**Who Can Be a Disciple of Jesus?**

August 9, 2015

Luke 14:25-35

Key Verse 14:33 “In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

Words like “disciple” and “discipleship” are often tossed about without a clear explanation of what they mean. The term “disciples” occurs 269 times in the New Testament, while the term “Christian” only occurs 3 times. Acts 11:26 says, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” In other words the word Christian and disciple were used interchangeably. Some have questioned whether every Christian or believer is also a disciple or the term disciple is reserved for those called by Jesus with a special purpose. They think that discipleship is like the Marines—a select group of highly committed people, a few good men and women. But this passage shows that it is not a correct Biblical view. Some people believe that Jesus invites people who already believe in him as Savior to move up to a higher level, to become disciples. So we use the term, “Raise disciples of Jesus.” I don’t think it is Biblical. Becoming a disciple of Christ is not an invitation to add something to your life. Jesus is not asking for some emotional makeover when he calls people to become his disciples. He’s calling for a takeover. He is calling to become the sovereign Lord and the king of your life. Today Jesus makes a provocative statement on the stringent terms of discipleship. Let’s learn who can a disciple of Jesus Christ.

**First**, the demands of discipleship. Look at verse 26. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” The words of Jesus are shocking. I can almost see the crowd reel in shock at the demands which Jesus placed on his disciples. Few, I suspect, grasped what he meant by what he said. I think the crowd left after Jesus finished, perhaps discussing among themselves on their way back home what he meant. Here we need to understand what Jesus meant by “hate.”

The parallel passage, Matthew 10:37-39 says, “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Here, Matthew’s wording does not speak of “hating” father and mother and other loved ones, but of loving them more than Jesus. Thus, to “hate” in our text means “to love less than.” Jesus is saying that in order to be his disciple, we must love Christ more than our parents, more than our wives, more than our children, more than our sisters and brothers. Exodus 20:5 says, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them [other gods]; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me.” To have other gods, is to love them above God. To have other gods is to hate God. Romans 9:13 says, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” We know that God chose Jacob above Esau, that he gave Jacob the preeminence and blessings that normally came to the oldest son. But God did not hate Esau in the way we think of hate. We see God’s compassion on Esau and on his descendants later. God hated Esau in the sense that he loved Jacob more.

Jesus’ concluding remark is verse 33. “In the same way, those of you who does not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.” In verse 26 Jesus was talking about one’s family, but in verse 33 he speaks of one’s possessions. Do these two sayings really speak of the same thing? I believe that Jesus is here speaking of one’s family as a part of one’s possessions which he or she must “give up.” Family is often thought of in terms of duty. Family can make many demands on a person, demands that can distract (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29-35), demands that can interfere with discipleship. Jesus dealt with the matter of duty to family in chapter 9 (9:57-62). Here, I think that Jesus is speaking of one’s family in terms of his dependence, not his duty. When I speak of dependence, I refer to the needs which we have, which our family provides for us. Family is thus a two-way street: it demands certain things from us and promises to provide us with certain things we feel we need.

In the Jewish culture, a family is the center of one’s life, as it is the case with Muslim families. A family provides status and security, and all kinds of connections for your careers. When a Jewish person makes a commitment to Jesus Christ, he would immediately alienate his family. It is true in Muslim families. Nothing is more severe than for a Muslim to become a Christian. Alienation of the worst kind if not execution can occur in that situation. When Jesus demands that his disciples must “hate” their family, he means that they must give up their dependence upon family, and must depend totally upon him. To be his disciple is not only to love him more than anyone or anything else, it is to depend upon him. Independence of God is at the core of sin, and dependence on him is at the core of discipleship.

There is another element demand of discipleship, which is found in verses 26, 27: hating one’s own life and taking up his own cross. I think that these two expressions speak of one reality. When one decides to follow Christ as his disciple, one must surrender any other source of “life” than him, and one must surrender all self-seeking. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means to give up our goals and to pursue his goals. Instead of living self-centered lives, we must live Christ-centered lives. Instead of asking how every action will affect ourselves, we must be careful to assess how it will affect Christ and his glory. Consideration of personal comfort and safety must be subordinated to the great task of glorifying Christ and making him known. And just as the Master takes up his own cross, so we, too, must take up that cross which God has ordained for us.

**Second**, the decision of discipleship. Unlike many preachers of our day, Jesus did not desire a large following. He would rather have men count the cost of discipleship and opt to stay out than to merely go along with him ignorantly. Jesus’ words here state that discipleship comes at a very high cost, but also imply that the price of discipleship often is collected later. Jesus informs these followers of what that cost will be, lest they commit themselves to a course they will not complete.

Jesus cites two illustrations of those who commenced a project without counting the cost and without determining if they had the needed resources. The first is that of a man who wanted to build a tower, but did not calculate the total cost, and so the tower was never finished. This “unfinished tower” became a monument to this man’s folly. What the man thought would bring him fame, brought him shame.

