

# Count the Cost

Luke 14:25-35 | March 15, 2020 | Bryce Beale

When Jesus walked our earth, the temptation that he attacked most was his Jewish kinsmen's assumption that they, being descendants of Abraham, were automatically members of the kingdom of God. And when just afterward Christianity was born and spread out beyond the Jewish world, the temptation went with it. Not in its Jewish form—but the temptation in its essence was still intact, and has continued ever since in every place that Christianity has gone.

The temptation is to think that the kingdom of God can be had cheaply. For the Jews, that meant imagining their birth sufficient to acquire it. They were born Jews, and that was enough. It cost nothing for them to be born, but in their minds that earned them God's favor automatically.

Fast forward to medieval times when Christianity had conquered Europe. None are now tempted to plead their Jewish birth, because these European Christians are not Jews. But the temptation is still there in another form—they imagine they can have the kingdom of God through the rituals invented by the Roman Catholic Church. You and I might think this a heavy task, to obey the sacramental system, but actually it is much lighter than true Christianity in its demands. You can keep your heart from God, your soul from him, and usually keep your comforts, sins, and idols too, so long as you do the outward rituals demanded of you.

Now speed forward to our own day, here in America. And the temptation of cheap grace, of heaven at cut-rate prices, of the kingdom without a cross, endures. Our version of it has been this: make a decision for Christ, pray a sinner's prayer, and you are in. If afterward your life looks no different than before, you are only a carnal Christian, but still you are a Christian.

In our text today, Jesus will not allow this sort of thinking. Any person who comes to the kingdom the same way he books a hotel or flight, by looking for the cheapest deal, cannot have it. The kingdom is not cheap. No, none can work to earn it, for Christ has already earned it for us. But he has only earned it for his true followers, those who have abandoned all else to have him.

Jesus refuses to be treated as one of our treasures among the many—he will be the only treasure, or he will not be one at all. He will not be held lightly, nor let his kingdom be given to those who lightly value it. The kingdom of God is for those who have left all other kingdoms to have it; Christ is not for those who want him, but for those who feel they cannot live without him.

So in his mercy, Jesus today takes up his sword again against that ancient heresy of cheap grace, of an easy kingdom. See how he attacks that temptation in our passage by strong statements, by examples, and by warnings.

### **LUKE 14:25-35**

You can see that at the very start of our text, Jesus is being followed by “great crowds.”<sup>1</sup> It says they “accompanied” him—they went with him where he went. And we know they were doing so anyways, because to speak to them he first “turned” and then spoke.

These large numbers of people are mostly made up of individuals who are living under the delusion of cheap grace. They like the excitement of Jesus’ miracles, they like the way he speaks and puts his enemies to shame. They are interested in Jesus, but they are not committed to him. Jesus knows this. These people assume they are good with God because of their birth, or their association with this rabbi, or something else. But they want heaven cheaply, and when trial comes, most all of them will stop following Jesus. The cost is too great.

So Jesus turns and tells them here to count the cost. He is not impressed with the large numbers following him. He would rather scare men and women away who are only half committed, then keep them living in a delusion of discipleship.

In our text, Jesus challenges the crowds to count the cost, to make sure they are under no delusion, in three ways. He calls them directly to it, he gives them real world examples to help them understand what he is calling them to, and then he warns them not to miss his call. So under these three headings we will now consider the text ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> ESV.

## The call

We begin therefore with the most direct part of the text: the call to true, costly discipleship.

When Jesus turns to the large crowds, he sees behind the wide eyes. He knows that in the hearts of those here present there are three things they are tempted to love more than himself. These are three competitors for their affection, and Jesus, who is so quick to welcome the little ones into his arms, will not open his arms to any who come carrying these idols. So he calls upon the crowds to lay these three idols down.

## Family

See the first idol in verse 26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

If these words shock you, know that they were meant to. Jesus uses the word “hate” very intentionally. He does not mean you must truly hate your family, for he everywhere else exhorts us to love our family and neighbors, to respect our parents, and so forth. Then why use this word “hate”?

Because it alone can convey the power of Jesus’ call. When Christ calls a person—that is, when someone hears the offer of the gospel, of forgiveness through the death of Jesus—then immediately a door of salvation is opened right in front of him or her. He may enter through and be saved, without money and without price. But, the door is narrow—you can fit through it, but not your other loves.

So those loves you must leave behind. Your love for Christ and your desire to enter through him into the kingdom must be so overwhelming that the human affection you feel for your own family should look like hate compared to it.

