

“Count the Cost” (Luke 14:25–35)

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Think about anyone who has done something great with his or her life. Think about a great athlete, a great artist, a great leader, a great inventor, a great businessman. What made that person great? There are many things. Natural talent, intelligence, education, opportunity, and sometimes what we would call luck. But usually there’s another key ingredient, something that separates that person from others who had similar backgrounds. And that something is a singular devotion to what they’re doing. To be great athletes, people have to center their lives around their sport. They have to sleep enough, eat a certain diet, train long hours. Their lives are devoted to what they do. Similar things can be said of great musicians, painters, and writers, and certainly of people who create technologies or products.

To be great in the kingdom of God, we need to center our lives on Jesus. To be a Christian—and not just a great Christian, but an average one—we need to have a singular devotion to Jesus. We need to put him above everything else.

Today, we’re continuing our study of Jesus’ life. We’ve been studying the Gospel of Luke for a long time now, and today we see what Jesus requires of those who would follow him. He requires that those who follow him love him more than they love anything else, even their own lives. He urges those who are considering following him to count the cost, which is being willing to suffer and renounce everything else. And he says that those who lose their distinctive Christian character are useless and will be thrown out.

The words that Jesus utters are hard words. He didn’t sugar-coat things. Neither will I this morning. But this a message that we need to hear. It’s a clarion call to greater commitment to Jesus. But the good news is that he is worth following. The athlete’s career will not save him. The artist’s great works will not pay for her sins against God and against others. The inventor’s inventions will not bring him eternal life. But Jesus can give all these things and more to those who are his disciples.

Today, we’re reading Luke 14:25–35. We’ll start by reading verses 25 and 26:

²⁵ Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “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.¹

Recently in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has had a lot of conflict with the religious leaders of Judaism at this time. He was eating with some of them at the beginning of this chapter (Luke 14:1–24). But now Jesus is traveling, and a great amount of people are following him. We have seen that Jesus has attracted crowds wherever he goes. There is simply no one like him. No one has ever taught as brilliantly as he has. No one has ever been able to perform all the miracles that he has. So, it makes sense that he would get a lot of attention. But he wants people who are coming to him to know that it's not enough for them to be fans. Jesus doesn't want fans, he wants followers. He doesn't want people who spectate, he wants students. (That's what the Greek word translated as "disciple" literally means.)

So, Jesus says to the crowd something that might shock us. He says that anyone who could come after him must hate his or her own family and even his or her own life. Now, Jesus doesn't literally mean that we must hate our family members. That would contradict the call to love our neighbors, and even our enemies. If we're supposed to love all neighbors and enemies, how much more should we love our family members? The language of "hate" is a Semitic expression, an idiom. It means that our love for Jesus should so far outweigh our love for anyone else that it looks, in comparison, as if we "hate" them. But that's not a literal hate. It means to love less.² Jesus demands ultimate allegiance.

There have been many times throughout history, in various places and cultures, when and where following Jesus has meant being distanced from one's family. In the early days of the church, to be a Christian might mean being separated from one's non-Christian Jewish family members, or from one's non-Christian pagan family members. To become a Protestant, trusting Jesus alone for your salvation, might mean leaving behind the Catholic faith and, in some Catholic cultures, this could mean being distanced from family. In Muslim cultures and countries, being a Christian can mean being disowned from family. In some cases, becoming a Christian means putting your own life in danger.

The point is that we have to love Jesus more than anything else, even our own safety and security. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that our hearts are given to what we treasure (Matt.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² See Gen. 29:30–31; Deut. 21:15–17; Judg. 14:16.

6:21). He says that we can't serve two masters, because our hearts will be divided (Matt. 6:24). We must serve Jesus, which means that we must give him not just obedience, but our hearts.

Jesus then goes on to talk about the cost of following him. We must be willing to give up safety and comfort to follow him. Let's read verses 27–33:

²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ 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? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ 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? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Jesus says that if you are not willing to bear your own cross and come after him, you cannot be his disciple. He has already said something similar in Luke. This is what he said in Luke 9:23–24: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." What does it mean to bear your cross or take it up daily? The cross was an instrument of shame, torture, and death. The Roman Empire used it to kill enemies of the state in a very public way. It was reserved for those who weren't Roman citizens, and for the worst of criminals. Death by crucifixion was slow and agonizing—that's why we have that word "excruciating." And it was death in public, in view of passersby. It was a way of saying, "Don't mess with Rome or this will happen to you!"

