

What does it cost to follow Jesus?
Luke 14:25-33
La Paz, Mexico/Crossroads/June 1, 2008

The mark of a great leader is the demands he makes upon his followers. The Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi offered his men only hunger and death to free Italy. Winston Churchill told the English people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, sweat, toil, and tears" in their fight against the enemies of England. Jesus demanded that his followers carry a cross.

The cross: A sign of death. Listen to what happened to 11 of the 12 disciples of Jesus:

Andrew died on a cross
Simon was crucified
Bartholomew was flayed alive
James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded
The other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death
Thomas was run through with a lance
Matthias was stoned and then beheaded
Matthew was slain by the sword
Peter was crucified upside down
Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows
Philip was hanged

The demands that Jesus makes upon those who would follow him are extreme. Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It is a hungering after God to the point of death if need be. It shakes our foundations, topples our priorities, pits us against friend and family, and makes us strangers in this world.

One day, as Jesus was being followed by a large crowd he turned on them, sensing that the demands of discipleship were not getting through, he told two parables. In these parables we learn the three great requirements of Christianity. To follow Jesus:

1. We must establish our priorities.
2. We must count the cost.
3. We must pay the price.

Let's look at the text in Luke 14:25-33. (From The Message)

²⁵One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, ²⁶"Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters--yes, even one's own self!--can't be my disciple. ²⁷Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple.

²⁸"Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn't first sit down and figure the cost so you'll know if you can complete it? ²⁹If you only get the foundation laid and then run out

of money, you're going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: ³⁰"He started something he couldn't finish.'

³¹"Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? ³²And if he decides he can't, won't he send an emissary and work out a truce?

³³"Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.

Let's examine some of the key ideas in this passage. Verse 26 in the message says, "Whoever does not let go of . . . family." Most translations actually say, "If anyone comes after me and does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, his own life, he can't be my disciple." We often struggle with that word "hate." It is such a strong emotional word in our English language. However, in the Aramaic language, the language Jesus spoke, hate is not primarily a feeling word.

In Aramaic, "hate" means *to abandon or to leave aside*; the way a sailor needs to abandon a sinking ship or the way a general needs to leave aside distracting things to win his battle. (John G. Lynch, *Troubled Journey*, CSS Publishing Company, 1994.)

Jesus is asking us to examine our priorities. Now, let's get one thing straight, he is not asking us to abandon our families or to consider them distractions. He is using the shock value of words to get his listeners to truly confront what it might mean to be a disciple of Jesus. He is stating, "I know how much you value your family members, even your very own life, but would you sacrifice these relationships, would you consider death, to follow me?"

Ibrahim Yousef James had to confront these very questions when he became a Christian. Listen to his story:

Indian-born Ibrahim Yousef James moved with his family to Kuwait when he was six. While still in his teens he went into business with his older brother and by the time he was 20, he had amassed a fortune. He owned the largest television production facility in Kuwait. A devout Muslim, he studied the Koran and kept all the religious Islamic traditions. He gave money to the poor and made many pilgrimages to Mecca. There was only one thing Ibrahim had attempted and failed. He had tried suicide four times, and failed each time. Why could he not find peace? He searched the Koran for answers but found none.

He went to England to study electronic engineering. In the month of Ramadan, during the last week of his fast, he developed insomnia. No matter what he tried, sleep eluded him. Prowling around in his hotel room he found a Bible. Flipping it open he read 'Where to find help in time of need'. He read the list and found 'needing sleep - Psalm 4.' 'If you are the God of this book, give me sleep,' he prayed. He stretched across the bed and fell into a deep dreamless sleep. The next morning he forgot about the Bible and God.

Later in the week he came across a man on the street preaching and claiming that Jesus was the only way to God. Ibrahim thought it was all rubbish and Jesus was not the son of God. He also came across an American couple who told him to ask God for the answer, and that God loves him and will speak to him. Ibrahim had never heard of anyone say that God would speak to them. Five nights later Ibrahim dreamed of a bright light in the form of a cross and a voice said, 'This is my way. Jesus is my son. I give my peace to you. I leave my joy with you'.

