

Parables of Jesus

Message 6

What it Takes to Follow Christ

Luke 14:25-35

The Kingdom of God

Last week we studied the parable of the Great Supper. It is a story about a generous man who prepared a lavish feast and invited all his friends to celebrate with him. We were shocked to discover that his friends did not want to come. They *all* had excuses – lame excuses – why they could not attend. It was a huge insult and a devastating disappointment, so the host combed the neighborhood to find anyone who was willing to come and join him in his banquet. In the end he had a splendid party with the poor and crippled who filled the house.

We saw that this parable is a picture of the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom is very much like a party. Sometimes we get the idea that sinners have all the fun and Christians are rather dour, but it's not true. Sure, there are some sins which are pleasurable for a while, but sin eventually destroys you. The Kingdom of God, by contrast, is an eternal party. It's also true that life as a Christian is not always easy, but at its core real Christianity is joyful and deeply satisfying. This parable paints a picture of God's Kingdom as a wonderful place only a fool would refuse. Unfortunately, this world has fools in it, like the busy friends in the parable. You are surrounded by people who are so foolish they will turn down an invitation into God's Kingdom so they can do some other silly thing.

The Kingdom of God is a fabulous deal. When you are invited to a feast you just come. You don't have to cook the food or clean the house. You don't have to decorate the banquet room or hire a band – the host sees to all that. And so it is in the Kingdom of God. You don't have to do anything at all to prepare for the feast – you just show up. Jesus saves us by His own power. He died for us, went to heaven to prepare a place for us, sent the Holy Spirit for us, and calls us into His Kingdom. But although we need do nothing to prepare the Kingdom party, there is something we must do in order to share this feast. There is an entrance requirement to get into God's Kingdom, and today's passage tells us what it is.

The Entrance Requirement

Now some of you are already bristling a bit when you hear me say there is an entrance requirement to get into God's Kingdom. This does not sound like the loving God we know. This goes against the principle that we are saved by grace, doesn't it? Medieval Christianity laid a mountain of good works on the souls of men and women so that they could hardly be saved, even with the benefit of purgatory. *Sola gratia* was the glory of the Reformation – the rediscovery that we cannot save ourselves by our good works, but salvation can come only by the grace of God. So how dare I say that there is an entrance requirement to becoming a Christian! If this were true, that would mean that some people may not be qualified to enter – they will be unable to become Christians. What a preposterous claim! Exclusive, intolerant, divisive, mean – what sort of twisted religion would spread such an idea? Who would teach such a doctrine? Jesus would.

Let's not water down the scripture. When we approach a text like this, we are tempted to try to "interpret" it. Jesus says plainly here there are some who cannot be His disciples. He is not saying it will be more difficult for some than for others. He is not recognizing that we all come with various levels of intelligence, different skills, diverse experiences, many kinds of home experiences – and that these may play a role in accepting His teaching. He is not saying it will take some longer to believe the gospel than others. No, He flatly announces that some people cannot be His disciples. If this sounds elitist, exclusive, or even mean, so be it. Let's not patronize Jesus by assuming that He did not mean what He said.

On the other hand, let's be sure that we do understand what He said. Notice that the entrance requirement includes none of the qualifications we might include if we were organizing a Kingdom, or even something much less imposing. What about a roommate? When you chose a roommate, didn't you think about whether he or she would have habits and interests that correspond to yours? If you are a relaxed, casual person, you do not want to live with some uptight guy who insists on washing the dishes every day. If you are a neat, organized person, you do not want to live with a slob who throws his clothes all over the room. If you smoke, you want to live with someone who will tolerate your habit, but if you don't you may prefer to have a roommate who doesn't as well. And wouldn't it be annoying to live with someone who sets the alarm for 7:00 every day if you don't have class until 10:00 and like to sleep until 9:55? When we chose to associate with people, we have very definite entrance requirements for them.

Think about fraternities and sororities. The whole point of these houses is to give people the opportunity to live with others similar to them. They can associate with other beautiful/handsome, cool, sexy, fun students like themselves. Universities choose their students based on intelligence and academic performance. If you want to join the choir you have to demonstrate a certain level of musical ability, and of course the football team is very selective according to athletic ability. This is the way we separate people in our society, but there is not a hint of any of these criteria in Jesus' words in this passage. There is nothing at all exclusive or mean in Jesus' entrance requirement. In fact, theoretically *anyone* could meet it! Let's look more closely Jesus' requirement.

Hating Your Family

In verse 26 Jesus provides a list. All you have to do to follow Jesus is to hate seven things: your father, your mother, your wife, your children, your brothers, your sisters, and your life. That's it! Just do this and you can be a disciple of Jesus. Now what kind of requirement is this? Why would Jesus demand that you hate your family before you can become His disciple?

First, let's observe that this is another case where Jesus is speaking hyperbolically. He is exaggerating in order to make His point memorable. He does not mean hate as in a venomous loathing of your family. After all, the fifth commandment teaches us to honor our parents. Later in the New Testament we are instructed to care for our relatives. Men must support their wives and children, and women must assist their husbands in their work. Parents must invest enormous time and money in training their children, and children must care for their parents in their old age. You also must care for any widows in your family. All this is covered in the scripture – so Jesus is not speaking of rebellion or hostility to your family. If hostility is not in view here, what is? Jesus is setting up a contrast here – a contrast of love for family versus following Jesus. Becoming Jesus' disciple is the thing which is opposed to love for family.