So, when Jesus tells those who would follow him that they must take up a cross, he means they must be willing to suffer, to even die if it should come to that. Now, most Christians will not be put to death because they are Christians. But that has happened throughout history, and it still happens in certain parts of the world. For most of us, it means being willing to be called names, or to be regarded as fools. Being a Christian often means having priorities that don't line up with the prevailing culture. It means having unpopular views. Non-Christians will sometimes resent that we don't bow the knee and pledge allegiance to what is popular. In the early church, that meant not regarding Caesar, the Emperor, as Lord, as the ultimate King. Being a Christian means that you believe Jesus is the ultimate authority, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Romans were expected to worship the emperor, but Christianity forbids us to worship

anyone but the triune God. Today, Christians often have different views on controversial topics like sexuality and abortion, but also about how to use money, caring for the poor, and many other issues. In the past, Christians have been against slavery when others wanted it, and this put them at odds with the world.

To be a Christian means being willing to follow Jesus even when it's hard, even when it brings suffering and shame. This doesn't mean that being a Christian always brings those things. Christians also experience many joys and comforts in this life. But we must be willing to experience those things for the sake of Jesus.

And that is one of the costs of becoming a Christian. So, Jesus tells those who would follow him to count the cost. Be like that man who was going to build a tower, which would have been a watchtower or perhaps even a barn of sorts that could store produce and tools. If someone is going to build such a structure, he has to figure out how much it will cost. If he doesn't, he won't finish the project and he'll be ashamed. Likewise, a king going to battle must count the cost of war. If he goes to war without considering whether he can actually win, it could leave to great disaster and shame.

These things happen in real life, by the way. When we lived in Washington and I served a church there, there was another church that was right across the street from ours. Before we arrived at our church, that other church had plans to build a new building. They had a large parcel of land and they had recently built the outside of the new building. Eventually, they even paved a large parking lot in front of it. But the cost of the new building was greater than they had anticipated, so they couldn't finish the new building. It was empty and unfinished inside. It was useless. Likewise, a half-Christian, not willing to go the distance for Jesus, is useless.

Countries have gone to war without carefully considering what war will cost in terms of dollars and, more importantly, in terms of human lives. And that always brings disaster. It ends in national debt, many lives lost, and futility. One could argue that our country's wars over the last fifty or sixty years have been like that. So it is with someone who likes Jesus, who even sees his or her need to follow him, but doesn't carefully think about what it will mean to follow Jesus throughout life.

Those who aren't willing to follow Jesus wherever he leads are ultimately useless. That's the point that Jesus makes in verses 34 and 35:

³⁴ “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?
³⁵ 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.”

This saying about salt might seem odd. In the ancient world, salt had many uses, just as it has many uses today. It was used not only as seasoning for foods, but also as a preservative and a fertilizer. Today, we can buy all kinds of pure salt to use for cooking or to put on ice in the winter. But in those days, salt was often mixed with impurities like gypsum. Whenever the salt was dissolved in water, the other minerals were left behind. Salt had lost its saltiness and was therefore useless. According to Darrel Bock, “Bakers covered the floor of their ovens with salt to give a catalytic effect on the burning fuel, which was usually cattle dung. After a time, the effect wore off and the salt was thrown away.”³ Obviously, you wouldn’t use that “salt” on your food, but it also couldn’t be used for anything else. Bock says, “Salt used for fertilizer wilted weeds and improved the soil at a deeper level, but useless salt was discarded.”⁴

A person who claims to be a Christian yet who doesn’t have a distinctive Christian character is useless. He or she isn’t really a Christian at all, and never was one. And he or she will be “thrown away,” or condemned.

For those familiar with the whole of the Bible, or at least the New Testament, you know that being a Christian isn’t a matter of self-identifying as a Christian. We can self-identify as many things, but that doesn’t mean we actually are those things. If I self-identify as Superman right now, that doesn’t mean I can fly, see through walls, or deflect bullets. In a similar way, self-identifying as a Christian doesn’t mean you actually love Jesus more than anything else. It’s easy to say you’re a Christian, but it’s another thing to actually be one. To be a Christian, you must love Jesus more than anything. You must deny yourself, which often means continually repenting, turning away from sin, from the things that God has forbidden because they are destructive, and turning back to God’s ways. It means being willing to suffer for Jesus. It means being willing to move, to change jobs, to sell possessions—if that’s what he calls you to do.

