

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller
 SERMON: **Come at All Cost, But Count the Cost**
 SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:25-35
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 DATE: June 19, 2005

I love odd-numbered years—because there are no national elections. I never cease to be amazed at the fact that so many politicians in our country, of both major parties, are so willing to tell people whatever they want to hear: lower taxes, inflation, and crime rates; higher Social Security checks, farm prices, and employment. Anyone teetering on the brink of indecision is wooed by grandiose promises of less work, more money, and a happier life now and forevermore.

But Jesus was not much of a politician, even at the height of His popularity. His campaign managers, better known as the Twelve Apostles, spent much of their time arguing strategy and planning for new cabinet posts in the coming Kingdom of God. Imagine my interest when I learned this week of a recent archeological discovery which purports to be a memo to Jesus from James and John, Co-Chairpersons of the Committee to Establish the Kingdom of God, or CEKOG for short. I can't vouch for its genuineness, but I will read it so you can make up your own mind. Some of you may remember my archaeologist friend from years ago; you know how he wasn't always reliable, but he was always stimulating.

MEMO: To Jesus
FROM: James and John
RE: Campaign Strategy

The Logistics Sub-Committee has met three times and we respectfully submit the following suggestions as most conducive to a quick and victorious conclusion to our goal to establish the Kingdom of God on earth quickly and efficiently.

- 1. Make sure your press releases include something that each political and religious party in Israel wants to hear.*
- 2. Continue the healings and miracles—they're a great marketing strategy! We especially encourage you to try a feeding of 6,000, since you were so successful with the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000. And how about hiring the Temple band to escort you into Jerusalem?*
- 3. That was a nice touch to speak to the Samaritan woman at the well; we probably now have the Samaritan vote in our hip pocket. But next time, don't drink out of the same cup—if a photographer had caught that we'd be toast.*
- 4. Reassign Matthew to a less public position than Apostle. His background as a tax collector is not helping our image. We suggest another Judean of good reputation to take his place—someone of Judas' sterling caliber.*

5. *Set up a campaign headquarters in Jerusalem. Roaming around the country as you do makes communications difficult and irritates the press corps.*
6. *When in the Jerusalem area, stay at the King David Hotel. When you stay at Mary and Martha's B & B in Bethany, you miss the opportunity to meet many of the wheelers and dealers of society and leave the impression that you are a commoner.*
7. *Purchase a large quantity of chariot bumper stickers with our new logo, IXTHUS, as well as a quantity of T-Togas with your name on them.*
8. *If we (James and John) as Committee Co-Chairs were appointed first and second place in the coming Kingdom, the expected continuity in leadership would go a long way toward increasing people's confidence in the future. Furthermore, such recognition for your key staff would help increase the loyalty of your followers.*
9. *Challenge Pilate to a public debate. We feel you could beat him easily and the exposure would be invaluable. Besides, his Roman accent would probably produce a backlash against him.*
10. *Tone down your vituperative invectives and sardonic epithets against the Pharisees. Calling them "whitewashed tombs" and "snakes" sounds too much like Howard Dean describing Republicans.*

Now we have no record of what Jesus did with this memo, unless perhaps our Scripture text today is His response. Please stand with me as we read from Luke 14:25-35:

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear.""

It is late in Jesus' public ministry. He has just completed a series of successful evangelistic meetings across the Jordan and has now set His face resolutely toward Jerusalem. The crowds are steadily growing larger. The opportunity is ripe for a final recruitment drive that should

supply the critical mass of disciples needed for a final *coup de grace* to the wicked Sanhedrin and produce a tumultuous welcome from the citizens of Jerusalem. Just a few strategically placed miracles and the crowd would be His!

But then He blows it! Right there on the threshold of success He blows it! He turns to that tremendous crowd of eager listeners and speaks of the extremely high cost of discipleship. Instead of a positive message along the lines of “Here’s all you have to do to join My team . . . ,” He couches it in negative terms: “You *can’t* join my team *unless* you hate your family, carry your cross, and give up everything you have.” How does He expect to get ahead by discouraging people from following Him!

Can this be the same Lord who earlier said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” and “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst”? Can He now be turning away those He has spent so many months trying to recruit?

