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The Gospel of Luke
LI. Counting the Cost
Luke 14:25-35

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One aspect of American Christianity used to frustrate C. S. Lewis. Specifically, the American Christian emphasis on getting saved. Or, rather, the idea that “getting saved” was the sum total of the Christian life. That all we had to do was accept Jesus Christ -- and, boom, you’re done! Mission accomplished! Over and over again Lewis would pose a question to his American audiences, trying to get them just to consider the possibility that there was more to being a Christian than just getting saved. He would ask, “*What have you been saved for?*” Meaning that “getting saved” was to be understood not as the end of our Christian experience, but rather the very beginning. “*What have you been saved for?*” And then he would supply the answer: “*For service, ministry, and your own transformation. You have to become something other and greater.*”¹

In our passage this morning, this same concern seems to be on Jesus’ mind. He is on His way to Jerusalem, and to His cross. Way back in chapter 9, Luke recorded how Jesus had set his face to Jerusalem – that He had set His mind and His footsteps to the accomplishment of the last and greatest stage of the earthly mission for which the Father had sent Him.² He had already twice told His disciples about what lies ahead in Jerusalem.³ But they had not seemed to get it. From their perspective, perhaps, it probably seemed absurd even to suggest that Jesus might end up crucified in Jerusalem – after all, as our passage indicates, Jesus is now at the very height of His popularity with the people. Great crowds, says Luke, were now following Jesus everywhere He went. But Jesus, rather than seeing this as a sign of success, seems to see it as a cause for concern. For He turns and tells the great crowd that there is no point in their flocking after Him unless they too are willing to bear a cross for Jesus’ sake:

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple . . . So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

“*What have you been saved for?*” Well, clearly Jesus wants more from us than merely our acceptance of Him as our Savior. Jesus wants us to accept Him also as our Lord and as our Teacher. Because Jesus wants disciples, not merely believers. He wants disciples, not merely

church members. He wants disciples – and a disciple is someone who is earnestly and steadfastly seeking to learn from Jesus how to live. Those who have firmly decided to live as Jesus teaches them how to live. And, as best as they know how, and with as much conviction and intent as they can muster, are *“making plans – taking the necessary steps, progressively arranging and rearranging their affairs – to do this.”*⁴ Disciples, not merely believers. Disciples, not merely church members. Disciples, those shouldering a cross of their own, and so learning from Jesus how to live.

Two further instructions on discipleship He then gives us. First, *“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.”* Now, He is talking about our priorities here – not about literally hating our family members in order to love Him. It is a Hebraic way of expressing preference for one thing over another. We would say, “Pie is okay, but what I really love is cake.” In Jesus’ day, the way you would say it was, “I hate pie and I love cake.” It doesn’t mean you literally hate pies – nor does it mean Jesus literally wants us to hate our families in order to follow Him. What it does mean, however, is that cake is more important to us than pie. What it does mean, however – and mark this well – is that we are to love Jesus above and before everything else, prioritize Jesus in our lives above and before everything else, dedicate ourselves to Jesus even above and before that which we love most on this earth. Even above those whom we love most on this earth. To be His disciples, Jesus must first for us always – first in our loyalties, first in our priorities, first in the living out of our lives. Not to the exclusion of our love for, our attention to our families, our work, and so forth and so on. But Jesus first – first in our heads, first in our hearts, first in how we think about the world and our place in it. First, even above and before that which we otherwise cherish most. Learning from Him how to live – and seeking to keep Him central in all our aims and goals and priorities.

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children . . .” Priorities. So, simple question – or, maybe not so simple: Is Jesus and His Word at the center for us, the priority for us? At the core of what we hope to accomplish in these lives of ours, at the core of what we are living for and at the core of what we are striving after day by day? Is Jesus and His Word shaping the dreams we hold for our children and how we are raising them? Is Jesus and His Word shaping the way we do our daily work? Is Jesus and His Word shaping the way we interact with others, especially those who are different from us? Is Jesus and His Word shaping how we respond to both adversity and bounty? Priorities. Because Jesus doesn’t want us merely to get saved – Jesus wants us to become disciples. Not Jesus added to our lives as they currently are without any need for change – but our lives as they are being completely changed and rearranged by our allegiance to Jesus, by having Jesus first in all things.

Priorities. Discipleship. Learning from Jesus how to live. Seeking daily, hourly, moment by moment to put into practice what He teaches. *“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.”* And if we are not His disciples, then we are still lost in this world. Jesus first, foremost, before and above all else. In every aspect of our lives. In every decision we make for our lives. In every priority we set for our lives.

So let us now say the second thing which Jesus tells us, the by now obvious thing – which is that this will not be easy. It’s not even supposed to be easy. What it’s like, says Jesus, is bearing a cross – dying to self, dying to what we have been, dying to what the world teaches us about how to live and what to prioritize. That we might then be raised up into a new, but also very different way of living. It is going to be hard, because it is a way of living which is tremendously counter-cultural – a constant pushing back against the rip currents of a world and of a culture ceaselessly trying to drag us down into conformity and compromise and lukewarmness in the eyes of Jesus. We want our Christianity to be easy, non-threatening, comfortable – but Jesus straight out tells us here that it just won’t be like that. Not in this world as it is, nor in our lives as they currently are. So, “*Count the cost,*” He tells us next. “*Count the cost*” – because it is not going to be easy to be His disciple. It will not be non-threatening – in fact, so much so, that if we aren’t finding ourselves in some form of conflict with the ways of the world or even with the ways of our own hearts, if we aren’t finding ourselves constantly having to make very difficult decisions and choices – then it is most likely because we are not yet taking Jesus seriously enough, giving priority enough to what He says to us and how He teaches us to live.