Now, Jesus doesn’t always call us to do those drastic things. He did call some of his disciples to leave their professions as fishermen or as a tax collector (Luke 5:1–11, 27–28). But often, Jesus doesn’t call us to leave jobs or situations. Instead, he asks us to live as Christians

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1290.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1292.

within those circumstances (1 Cor. 7:17–24). Peter, one of the disciples, left his occupation of being a fisherman, but he was married and wasn't required to leave his wife. But we must be willing to leave everything to follow Jesus if that's what he leads us to do. Similarly, I doubt that any of us will die for our faith, but we must be willing to do so.

For most of us, being a Christian will mean being obedient to Jesus because we love him. It will mean a life of being committed to a local church, reading the Bible, praying, telling other people about Jesus, giving to the church and to the poor. If you're married, it will either mean loving your wife as Christ loved the church or honoring your husband as you honor Christ (Eph. 5:22ff.). If you're single, it will mean refraining from sex and living as if Christ is your ultimate spouse (see 1 Cor. 7). If you're a parent, it will mean raising your children with discipline and teaching them about Jesus (Eph. 6:4). If you're a child, it will mean honoring your parents and obeying them (Eph. 6:1–3). It will mean lots of things like working hard, keeping yourself from lust and coveting and all kinds of destructive behavior. If you aren't committed to these ongoing acts of faith, you aren't really a Christian. You're not really salt, but worthless trace minerals that will be thrown out.

To be a Christian is not to be fan of Jesus, to like what he did, but to realize that he is our only hope, that he is our King, to live under his rule so that you can receive his blessings. Jesus says that we should “come after” him. That language is used in the Bible to describe either coming after God, walking with him, or going after false gods (Deut. 6:14; 13:4; 1 Kings 11:2; 14:8; 18:21; Jer. 11:10; 13:10; 16:11; Hos. 2:5, 13).⁵ All of us will make something or someone the ultimate thing in life. Some people may make their careers their ultimate object of trust and worship. They will sacrifice things in order to have a career. That's often what “great” people have done. That means their careers were their gods, their true king. Some people will make money or power their god. Others will make a relationship—a husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend, or even a child—their god. Others will make comfort, safety, entertainment their god. What we trust the most, what we focus on the most, what we love and obey the most is the object of our worship, our true God. Jesus says that we must “go after” him. He is the God-man, the only way to God the Father, the one who gives us God the Spirit. And only he can do that.

⁵ Ibid., 1287.

The question for us today is, Are we really going after Jesus? Are we truly following him? Or are we just paying lip-service to Jesus? Are we doing our token rituals, like coming to church on Sunday morning? Do we really love Jesus?

When thinking about all of this, I think of the beginning of the book of Revelation. Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and it's hard to understand because it's full of symbols and fantastical imagery. But there are some clearer parts of the book. Jesus tells the apostle John to send letters to seven representative churches, all located in the province of Asia Minor, which is part of what we now call Turkey. This is what Jesus says to the church in Ephesus:

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev. 2:2–5).

The church had abandoned its love for Jesus. It wasn't doing the things that it used to do for Jesus. And Jesus says that if they don't change their ways, he will remove that church. And that happens. Churches often lose their passion for Jesus. Worship becomes a ritual. People mumble the words of hymns and songs instead of making a joyful noise. People stop telling others about Jesus. Churches like that eventually die.

Now, I want to say something very clearly to this church: If *we* don't truly love Jesus, if *we* don't obey him in all that we do, if *we* don't do things here with passion and excellence, and if *we* don't evangelize, this local church could easily die. Frankly, I think that's what was happening in this church for a long time. We need to consider whether we're truly following Jesus.

I want to say something else, this time for people who may not yet be Christians. Jesus' call to be willing to suffer, to renounce all that we have in this life, and even to die for his sake may sound cruel and abusive. It may sound sadistic, even. Why would anyone do that?