He had heard from God, and spent the day counting the cost of following Jesus. He knew he would be rejected totally. But the more he thought about Jesus, the more he wanted to know. He met a Christian lady who told him about Jesus, and Ibrahim, weeping openly, gave his life to the Lord Jesus. The first thing he did was to tell his family. They were all very angry and told him that they never want to hear from him again.

Ibrahim began seriously studying the Bible and married a Christian woman. There was no reconciliation from his family. Then one day he got a telegram asking him to attend his sister's wedding. 'We forgive you, please come,' said his father. As Ibrahim prayed about it, God told him not to take his wife. Upon arriving in Bombay, Ibrahim was warmly welcomed by his relatives and friends. Before long, however, his father attacked him, beating, kicking and punching Ibrahim until he was blinded with blood. Every member of Ibrahim's family supported his father's action. 'I cannot deny Christ,' Ibrahim kept saying. His father pointed a gun at him. Just seconds before he fired, Ibrahim's uncle grabbed the gun from his father.

Ibrahim was kept as a prisoner in the house. They destroyed all his wedding pictures, Bible, Christian books and tapes. As days passed Ibrahim's father felt that he was coming around, but he still kept him prisoner, instructing guards to shoot Ibrahim if he ever tried to leave. Gradually he was allowed to go out to meet friends but not without a guard.

One day Ibrahim asked to see his school friend and his father took him out. God said to Ibrahim, 'This is the day to leave your family.' His father had to inspect something on the way, so he let Ibrahim complete the journey on his own. Seizing the opportunity, Ibrahim went straight to a Christian pastor, who helped him get away.

Recently Ibrahim spoke to his father by phone and his father admitted, 'I know that your God is real because for ten years all our plans to harm you have failed.'

(Source: *The Price of Peace*, an article published in *The Believer's Voice of Victory' Magazine*, April 1998, published by Kenneth Copland and Gloria Copland from the UK. Ibrahim's story took place around the year 1986-87.)

Ibrahim knows firsthand the cost of following Jesus. He had to forsake his family. His country. His culture. But it was worth the price. The complete peace and joy that he found through a relationship with Jesus was not something he was willing to negotiate or to deny, even if it meant death.

What is nearest and dearest to our hearts is reflected in our life choices. If your father had pointed a gun at your head and said, ‘Recant Jesus or die’, what would have happened next? Is it readily evident that a relationship with Jesus is at the core of who you are and what you do?

In this Scripture lesson Jesus also offers the illustration of a person who went to build a tower. He says that if this person doesn’t calculate the cost before he builds, and then runs out of money before he can finish the project, he will be ridiculed by his neighbors. Jesus is pointing out that too often we don’t count the cost of what it means to be his disciple. We start off strong, but then fall away when circumstances get difficult. We undermine our own witness to the Gospel.

And then Jesus adds the story of a king considering war against another king. This king must consider the odds against him. If he decides he cannot win, will he then not negotiate for peace? He will give up everything—his plans to attack, his plans to conquer, his desire for the spoils of war-- in order to spare the lives of his people.

Jesus’ theme is consistent: Have you counted the cost? Are you willing to give up everything? . . . To pick up your cross and follow me.

Let me share with you the story of a Muslim woman who recently picked up her cross to follow Jesus. Her name is withheld to protect her identity.

“I am a Christian Muslim woman. There is no other way to say it. It is difficult to describe what it’s like. Believing Jesus is dangerous for many of us in the Middle East. I am a Believer but if you were to meet me and follow me around for a day you probably wouldn’t know it. I go to the mosque with my family. I pray five times a day. I utter words only Muslims use. But these rituals mean nothing to me now that I know Christ.

I came to know Jesus through a radio broadcast. As a Muslim, I heard a lot about Christians but never understood what they believed. I have always thought of myself as an enlightened person so listening to the radio show was supposed to merely provide education.

