

## Luke 14:25-35 - Counting the Cost

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### Introduction

I would like to start this morning by looking at one of the Bible's favourite literary tools: hyperbole. It's basically a form of exaggeration, except that, where most exaggeration is used to embellish the truth, while still being believable, hyperbole is specifically designed *not* to be believed - its purpose is simply to emphasize a point.

For example, if I said I was so hungry I could eat a horse, you would understand that I was simply stressing how hungry I was, not that I could literally eat a horse. On the other hand, if I told you that I had actually eaten a horse, that would simply be an outrageous exaggeration. Actually it'd just be a lie.

Let me give you some better examples from Jesus' teaching:

- *"You blind guides!"* said He, busy making friends with the Pharisees, *"You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."* (Matthew 23:24)
- In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, *"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."* (Matthew 5:29-30)
- And later in that discourse, *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"* (Matthew 7:3)

Now, hopefully it's clear that none of these statements are meant to be taken literally. The Pharisees didn't really swallow camels, Jesus didn't really expect His followers to mutilate themselves, and people weren't really going around with length of timber sticking out of their faces. Rather Jesus uses hyperbole to make the points that the Pharisees were picky about the wrong things, that sin should be taken seriously, and that we need to watch our for hypocrisy.

So that's hyperbole, and you might be wondering why I'm blabbering on about it rather than getting stuck into Luke 14, and the answer is that in order to understand what Jesus is going to say here, we need to understand hyperbole.

If you have your Bible with you, please turn to Luke chapter 14. When Simon spoke on chapter 13 last week, it may have struck you as a strange place to start a new series on Luke's Gospel - what have we got against the first twelve chapters? The truth is, however, this is not actually a new series, but a continuation of a series we began in March last year. It's just that the talks on earlier chapters were done as study nights on Sunday evenings.

I'm assuming most of you were not at those study nights and are not going to listen to the audio on the church website, so I'll quickly fill in the context for our passage this morning.

The book opens with Luke stating his intention of producing a carefully researched document on the life of Jesus, and begins with God breaking His 400 year silence to speak to the priest, Zechariah, announcing he would have a son, John. Mary receives a similar, but altogether more amazing announcement that she would give birth to the Messiah - the Christ - who was to be called Jesus. The nativity follows, and we no doubt heard Luke's account thousands of times at countless carol services (that's hyperbole again).

From this point, Luke follows the standard format of the Synoptic Gospels, being Matthew, Mark and Luke:

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- Baptism and temptation - Zechariah's son baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, then Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness.
- Galilean ministry - this covers roughly three years of Jesus' life as He travels around the north of Israel, calling disciples, healing the sick, preaching the Good News and so on.
- Then comes the 'Turning point' - when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus says He must go to Jerusalem to die
- Travel narrative - This is Jesus' seventy mile journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and in Luke's Gospel it takes up a massive section: chapters 9 through 19. As such it contains a lot of detail not found elsewhere in the Gospels.
- Holy Week - following Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem
- Death & Resurrection -

We are currently in the travel narrative and Jesus has spent the last few chapters confronting the Pharisees. If you were here last week, you'll recall they had a bit of a falling out over healing on the Sabbath, with the Pharisees condemning such a disgraceful act, and Jesus pointing out the hypocrisy of their comments. Chapter 14 opens with another Sabbath healing and this time it is Jesus who tests the Pharisees, calling on them to say whether or not it is lawful. The Pharisees this time keeps their mouths shut!

Jesus then goes to dinner at a Pharisee's house and through a series of short parables, he shows them that in rejecting him, they have rejected God and ultimately salvation, and so now God is going to open up the Kingdom of Heaven to others - to outsiders. Which includes us!

In verse 25, Jesus is back on the road to Jerusalem and these final verses of chapter 14 will be our focus this morning, so let's read them together:

*"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."* (v25-35)

### Conditions for Discipleship

So here is Jesus, marching on to Jerusalem and His death, and note, he is not accompanied by merely a 'large crowd', but by 'large crowds', suggesting a vast following of people. Many of them will have seen Jesus perform miracles and may have been healed by him or been among those miraculously fed Jesus. They would have heard Jesus teaching on the coming Kingdom of God, and so they had happily joined the

throng of those who followed Him. "This is the good life! We'll never get ill, never want for anything, all we need to do is follow Jesus and life will be easy!"

But suddenly, Jesus stops. And He turns to face them, these would-be disciples, and sets them straight, telling them in clear, stark terms what it really means to be one of His disciples.