There are at least two reasons. The first reason is that Jesus doesn't just call us to suffer and die. He also promises people that if they follow him, they will receive priceless treasures. I just quoted Revelation 2, in which Jesus chastise a church. Consider verse 7: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of

the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” What that means is that Jesus will give his followers eternal life. They will live in a paradise with him forever. One day, when Jesus returns, he will recreate the universe to be perfect. There won’t be suffering or pain, loneliness or depression, natural disasters or wars. There won’t be any death. Everything will be right. Christianity makes the bold claim that those who follow Jesus will live forever. But it also makes the bold claim that only followers of Jesus will live in that perfect world. All others who don’t follow Jesus will be condemned by God. It won’t be heaven on earth for them, but an eternity of separation from God, which we call hell.

The second reason why Jesus can demand that his followers be willing to suffer and die is because Jesus first suffered and died. Jesus is the Son of God, who has always existed. Yet he added a second nature, becoming a human being, more than two thousand years ago. He did that to live the life that you and I don’t live, a perfect life of loving God the Father and worshipping him, loving him and loving others. Only Jesus lived a sinless life. He did that so that all who follow him could be credited with that moral perfection. And Jesus became a man to die in place of men and women, to take the penalty that they deserve for their sin. But Jesus didn’t die for everyone. He died for those who would love, trust, and follow him. Only those who realize that he is the Son of God, who are willing to come under his rule, who trust that his works are the only way to be right with God, will live with him in that paradise. Only they will have their sins forgiven. Only they will be adopted into God’s family. Only they will receive the Holy Spirit, the third person of God who comes to dwell in Christians and give them the power to follow Jesus. Jesus suffered and died to save us, and all who are saved must be willing to follow Jesus, even if it means suffering and dying. It will cost us to follow Jesus, but salvation doesn’t cost us anything. It cost Jesus everything.

There’s another letter in Revelation, to a church in the city of Laodicea, which was known for its wealth. It was a center of banking. It was known for producing black wool and garments. It was also a center of medicine, known for a certain salve that was supposed to help eye diseases. This is what Jesus says to that church, in Revelation 3:15–22:

¹⁵ “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness

may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. ²¹ The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The church apparently didn't see their need for Jesus. They didn't realize that, in reality, they were “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” They trusted in their money, their clothing industry, their ability to cure eyes. But the truth is that none of those things made them right with God. None of those things could grant them eternal life. Jesus says they had become useless. They were neither hot, like the hot springs in the city of Hierapolis, which was six miles to the north. Nor were they cold, like the cold water that came from the city of Colosse, ten miles to the east. They were a mixture that wasn't good for anything. They were salt that lost its saltiness, and Jesus was going to spit them out if they didn't repent. But if they turned to Jesus for salvation, they would sit on his throne with them. They would dine with him. They would be at peace.

That is true for us today. If we don't realize our need for Jesus and live for him, we will be spit out, cast out, condemned. But if we turn to Jesus and follow him, we will live with him forever.

Before I conclude, I want to say this to Christians: There are many ways we can lose our saltiness. One is a lack of commitment. That is one of the great problems of our age. We don't commit to much of anything, other than ourselves. If you're committed to Christ, you will be committed to a local church. You will show up each week unless you're really sick or out of town. You will join the church, coming under the authority of its leaders and ultimately the whole congregation. You will serve the church.

Another way to lose saltiness is through lack of love for Jesus and for others. Selfishness and a lack of care for God and others will cause us to be hypocrites.

Yet another way to lose saltiness is anti-intellectualism. We won't use our minds to love God. We won't read the Bible and think carefully of how it applies to all of life. We won't train our minds to learn to think about how to share the gospel, or how to work Christianly, or how to do marriage Christianly, or raise our kids Christianly.

Another way to lose our saltiness is materialism, loving stuff more than Jesus. Or Hedonism, seeking pleasure in created things instead of finding our greatest pleasures in Christ. We are drowning in entertainment and trivial pursuits, which cause our saltiness to erode.

And there are so many other ways to lose a distinctive Christian character. What is the best way to remain “salty”? We must fix our eyes on Christ. This is what Paul commanded Christians to do, in Colossians 3:1–4:

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

We must be reminded of the truth, about who Jesus is, our need for him, about how this life is fleeting, and that we are called to love God and to obey him. If we don’t fix our minds on these things, we will be useless. This reminds me of something that C. S. Lewis wrote in his famous book, *Mere Christianity*:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.⁶

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and you will get God and paradise, and your life will be great. If you don’t live for him, you won’t get God, paradise, or greatness.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: HarperOne, 2001), 134.