Yes, it is the same Jesus. And the reason His message here is different is that Jesus knows the hearts of these people, and He perceives that a large number of them are following Him for the wrong reasons. They are like those would-be disciples at Capernaum to whom Jesus said (John 6:26), “You seek me . . . because you ate of the loaves and were filled.” They wanted Messianic Medicare and Kingdom Food Stamps, but they did not want to be true disciples. And when He made the truth clear to them, we read in John 6:66, “From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

Faced with an enormous task to accomplish on the one hand and an uncertain crowd of volunteers on the other, Jesus chooses to do some thinning of the ranks, to separate the strong from the weak, the whole-hearted from the half-hearted, the true from the false. Like Gideon of old, He preferred a small, hard-core band of completely dedicated followers to a large and unwieldy army of unpredictable pretenders. Jesus “was never a huckster pushing a product while hiding the real costs in the fine print.”ⁱ

Today Jesus is once again a very popular figure. A national poll tells us that over 75 million Americans claim to have had a “born again” experience. The evangelical mega-church, virtually non-existent 25 years ago, is a common fixture on the religious landscape. Christian musical artists, authors, and speakers attract enormous crowds to concerts, seminars, and conventions. A million men gather for repentance and praise on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Should we not capitalize on all this enthusiasm and try to get as many “decisions” as possible? Frankly, that seems to be what a lot of churches have opted for. They have removed all the cultural barriers that make unchurched people uncomfortable—pews, hymns, choirs, doctrine, absolutes, lifestyle standards, etc. The goal is to adopt as much of the culture as possible so as to make the transition to disciple as easy as possible.

Frankly, we live in a day when a lot of evangelism is nothing more than “easy believism.” “Receive Christ and your problems are over. No more guilt, no more depression, just peace and

satisfaction!” Not only that, but there are a lot of well-known spokesmen for Christianity who are preaching that health and wealth are the automatic inheritance of the faithful believer. Self-esteem and self-actualization seem to be the new goal of the Gospel.

Friends, that isn't true and it isn't honest. We have an obligation to be honest with people and to tell them that while salvation is free, discipleship is costly. We need to tell them of the trials, the sacrifices, and the obligations that are entailed in being a disciple of Christ. Besides, I'm convinced that most people in their heart of hearts are not looking for Easy Street, but for a challenge—something to live for, even something to die for. Well, believe me, the real Jesus offers that.

You undoubtedly picked up from our Scripture reading that Jesus repeats three times the words, “he cannot be my disciple.” The message in this three-fold repetition is that . . .

We must count the cost of following Jesus.

The true disciple must realign personal relationships. There is hardly a statement in the entire Bible more shocking and perplexing than verse 26 of Luke 14: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” Hatred seems to be utterly paradoxical to the nature and teaching of Christ. After all, didn't Jesus Himself say on at least four occasions, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”? And if the neighbor must be loved, isn't it even more true that one's family must be loved?

Furthermore, isn't hatred forbidden in Scripture? 1 John 4:20 reads, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” John also says that the one who hates his brother is a murderer. How can we possibly reconcile such statements with this demand of our Lord to hate our families?

I believe the answer is that Jesus is employing a figure of speech here. The stunning juxtaposition of words like “hate” with “father and mother” is designed by Jesus to convey the truth that our love and devotion to Him should be so great, so pure, so unqualified, and so unconditional, that the fondest love we have for anything or anyone else will, by comparison, appear to be hatred. I think we find in our Lord's own words in Matt. 10:37 the proper interpretation of Luke 14:26: “Anyone who loves his father or mother *more* than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter *more* than me is not worthy of me.” In other words, when Jesus calls upon us to hate our family members, He is really just asking us to love them *less* than we love Him.

You know, it is precisely because family ties are so precious that Jesus uses them here in this context. It would make no sense were He to say, “If any man hate not mosquitoes or tornadoes or child abuse, he cannot be my disciple,” because hatred of such things comes naturally to most people. All of us love Jesus more than mosquitoes. But not all of us love Him more than our families.

How do we know whether we love Jesus more than our human relations? That's perhaps difficult to gauge. But ask yourself, "If God asked me to, could I leave my parents and go to the mission field or could I accept having my child go? If God were to take my wife or child in death, would I get bitter and quit God? If my family were to threaten to disown me because of my faith in Christ, would I renounce my faith?" Most of us have never had to make such decisions, but many, many Christians make them every day. And someday every one of us may have to.

