

## **NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 14**

### **“Counting the Cost of Following Jesus”**

Luke 14: 25-33

A few years ago now the VISA Credit Card company produced a commercial that showed a young man getting a tattoo on his left arm of his favorite girlfriend's name; because he wanted the whole world to know whom he loved. In the background played the 60's hit "Oh Donna". Donna asks if he's sure this is what he wants to do. Part way through the tattoo he asks the 'artist' how much this will be. He replies; "50 bucks". The young man pulls a crumpled wad of bills from his jeans and laughingly offers; "All I've got is \$41". The music stops along with the tattoo pen, and the next scene is of Donna running out of the store with her friend in hot pursuit with the promise: "I'll get it fixed." The camera zooms in on his left arm with the half finished tattoo now reading: "I Love Don..." "Next time use your VISA Check card, it'll get you in, out and on with your life."

That funny ad introduces us to the main point of our text for today; the necessity of counting the cost before embarking on any adventure, whether getting a tattoo, or following Jesus. Let's look at the story.

*"A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, <sup>26</sup>"If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison – your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple.*

*<sup>27</sup>And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple." <sup>28</sup>But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?*

*<sup>29</sup>Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of funds. And then how everyone would laugh at you! <sup>30</sup>They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it' <sup>31</sup>*

*"Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down with his counselors to discuss whether his army of 10,000 could defeat the 20,000 soldiers marching against him? And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.*

*<sup>34</sup>"Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? Flavorless salt is good neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown away. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.*

We cannot miss the context, because it is so different than the ones we have observed previously in this series. No Pharisees here, no Sadducees here, no mention of religious leaders, just a large crowd of followers...and I use the term loosely. Jesus stops the procession, turns around to address the 'crowd' and what an address he delivers. There is an unquestionable play on words: if you really want to be my followers...(literally disciple) there are a few things you better consider!

### **1. A FAMILY: LOVE JESUS SUPREME**

Throughout the years of my ministry I've considered a series of sermons on "Things I wish Jesus would never have said." This would be on the top of my list. *"If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must hate his father and mother, wife and children... sons and daughters."* Hate seems a bit harsh, especially in light of all the commands to love one another, love each other, greater love has no man than this, that he lays down his life...love even your enemies. How in the world can Jesus say we must hate our most intimate human relations? Understanding this hinges on the meaning of the word hate. The Greek word and its Hebrew ancestry more accurately might be translated: to love less! Jesus is using a dramatic hyperbole to make an even more dramatic point. Like my wife telling me for the millionth time to put the toilet seat down. We all know it's not really been a million times; 500,000 or so, but not a million. She is trying to make a point, and so is Jesus.

To be a disciple, you must love Jesus more than you love anyone else—even family members. Your love for Jesus should be so powerful that in comparison, it seems as if you hate everyone else. It is also true that sometimes your love for Jesus will alienate you from others, even your family. A few years ago, a young Muslim woman came to know Christ and was baptized in a local church, here in the states.

It was a tough decision for her because she knew the moment she became a Christian, her family back in Iran would not just disown her, they would have a funeral for her and consider her to be dead. She had to make the hard choice, but she followed Jesus—even though her family opposed it.

Friend, when God calls you to be a follower, you will have to make some difficult decisions. Sometimes saying Yes to Jesus means saying No to many other options. And sometimes, even your family will not jump up and down and rejoice over your choices. That's the first mark of a true disciple. Next:

## **2. A CROSS: LIVE LIKE A DEAD PERSON**

The image Jesus used next was a cross. A real disciple is someone who carries his cross. There is a hymn we used to sing when I was a kid that said something about “the cross I bear.” I thought they were singing about a cross-eyed bear. I remember thinking if I ever met a bear in the woods, I sure hoped it was a cross-eyed bear, so it couldn't see me very well!

Many Christians are just as confused today about what it means to carry a cross. I've had someone say to me, “I have such terrible in-grown toenails, but I guess it's just the cross I have to bear.” I always wanted to say, as they start taking off their shoes to show me, “Why don't you get that nasty thing worked on by a doctor?” The cross is NOT a headache, hangnail, or an ingrown toenail.

