

“The Cost of Discipleship”

(St. Luke 14:25-35)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, our Gospel today is a fantastic summary on being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's be clear about the word “disciple,” to be a disciple is to be a hearer, a listener, and a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It means that you “come after” Jesus or that you go after or behind Him (Barth, *Dogmatics IV. 3.2: 625*). This call of discipleship binds a man to the One who calls him (ibid, 536). And make no mistake about it Christian, Jesus has called you and chosen you to be His disciple as you were baptized into Christ, you are one with Him and now you follow Him! Bonhoeffer says that “discipleship is commitment to Christ (*Discipleship*, 59).” Bonhoeffer elaborates: “*What is said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That's all...Former things are left behind; they are completely given up. The disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity...(ibid, 58).*”

To say that Bonhoeffer is challenging here is an understatement, but he is being completely consistent with our Gospel in Luke 14, the very words of Jesus. Jesus is as plain as day when He describes what discipleship *does*. The disciple of Christ...

- 1) **Hates** (verse 26) his family members and even himself or herself.
- 2) **Bears** (verse 27) their own cross.
- 3) **Renounces** (verse 33) all that he has.

These three things make disciples “**salt**” (vs. 34-35). Salt is a preservative, it checks corruption in the world; it preserves the world so that darkness would not overcome light; so that Jesus is still known in a world that is so lost and confused. So soak it in Christian: If you are truly a disciple of Jesus, you must and you will hate, bear, renounce, and you will be, and actually are already, salt!

But the call to discipleship is beyond difficult. Many commentators soft-peddle what Jesus says about hating your family and hating yourself. There are many who say that the word “hate” may simply be reduced to “do not love more than (e.g., L.T. Johnson (*The Gospel of Luke*, 229-30); Robertson and his words about reducing this simply to the element of choice (*Word Pictures*, 200), even Cyril of Alexandria (ACC, New Testament III Luke, 240, etc.).” So as long as you do not love your family or yourself MORE THAN God, then you keep these words of the Lord. But we must be very careful about this reductionism. When Jesus made a whip and drove the moneychangers out of the temple court (John 2:13f), I don't think that those being driven out were thinking about shades of love. When Jesus told Peter: “Get thee behind me Satan (Mt

16:23)!" we can be fairly confident that Peter didn't feel especially loved at that moment. When we are commanded in God's Word to hate evil (Amos 5:15) and to crucify our own sinful nature (Gal 5:24) which word "crucify" always refers to a violent putting to death, these are words that do *not* describe -- at least in the first round of considerations -- degrees or levels of love. They are harsh realities. It is better -- beyond the soft-peddling -- to know that God calls you and me to love and to hate at the same time.

"So the hate required for discipleship goes together with our love...to our parents, etc., that love which understands any evil in them [would]...with the help of Jesus, remove it (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 785)." If your child who you love so much that you would give your life for them, starts to engage in destructive behavior, how many of you parents would coddle and permit the destructive behavior so as to turn into perversion the idea of "unconditional love"? No, instead while you absolutely love your child, you would with all your might hate and go to battle against anything that threatens their well-being. And you all know that what I'm describing while being the right thing is a very, very difficult thing indeed. You've heard the saying, "Love-hate relationship." Well, this is the normal Christian life. This is the life of discipleship.

This is also true for bearing your cross. You must bear the cross that the Lord permits to weigh upon you, you must bear many burdens in this life from within you and from outside of you that come upon you. As you bear your cross, **and continue to follow Jesus in spite of these things**, then you are a disciple of Christ. If you do not bear these things, and you use them as an excuse to run away from God, then you are not a disciple. Calvin says, "*The reason why many persons yield to very slight temptations is, that they have pictured to themselves unmixed enjoyment, as if they were to be always in the shade and at their ease (Harmony of the Evangelists, on verses 28-32).*" How true! How many so-called Christians believe that to be a Christian is supposed to be to enter a life of ease because God is loving and gracious and kind?

Luther says simply, "**Whoever is no crucianus [one who is always crucifying himself]...is also no christianus [Christian]; he is not like his Master Christ** (St. L. II:467 quoted in Pieper's *Dogmatics*, III:71)."

This is a call to what is painful. An ancient church father asserted, "*we learn for sure that cross and death consist in nothing else than the complete putting to death of self-will (Symeon The New Theologian, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament III Luke, 241).*"

Indeed, where there is a cross, death is always in view; so to carry a cross everyday -- and this is the significance of the verb; this is an ongoing thing -- is to practice what leads to death over and over again. One Lutheran exegete says simply, *“One bears one’s own cross only in preparation for one’s own crucifixion and death (Just, Concordia Commentary, Luke 9:51-24:53, 579).*

And I’ve only reviewed the first two signs of discipleship, there is still the third one: **renouncing**. Let me give you Basil the Great to cover this one: *“Whoever would truly be a follower of God must break the bonds of attachment to this life. This is done through complete separation from and forgetfulness of old habits (ACC, Luke, 242).”*

So what do you think thus far? Our thoughts and feelings are assuredly all over the map are they not? What is going on here with these words on discipleship? Let’s be clear about what our Lord is **not** saying:

- 1) God is not contradicting Himself. You may have asked, “but doesn’t God command us to love, and esp. honor our father and mother,” etc. Of course He does and all of this still holds.
- 2) God is not saying that we are not to do our duty. If He has stationed you in holy vocation to be a husband, father, wife, mother, then be these things and be them faithfully as you follow Jesus!
- 3) God is not contradicting the fact that you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus apart from the works of the Law! As a matter of fact if not for God’s grace and the gift of faith, there would be no discipleship!
- 4) God is not in any way teaching that Christian sanctification comes through your self-effort and determination. God is not saying, “I’ll get you started on the road by forgiving your sins, but the rest is up to you if you produce the right commitment, surrender or decision.” No! No! No!