The true disciple must yield his personal safety and preferences. The common interpretation of bearing one's cross is that the cross represents the sacrifices and inconveniences in life. I'm bearing my cross when I give a tithe that I could find many other good uses for, when someone sneers at the fish symbol on my car, when I attend worship, an ABF, and a small group all in the same week.

Actually this is a pathetic misrepresentation of the cross Jesus speaks of. What would His listeners have thought of when they heard the word "cross"? They would have thought of the most cruel and ignominious death known to man. When they saw a man carrying his cross behind some Roman soldiers, they knew it was a one-way trip. The taking up of the cross is the voluntary yielding of personal safety and preferences, even the possibility of martyrdom. No wonder true discipleship has never been a mass movement.

In 1948 Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist, went before a New York Grand Jury to witness against the Communistic involvements of one of our high government officials, Alger Hiss. One of the jurors leaned forward and asked him, "Mr. Chambers, what does it mean to be a Communist?" Chambers struggled for a way to explain what it meant to those for whom Communism was virtually incomprehensible. Finally he told them that when he was a Communist he had three heroes. The first was a Polish political prisoner in Warsaw. He insisted on cleaning the latrines of the other prisoners because he felt that the most developed member of any community should take upon himself the lowliest tasks as an example to the rest. "That," said Chambers, "is one thing it meant to be a Communist."

His second hero was a German Jew who was captured and court-martialed during a revolt in Bavaria. When the judge told him, "You are under sentence of death," he answered, "We Communists are *always* under sentence of death." "That," said Chambers, "is another thing that it meant to be a Communist."

His third hero was a Russian who was exiled to a Siberian prison camp where political prisoners were routinely flogged. He sought some means of protesting this inhumane persecution. Finally, in desperation he drenched himself in kerosene, set himself on fire and burned himself to death as a protest against this outrage which he deplored. "That," repeated Chambers, "is also what it meant to be a Communist."ⁱⁱ

What, may I ask, does it mean to us to be a Christian? Does it mean any more than participatory democracy, a nice home in the suburbs, a parochial school for our kids, and a church to provide fellowship and hear a decent sermon? God is asking us for a level of commitment that could

conceivably end in physical death.

The true disciple must give up personal resources. Verse 33: “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” Jesus does not ask for much—only all that you have—your possessions, your time, your talents, your career, your desires, your ideals, your plans. He may not take them from you, but He does demand that you surrender title to them. He does not ask that you give them away but rather that you give them up.

Obviously, the demands of discipleship are great, and the cost is significant. But there’s something else conveyed here in this text.

We must count the cost *before* following Jesus. (28-32)

Jesus employs two brief parables to communicate the importance of counting the cost of discipleship. Look at the first one again:

{28} "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? {29} For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, {30} saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

We lived briefly in Hollywood, FL in the early 70's, and I remember a magnificent condominium built along the Intercoastal canal between Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale, probably 25 stories tall and just a few hundred yards from the Atlantic ocean. The condos were designed for absolute luxury, with rentals that in today’s dollars would be \$5,000-\$10,000 a month. But the builder ran out of money. There stood the shell, with half the building finished and huge signs plastered all over it, “Keep out.” He didn’t count the cost and he became a laughing stock.

I know people like that—seminary buddies who went through school with flying colors but today are selling insurance because they failed to count the cost of full-time ministry, missionaries who return home after one term because life in another culture was too rough (by the way, don’t criticize them until you’ve walked in their shoes—at least they tried), laymen who quit giving or quit serving because love for this present world became too dominant in their lives.

Part of the problem is that the church and its preachers have spent a lot of time covering up the cost—giving people the notion that Christianity is a free ride now and eternal bliss later. Well, it is eternal bliss later, but Jesus never promised a smooth ride with no bumps here and now. Furthermore, I don’t think that’s what most people want to be told—they’d rather get the straight scoop. To me there’s only one thing worse than going into a steak house and seeing prices of \$25, \$30, or even \$35. And that’s going into a steakhouse where the prices aren’t even on the menu. I’m too bashful to ask and too cowardly to leave. I think most people are like me in that they want to see the cost up front. If the quality is good, they’re willing to pay the price.

