

The Cost of Discipleship — Rev. Denise Stone

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Today's passage is a hard one to hear. It was hard for the people who first heard it and it is still hard today. And it needs to be hard. Being a true follower of Christ comes with a cost.

Now before you go and start hating your family and giving away all of your possessions, however, you need to understand that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole to make his point. I'm going to tell you the end of the story now so that you can view the text through this lens. The point is that Jesus needs (and God demands this) that Jesus must be the most important thing in your life.

Ultimately, this text is all about priorities.

So let us look at what it is that Jesus is telling us here.

We begin this text just after a story of Jesus at the home of a Pharisee for a meal and he heals another person on the Sabbath. Jesus uses that opportunity to teach a relatively small group of more "elite" people if you will about priorities. With today's text Jesus has returned to his journey to Jerusalem and there is a large number of people in addition to the disciples that have gathered and are following along.

Bear in mind that Jesus knows why he is going to Jerusalem. He knows what awaits him. Yet his disciples and the others really don't know what is ahead.

In Luke's Gospel we don't know what prompted Jesus to have this discussion. Perhaps it was the knowledge of what would happen in Jerusalem combined with people who seem to just be along for the ride. Maybe Jesus knew that most of those people would abandon him when they got to Jerusalem. Whatever the reason, Jesus lays out the cost of being a disciple; the importance of priorities.

Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them that unless they hate their families and even their own lives, they cannot be a disciple. Here is where the hyperbole comes in. Professor of New Testament, Jeannine K. Brown, points out in a discussion of the use of the word "hate" in Hebrew idioms, "Jesus is not calling his followers to hate their families in terms of emotional response; instead, he calls for undivided loyalty to himself above family loyalties."ⁱ Priorities.

Jesus goes further using the imagery of crucifixion, carrying one's cross in verse 27, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."ⁱⁱ This is also very stark language.

Professor Brown continues in her article about this part of the text,

The next saying emphasizes the same point about loyalty. Discipleship is defined by following Jesus and "carrying the cross." This phrase indicates that giving up self interest and competing loyalties are central to discipleship. Neither of these sayings of Jesus lend themselves to an "easy believism" or a "low-cost" form of faith. Instead, they stress the high cost of following Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ

If you watch enough televangelists or attend some churches, you will hear more of a consumerism Christianity. That if you come to Jesus you can get what you need or want. Some refer to this as the prosperity Gospel. Rarely will you hear about the cost of discipleship.

Jesus demands commitment from his followers. Commitment is less of an important concept for many people today. Our lives today (and in the time of Jesus as evidenced from this text) is more about "ME." What can I get, what can you do for me? It is like the "me generation" of the 80's on steroids. Our focus is on ourselves and our families and what God demands often takes a back seat.

The next five verses contain two illustrative short stories or parables. Jesus is helping the crowd understand about the cost of discipleship.

²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

These are examples that the people in the crowd would have understood. We still understand them today. It is important to seriously consider all the ramifications of our decisions and actions. We do this when we budget so we can afford a house or a new car or a fancy trip. Jesus is telling us that we need to do the same thing when we decide to become a follower / a disciple.

In verse 33 Jesus drives home his point, “³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Another Professor, David Schnasa Jacobsen suggests,

If the first several verses of our periscope (our text) have been leading us to a kind of disciples’ wisdom, the final verse lays *everything* on the line: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” The “So therefore,” indicates that Jesus is still building on the previous ordinary analogies and his earlier point about counting the cost -- this is true. Yet the final condition comes at us would-be followers with a stunning force.^{iv}

Following God is not an optional add-on to our lives. It is to be the focus, the primary thing -- the most important.

Again, it is all about priorities.

Yes, this is a heavy text to consider and apply. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to literally take up his cross for us. Jesus knew that his followers would be subjected to persecution and possible death. He put the cost of discipleship front and center with this text. Following Christ does have benefits such as a community of faith to see as family as well as

ultimately eternal life. It is just vital to place our understanding of the call of Christ on our lives in proper balance.

Let me help frame this for you, again quoting Professor Jacobsen,

Long before Jesus' troubling call to reflection and discernment comes the gift of God's coming reign. And at the other end of the road on which the crowds would wish to accompany Jesus is *his cross*, but also his resurrection, his ascension, and the Spirit poured out lavishly upon Jews (Acts 2) and Gentiles (Acts 10) alike. Luke's Gospel reminds us that the gospel is even more than renunciation, even renunciation for God's ultimate claim upon us. It is task, to be sure, but it is first gift, call, and hope for the journey.^v

We hold on to the hope of Jesus Christ, the gift of Salvation to sustain us through our journey of life, to sustain us through the call and priorities of the Christian life.

In a few moments, as we come to the Communion Table, let us consider the call of Jesus Christ on our lives. Let us count the cost of discipleship. Let us get our priorities straight.

Let us see that Jesus Christ should be and demands to be our focus, the primary thing -- the most important.

Pray with me.

ⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=667.

ⁱⁱ All Scripture references are from the **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

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ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=667.

^{iv} https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2958

^v https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2958