Count the cost – because none of this is going to be easy. Here’s a picture. A young woman who had converted to Christ said that when she first became a Christian, someone suggested to her that she should imagine Jesus sitting beside her when she drove her car, that this would help build her prayer life. So she did it. Only what she found, quite to her surprise, was that for the longest time, this was no sweet and happy hour of prayer, with Jesus cooing over her and cuddling her. Rather, she found herself having shouting matches with Jesus while she drove. “*Sometimes,*” she said, “*I would be hollering at him. Just screaming my head off. I really needed Him to talk straight with me, and I was angry about a lot of things. ‘Why is it always Your way, Jesus? Why always in Your time? Sometimes, frankly Your way and Your time seem lousy.’*”⁵ To be a disciple, to be one seeking to learn from Jesus how to live, is to be one whose own heart and mind will often be a battleground – simply because what Jesus teaches us, what Jesus asks of us, how Jesus wants us to live is so contrary to what is easiest, so contrary to what is most convenient, so contrary to how so many others are living.

Count the cost – because none of this is going to be easy. Here’s another picture. Paul writes these words to the Corinthians: “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*”⁶ Meaning that how Jesus teaches us to live is going to look like foolishness to the world around us. Here’s Frederick Buechner’s take on the matter:

If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own – and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get, and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world’s sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody

who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under the cross than under a delusion.

“We are fools for Christ’s sake,” Paul says, faith says – the faith that ultimately the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, the lunacy of Jesus saner than the grim sanity of the world.⁷

Count the cost, says Jesus – because none of this is going to be easy, this counter-cultural, upside-down, inside-out, up is down and down is up life of a disciple. Here’s yet one more picture:

I live in a complex, consumer society, which exploits both people and the earth itself . . . [But] I can live simply and with respect and reverence, for people, for material things, for the environment. I can live with concern, responsibility, stewardship.

I live in a highly competitive and individualistic society, and one that is constantly mobile and changing. I can refuse to live under pressure like that. I can try to be stable, not only in my innermost self, but in my relations to those around me, and in my continuous search for God.

I live in a world of injustice and exploitation, where people are denied the right to live with honor and dignity, a world divided by race, color, class. I can refuse to live by divisions like this, for I try to find the face of Christ in all I see.

I live in a world of battering noise, insistent media claims for attention, and endless words of confrontation, constant talk and ceaseless chatter. I can try instead to become a listening person, listening to those around me, and listening above all to God.⁸

Count the cost, says Jesus. Because this Jesus life is not only counter-cultural – it is not easy.

“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” A complete reorganizing of our priorities, putting Jesus first even above family, even above self. Putting Jesus first in our families and in our self. A count-the-cost, counter-cultural way of living that will constantly require us to be on our guard against the pull of what is considered normal behavior and normal priorities in the world around us.

So, why would we do this at all? Why would any of us ever want to sign up for such a demanding, difficult mission? I can speak only for myself: because in Jesus Christ I have found everything my soul has been searching for. Because in Jesus Christ I have found a Way and a Truth and a Life which alone makes sense of this world in which we live, and of my own mortal journey through this world. Because in trying to do what He is here telling us to do, I have found a life worth living. Why do this at all? Because of Jesus, who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do for us.

Oh, let us gaze into his eyes. Let us stand before this humble carpenter and let his beauty knock down our defenses. And our pride. And control and shame and hesitancy. And let us run with

him a wild race of truth and beauty and grace. Let us pour out our most treasured prizes upon him, only him.

Let us abandon all for him.

Let us no longer be couch-sitting Christians who are known more for our dogma than for the actions of our hands and feet. Let us become people of the Way. Jesus followers . . .

Let us throw off this heavy blanket of cultural Christianity and relearn how to run. How to repent. How to lose our lives instead of always trying to save them. How to be used by God. How to change this world.

Let us relearn . . . how to worship, how to study, how to kneel, how to touch, how to trust. Jesus is so rich. So full. So utterly captivating and beautiful and worth everything we have. He is all.

Help us stand before your beauty with open eyes, Jesus. And help us respond from the bravest parts of our souls.⁹

¹ Quoted in Jay Tolson, "God's Storyteller," U. S. News & World Report, Vol.139, No. 22 (December 12, 2005), p. 52.

² Luke 9:51.

³ Luke 9:21-22, 43-45.

⁴ Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 291.

⁵ Mark Buchanan, Your God Is Too Safe (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishing, 2001), p. 31.

⁶ I Corinthians 1:18.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, The Faces of Jesus (New York: Stearn/Harper & Row, 1989), p. 136.

⁸ Esther de Waal, Living with Contradiction (Morehouse Publishing, 1998), page information unknown.

⁹ Don Everts, God in the Flesh (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 150.