So we must know the key to these words on discipleship and the key is found in the two illustrations or parables that come between Jesus’ words on hating and bearing; and right before what Jesus says about renouncing. Without these two illustrations, we would never properly understand discipleship.

The two illustrations and parables have a common theme: **“count the cost before embarking (Just, 581).”**

So let's do that in terms of taking in the ramifications of the parables themselves: one is about building and the other is about going to war.

In my family HGTV is big. If you come over, there's a good chance that you'll see "Love It or List It" or "Brother vs. Brother" or "Selling New York/L.A./London, etc."...these shows are almost as exciting as Indiana Jones, Star Wars, or Star Trek (I said, "almost"). My favorite scenarios are when there's this big time crunch in building or remodeling and it's always the same story: something goes wrong. You know the saying about the best laid plans. When it comes to building, things NEVER go the way you plan. The bathroom counter was cut too long, we discover the extra expense for new electrical wiring, we discover that that wall that was going to give us an open space is load-bearing and can't be touched, we discover mold or asbestos, etc. etc. This is the nature of building. Now sit down and predict it all...carefully consider as our Lord clearly teaches.

Listen to the careful consideration of Francis Pieper (Volume III, p. 70): *"Furthermore, since the flesh of Christians lusts against God's Word, will, and order and refuses to submit to suffering, bearing the cross means self-denial (Matt. 16:24); it means that we must renounce everything that interferes with our following Christ (Luke 14:33)..." and yet there is as Pieper says, a part of us that "refuses to submit."*

And when you take into account this reality before you start building the life of discipleship, you and I are overwhelmed. What are the chances that something will go wrong? What are the odds that I will sin against the Lord? The fact is that in accord with this list – like building – things will not go the way we want them to go and we will cry out as Paul did, *"sinful man that I am (Rom. 7)!"*

Sit down and count the cost and you will find that as much as your baptism-given faith wants to follow Jesus, you can feel the weight of your sin overwhelming you before you even take the first step. And if you don't know this; if this does not completely humble you and you rather delude yourself into thinking that you're capable of any of it by yourself...then this first test from this first parable will lead to ridicule: You said you were a disciple! And you failed!

But the second test is even more severe and it is illustrated by war. If building is unpredictable, then war is 10 times more so while also being chaotic. If building can lead to ridicule, then war – often – leads to defeat. My dad told me a lot about his experiences as a Marine in WW II in Okinawa and other Pacific Islands, but there were some stories I knew that he would never divulge...they were just too painful.

From our standpoint, the preparation for building and going to war is overwhelming to the extent that we must realize that none of this will be done on our own power. Everything must be turned around: discipleship is not something you do; but something that Jesus does in and through you:

Bonhoeffer: *“Jesus’ commandment is harsh, inhumanly harsh for someone who resists it. Jesus’ commandment is gentle and not difficult for someone who willingly accepts it. ‘His commandments are not burdensome’ (1 John 5:3). Jesus’ commandment has nothing to do with forced spiritual cures. Jesus demands nothing from us without giving us the strength to comply. Jesus’ commandment never wishes to destroy life, but rather to preserve, strengthen, and heal life (Discipleship, 39).”*

Where does such a life of discipleship come from? It comes from Jesus the author and perfecter of your faith (Hebrews 12:2). *“The passion of Jesus [the suffering that HE endured for you – through HIS hatred of evil, through HIS bearing of THE cross, through HIS renunciation of anything that would get in the way of saving you dear Christian is] the overcoming of evil by divine love [this] is the only solid foundation for the disciples’ obedience (Discipleship, 136).”*

One would never begin this new life of discipleship without the resources to complete it. And poor sinners who can never trust in themselves trust in the ONLY ONE who can give a proper counting of the cost...the ONE who builds His church perfectly and without a hitch; the ONE who went into war knowing full well His power over the devil; the ONE who drew up the terms of peace from the foundation of the world. He is your forgiveness. He is your life. He is your discipleship.

Come...hear the call again...to “come after Jesus” and rejoice in your baptism that God performed covering everything that would keep you from following Jesus...come...hear the call again to “come after Jesus” and receive the body and blood of Christ so as to receive not only forgiveness, but the very presence of Jesus to live in and through you, His disciple. He knows how to conduct discipleship...He leads us to despair of ourselves, to even hate our own sin; and then He leads us to the greatest hope and confidence: “I follow Jesus; He is with me; and I am with Him; in His Name, by His Word, in my Baptism, having received His Supper...it is not a matter of whether I will be, because I already am, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ and as for the cost, that is something He has covered for me and now even in death, my life in Christ overflows!”