So far this evening we have used several terms interchangeably: membership in God's Kingdom, following Jesus, and being a disciple of Jesus. These parables use all these terms and they do all point to the same condition, but they each have a different nuance. "Kingdom of God" directs our focus to God as our King and our life together as a shared community. Following Jesus is very similar to being a disciple. The word disciple means "learner". A disciple is some one who is learning a new way of life. In the ancient world if you wished to become a philosopher or a rabbi (a religious teacher) you would find a man you respected and learn from him. In those days you did not sign up for a course on Pharisaism or Stoicism. You found a Pharisee or a Stoic whom you respected and followed him around. You became a follower, literally first, then as you learned his life, you became a follower in that you imitated him. Over time, your life began to look like his.

Now of course if you did this, if your life began to take on the qualities of your master, you would grow increasingly different from the person you used to be. You would become increasingly different from those among whom you grew up. You would do different things than your parents and siblings. Your values would be different than theirs. You could still care for them. You could still respect them. But if you valued their opinions more than your master's, you would never become his disciple, would you? In that case you should simply stay home and live as you were reared.

Jesus' twelve disciples fit this ancient pattern fairly well. They followed Jesus around all over Galilee. They absorbed His teaching, they learned His life – they began to preach and heal people as He did. If they had insisted on getting home to their families every night by dark, or putting in a full day on the fishing boat with their dad, obviously they could never have become Jesus' disciples. But by following Him for three years, they did in fact learn His life – and when He left earth for heaven, they continued to live as He did and taught their followers to do likewise.

So by now it should be apparent that Jesus was merely stating the obvious when He said that to become His disciple you have to hate your family. If you are going to become His disciple, your life – your activities and your values – will become like His. And when this conflicts with the way your family does things, you must choose Jesus' way over your family's way. If you can't choose Jesus' way over your family's way, you cannot learn His way of life.

But although this is simple and fairly obvious to comprehend, it is very difficult to put into practice. Family conflict can be an ugly sight. Parents do not respond well to their children living differently than they. Wives are threatened when their husbands change the way they live, and husbands do not appreciate it when wives pay more attention to some other man than they. Arguments usually ensue, sometimes followed by threats or worse. Children have been disinherited and marriages have been broken when one member chose to follow Jesus. In certain cases, especially in non-Christian cultures, families have killed those members who chose to follow Christ. When this happens, the starkness of the contrast between Christ and the family becomes more evident, and we can see why Jesus used hyperbole to emphasize the significance of this contrast.

If we look back now at the previous parable, we can see that Jesus is really just building on the point He made there. In that parable the invited guests cared more about their property and families than entering the feast. Since they cared more about those things, they will not get to join the feast. As long as they continue to care more about those things, they *cannot* join the feast. They cannot be in two places at once. If they are inspecting fields or testing oxen or providing private entertainment for their wives, they are not in the banquet hall. The only way to get to the feast is to leave those other things behind. Those things are very good and desirable. There is nothing wrong with wanting them. But if you are going to follow Jesus, you must want Him even more. What will overcome your business interest, or your affection for your wife, or your family concern? Only a more powerful love. Only when your love for Jesus is much stronger than your love for your family will you follow Him. Only when your love for Jesus makes your family love seem like hate in comparison will you become Jesus' disciple.

Hating Your Life

But there is still the seventh item on Jesus' list of requirements. You must also hate your own life. The next verse really just expands this point. Taking up the cross did not refer to putting on a piece of jewelry in the morning. It was not a phrase that merely indicated undertaking some hardship. Crosses meant only one thing – death. Crucifixion was used because it was the most agonizing and humiliating form of death. The Romans did not become masters of the whole civilized world by their charming manners and

striking good looks! They did not generally delight in killing, but they demanded order and obedience. Anyone who would disturb the *pax romana* was made a public example of the stupidity of opposing Rome. They hung their enemies up on crosses naked to die a slow, painful, and humiliating death so that no one would dare to follow the rebels' footsteps.

In essence, Jesus is saying you have to be willing to die if you wish to follow Him. If you value your life more than following Jesus, you cannot follow Him. Notice it does not say you can only partly follow Him. Nor does it say it will be more difficult to follow Him. No, Jesus says it is *impossible* to follow Him if you value your life. So what good is it to follow Christ if you are dead? What kind of a life is that? It would be a poor trade if you died and rotted in the grave. But if there is an afterlife, as we studied two weeks ago, in which Jesus' followers go to heaven and the rest go to eternal torment in hell, the trade off is pretty good. Brief suffering now will get you eternal bliss, while a life of your own pursuits will get you eternal suffering. You would be an idiot to chose eternal suffering. From an eternal perspective, giving up your life here is a real bargain.