“Well,” we may think, “why not just say that? Why doesn’t Jesus say, ‘Unless you love your family less than me, you cannot be my disciple?’” And the answer again I think must be that if he had, our hearts would use his softer words to excuse our idols. If I idolize the comforts of my family and love these more than I love Christ, I might have tricked myself and said, “But I love Christ more, of course. I just love my family too.” When Jesus throws the

word “hate” before us, it forces us to consider whether we would be willing to leave our families, if he required it. Would we treat them as less than Christ in our decisions?

At the time that Jesus spoke these words and for many years afterward, many who became his disciples lost their families. No doubt many families made many appeals to their beloved members who were thinking about following Jesus, begging them not to get involved with this heretical rabbi. The pressure in that communal culture would have been immense.

So Jesus is not interested in us despising our families day to day—we should love them and lay down our lives for them. But, if we must make a choice between our families and Christ, then we must choose Christ, for we love him more. And since we as Christians are willing to be cut off from our families if they so please, it should look like we hate them compared to the love we have for Christ.

There is the first idol, of family, and Jesus tells the crowd, “If you prefer your family to me, do not fool yourself. You cannot be my disciple.”

### Safety

But another competitor exists out among the crowd. See this second contender for the hearts of mankind in verse 27: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

This line follows naturally from the end of verse 26, for there Jesus not only forbade loving our families too much, but also loving our own lives. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate...even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

Why? Because if you value your own physical life and comfort more than Christ, then your life is your God, your highest good and goal, your idol, and Christ is not. Not every Christian will be required to die for their faith—but if you are not willing to die for your faith, you cannot be a Christian.

For “[w]hoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” The cross is a Roman tool used to inflict pain and death. That is the very purpose of a cross, and it has no other from the human side of things. These crowds behind Jesus are happy to follow in his tread, but now he says, “If you want to

follow with me further, here are crosses for you to carry. For when we reach Jerusalem, we die.”

“When Christ calls a man,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “he bids him come and die.”<sup>2</sup> That is what Jesus is doing to this crowd—that is what he is doing right now to you.

I hope you will not misunderstand me or this text. Jesus is not requiring of us a perfect courage before we can be his true followers. Even the twelve disciples will fail in this point and, when Jesus is taken away to be crucified, they all will flee to save their lives.

But then they will come back and die. Jesus is not demanding immediate perfection of us, but he is demanding immediate commitment of our whole selves, without reserve, to him. We cannot try to reach out and hold him with one hand, while with the other we are grasping our own safety. We have to surrender this up to him, and say, “Lord, my life and comfort are yours, and you may give or take them as you please.” That is a true disciple.

This is why by the way something like the Coronavirus is an opportunity for true disciples to stand apart from the rest of the world. Yes, we are tempted to fear like others are; but in Christ we trample on these fears and triumph, for the simple reason that we surrendered our physical lives the moment we came to Christ. We agreed at that time to hate our lives, to die for Christ if need be, because we have a better hope after death. Jesus is our life and our resurrection, we cannot truly die but only sleep.

We have in fact already died with Christ. We have resigned ourselves to the fact of death not stoically or coldly, but in hope. We love Christ so much, and trust him so much, that we despise our physical lives. And if the fear of death has fallen like shackles off our wrists, then nothing in this world can shake us. So, when something shakes the rest of the world, we have an opportunity to stand apart and display the confidence that only Christ can give.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*.

## Possessions

Which brings us to the final of the three idols in Jesus' call. He calls us away from family, away from our own safety, and now, away from our possessions.

Skip down to verse 33: "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

The last idol is that of possessions. And again, as he did with our families and our safety, Jesus says, "You cannot have me and them. You choose which you prefer."

Jesus will not let us deceive ourselves, and this is the point at which we are most likely to do so. Because in our context professing yourself a Christian will not cost you your wealth or your possessions, it is easy not to count the cost when it comes to what you have. It is easy to assume that though you love your possessions, you do not love them as much as Christ. But we do not have here the persecution that proves that assumption.

So we must ask God to make our situation clear to us. If your every possession were required of you, including home and bank accounts and any future prospects for financial growth, would you continue walking after Christ unswerved? If the devil took you to a high mountain and showed you all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and offered them to you if only you would not have Jesus as your Lord, would you choose Jesus over all else? If the time comes when you must choose either to be faithful to your Lord in your workplace and lose your job, or compromise and keep it, would you choose Christ over your source of income?

When Jesus says you must renounce all your possessions, he does not mean that all of you must sell all you have now. That may be true for some—it was for the rich young ruler. But he does mean you must despise your possessions as you despise your family and your life—that is, you must be willing to part with all of them at the drop of a hat, if Christ requires it. You must, to put it simply, really love Christ more than anything or all you have.

