

“Calculating the Cost”

Luke 14: 25-35

CXIV. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke

June 29, 2014

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 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.’ 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 great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 14:25-35)

Salvation is a free gift, right? It is “the *gift of God*” that is “*not according to works*” (Eph 2:8, 9). Though “the wages of sin is death,” yet “the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). The heavenly banquet described in Luke 14:15-24 is free, whatever one’s

background might be. Those who participate have no ability to repay the host and are not required to do so (14:12-14). Salvation is all of God, and all of grace.

However, there are *indirect* costs involved in receiving the free gift of salvation. Accept Jesus's invitation, become His disciple and one may lose one's family, friends, vocation, social standing, and even one's life itself. The price that one might have to pay for following Christ must be taken into consideration before one makes the decision. The costs must be faced. Stated *positively*, His meaning, says Gooding, is that "salvation is so valuable that if receiving it as a gift involved us in the loss of everything else, we should be foolish indeed not to accept the loss."¹ Hopefully for us it will be "the pearl of great price" for which we would gladly give up everything in order to gain (Mt 13:45, 46). Stated *negatively*, the indirect losses and crosses may be more than we care to bear. Jesus is forcing us to make a decision. He places Himself and all His benefits on one side of the line, and everything else on the other side. "When you step over that line with Jesus you'll find help there. He'll be there and he'll provide strength and grace. Yet one must take the step." He demands what the economists call a "cost-benefit analysis." "You may come to My banquet without money and without cost" (Isa 55:1), but doing so may "cost" you everything, even your own life. What shall it be?

The cost

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, (Luke 14:25)

¹ Gooding, 268

Verse 25 reminds us that Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem begun back in Luke 9:51. He continues to attract “great crowds” who “accompany” Him, eager to observe His ministry. Apparently many of those in the crowd were mere curiosity-seekers. Among the committed disciples were those whom we might call “nominal” followers, or even fence-sitters. They were undecided. They were withholding their commitment. Jesus challenges them directly:

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. (Luke 14:26)

Who can be a disciple of Jesus? As we’ve seen in Luke’s gospel, a disciple is not part of an elite group of believers. All true believers, all those who are saved, are disciples (see Lk 9:23-27). To be one, one must “hate” the members of one’s own family. What does He mean? The parallel in Matthew makes it clear that “hate” here is a hyperbolic way of saying “love more than” or “love less than” as in, “Whoever loves his father or mother *more than* me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). “The thought is...not of psychological hate but of renunciation,” explains Marshall.² We’ve seen already that Jesus teaches His disciples to love even their enemies (Lk 6:27). Hate is not meant literally. “Jesus’ meaning”, says Morris, “is surely that the love the disciple has for Him must be so great that the best of earthly loves is hatred by comparison.”³ Yet it is an attention-grabbing way of making a point.

² Marshall, 592.

³ Morris, 236.

Further, Jesus says we are to “hate” our own lives, that is, love Him even more than our own life. Jesus is requiring not self-loathing, but total commitment, without reservation. This is the irony of the Christian life. On the one hand, salvation is a free gift. We are not asked to perform our good works or to participate in any particular ceremonies. On the other hand, salvation may cost us everything, a price, which, from the outset, we must be willing to bear. This is not a meritorious *precondition* of salvation but an attitudinal *context*. He speaks not of a *work* that we must *perform*, but of a *willingness* that must be *present*. Jesus’ meaning, says J.C. Ryle, is “that those who follow Him must love Him with a deeper love even than their nearest and dearest connections, or their own lives.” While he does not require that we abandon our families, “He did mean that if the claims of our relatives and the claims of Christ came into collision, the claims of relatives must give way.”⁴

We’re calling this an “indirect” cost because Jesus is not saying we must renounce our families and *then* we may come to the Banquet. Rather, He is saying that if we come to the banquet we may lose our families. This we must be willing to do. A parent may oppose one’s commitment to Christ. A sibling may mock one’s new allegiance. One may be disowned and disinherited. One may become subject to withering criticism of one’s new Christian community. It’s happened before, many times over. “Experience shows,” says Ryle, “that the greatest foes to a man’s soul are sometimes those of his own house.”⁵ Jesus places loyalty to Him above loyalty to family. Arguing from the greater (family commitments) to the lesser (all other commitments), Jesus is