Are you with me here? Are you willing to die for Christ so that you may gain eternal life? This might seem like a remote concept for us, but for many people this is an immediate issue. Here is an excerpt from a few years ago in *World Magazine*, a Christian news magazine. The article is about present day persecution of Christians for their faith.

Three years ago in a secret house church near the city of Ahwaz, Iran, Akbar realized that his life was about to irrevocably change. On Jan. 11, 1997, he was baptized. As he stepped into the cool water of the impromptu baptismal pool, he shuddered. Once a faithful Muslim, he had covertly converted to Christianity – a life-changing act in any country but a dangerous one in Iran. Akbar had seen Christian converts hanged in the street and his relatives jailed and beaten for talking about their faith.

Many non-Muslims in Iran are able to practice their faith, but converts are treated differently. "There is no persecution in Iran," a political science professor at Tehran University insists in an interview outside Iran. "It is not as bad as you reporters in the West think," he continued. (Still, he demanded anonymity.) But what about some 10,000 Muslims who have converted to Christianity? "Ah, that is different. They will die." Both Iran's Shariah (the religious law) and Iran's civil code punish "crimes against God" with death.

So pervasive is the climate of fear that refugees are afraid to have their names published. As a result, all of the names of Iranian Christians in this article, including Akbar's, have been changed.

Beginning in January 1998, police arrested him repeatedly; he realized they were building a case against him. He lost his job with the National Oil Company. His wife and daughter were threatened and harassed. Their middle-class existence was ending.

On June 28, 1999, Akbar and his family boarded a bus with a single suitcase and a cover story about visiting relatives in Tabriz. The next day in Tabriz they met three of Akbar's Christian cousins, who introduced them to a Kurdish smuggler who promised to take them to Turkey. He charged them \$1,250, a sum that devoured almost all of their savings. But would it buy their freedom?

The family arrived in Van, a hot Turkish city near the edge of an undrinkable lake, on July 4, 1999.

For the first time they felt free. They had made it, but the real ordeal was just beginning.¹

Akbar gave up his job, his home, his friends, all his possessions and savings, his security for Jesus. He subjected his family to grave danger and great discomfort. Will they survive? Perhaps not. Perhaps they will be sent back to Iran and executed for “crimes against God”. Will it be worth it? What would you do? If you could have your family, your job, and your home back – and be spared execution – only for renouncing Christ, would you do it? Is eternal life worth death now?

Counting the Cost

Following Jesus is a very serious matter. It changes everything about your life. If you decide to follow Jesus, your parents might torment you. Your friends might laugh at you. You might not get the exciting job you dream of. You might be passed over for promotion. You might never have enough money to buy a new car or vacation on the ski slopes. You go to a mission field and be killed for your faith. Who knows what Jesus might call you to do? That is why Jesus says following Him is not something you may begin casually. If you wish to follow Jesus, you must count the cost.

All about us are examples of people who began a project and were unable to finish it. A few years ago Allentown tore down the old Hess’s department store to build a stadium. It was going to house the new hockey franchise and be the focal point for rejuvenating that part of Allentown. But for several years all we had was a big hole in the ground. The engineers failed to discover in advance the unstable ground on that site, which made building much more expensive. They did not accurately count the cost. Jesus’ point is that you must count the cost before you undertake any significant enterprise. In the case of a building project, you might run out of money and be forced to quit before you are finished. The unfinished building will be a monument to your foolishness. In the case of war, the stakes are much higher. You might lose your kingdom, or even your life, if you fail to estimate accurately your own strength versus your enemy’s.

Likewise, if you would follow Jesus, you must count the cost. You do not want to begin following Him, only to give up later when His life conflicts with yours. You will look very foolish if for a couple of months you declare you are giving up this world’s pleasures to follow Jesus, only to revert to your old life later. People will laugh at you. Neither do you want to persist in your claim to be a Christian while you are living your own life. That is hypocrisy – and everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, hates a hypocrite. You have to decide now if eternal life is worth giving up your life here.

Most of us here tonight are unlikely to face physical death anytime soon. For us, the issues are more like those in last week’s parable. What might keep us out of the banquet, what might keep us from following Jesus is the other things in life. Love for family and friends, love for a job, love of good grades, love of leisure time, love of sleep and food and TV – in short, the pleasures of American life. These are not bad things, but unless your love for Christ is so much greater than your love for these things that you essentially hate them, you cannot be a disciple of Christ. You can be a hypocrite, you can be a fraud, you can be a false Christian, but you cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

You must desire to wake up each morning and, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, say,

I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the

¹ *World Magazine*, September 30, 2000; Vol. 15, no. 38; by Richard Minter in Van, Turkey; pp. 35-36.

will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Is this your desire? Do you wish to abandon your own interests and live only for Christ? Do you wish to be owned by someone who loved you enough to die for you? Are you willing to trade absolute control of your life for submission to Jesus who bought you with His own blood? If so, then welcome to the feast! As you follow Christ you will become more like Him and you will gain eternal life. If this is not your desire, you are in grave danger. You might fool me, or your home pastor, or even your friends, but if you are holding back on Christ, He knows, and will reject you. Pray with me now, that God would change your heart so that you will hate your current life and become Christ's disciple.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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