You better get ready for being really tired,” or something similar. I have to tell you, I got pretty annoyed thinking, “We have waited for years to become parents. Why are people being so negative and discouraging?” I now know that they were trying to help me count the cost of parenthood. They knew something experientially that I could not know until it happened. It wasn't going to be easy. And I have to tell you, when sleep deprivation came, it was helpful to know others had lived through it and knew how challenging it would be.

I think that's what Jesus is trying to do here. He understands that discipleship is challenging, and he wants to help people count the cost of following him. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is already moving toward Jerusalem, and he is fully aware of what awaits him there—his own death. Throngs of people are following him, and they are awed by his teaching and amazed by his miraculous works. When Jesus turns and sees the

crowd following him, he is not impressed by his own success. He is not interested in the casual, easy acceptance the crowd offers. He wants to make clear how much following him requires. His followers must be prepared to make Jesus their first priority. Disciples have to be willing to leave behind one way of life to live in the kingdom of God. That's what this passage is about, and it has something to say to us because, as you see on the back of your bulletin, one of our core beliefs at VPC is that everyone is called to discipleship. These words aren't for the person sitting next to you or the person you know who is really serious about his faith. A disciple is a follower of Jesus; these words are for you and me. So let's understand what Jesus says about counting the cost of discipleship.

Jesus uses a phrase three times to help us understand what it will mean to follow him. The first is in verse 26: Jesus 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.” To follow Jesus, to count the cost of discipleship, we must be willing to renounce family ties.

Our first reaction to hearing the word “hate” is probably an emotional resistance. In the spiritual life, it is always important to pay attention to resistance. It is helpful to

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understand that the use of hyperbole was common, so the meaning of “hate” carries a comparative force here. The idea is not that we should hate our family, but that in comparison to Jesus, if we are forced to choose, the winner must always be Jesus. He is to be loved more than anyone else.

This saying was undoubtedly important to the early Christians and reflects the reality of their lives, because choosing to follow Jesus did mean deciding against family. In Jesus' time and in the early generations after him, to decide for Jesus usually meant facing rejection, ridicule and tension. Those who loved family more would not even consider following Jesus.

The same is true today for many around the world. Those who come to Christ out of a strong Jewish heritage, out of a Muslim cultural context, or in those parts of Asia where ancestral worship reigns risk rejection from the outset.

The cost may not be so great in our culture, but this text still speaks to us. Families are meant to be a gift from God that we are to love, enjoy and celebrate, but in our culture, our families can become idols if they are more important than following Christ. Many of us have made pleasing our parents, children or spouse or other people in our lives more important than following Jesus. Loving our family is a good thing, but if Jesus calls us to move away from family of origin to follow his calling vocationally or through

marriage, we are to do it. If we are to pursue some ministry or lifestyle that is not understood or appreciated by family, there is no question where our allegiance should be.

The priority of following Jesus always has to come before any other human relationship—no matter what the cost—even if it means renouncing family ties and our own lives.

In verse 27, the phrase is repeated again as Jesus says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Here, Jesus alludes again to the suffering that awaits him in Jerusalem. He warns the crowd that those who follow him must be ready to suffer the same fate Jesus would suffer. To follow Jesus, to count the cost of discipleship, we must be willing to bear our cross.

As Pete mentioned last week, we mistakenly talk about a chronic illness, a painful physical condition, or a trying relationship being the cross we have to bear. These may be difficulties that we endure and that God can use for his redemptive purposes. But carrying our cross requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. To bear our cross is the voluntary consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives two illustrations to help us understand what it means to count the cost to follow him, and they are very timely and applicable to us. One is of a man who builds a watchtower over his land or over a city. It's going to cost a lot, and he has to make sure that such a project is affordable. So, he has to count the cost before starting to build. It

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would be sad and embarrassing, and in the end more costly, to start a project and not have the money to finish it.

The current situation our country is dealing with brings this illustration home. Individuals and banks failed to count the costs with regards to the affordability of mortgages, and the world is dealing with the consequences. But we don't even have to look at the global level.

Many of us have taken on renovations of our homes of one kind or another only to discover that we had not adequately counted the cost in terms of money, time and energy. It seems home projects rarely come in on time and under budget.