⁴ Ryle, II:167. By hate, says Green, Jesus means “a disavowal of primary allegiance to one’s kin.” (565)

⁵ Ibid

placing Himself above all other claims upon our loyalties. He comes first. “Discipleship means giving one’s first loyalty.”⁶

Commitment to Jesus trumps commitment to my nation. Patriotic feelings run high among most of us. Nationalism has at times been allowed to supersede Christian loyalties. Jesus comes first. Commitment to Jesus trumps commitment to my social club, my civic organization, my college, my race, my tribe and all other human associations. The prophet Jonah struggled with this when sent to preach repentance to Israel’s arch enemies, the Assyrians. He allowed national feelings to interfere with gospel imperatives. We do the same thing whenever we allow disdain for our rivals to interfere with our concern for their souls. Gospel loyalties trump all lesser loyalties. This includes “loyalty” to myself: my desires, my comfort, my earthly well-being, my life. I must “hate” all other loyalties; that is, I cannot love them more than I do Christ.

The calculation

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

(Lk 14:27)

Jesus repeats in verse 27 what he said previously (Lk 9:23). “Cross-bearing,” explains Morris, “is of the essence of discipleship.”⁷ We not only must give second place to all that we cherish, but we must also accept hostility from the world. This is what the cross represents. “Whoever” means everyone as well as anyone. Cross-bearing is required of all and open to all. The disciples of Christ *all* must die to themselves. Jesus uses twin parables to make the point that those who

⁶ Morris, 235.

⁷ Morris, 236.

would be his disciples must calculate the cost in advance.⁸ The first describes a person who plans to build a tower.

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.' (Lk 14:28-30)

Before he builds he must first consider if he has the resources to complete the project. He must “sit down” and think about it. If he doesn’t, and if he is able only to lay the foundation and then must quit, he exposes himself to ridicule. He must “count the cost.”

The second illustration describes a king who is going to war against an opponent who has twice the number of soldiers as he has.

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 great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. (Lk 14:31, 32)

⁸ Morris (following A. M. Hunter) suggests that the two parables make slightly different points. The first is, consider if you can afford to follow me. Are you willing to pay the price? The second, (if he is right to see the larger army as an invading force) is, can you afford to refuse my command? Can you afford not to make peace with me? (236)

He “sit(s) down,” taking the posture of contemplation, and carefully “deliberates” whether he has the ability to defeat the superior army. If he hasn’t, he doesn’t charge into certain defeat. He “sends a delegation” and seeks “terms of peace.”

The point of the two “parables” is the same. Calculate the cost of discipleship. Weigh the cost before deciding for Christ. Carefully consider the price. Is this what I want? Don’t join the builders of God’s kingdom and fail to factor in the strenuousness of the work. Don’t join the Lord’s armies and fail to consider the hardships of battle (Eph 6:11ff). Don’t make a quick, uninformed, impulsive decision. Since the days of Charles Finney’s (1792-1875) “anxious bench” and forward to the present use of the “altar call” in its various forms, superficial and inadequately considered “decisions” have been a problem. There is an area in upper-state New York that history knows as the “burned-over district,” visited repeatedly by traveling evangelists who manipulated from the population decision after decision which for many “never took.” The result was cynicism and a hardness to the gospel throughout that entire region. We don’t do altar calls precisely because Jesus doesn’t want impulsive decisions. Ryle explains: “Our Lord spoke as He did to prevent men following Him lightly and unconscientiously... He had no desire to swell the number of His followers by admitting soldiers who would fail in the hour of need.”⁹

Years ago a young man in my fraternity made such a rash decision. A few weeks of ridicule later and he had reversed course and rejoined the pagans. “The lesson is plain,” says Morris, that “Jesus does not want followers who rush into discipleship without thinking of what is involved.”¹⁰

⁹ Ryle, II:169.