The other parable tells us that *before* going to battle, an intelligent military leader will always assess his strength and take inventory of his resources.

{31} "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not

first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? {32} If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

If he recognizes that he doesn't have the troops or the firepower or the willpower to win the battle, he will negotiate terms of peace. Otherwise he will end up like Saddam Hussein. Again the cost must be counted in advance if one wants to avoid a disaster.

So far we have seen that the cost of being a true disciple is high and we owe it to people to do what Jesus did—tell them up front. But there's one more critical issue:

We must also count the cost of *not* following Jesus. (34, 35)

Look at verses 34 & 35: "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'" Only the person on a salt-free diet can probably appreciate the illustration Jesus uses here. Salt corrects the tastelessness of many foods. I'm a rice lover—I like it hot, cold, luke-warm, I like it with chowmein, with cream, sugar and cinnamon, or all by itself. I like rice pudding. But I don't like rice without salt. Once in a while my wife will fix rice and forget the little dab of salt that goes in the water. You can't eat it.

Now here's what Jesus says, "Salt is good, but if salt itself should lose its seasoning qualities, what could you use to 'salt' *it* with?" Nothing. It's not good as a preservative, not good for seasoning, not even worth mixing with manure to serve as a fertilizer. It can only be thrown out! What's the point? Christians are to be the salt of the earth. If, however, the professing believer doesn't read his Bible, doesn't pray, doesn't share his faith, doesn't put God first, doesn't make any sacrifices for his faith, and retains tight ownership of all that he has, he's worthless, and he's kidding himself. His profession isn't worth the breath it takes to verbalize it.

I'm sure someone is asking, "Should we also conclude that the less-than-committed disciple will be thrown out by God, just as the tasteless salt is? In other words, are the only truly saved people those who are whole-hearted followers of Jesus?" I am cautious in my answer. Being thrown out can just as well refer to discipline as to eternal punishment. I believe it *is* possible to be a child of God without being the kind of disciple Jesus speaks of here in this passage. Some follow Him closely and some, sadly, from afar.

On the other hand, it is also possible to *think* we are a follower of Jesus when we are not at all. Once someone was talking to a great scholar about a younger man. He said, "So and so tells me that he was one of your students." The teacher answered devastatingly, "He may have attended my lectures, but he was *not* one of my students."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ I fear that God will say about many, "They may have attended my Church, but they were not my children."

But perhaps the question I raised is the wrong one to be asking. Instead of, "Can I be saved without being a whole-hearted disciple?" perhaps it would be better to ask, "Why would I even *consider* being a half-hearted disciple? Why forfeit the joy and blessing that is promised in this life to those who give themselves wholly to Jesus, to say nothing of forfeiting the privilege of

one day hearing Him say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of thy Lord.’”

The half-hearted disciple, friends, enjoys neither the respect of the world nor the blessing of God on his life. Helmut Thielike writes,

“When we are only half-Christians we often feel a kind of envy of thorough-going worldlings. They have no inhibitions about brushing aside an undesired competitor. They get over a bit of tax chiseling or a little adultery without too many bumps and bruises on their conscience. But we half-Christians have our inhibitions, scruples, and troubles in our conscience with such things. We can no longer be tough, red-blooded sinners like these others, but we also are not saints and that is why we feel so uneasy . . .

The man who wants only a bit of God always finds God to be only a brake, an impediment, a pain. But he who wants God wholly learns that he is the source of power, that he gives a man freedom and verve, that following him is the most joyful thing in the world because he frees a man from all the things that tempt and torment the half-hearted.”^{iv}

Conclusion: The passage we have studied this morning is not, as you might be tempted to conclude, a suggestion to fear failure and thus back away from the claims of Christ. When the pastor says to the young couple at the marriage ceremony, “It is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God,” he is not trying to discourage them from getting married. He’s just challenging them to face marriage realistically. And Jesus is just challenging us to face discipleship realistically. While salvation is free, discipleship is very costly. He’s reminding us that the Christian life is not a 100 yard dash—it’s a marathon race. But it’s worth it! Yes, friends, it’s costly to follow Jesus, but it is even more costly not to.

i. Gary Inrig, *The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant*, 80.

ii. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*, 5-6.

iii. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 203.

iv. Helmut Thielike, citation misplaced.