The second illustration pictures a king assessing his strength in preparation for war. What king goes to war out-manned? Does he first sit down and consider whether his ten thousand can beat his opponent's twenty thousand? If he realizes he cannot win, he will send a delegation and negotiate peace. I remember well, six years ago, the debate going on about whether we should go to war in Iraq or continue to pursue other alternatives. Now, we are debating how and when to get out. It doesn't matter where we fall politically on this issue. The point the text is making is that to go to war or not go to war, to stay in the war or not stay in the war, necessitates counting the cost. What is the cost in human lives, in finances and other resources? What is the cost in terms of security and

safety? There are consequences either way, and we absolutely have to count the cost.

The same is true of discipleship. We have two options. We can go our own way, with the result being taking a stand against God. Or we can take a wiser approach by following Christ on his gracious terms. There will be consequences either way.

I think I have shared with you before words from Dallas Willard's book, *Renovation of the Heart*, but it bears repeating: "The impression gained by most who hear about counting the cost of following Jesus is one of how terrible and painful that cost is. But to count the cost is to take into consideration both the losses and the gains of all possible courses of action, to see which is most beneficial. This done, Jesus knew, the trials of discipleship would appear to be the only reasonable path. As has been said, He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." The cost of non-discipleship would then be seen for what it is—unbearable. That is why one would become able to sustain cheerfully the much smaller cost of discipleship.

Finally, in verse 33, Jesus says, "So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." I like the NIV translation better as it says, "everything you have." To follow Jesus, to count the cost of discipleship, we must be willing to give up everything. No one can know at the start of the walk everything involved. If we seek to follow Jesus, then understand first that what is

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required is all we have—everything. “To give up” literally means “to say farewell to” or “to take leave of” or “forsake all our possessions.”

In the gospel, there is a story of a young man who comes to Jesus and asks him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus reviews the commandments, and the young man replies, “All these I have kept since I was a boy.” Then Jesus says, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” The man’s response is troubling: “He went away very sad because he was a man of great wealth.”

Jesus was not suggesting that giving everything to the poor was necessary to be saved. But concern for the poor is of great importance for those who want to live out the values of the kingdom of God. And listen very carefully: Jesus understood that for this wealthy man, and for many affluent people, possessions get in the way of following Jesus.

Perhaps the question we need to be asking ourselves is this: What in my life is getting in the way of following Jesus? What am I so attached to that it is keeping me from fully attaching to Christ and following him in whatever ways he calls me? What am I unwilling to leave behind. Again, pay attention to your resistance.

I have learned a lot from my children, and one thing I have learned is how much we have to give up to grow and mature. When my boys were babies, we learned

that it was very good for them to suck on a pacifier, but the time came that it was no longer good and even detrimental for them to continue to use a pacifier. So, the time came to give up, leave behind, forsake the pacifier. Many of you parents know that this is often more easily said than done, because some children have an unusual attachment to a pacifier or bottle. They don’t really need it anyone more, but they still like it—a lot. They don’t want to detach from the pacifier. They often don’t want to give up the life they know with a pacifier to grow and mature into the life without a pacifier.

And it’s up to us parents to help them, so we come up with all kinds of strategies to make this transition happen. One friend slowly cut the end of the pacifier off day by day talking about how the “pacy was broken” until finally it was “all gone.” Another friend described how their dog chewed up one of the pacifiers. She quickly gathered up all of the rest of them and threw them in the trash, then told her child, “I’m so sorry that Muffy ate the pacifier.” Her child wailed for several hours grieving the loss. My favorite story is the one in which a friend held a ritual of tying the pacifier to a helium balloon and then waving goodbye with her child as the pacifier floated away.

You’re probably thinking, enough with the pacifiers. But here’s what I want to say. We all have pacifiers. We all have things we are inordinately attached to that bring us comfort, a sense of security or significance or pleasure. It may

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take different forms at different times in our lives, but the question is this: What is your pacifier? What are you so attached to that keeping you from attaching to Christ the way he wants you to? What is keeping you from growing and maturing into Christ-likeness the way he wants you to? Maybe it's an addiction to sugar, or food, or alcohol, or pornography because it fills or covers up some need or pain that you don't want to address. Maybe it's TV or busyness that keeps you distracted. Maybe it's a work or pleasing person that makes you feel important or needed. Maybe it's worry, anger, bitterness, resentment, shame, fear. Maybe it's your stuff: Your house, your car, your IRA, or 401K. Maybe it's a relationship: Your children, your family, or a friend, a dating relationship. I could go on. I don't know what it is for you, but some of you know right now what your pacifier is.