The second illustration is that of a king, who goes to war against another king, but without calculating whether or not he had the manpower to win. Because he was outnumbered two-to-one, he had to humble himself and surrender to his enemy, entirely at his mercy. Again, he was put to shame because he commenced without counting the cost.

What they have in common is: (1) Both the builder and the king committed themselves to a course of action without having counted the cost. (2) Both the builder and the king discovered, after they committed themselves to a course of action, that they did not have the resources to complete what they had started. (3) Both the builder and the king failed to finish, and ended in humiliation and shame. (4) In both instances, the builder and the king should have sat down and reflected, rather than acting quickly.

What was Jesus trying to say, especially to these crowds, who were following along after him?

Firstly, Jesus wanted all men to know, in advance, that the price of discipleship was high. Yes, they were all enthusiastic and eager now, but Jerusalem was coming, as was the cross. Jesus did not want men and women following him without knowing that there was a “cross” for them as well. Jesus wanted men to calculate the cost of following him as his disciple.

Secondly, Jesus wanted men to choose to be his disciple purposefully, rather than to unthinkingly follow after him. If Jesus was not after a large following of uncommitted followers, neither was he pressing them for a quick decision. The very difficulty of his words caused the people to have to go away and ponder what he meant. Furthermore, in his two illustrations, Jesus said that each man should have sat down and considered what he purposed to do. Sitting down implied that some time and much thought should have been devoted to this matter of discipleship. Quick decisions are only for those who want unthinking commitment; slow, deliberate decisions are for those who want long-term commitments.

Thirdly, Jesus is not looking for those who had the resources to follow him, but for those who, after thinking about it, knew they did not. At first, I thought that Jesus was, like the Marines, “looking for a few good men,” those few who would count the cost, and who found in themselves sufficient commitment and resources to follow-through in their commitment to the end. But then I realized that none of the 12 disciples of Jesus followed through. At the critical moment, they all forsook Jesus; even Peter, who assured Jesus that he would never forsake him (cf. Luke 22:31-34). If Peter, James, and John, the three closest followers of Christ, could not follow through, why would we dare to think that we would? It also occurred to me that in both of the illustrations which Jesus used, both of the men failed to follow through. Neither had the means to finish what they had started. Do we think that we have the means to be his disciples? Do we think that our level of commitment is sufficient to sustain us when family and friends forsake us, as the Bible says they will?

No one has the resources in and of himself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, any more than he or she has the resources to earn God’s favor and eternal life. This is precisely why Jesus began by teaching that in order to be his disciple, one would have to “hate” his family, to renounce his dependence upon family, so as to depend fully upon Christ alone. Jesus is not trying to get these followers to muster up enough commitment to become his disciples, but to reckon with the reality that no one has the resources to follow him, apart from his enablement. Discipleship, then, is not following Christ with sufficient means to do what he commands, but with utter dependence upon him to enable us to do his will. Both the willing and the doing come from him, and not from us. The whole concept of raising “the committed disciples” does not make sense, simply because no one is that capable or that committed. The key element of discipleship is not obedience, for we are incapable of that in and of ourselves. The key element of discipleship is dependence, for without him, we can do nothing.

Look at verse 33 again. “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” Discipleship is not a matter of how much we have to offer, but of renouncing all that we think we have to offer. To be Jesus’ disciple, you do not bring anything to him to prove your commitment and worthiness; you leave all behind, trusting only on him and on his faithful provision of all that we need to do what he calls us to do. This is true discipleship. Discipleship, like salvation, begins by recognizing the high price required, and that we are unable to meet it, and thus coming to Christ empty-handed, looking to him to do what we cannot with our own strength.

Look at verse 34. “Salt is good, but if it loses saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” The key to the impact of His disciples is not their large number, but their distinctiveness. Very little salt is required to season a large quantity of food because salt has a very distinct flavor. The ocean water has only 3% of salt. Nevertheless it is enough to make the ocean salty so that it is undrinkable. Even 0.3% salt would be enough to season food. Likewise, when there are only 0.3% of salty Christians in this world, they will make a great impact on this society. There are 85,000 students at the University of Toronto. 0.3% of 85,000 is 255. 255 salty Christians will make a difference on this campus. But salt which loses its saltiness is useless. It could not even be used for fertilizing the land. It is thrown out. It becomes worse than useless.

Great numbers of disciples do not guarantee great impact. It is not the sheer number of disciples that matters, but it is their distinctness, their utter differentness from the world. The world will not take note of a large group of people who think, feel, and act like them. The world will take note of a few “disciples” who are Christ-like, whose lives are distinctive. When we recognize that power and impact do not come through the number of disciples, but through their dependence upon God and their distinctive lifestyles, then we understand why Jesus did not seek a large following. May God bless you to make an impact as Jesus’ disciples.