Today, the image of the cross has lost its horror. The true message of the cross is death. Today, the cross has become a benign piece of harmless jewelry. In Jesus' time, it was a horrible, agonizing tortuous mode of execution. In the time of Jesus when you saw someone carrying a cross it meant one and only one thing—they were as good as dead. We are dead people. We should just start acting like a dead person.

Paul understood the reality of what it meant to carry a cross. In Galatians there are three dynamite verses about what it means to carry your cross: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...”* (Galatians 2:20) *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”* (Galatians 5:24) *“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* (Galatians 6:14) Saying Yes to being a follower of Jesus, means that you automatically say No to the system of values defined by this world. True followers of Jesus are dead to the world, that’s the second mark of a disciple.

### **3. A TOWER: CONSIDER THE VALUE OF A GOOD FINISH**

Jesus presents the image of a man who plans on building a tower, probably a watchtower to guard a large vineyard. Before he begins the construction, he must “count the cost” to see if he has enough resources to finish the job.

Jesus is talking about the cost of total commitment. I’m afraid the church of Jesus Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is made up of a large number of ‘disciples’ who may have begun well, but who are failing at the finish. It’s hard to keep going sometimes. It can get boring, it might appear worth less than the investment, the longer you are in it. It is sometimes difficult to complete the journey; I know that. But we must consider all the cost before we begin, and we must continually recommit ourselves all along the way.

Actually, it might be better to think in terms of the value instead of the cost. A good finish as a disciple is the key. A lot of backslidden Christians may go to heaven when they die, but they won’t be finishing well. In verse 29 Jesus spoke about the man “who was not able to finish.” Jesus says everyone will look at the uncompleted project and ridicule the one who didn’t finish it. I’m haunted by those words—I don’t want to become a spiritual dropout.

The older I get, the more I realize there can never be any “coasting” in the Christian life. There is no such thing as spiritual retirement. The pages of the Bible are littered with great men and women who didn’t finish well. Noah and his family were saved from the flood, but poor Noah ended as a drunken man who got naked and cursed his son. Solomon was the wisest man in all of history, but he didn’t finish well—his many wives turned his heart from God.

Are you going to finish well? I’ve been here long enough to know some folks who used to be faithful servants—real disciples—but they have dropped out. Oh, they still attend sometimes, and I suppose they’ll go to heaven when they die, but unless something changes they aren’t going to finish strong.

The good news is none of us are finished yet. It doesn’t matter what has happened in the past, we still can finish well. The finish line is still ahead. Are you sitting down on the track? Are you walking at a snails pace? Are you going to barely drag yourself across the finish line, or are you going to summon God’s strength so you can sprint across the finish line?

Billy Sunday was the Billy Graham of his generation. He was a former professional baseball player. He once said: “Stopping at third adds no more to the score than striking out. It doesn’t matter how well you start if you fail to finish.” A real disciple finishes strong. A real disciple knows that saying Yes to following Jesus means saying No to coasting and cruising into third base, it means finishing strong. That’s the third mark.

#### **4. A WAR: SURRENDER TO THE STRONGER KING**

Most people assume that this part of the parable is just another way of saying the same thing Jesus just said.

Before building a building you must calculate the cost, before beginning a war, you must measure your troop strength against the enemy king's troop strength, and if your troops are found wanting, then by any means make a peace offering before the enemy gets too close.

There may be another way to look at this. Maybe the stronger King represents God, and not Satan, our ultimate enemy. Maybe, just maybe, God is standing in front of our well oiled schemes to make our millions, build our businesses, reap our rewards, suck all the life we can from this world, then on our dying bed, give our lives to Jesus. Maybe Jesus is saying here that God wants ultimate surrender from each of us, that is frankly, what being a disciple really means. So many people, who wear the name Christian, are not really followers of Jesus! They may wear the nametag, they may choose the religious respectability of maintaining a church membership, but when they stand before Jesus, He may well give us a look and say, depart from me, for not all who call "Lord, Lord", will get into my heaven!