These three idols then make up the direct call of Christ in our text. If you are not willing to part with these, you cannot be Jesus' disciple. He accepts no competition, he requires your absolute and unreserved commitment to himself.

## The examples

But to drive home his point, Jesus offers two relatable examples. He is calling this morning to some who hear these words, and though he wants to push away the halfhearted, he very much is eager to draw in the humble who wish to come to him. That is why he is pressing and pressing his point. He does want you to follow him, just not halfheartedly.

So in his appeal he moves from his direct call to examples. And there are two of these.

### The tower

See the first, beginning in verse 28:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a 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.'<sup>3</sup>

Probably Jesus has in mind a tower someone might make for private use, to protect their own home, since he is speaking to a crowd as though they might build one. And the point he makes is simple: if one in the crowd were planning to build a tower, they would not just impulsively jump into the project. They would first ask, "Do I have enough money?"

Because if they did jump impulsively into the project without enough funds, the project would stall and prove an embarrassment to them. It would show them to be poor planners who did not think ahead.

### The battle

This is the same point that Jesus makes with his second example, in verses 31 and 32:

Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a

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<sup>3</sup> Vv. 28-30.

great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.

Before the king stands up to lead his men into war, he sits down. The wise king is not impulsive and flimsy, but deliberates what he will do, considering carefully what the battle will cost him and if he has enough of a force to win it. If he was impulsive, he might jump into the battle and lose, to his own shame. In such a case it would have been better to send a delegation seeking peace than to lose the war for thoughtlessness.

### The meaning

In both of these examples, that of the tower and that of the battle, Jesus' point is that in even human affairs the wise person thinks before he acts. He or she counts the cost of major undertakings, to avoid embarrassment and failure.

And so, Jesus implies, the same should be true of how we approach discipleship. The true disciple is not the person who caves under emotional pressure and prays one prayer on impulse that quickly comes and then quickly goes. No, the true disciple considers the cost of what Jesus is calling them to.

Jesus calls you to come to him if you have not already, and his arms are always open, but he does not want you to think you can come with all your idols intact. If you love your sin and are unwilling to part with it, then before you run to Christ you need to sit and deliberate. Christ has made his decision to welcome you if you come; but you must make your decision to leave all else and come to him. The cost is nothing, for salvation is free; and, the cost is everything, for with salvation comes discipleship.

If you just want to be a Christian in name and benefit, you cannot come. You cannot be his disciple. But if you see in Christ such worth, such value, that nothing else on earth or in heaven can compare to him, and if you are therefore willing to part with all else for his sake, then the door is wide open to you.

Jesus' call to you this moment is that you sit and deliberate. You are the man about to build a tower, and you are the king before the battle. Before you are the options and the outcomes. Christ has made his choice to take his cross and die, that you might have eternal life. Now he summons you to follow him, to die like him to this whole world, that you, like him, might forever enjoy the bliss of paradise. Here is your cross—will you take it?

## The warning

In case you still will not, Jesus concludes our passage with a warning—and a very interesting warning that has to do with salt.

See it again in verses 34 and 35: “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away.”

Salt itself does not easily lose its flavor, but in the region where Jesus spoke these words much salt came from around the Dead Sea. And in that case, it was common for the salt to be mixed with impurities like gypsum, so that once you put the salt in water it separated and left you with only the tasteless impurities. Hence, unsalty salt. Something “good” for flavor, for preservation, and for fertilizer becomes worthless, not even able to enrich the soil or slow the decay of manure.

So Jesus concludes, “It is thrown away.”

That is his warning to us all. This is the warning he offers to every person listening who has a true spiritual ear, an ear awakened to the truth and no longer asleep in the world.

It is good to follow Christ, but you must search yourself to ensure that you are following him, not accompanying him like the crowds. There is a difference between the two, a difference as wide apart as heaven and hell.

There is a salt which tastes good—the true disciple, who has renounced all that he has to gain all that he needs in Christ. You will know this disciple from his or her fruit. Priorities have changed, lifestyle has altered. There is a man who has enough and builds the tower, a king who goes out to war and wins.

And, there is a salt which has lost its taste. Here is the person who accompanies Jesus, but never renounces idols for him. This person wants paradise, but not at the price Jesus has set. They want it cheaply, but Jesus will not sell it cheaply. This person’s tower will be only half built, their delegation will be on their way to make peace with the world.

Anyone who has ears to hear what Jesus says to his church, let him or her hear. Let him sit, and let him count the cost.