For those of you who don't, ask God, "What is my pacifier? Lord, what am I hanging onto for comfort, or security or a sense of control that is keeping me from counting the cost of discipleship and following you?"

This week Lent begins. I love the season of Lent because it helps me count the cost of discipleship. It's like spring training for the soul. It helps me, conditions me for the regular season of life. As I follow Jesus on his journey to the cross, I recognize the obstacles to discipleship, the pacifiers in my life that I need to let go of, to die to, in order to live more fully for

Christ. Of course, this is not something we are only to do during Lent, but it is a particularly fitting season to do so, and it provides the opportunity to be even more intentional. What might that look like in our lives this Lenten season?

Many people practice a form of fasting by "giving up something for Lent." Please understand, giving up something doesn't make us more spiritual. It is simply a way of practicing self-denial. Just as a musician practices scales or a basketball player does lay-ups, so we go into training to learn how to deny ourselves through some form of fasting. What we choose to give up, then, is significant. Some people trivialize this by giving up things they don't even care about, but it should be something that's a sacrifice so that it will help us recognize our need and thus help us turn to God, the one who meets our need. I am giving up sweets and snack foods and I plan to fast once a week. The ritual of self-denial helps to remind me of Christ's great sacrifice for me, and it helps me practice detaching. And, as I let go of my desire for certain foods, I also pray God will also help me to let go of my attachment to negative attitudes and actions that hurt me and others around me. I can't change myself, but "with God all things are possible." Spiritual disciplines don't change me or make me more spiritual. They are a means of offering myself to God. As I deny myself, I open up to God's grace and power to transform me and help me to let go.

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Giving up something doesn't have to involve food. Some people limit or give up watching TV or playing computer games or going to movies. I do believe that it is only as we deny ourselves that we learn to depend utterly on God. In a society as affluent, materialistic, and self-indulgent as ours, fasting is a crucial discipline. Again, I would ask you to consider what you are inordinately attached to that God might be calling you to consider "giving up" or "forsaking" or saying "goodbye" to for a season—the season of Lent—in order to count the cost of discipleship and to follow him.

Giving up something for Lent is really meant to open up time and space to connect with God and our deep need for him. So the discipline of fasting is meant to be accompanied by taking on other disciplines that enable us to connect more deeply with Christ and the life he wants for us through finding more time to spend with Christ in prayer and the reading of his word.

We are providing Lenten daily devotionals for this very purpose. New small groups are starting so you can share the journey in seeking God together with others. We really need the love and support of others to count the cost; we were never meant to do it alone. Perhaps God is calling you to participate in a class, or a new area of service or a mission project to follow him. I know you are busy and it's hard to find the time, but let's just put down our defenses and excuses for a moment and consider this prayerfully and carefully.

I don't know what it means for you to follow Jesus, but I do know

for all of us—including me—God is always calling us to give up, to leave, to forsake some things in order to follow him. Discipleship requires that Jesus be given primary allegiance.

I want to make clear that discipleship is a long journey. It's like getting married, or having children, or moving, or starting a new job, or changing careers. We don't really know what we're getting into, but to begin, we have to count the cost and be willing to commit to one way of life over another.

And we grow in our understanding and application of what giving Jesus a primary role in our lives means. "Faith is giving as much of ourselves as we know to as much of Jesus as we know." But even that should be changing and growing. If we're honest, we know that God is constantly claiming more of our lives for himself. We never completely arrive as disciples; we are always on the road with God.

The cost of discipleship is real. It will cost us something to follow Jesus, but it will cost us a lot more not to follow him. And consider what it cost Jesus to love us, to save us, to draw us to himself. He gave his very life for you and me. Nothing is too great to give up, nothing is too great to take on when we consider him who loved us so. And, really, there is no comparison to all that we gain in Christ—to know his abiding love, his amazing grace, and his resurrection power. I urge you to count the cost of discipleship and follow Jesus. There is nothing so sweet, so fine, so good, so valuable in all the world.