Three times Jesus uses the phrase "Cannot be my disciple", each time these statements follow conditions Jesus lays on His disciples. The first of these is in verse 26:

*"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."* (v26)

As you can imagine this is something of a difficult verse to know what to do with, and it's been seized upon by countless anti-Christians as proof, undeniable proof, that the Bible contradicts itself. On the one hand it commands love, and on the other it commands hatred. And this is certainly an understandable mistake, but you can be sure that it is nonetheless a mistake. Thankfully, we know what hyperbole is! And just as Jesus didn't really suggest people swallowed camels or walked around with planks of wood in their eyes, and just as He didn't really expect his followers to hack off their hands or gouge out their eyes, so too He doesn't really command us to hate our families or our own lives. Remember, hyperbole is not meant to be believed, it's meant to make a point. Let's be clear on this as our starting point. Jesus *wants* us to love others, he *commands* us to love others, and He *expects* us to love others. Hatred is not an option for His disciples.

We have a similar use of hyperbole in the opening words of Malachi: *"The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the LORD. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the LORD says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.'" (1:1-3)* Now we might read this and be shocked to think of God 'hating' someone. But hatred of Esau is not the point God is trying to make here. The focus *is* on God's love for Israel - the descendants of Jacob. "I love you" says God, "Prove it" say the Israelites. "Okay," God replies, "Look at Esau and his descendants. He was Jacob's brother, and yet, the love I have shown to Jacob and his descendants is so great that by comparison you would think I hated Esau!"

Now God did not actually hate Esau, but He uses this hyperbole to stress the vastness of His love for Israel by comparison.

And that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. "If you are going to be one of my disciples," says Jesus, "your love for me must be so great that it dwarfs even your love for your own family, and your love for yourself." The focus is not on hatred, but on the greatness of your love for God. His love must be your first love, and not just a close first, but a distant first - He must be absolutely pre-eminent in our lives. We must love God above all else, far above even over our most intimate human relationships. This is a condition of being one of His disciples.

The second condition, in verse 27, is that *"anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."* Now, let's bear in mind that this is in the travel narrative - Jesus has yet to arrive in Jerusalem, yet to be betrayed and arrested, yet to be handed over to Pilate. There was no link at this point between Jesus and crucifixion - it wasn't in anyone's mind. No one on hearing these words at this time

would have suspected Jesus himself would one day carry His own, real cross to His place of execution. That said, there would have been no doubt in people's minds that Jesus was referring to the Roman practice of crucifixion.

Now, we have a somewhat unfortunate phrase in English, which we've derived from Jesus' words here, that undermines the point Jesus is trying to make. Specifically - "That's my cross to bear." And it's used in this sort of way: "I hate getting up in the morning, but I have meeting every Thursday at 7 a.m. I guess that's just my cross to bear."

That's simply not the sort of thing Jesus meant when he said these words. Your cross is not any particular burden that life might throw on you, it's not some annoying thing you just have to put up with, but rather it represents an attitude to the way you live your whole life. When someone took up their cross, they were heading to their place of execution.

- They had said goodbye to their friends and family, and their loved ones could not affect where they were headed, because they were walking to their death.
- Their possessions, their homes, food, drink, clothes and such like meant nothing to them, because they were walking to their death.
- Their savings, their hopes, their dreams, their plans for the future were all lost to them - they had no future, because they were walking to their death. Their lives were as good as over, and ahead there was only suffering, shame and finally separation from life.

It's a bleak image, but it gets the message across, doesn't it. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we need to live as though walking to our deaths - not in a morbid sense, with fear of suffering and impending doom, but in a liberated sense, being free from the clutches of the things of this world. We may have friends and family whom we love, but our love for God must come first. We may have possessions, home, food and drink, but they should not be able to hinder our work for God. We may have hopes and dreams and plans for the future, but our these must not distract us from our ultimate goal.

We are aliens and strangers - just passing through, so that we can, like Paul, say, "*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain... Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two.*" (Philippians 2:21-23) It may sound like Paul has lost the plot, but Jesus would suggest that he had, in fact, discovered the plot - the right way to live. Nothing in this world should have a greater hold on us than God, nothing in this world can should be able to stop us following His call. There must be nothing in our lives that can keep us from serving God. This is a condition of being one of Jesus' disciples.

