

Counting the Cost

Luke 14:28-33 New Living Translation (NLT)

²⁸ “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? ²⁹ Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. ³⁰ They would say, ‘There’s the person who started that building and couldn’t afford to finish it!’

³¹ “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? ³² And if he can’t, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. ³³ So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.

5. THE MULTITUDES: FALSE EXPECTANCY (14:25–35)

When Jesus left the Pharisee’s house, great crowds followed Him, but He was not impressed by their enthusiasm. He knew that most of those in the crowd were not the least bit interested in spiritual things. Some wanted only to see miracles, others heard that He fed the hungry, and a few hoped He would overthrow Rome and establish David’s promised kingdom. They were expecting the wrong things.

Jesus turned to the multitude and preached a sermon that deliberately thinned out the ranks. He made it clear that, when it comes to personal discipleship, He is more interested in *quality* than *quantity*. In the matter of saving lost souls, He wants His house to be filled (Luke 14:23), but in the matter of personal discipleship, He wants only those who are willing to pay the price.

A “disciple” is a learner, one who attaches himself or herself to a teacher in order to learn a trade or a subject. Perhaps our nearest modern equivalent is “apprentice,” one who learns by watching and by doing. The word *disciple* was the most common name for the followers of Jesus Christ and is used 264 times in the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Jesus seems to make a distinction between salvation and discipleship. Salvation is open to all who will come by faith, while discipleship is for believers willing to pay a price. Salvation means coming to the cross and trusting Jesus Christ, while discipleship means carrying the cross and following Jesus Christ. Jesus wants as many sinners saved as possible (“that my house may be filled”), but He cautions us not to take discipleship lightly, and in the three parables He gave, He made it clear that there is a price to pay.

To begin with, we must love Christ supremely, even more than we love our own flesh and blood (Luke 14:26–27). The word *hate* does not suggest positive antagonism but rather “to love less” (see Gen. 29:30–31; Mal. 1:2–3; and Matt. 10:37). Our love for Christ must be so strong that all other love is like hatred in comparison. In fact, we must hate our own lives and be willing to bear the cross after Him.

What does it mean to “carry the cross”? It means daily identification with Christ in shame, suffering, and surrender to God’s will. It means death to self, to our own plans and ambitions, and a willingness to serve

Him as He directs (John 12:23–28). A “cross” is something we willingly accept from God as part of His will for our lives. The Christian who called his noisy neighbors the “cross” he had to bear certainly did not understand the meaning of dying to self.

Jesus gave three parables to explain why He makes such costly demands on His followers: the man building a tower, the king fighting a war, and the salt losing its flavor. The usual interpretation is that believers are represented by the man building the tower and the king fighting the war, and we had better “count the cost” before we start, lest we start and not be able to finish. But I agree with Campbell Morgan that the builder and the king represent not the believer but Jesus Christ. *He is the one who must “count the cost” to see whether we are the kind of material He can use to build the church and battle the enemy.* He cannot get the job done with halfhearted followers who will not pay the price.

As I write this chapter, I can look up and see on my library shelves hundreds of volumes of Christian biographies and autobiographies, the stories of godly men and women who made great contributions to the building of the church and the battle against the enemy. They were willing to pay the price, and God blessed them and used them. They were people with “salt” in their character.

Jesus had already told His disciples that they were “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13). When the sinner trusts Jesus Christ as Savior, a miracle takes place and “clay” is turned into “salt.” Salt was a valued item in that day; in fact, part of a soldier’s pay was given in salt. (The words *salt* and *salary* are related; hence, the saying, “He’s not worth his salt.”)

Salt is a preservative, and God’s people in this world are helping to retard the growth of evil and decay. Salt is also a purifying agent, an antiseptic that makes things cleaner. It may sting when it touches the wound, but it helps to kill infection. Salt gives flavor to things and, most of all, makes people thirsty. By our character and conduct, we ought to make others thirsty for the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation that He alone can give.

Our modern salt is pure and does not lose its flavor, but the salt in Jesus’ day was impure and could lose its flavor, especially if it came in contact with earth. Once the saltiness was gone, there was no way to restore it, and the salt was thrown out into the street to be walked on. When a disciple loses his Christian character, he is “good for nothing” and will eventually be “walked on” by others and bring disgrace to Christ.

Discipleship is serious business. If we are not true disciples, then Jesus cannot build the tower and fight the war. “There is always an *if* in connection with discipleship,” wrote Oswald Chambers, “and it implies that we need not [be disciples] unless we like. There is never any compulsion; Jesus does not coerce us. There is only one way of being a disciple, and that is by being devoted to Jesus.”

