

LUKE 14:25–35. (EHV)

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, if he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, everyone who sees it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build, but was not able to finish.’ Or what king, as he goes out to confront another king in war, will not first sit down and consider if he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if he is not able, he sends out a delegation and asks for terms of peace while his opponent is still far away. So then, any one of you who does not say farewell to all his own possessions cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its flavor, how will it become salty again? It is not fit for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. The one who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

When Martin Luther was fourteen years old and attending school in Magdeburg, he saw an unforgettable sight. A forty-year-old prince, William of Anhalt, had voluntarily given up the rich robes of the nobility in exchange for the rough cowl, or hood, of the barefoot Franciscan monks. With his own eyes, Luther watched this prince go around begging for bread, nearly bent over to the ground beneath his begging sack—like a donkey, Luther said. William had fasted and neglected, denied, and disciplined his body to such an extent that he was nothing but skin and bones and looked like a dead man walking. And in fact, he *did* die about seven years later because he wasn’t able to endure such a strict lifestyle.

Jesus tells us in our text for today, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate...even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ... Any one of you who does not say farewell to all his own possessions cannot be my disciple.” Is Jesus asking us all to become Williams of Anhalt? Luther still remembered the sight of William thirty-five years later, and he had to acknowledge, “Whoever looked at [William] couldn’t help but stop and think and be ashamed of their own worldliness.”

Luther was ashamed of his own worldliness, but he also knew better than to go to William’s extremes, and so do we. Yet Jesus’s words are not lighthearted or said in jest. They are weighty and serious and life-altering. When we hear them, *we* can’t help but stop and think, and count the cost of being a disciple of Christ.

1. What is the cost?

Jesus asks us to count the cost of being his disciple using a couple of illustrations. Here’s the first: “Which of you, if he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, everyone who sees it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build, but was not able to finish.’”

Towers were common enough in Jesus’s day. One could even find them in vineyards. They served as watchtowers for supervisors and watchmen. If someone wanted to build such a

tower, he would make sure that he had obtained a good estimate. Otherwise he might end up with this unfinished structure clearly visible above his grapevines. It's no different when someone starts building a shed today and can't finish. All the neighbors will talk about how the skeleton of that building has been sitting there for years. It becomes the punchline to local jokes. Owners and builders don't want that. That's why good owners count the cost.

Jesus continues with the second illustration: "Or what king, as he goes out to confront another king in war, will not first sit down and consider if he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if he is not able, he sends out a delegation and asks for terms of peace while his opponent is still far away."

Hollywood likes to romanticize battles where soldiers have marched to sure and certain death, for example *The Last Samurai*. But most people realize that, if death is absolutely certain, going to war is not the height of bravery, but the epitome of folly. That doesn't mean that a smaller army can't face a larger one. But if it does, its general needs to figure out whether position, condition, and battle strategy will give his army a decided advantage and a reasonable chance of victory. Otherwise he will, without shame, go and ask for the terms of peace. To a good general, his soldiers' lives are more important than his own legacy.

"So then, any one of you who does not say farewell to all his own possessions cannot be my disciple." Jesus wants us to count the cost of discipleship. Is Christianity something we plan on finishing? Is it worth the price that we must pay?

Make no mistake, the price is costly. Jesus says that, if you plan on being a Christian to the end of your life, you need to be ready to give up everything you have.

Well, that seems kind of broad! What does that all entail? Jesus tells us at the beginning of our lesson: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

We know that Jesus isn't actually commanding us to hate these people, period. He sums up God's entire law with the word "love" on multiple occasions. And he specifically commands love for these same people throughout the Scriptures. "Honor your father and mother." "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church." "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer."

But here Jesus is commanding obedience to the First Commandment. The more we read Scripture, the more we see that Luther interpreted that commandment beautifully: "What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God *above all things*." Compared to our love for Christ, our love for father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters should be hatred. When they come between us and Christ and his teachings, we should be able to part with them as easily as we would with something we hate.

But the price is costlier still. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate...yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." Again, we know that Jesus isn't commanding us to move out of our houses and expose ourselves to the elements, or to commit suicide or accelerate the coming of our death. The Bible tells us that God alone is the giver and taker of human life and the giver of every gift we have in life. Jesus tells us to be good stewards of all the blessings God has given us. Paul tells us that includes our body, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit and was bought at the price of Christ's blood. Besides that, suicide is one of the most selfish acts there is.

It has no thought for the feelings of friends, acquaintances, family, neighbors, or God. It is the opposite of the selfless love Christ commands.

But again, Jesus is getting at the heart of the First Commandment. We ought to love our neighbor *as* ourself, but we are to love God *above all things*, including ourself. Compared to our love for Christ, our love for ourself, our well being, our possessions, our very lives should be hatred. When our life comes between Christ and his teachings—for instance, if we are compelled to compromise our faith on threat of imprisonment or death (which might not be far off even in our country)—then we should be able to forsake our stuff and our lives as easily as things we hate.