You cannot be a disciple unless you are willing to give up control of your life to Jesus. And that's hard to do. None of us wants to give up.

I once read about a lifeguard on a beach who saw a drowning man. He walked into the surf but didn't go out to rescue him. People gathered on the beach and yelled and screamed at the lifeguard to go out and rescue the drowning man. The lifeguard waded a little deeper, and kept his eye on the drowning man, but the yells and screams of the onlookers didn't motivate him to swim out. Just when it seemed the man was going down for the last time, the lifeguard swam out with strong strokes and grabbed the man and brought him back to shore. After some spitting and coughing, the man was conscious. But rather than hailing him as a hero, the onlookers were angry at the lifeguard and said, "You coward! You saw he was drowning, why didn't you go out sooner?"

The lifeguard patiently explained, “You can see that he is much bigger and stronger than I am.” If I had gone out sooner, he was thrashing and kicked so violently that he would have probably drowned both of us. As long as he was trying to save himself, I couldn’t save him. But when he got tired, and gave up, then I knew I could save him.”

That’s a great lesson about salvation. As long as you think you are strong enough to save yourself, you won’t surrender to Jesus. It’s only when you give up and realize you are hopelessly lost, that Jesus can come and rescue you. Have you ever come to a place in your life where you have surrendered everything you have and everything you are to Jesus? I think real discipleship is coming to Jesus and saying, “Jesus, I give up. I give up control of my life.” Saying Yes to following Jesus, means saying No to trying to save yourself. Are you ready? That’s the 4<sup>th</sup> mark. Finally, Jesus used the image of:

## **5. SALT: STAY PURE TO PRESERVE GOODNESS**

Salt was very valuable during Jesus’ time. Roman soldiers were paid with salt, that’s where the phrase “he’s not worth his salt”, probably comes from. But salt’s greatest attribute in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century culture was as a preservative. Since they didn’t have any way to refrigerate meat, salt would be applied to fresh meat to prevent the meat from rotting. The salt created a chemical reaction that slowed down the process of decay. It retarded corruption, so as a consequence, it preserved the goodness of the meat. Interesting that Jesus once said of his “Disciples” ...“You are the salt of the earth.

We live in a nation suffering from moral decay at an alarming rate. Our society is getting more rotten by the day. Like salt, we must come in contact with our corrupting culture to slow down the process of decay. As salt, our job is to preserve the goodness that still exists in our culture. It’s not entirely up to us, but we must do our part!

We must act on the fact that we are God's hands, and feet; God's mouth and ears to a hurting, lost, and decomposing generation. It's part of being a follower of Jesus, a disciple.

Have you ever noticed how salt stings when it gets in a wound? Salt irritates, but in addition to being a preservative, it is also an antiseptic—and our society needs a good cleaning! We must be salt in our corrupting world. If we don't speak up against evil, our nation will become even more perverse than it is now. Saying Yes to being a Follower of Jesus; means that we can no longer stand idly by, while our salt loses its saltiness.

Abraham Lincoln once saw in a slave market a young black girl for sale. He was obviously sympathetic toward slaves, but was doubly so for this beautiful young woman. He bought her and when she came to him, he handed her the papers of her freedom. He said to her, "you are free now." She looked at him with wondering eyes. "Am I free?" She asked. "free to go anywhere I like?" He said, "Indeed you are." "Then, master," she said, "I will follow you forever." Legally she was no longer a slave; but her heart had become the slave of love to him who had given her so much.

Counting the cost to follow Jesus is an essential prerequisite for becoming a Disciple. We have been set free, we have been purchased at a great price, we have been liberated from wasting our lives in sin, and futility. It is now up to us to decide; YES, I will follow you forever, NO, I will live my own life, my own way, following my own rules, determining my own future, taking my own chances, chasing my own dreams...Its our choice; choose wisely; choose now!

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### THE MARKS OF A DISCIPLE:

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2. A CROSS: LIVE LIKE A \_\_\_\_\_ PERSON

3. A TOWER: CONSIDER THE VALUE OF A GOOD \_\_\_\_\_

4. A WAR: \_\_\_\_\_ TO THE STRONGER KING

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