¹⁰ Morris, 236.

Jesus clinches his point:

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

The “renounce” is “to bid farewell” as if one were to join Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem. The present tense indicates that this is “a characteristic feature of the disciple”¹¹ The disciple renounces, turns his back on “all that he has.” “All” allows for no exceptions. It means “saying a final ‘goodbye’ to one’s possessions.”¹² The refrain, “cannot be my disciple,” is repeated for the third time (v 26, v 27). The temptation we all face is to reserve a little something for ourselves. I’m not willing to give up x, y, or z for the sake of Jesus and the kingdom of God. I can’t do it. I won’t do it. “These words condemn all half-heartedness,” says Morris. Jesus is eliminating the option of partial, or limited, or tentative discipleship. “He is warning against an ill-considered, faint-hearted attachment.” He requires “full-blooded discipleship.”¹³ None of us may negotiate the terms of salvation. None of us may retain certain idols or lusts, comforts or pleasures, habits or patterns as preconditions for discipleship. The Christian is one who has died to self. He has been “buried with Christ in baptism” (Rom 6:4). He has been “crucified with Christ” and no longer lives (Gal 2:20). “All those who belong to Christ Jesus,” says the Apostle Paul, “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). The world has been crucified to them and they to the world (Gal 6:14). They renounce all that they might gain all (cf 9:24).

¹¹ Green, 567.

¹² Marshall, 594; He continues: “the disciple must be continually ready (present tense) to give up all that he has got in order to follow Jesus.”

¹³ Morris, 237

Calculate the cost. Self will have to be denied; sin mortified; duties fulfilled; reputation and stature lost. Is it worth it? Has the cost been calculated? Jesus calls us to careful deliberation.

Warning

Finally, Jesus warns of the inadequacies of an insipid discipleship.¹⁴

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. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Lk 14:34, 35)

Salt “is good” for flavoring and preserving. Disciples are called to be the “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13). They savor. They permeate and preserve the good in the world. They perform a valuable function in the kingdom of God. However, if the salt “loses its taste,” or “loses its saltiness” (NIV), “becomes insipid,”¹⁵ how can its “saltiness be restored?” How can it “season?”¹⁶ Salt that has lost its capacity to savor is useless. It is of “no use” even for the “manure pile” but is “thrown away.” So likewise the disciple who loses his distinctive characteristic of complete surrender, of cross and cost bearing, has become insipid, bland, tasteless. If he is now waffling, if he has diluted his devotion and commitment, his discipleship is as worthless as tasteless salt. His witness is neutralized. He no longer is able to contribute. He has no credibility.

¹⁴ This final saying, says Marshall, “makes the same point as the two parabolic sayings: there is no point in beginning something which cannot be completed” (595).

¹⁵ Zerwick, I:242.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Ryle interprets the unsavory salt as “a likely emblem of the state of a backslider.”¹⁷ “Thrown away” is a metaphor of judgment. These are terrible warnings. “No man,” says Ryle, “is in so dangerous a state as he who has once known the truth and professed to love it and has afterwards fallen away from his profession (of faith) and gone back to the world.”¹⁸ He’s already heard it all. He knows it all. No one can tell him anything of which he isn’t already aware. This is why the writer to the Hebrews warns,

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.
(Heb 6:4-6)

Ryle concludes from his reading of the whole New Testament “that nothing is so displeasing to God as the misuse of knowledge, and the willful turning away from truth once seen and acknowledged, to the service of sin and the world.”¹⁹

Are those hard words from Jesus? They are. His concern is not with the sincere believer who struggles with sin, as we all do. It is not the weak but earnest believer that he targets. Rather, His words are meant to expose those relying on the self-deception of spiritual half-measures. Jesus offers free salvation to all. Yet Jesus also wants and requires our whole selves, without

¹⁷ Ryle, II:170.

¹⁸ Ibid.

hesitation, without preconditions, without limitations. Stepping forward willingly to bear the cost will be the best decision you've ever made.

¹⁹ Ibid., II:172.