The speaker shared about God pursuing us through Jesus and about the free gift of salvation. I tried to rationally process these ideas and look for how these Christians had it all wrong. *But the more I tried, the harder it became. Something was drawing me to this story of Jesus.* Free forgiveness! I could not believe it. Everything I ever learned about God told me that a price had to be paid to earn paradise. But that night I understood that Jesus paid the price for me.

I continued to listen to these broadcasts and wrestle with questions. Then one day, with sudden clarity, I sensed the power of Jesus and of true freedom. I’ll never forget the moment I gave my life to Jesus. On my knees beside the kitchen table, I surrendered to His incredible gift.

It was painful for me not to tell anyone about this important moment but it is not custom here for a woman to make a decision without the approval of her husband. It has been three years and it is hard. I constantly pray for my husband – in fact, I love our five daily prayer times more than I used to because I can talk to Jesus freely about my family. My husband does not understand this person of Jesus or the gift of forgiveness, yet. This gift of Life was free but the Relationship

comes with a cost. I am a Christian with a Muslim home. This is my price for following Christ. (Source: http://www.thoughts-about-god.com/stories/dang_love.html)

I found the stories of Ibrahim and this nameless Muslim woman extremely convicting. Not only did it make me stop and consider “What does it cost *me* to follow Jesus?” But it also made me realize again that when people are convicted by the Holy Spirit, they are not only willing, but also ready to take that leap of faith and embrace God’s costly grace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was imprisoned during WWII and later martyred, wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book he contrasts cheap grace with costly grace.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. 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; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has . . . it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets 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.

“Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs Jesus his life, and it is grace because it gives you and me the only true life.” (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, page 47, Macmillan Publishing, 1963)

Do you think about people hungering for God’s costly grace? Seeking it like a great treasure hidden in a field? Knocking on door after door hoping someone will explain what it means to follow Jesus?

When was the last time you risked sharing your faith with another person? Is that the cross Jesus asks you and me to pick up and carry? Those of us who live in countries where there is freedom of religion, where carrying a Bible is not a crime, where meeting for worship won’t land us in jail, where professing the name of Jesus doesn’t mean instant death . . . the risk to share Jesus is a lot less costly for us in Mexico than to share Jesus in the Middle East. But how often do we do so?

My attempt this morning is *not* to make you feel guilty. We all have enough guilt in our lives without me adding to it! And I don’t think Jesus wants us sharing the gospel out of guilt. But I do think it’s good to ask ourselves these questions periodically. To shake ourselves up. To step out of the complacency that so often rules our lives.

If Jesus changed us, then we should want him to change everyone we know! Jesus wants us to share out of our passion, our joy, out of the amazing love we experience with God on a daily basis. The Apostle Paul said in I Thessalonians 1:5 “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. Our gospel came to you

. . . he wants us to be motivated to move. Like the first 12 disciples, to drop our nets and just follow him. To go and proclaim his story.

And when we do this, whether it be across closed borders or across the street we live on, there will always be a cost to pay. You're confronting people with God's truth. It's a struggle. It's a journey. And that's why we need God's power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction to go forward.

But think of this: If Jesus lives in you and me, and we go to a troubled spot in the world, or to a troubled spot in our neighborhood, then Jesus is there too. And once we are there, we see opportunities we would never hear about by staying locked up and safe behind our closed doors, because the opportunities don't exist there. They come into being only the moment we go somewhere else. The moment we risk to act.

We need to be reminded that to live as a true member of Christ's church is not a hobby or something we do in spare time. It is our very life! God does not work with volunteers. He *calls* us. Not one of the 12 disciples was a volunteer. Jesus called each of them, and they left everything behind for him. (Brother Andrew, *God's Call*, pages 105, 139, 83, Revell Publishing, 2002)

I would like to close this morning by having you watch a DVD clip of the Rev. Dr. Leslie James who is the director of the William Carey School of Missions in South Africa. He tells of how God convicted and called him to reach out to refugees fleeing the country of Mozambique.

(Show DVD)

What took you so long? Someone in each of our lives is asking you and me that very question. What took you so long? If we truly believe that Jesus has changed us from the inside out, then we have something worth sharing. What does it cost to follow Jesus? Maybe it's time that we all took a risk and found out.