If we tell Jesus that we want to take up our cross and follow Him as His disciples, then He wants us to know exactly what we are getting into. He wants no false expectancy, no illusions, no bargains. He wants to use us as stones for building His church, soldiers for battling His enemies, and salt for bettering His world, *and He is looking for quality.*

After all, He was on His way to Jerusalem when He spoke these words, and look what happened to Him there! He does not ask us to do anything for Him that He has not already done for us.

To some, Jesus says, “You cannot be My disciples!” Why? Because they will not forsake all for Him, bear shame and reproach for Him, and let their love for Him control them.

And they are the losers.

Will *you* be His disciple?

8. Does Jesus really want us to “hate” our families and our lives (vs. 26)? **Explain.** (Some scholars say He was using hyperbole [exaggeration] to show that our love for Him should be so great that it makes all other loves look like hatred in comparison.)

9. If you were in the crowd and were writing down a “To Do” list as you listened to Jesus, what would be on it? (Let kids pick out at least three key commands and personalize them.)

10. For you personally, what has been the cost of following Jesus so far?

11. How big do you think the crowds were the day after Jesus said these things? (Probably smaller, if they understood the tough standards Jesus was setting.)

12. Do you have “ears to hear” what Jesus is saying here? What might plug them up?

Distribute the reproducible sheet, “Cross Carriers,” and have kids complete it. As you discuss, pinpoint what would be toughest about each situation—and ask kids to name other heavy crosses they might be asked to carry. Ask: **Did anyone tell you about the “cost” before you became a Christian? If not, do you feel cheated now? Does Christ’s command to take up your cross make you feel like getting to work—or trying to get out of this “disciple” thing?**

CROSS Carriers

“Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” – Jesus (in Luke 14:27)

How heavy would each of the following “crosses” be for you to carry? Circle the cross that comes closest to showing how tough it would be for you to follow Christ in each situation.



1 oz.



1 lb.



10 lbs.



50 lbs.



100 lbs.

At the last minute, you have to baby-sit your little sister instead of going with your friends to ride the new monster roller coaster at a nearby theme park.



1 oz.



1 lb.



10 lbs.



50 lbs.



100 lbs.

On a mission trip to Haiti with your youth group, you don’t get to use any indoor plumbing for two weeks.



1 oz.



1 lb.



10 lbs.



50 lbs.



100 lbs.

Your father decides that your whole family will have devotions together after dinner three times a week.



1 oz.



1 lb.



10 lbs.



50 lbs.



100 lbs.

You’re being pressured to join a gang. The last kid who refused to join was killed in a drive-by shooting.



1 oz.



1 lb.



10 lbs.



50 lbs.



100 lbs.

You’ve been going out with this person for six months. You think he/she’s perfect for you. But he/she isn’t a Christian, and your pastor says you shouldn’t be “unequally yoked” (II Corinthians 6:14).

Moving on to verses 25-35, how does Jesus keep turning the world's values and common expectations upside down?

We could say that Jesus is engaging in typical Middle Eastern exaggeration to make his point about family and possessions. And that may be true. Nonetheless, what is his point?

The two pictures of the tower and the battle (14:28-32) also carried a cryptic warning in Jesus' day. The most important building project of his time was of course the temple in Jerusalem: Herod the Great had begun a massive program of rebuilding and beautifying it, and his sons and heirs were carrying on the work. But what was it all for? Would it ever be completed? In fact, Jesus has already warned

that God has abandoned his house (13:35); by A.D. 70 Herod's temple would be left a smoldering ruin by the Romans, its folly plain for all to see.

What specific warning does the picture of the battle then hold for Jesus' contemporaries?

When there is an urgent task to be done, then everything, including family, possessions and one's own life, must be put at risk. If Jesus' followers aren't ready to do that for the sake of the kingdom, then they are like the tower-builder and the warmonger who haven't thought through what they are really about.

What might costly discipleship in light of the urgency of the kingdom look like for you or your Christian community?

From the Commentary

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—*Be Courageous*, page 26

10. What does it mean for you to be "carrying the cross"? How is this a way of identifying with Christ? What is the difference between simply calling yourself a believer and identifying yourself with Jesus daily?
13. What are some ways you are "carrying the cross" in your daily faith life? What challenges do you face as you consider what it means to carry the cross? What are some ways you can find the strength to carry the cross when doing so seems too costly?

Real-Life Application Ideas: This week, take a look at all the ways you're living out what it means to be a follower of Christ. Then consider what it would look like if you were more than just a follower, but instead a dedicated disciple. What changes would you have to make to be a disciple? How can you go about making those changes? Make a plan to focus on the disciplines that will bring you closer to Jesus, not just those that define you as a Christian.

Seeking Help

15. Write a prayer below (or simply pray one in silence), inviting God to work on your mind and heart in those areas you've noted in the Going Forward section. Be honest about your desires and fears.