

The Cost of Discipleship

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series

October 29, 2023

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Mark 8:34–9:1 (NRSV)

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**

³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” ⁹ ¹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Luke 14:25–33 (NRSV)

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ **Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.** ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see 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 will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Are we ready to count the cost . . . and commit?

Have you ever volunteered for a project without really realizing what you were taking on. Perhaps people were afraid to tell you the whole story for fear that you’d back out if you knew the truth. Or perhaps in your own enthusiasm, you simply failed to think it through. At one time or another, most of us have probably said to ourselves, “What have I gotten myself into!?” In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus ensures that no one could accuse him of misleading his disciples about the path they had chosen.

The passage is another in the long section of Luke’s Gospel that narrates Jesus’ final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In 9:51, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is impossible to tell from Luke’s account exactly how long Jesus took to reach Jerusalem, but the journey was by no means direct. Along the way, Jesus teaches and heals. He sends out seventy others who are to go ahead of him to every town Jesus planned to visit himself. At times, Jesus withdraws from the growing crowds; at others, he is beset by large crowds. In today’s passage, Jesus has attracted large crowds. But in the midst of their enthusiasm, Jesus turns to confront them.

Hating??

Jesus pulls no punches with the crowds. They may be caught up in the excitement of Jesus’ journey, but they better understand the cost of discipleship: there can be no higher priority than Jesus. If Mom calls and says to give up the journey and come home, Jesus warns that you better be prepared to hang up the phone. Jesus comes before mother . . . or father . . . or siblings . . . or even life itself. Jesus’ talk of “hate” is not about malice or hostility toward our parents nor is it about self-loathing. It is about

being willing to turn away from anyone or anything that would pull us away from Jesus. But there is more.

For you and me, Jesus' talk about carrying a cross (v. 27) is a figure of speech. For anyone in the crowd that day, the cross was a stark reality. Some in the crowds would have been old enough to remember thirty years before when the Romans had crucified thousands of Galilean Jews. The rest would have been told the story. The horror of crucifixion was a very real possibility for anyone who continued on with Jesus. You and I may not face death as a consequence of our faith in Christ, though some Christians still do. For us, the question is whether we can even recognize that there is a cost to our discipleship. If we believe there is no cost, then we are not hearing Jesus. As he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 14:35). PHEME PERKINS writes:

In addition to solidarity with the martyr church, Christians should consider whether there are situations in which public pressure may lead them to deny their faith. We may feel that pressure at any age. Many adults know that Christian faith is not always welcome in the workplace, so they learn to cloak their Christian identity when morally questionable practices seem to be the order of the day. Children and youth can feel the pinch, too. Coaches sometimes threaten to throw kids off teams if they insist on attending church rather than practice on Sunday morning (even Easter Sunday!). Compared to the dangers faced by a martyr church, our discomfort with religion in the public forum may seem trivial. But fidelity to Christ in such situations is not unimportant. As Fred Craddock pointed out in an address to pastors, the reality for most Christians in this country is seldom a life-and-death matter.

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—"Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all."

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25¢ here and 50¢ there....

Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25¢ at a time.¹

Jesus Knows?

Today's study leads to a question that we often end up discussing at length in my Bible Academy classes. The question comes down to this: "What did Jesus know and when did he know it?" How much did he really know about the road ahead?

When it comes to Jesus, we struggle to understand our proclamation that Jesus is fully God and fully human. It is a worthwhile struggle but, in the end, we cannot really make sense of it. When we try too hard, we end up making regrettable mistakes.

Many of the people in my classes tend to over-emphasize Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity. For them, when Jesus warns his disciples about the road ahead, it is because he sees the future in much the same way that you and I know what is coming in a movie we've already seen. After all, if God knows the future and Jesus is God, then isn't it logical to believe that Jesus knew the future in a way that you or I never could? It may seem logical, but it is not correct. In a letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . in human likeness" (2:7).

Jesus was not born knowing how to read. He had to be taught the same way all children are taught. When Jesus asked his disciples whether they were ready to bear the cost of discipleship, he was not looking into some sort of crystal ball. Jesus knew that he was on a collision course with the temple leadership and the Romans. And he knew that he would not abandon the vocation given him by the Father. Jesus knew that he would be "obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). But would his disciples?

¹ PHEME PERKINS, ["The Gospel of Mark,"](#) in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 628–629.

Jesus was such a great teacher. So often, he would make his point by telling a story and usually a brief story at that. Jesus didn't use parables because he wanted to obscure his message but because he wanted to illuminate his message. We can participate in Jesus' stories in a way that we could never participate in a saying or some sort of theological explanation.

After confronting the crowd with the cost of discipleship, Jesus tells two brief parables to illustrate a simple point: only fools would start a project without being pretty sure they could finish it. None of us would build a new house without understanding the costs and doing all we could to ensure that we could finish the job. Similarly, using a military analogy, Jesus notes that no wise king would wage war without the prospect of victory.

But could we ever be sure that we can pay the cost of discipleship? No, of course not. Peter would deny Jesus three times. But still, our call to discipleship is to be all consuming. This can be no half-hearted commitment. No part of our lives can be excluded from this commitment, including our wallets and relationships and, as Jesus pointedly notes, our possessions (v. 33).³ I sometimes hear people (including myself!) use the term "committed Christian." I guess I know what we mean, but it is deeply regrettable that we feel the need to say it. "Committed Christian" ought to be a redundancy. Let us pray that it is so with each of us.

A few things to think about this week

1. What do you think some people mean when they use the phrase "committed Christian?" What are they trying to convey? In your own experience what are some visible differences between those who seem more committed disciples of Jesus

The Cost of Discipleship

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April, 1945, for his part in an attempt on Hitler's life. *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) is his most well-known book. Had Bonhoeffer been in the crowd on the day that Jesus turned and confronted his disciples, he would have understood Jesus' talk of crosses. Listen to these words, written as the Nazi darkness fell across Germany:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . ."

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field . . . it is the pearl of great price . . . it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him. . . . Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. . . . it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. . . . Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life."

*Bonhoeffer's words moved my heart deeply even as I transcribed them.
Your heart will be moved also.*

Spend some time with this book.

²from Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Dr. Culpepper's observations on this passage were a big help in the preparation of this study.

³The Greek verb translated "give up" literally means "to say farewell to," as in waving goodbye!

Christ and those who seem not? What leads some people to be more committed than others?

2. Make a list of ten “costs” of discipleship that might be faced by a person in our church. How hard is it to come up with ten? In his reflections on today’s passage from Luke, Dr. Culpepper writes “Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith had progressed steadily in recent years. As a result, many see no tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of middle-class Americans.” Do you agree with Dr. Culpepper? If so, how could we begin to recognize the tension, to recognize the cost of discipleship? If you don’t agree with Dr. Culpepper, why not? What do you see as being the major points of tension that *do* exist between Christ’s teachings and our ambitions?
3. In their book, *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas and Willimon take a very different position. They hold that whereas it was once difficult to see much difference between Christianity and American culture, that has all changed. Instead, Christians are having to make their way in an increasingly hostile culture. Hence, Christians are “resident aliens” more so than ever before! Discuss what you think they mean. They hold that this change is an opportunity for the Christianity we practice to become more authentic. Do you agree?

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Esther*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

This Sunday: *World Religions in Seven Sentences – Christianity*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.