Jesus sums the cost of discipleship up with one word: “Whoever does not carry his own *cross* and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Crosses are not pleasant, as we well know, since one of them is at the center of our beliefs and teachings. Jesus is telling us that, if we are not willing to undergo the pain that comes with denying ourselves in favor of Christ and his word, then there’s the door.

There are even unbelievers who understand this. There are unbelievers who might think in the back of their mind that converting to Christianity would be good for them, but they know that, if they did, they couldn’t just continue with their sinful habits and lifestyles. So they stay away. Do we understand it? Do we know what the cost is of being Jesus’s disciple?

When drowsiness comes to our eyelids in the morning before church or during church, do we *hate* sleep?

When the offer of a promising career that would be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream threatens to ruin a God-pleasing marriage, do we *hate* that dream?

When our friends consistently lead us to laugh at godlessness or drink to excess, do we *hate* our friends, in a manner of speaking?

Church statisticians like to point the finger at fathers when children don’t end up attending church as adults, since there is considerable evidence that only 3% of children will attend church regularly when fathers don’t go, even if the mother is as steady as clock. But let’s look at it this way, children: If you don’t go to church because your dad doesn’t go, or even because your mom or any other family member doesn’t go, that means that you love dad or mom or that other relative more than Jesus, which Jesus says is as much as hating him.

When a busy schedule or a full to-do list stands between us and private time in the Word, between us and prayer, do we *hate* that schedule or list?

Count the cost of following Jesus, friends, and note that the cost is high. As we sing in the Lent hymn: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

2. Is it worth the cost?

But there’s always a second step when counting the cost of something, isn’t there? It might turn out that the vehicle you want, the tool you want, the toy you want costs a lot more than you expected. But that doesn’t automatically mean that you turn around and walk away. No, first you ask, “Okay, but is it worth it?”

We might be tempted to have a knee-jerk reaction to Jesus by saying, “Fine then, Jesus. If you’re going to make such demands, then I just won’t be your disciple.” But count the cost,

Christians! Don't just see how high the cost is, but also ask, "Is it worth it?" And one way to answer that is to ask, "What will it cost me if I don't follow him?"

Jesus tells us elsewhere, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it." If we don't follow Jesus, we may avoid the cross for now, we may enjoy earthly peace and prosperity for a time, but eventually the opposing army of death will arrive and march right through our house and haul us off, bound hand and foot, to hell. All the possessions and earthly joys we have accumulated by forsaking Jesus will not be able to do so much as slow that army down, much less stop it.

But there's another way to answer the question, "Is it worth the cost?"

Namely this way: "Would Jesus require this whole-hearted discipleship from me, this all-in commitment, if it were not ultimately good for me? Does Jesus require this kind of commitment because he is a selfish, egotistical, narcissistic megalomaniac?"

We might suspect that, if all we had were this paragraph. But as we follow Jesus around, we don't see him acting selfishly, egotistically, and narcissistically. We see him devoting all his strength and powers to others. We see him devoting entire days to others. We see him teaching, comforting, blessing, healing, cleansing, and feeding others. We even see him giving up his free time for the sake of others. We see him willing to make time even for little children, taking them up into his lap and addressing them as if they were his only concern in the world.

Yes, he demands that our love for him be so great that it essentially means hatred of everyone and everything else by comparison, but we see that that's precisely how he loves us—and does so perfectly, in spite of the fact that at most he gets imperfect love in return.

Yes, he demands our very life, but we see that he gives up his very life for us, even though we were not demanding it of him or even politely asking him to do it. He voluntarily did it, to wash away and pay for all of the love we have directed and will direct to people and things who don't deserve it even a fraction as much as he does.

Yes, he demands that we carry the cross, but we see that he has already borne the heaviest cross—the cross on which he bore not just our sins, but the sins of the whole world. The cross on which he experienced something that is the very opposite of him—death.

Yes, he demands that we be ready to say farewell to all of our possessions for his sake, but we see that he forsook the glories and riches of heaven to take on human flesh as our substitute, and we hear him promising us that for whatever we might lose in this life, we will be more than compensated with an imperishable, unblemished, and unfading inheritance in heaven.

Yes, he demands that we be ready to forsake our closest friends and family members for his sake, but we find as we follow him that we gain more fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters than we could have ever hoped for, in his family.

Yes, the cost is high, but yes, it is more than worth the cost. It is more than worth the cost because of the one we follow on this high-cost journey—Jesus, who somehow makes his yoke as easy as it is hard, who somehow makes his burden as light as it is heavy. Jesus, who never leaves us or forsake us, who forgives us, helps us, and saves us eternally. Jesus, who is nearer and dearer and better and worth far more to us than father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and all our work and possessions and accomplishments all put together.

How high the cost of following Jesus! How much greater the privilege of paying it! May Jesus help us to do so. Amen.