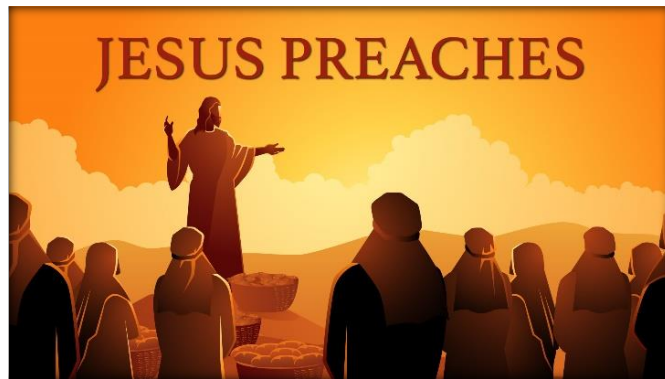


“The Cost of Discipleship”

Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 14:25-31

Are we ready to count the cost . . . and commit?

Have you volunteered for a project—maybe in the last few weeks—without really realizing what you were taking on. Perhaps people were afraid to tell you the whole story for fear that you’d back out if you knew the truth. Or perhaps in your own enthusiasm, you simply failed to think it through. At one time or another, most of us have probably said to ourselves, “What have I gotten myself into!?” In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus ensures that no one could accuse him of misleading his disciples about the path they had chosen.



The passage is another in the long section of Luke’s Gospel that narrates Jesus’ final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In 9:51, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is impossible to tell from Luke’s account exactly how long Jesus took to reach Jerusalem, but the journey was by no means direct. Along the way, Jesus teaches and heals. He sends out seventy others who are to go ahead of him to every town Jesus planned to visit himself. At times, Jesus withdraws from the growing crowds; at others, he is beset by large crowds. In today’s passage, Jesus has attracted large crowds. But in the midst of their enthusiasm, Jesus turns to confront them.

Hating??

Jesus pulls no punches with the crowds. They may be caught up in the excitement of Jesus’ journey, but they better understand the cost of discipleship: there can be no higher priority than Jesus. If Mom calls and says to give up the journey and come home, Jesus warns that you better be prepared to hang up the phone. Jesus comes before mother . . . or father . . . or siblings . . . or even life itself. Jesus’ talk of “hate” is not about malice or hostility toward our parents nor is it about self-loathing. It is about being willing to turn away from anyone or anything that would pull us away from Jesus. But there is more.

For you and me, Jesus’ talk about carrying a cross (v. 27) is a figure of speech. For anyone in the crowd that day, the cross was a stark reality. Some in the crowds would have been old enough to remember thirty years before when the Romans had crucified thousands of Galilean Jews. The rest would have been told the story. The horror of crucifixion was a very real possibility for anyone who continued with Jesus. You and I may not face death because of our faith in Christ, though some Christians still do. For us, the question is whether we can even recognize that there is a cost to our discipleship. If we believe there is no cost, then we are not hearing Jesus. As he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen” (Luke 14:35). PHEME PERKINS writes:

In addition to solidarity with the martyr church, Christians should consider whether there are situations in which public pressure may lead them to deny their faith. We may feel that pressure at any age. Many adults know that Christian faith is not always welcome in the workplace, so they learn to cloak their Christian identity when morally questionable practices seem to be the order of the day. Children and youth can feel the pinch, too. Coaches sometimes threaten to throw kids off teams if they insist on attending church rather than practice on Sunday morning (even Easter Sunday!). Compared to the dangers faced by a martyr church, our discomfort with religion in the public forum may seem trivial. But fidelity to Christ in such situations is not unimportant. As Fred Craddock pointed out in an address to pastors, the reality for most Christians in this country is seldom a life-and-death matter.

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—“Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.” But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in

the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25¢ here and 50¢ there.... Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25¢ at a time.¹

Fools at work and at war²

Jesus was such a great teacher. So often, he would make his point by telling a story and usually a brief story at that. Jesus didn't use parables because he wanted to obscure his message but because he wanted to illuminate his message. We can participate in Jesus' stories in a way that we could never participate in a saying or some sort of theological explanation.

After confronting the crowd with the cost of discipleship, Jesus tells two brief parables to illustrate a simple point: only fools would start a project without being pretty sure they could finish it. None of us would build a new house without understanding the costs and doing all we could to ensure that we could finish the job. Similarly, using a military analogy, Jesus notes that no wise king would wage war without the prospect of victory.

But could we ever be sure that we can pay the cost of discipleship? No, of course not. Peter would deny Jesus three times. But still, our call to discipleship is to be all consuming. This can be no half-hearted commitment. No part of our lives can be excluded from this commitment, including our wallets and relationships and, as Jesus pointedly notes, our possessions (v. 33).³ I sometimes hear people (including myself!) use the term "committed Christian." I guess I know what we mean, but it is deeply regrettable that we feel the need to say it. "Committed Christian" ought to be a redundancy. Let us pray that it is so with each of us.

The Cost of Discipleship

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April 1945, for his part in an attempt on Hitler's life. *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) is his most well-known book. Had Bonhoeffer been in the crowd on the day that Jesus turned and confronted his disciples, he would have understood Jesus' talk of crosses. Listen to these words, written as the Nazi darkness fell across Germany:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . Grace without price, grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . ."

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field . . . it is the pearl of great price . . . it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him. . . . Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. . . . it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. . . . Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life."

Bonhoeffer's words moved my heart deeply even as I transcribed them. Your heart will be moved also.

Spend some time with this book.

¹ Perkins, Pheme. "The Gospel of Mark," *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 628–629.

² from Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Dr. Culpepper's observations on this passage were a big help in the preparation of this study.

³ The Greek verb translated "give up" literally means "to say farewell to," as in waving goodbye!