The last condition, in verse 33, really summarizes these, saying, "*any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.*" Now this is one of those commands that has led to the unfortunate belief that having possessions is sinful. It's similar to Luke 12:33, where Jesus says, "*Sell your possessions and give to the poor.*" The problem is that we read that as, "*Sell all your possessions and give all the money you make to the poor,*" thus adding yourself to the list of the poor! But that's not what it says. This statement here in Luke 14:33 does, however, contain the extremes of 'everyone' and 'everything'. However, the term 'give up' is the part that helps us understand the point Jesus is making. 'Give up' would be more accurately translated as 'say good bye'. Very few translations have this, unfortunately, but the

Holman Christian Standard Bible puts it this way, *“every one of you who does not say good-bye to all his possessions cannot be My disciple.”*

What’s more this is in the present tense, the famous ‘present continuous’ as it is called, and so it suggests a state of saying good-bye, of readiness to drop all those worldly possessions the moment God calls. “Good bye, house. Good bye, car. Good bye, job. Good bye, my loved ones. Good bye!” We must be ready, at all times, to leave everything if God so calls us. This too is a condition of being a disciple of Jesus.

These then are the conditions Jesus lays down for His disciples:

- We must love God above all else, far above even over our most intimate human relationships.
- There must be nothing in our lives that can keep us from serving God.
- We must be ready, at all times, to leave everything if God so calls us.

Otherwise, we cannot be His disciples.

### Counting the Cost

But, hang on a moment. Isn’t is salvation by faith alone - believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved? Freely you have received, and all that? This is some pretty major small print hidden away here!

You may remember back just before Christmas we looked at faith and deeds in the letter of James. There we saw that faith without actions in keeping with true faith is dead, and only faith that produces such actions is able to save us. Well, this is all part of the same thing. You see, there is no such thing as a Christian for whom Christianity changes nothing. If, since you became a Christian, your life is no different, there’s something terribly wrong!

It is true: we are saved freely through trusting in Jesus’ death. Salvation costs us nothing. Discipleship however costs us everything. There is nothing so free as the grace God has given us, and nothing so costly as our walk with Him.

To hammer this point home, Jesus brings out three parables. The first begins in verse 28. *“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower.”* It sounds like a strange way start to a parable, but just say you did want to build a tower, *“Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?”* It sounds like a sensible course of action, doesn’t it? The question certainly implies a positive answer - “Yes! Of course we would sit down and estimate the cost - who would be so foolish as to start a building project without knowing if they could finish it?”

Funnily enough, here is a picture of my current building project.



It’s not a tower, which would be somewhat odd in the middle of Alton - it’s basically an area to store some of my children in. Now just imagine, if you can, how foolish it would have been if, before I committed myself to this costly venture, I had not taken the time to sit down and work out whether or not I had sufficient funds to actually complete it. I mean, can you imagine it?

Well, I don't have to imagine it, because that's exactly what I did. If I had a pound for every person who had reminded me about this parable, I'd have enough money to finish the wretched building! (Hyperbole) As it is I can't yet afford to finish it, which is a pity since Jesus goes on to point out: *"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.'"* Yeah, alright!

The second parable follows in verse 31 - and it's not one I have an example for from my own life: *"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."*

Now, over time much has been inferred from this 'asking for terms of peace', and much has been made of the mockery one might receive for not being able to finish building - too much one might say! But these are not the points Jesus is trying to make. To see what He is saying, we need to compare the two parables. In both cases we have:

- They both face a costly venture - building a tower, going to war
- They both sit down first - they stop what they are doing and take time to do something
- The builder counts the cost, the king considers the odds - both of them deliberate over whether they will be able to finish what they begin, considering the challenges they face and the resources they have

Jesus leaves the parables with the phrase, *"In the same way..."* showing that if we are to be Jesus disciples, we need to learn from these things the builder and the king did before committing themselves.

Like them, we face a costly venture - as I said earlier, there is nothing so costly in worldly terms as being a disciple of Jesus. And so, like them, the wise thing to do before embarking on such a venture is to sit down - to take time out - and count the cost of this discipleship, consider whether we will be able to see this through to completion, before we commit ourselves.

Can you see what Jesus in this passage? He's surrounded by all these would-be disciples, people who want to follow Him for all kinds of reasons and motives, and He says: "Stop! Don't just tag along! Following me is not as easy as you might think - in fact it could cost you everything you hold dear. Wait and consider - count the cost, and ask yourself if you can see this through to the end."

But what if you don't think you can? What does it really matter? After all, I'm sure there are countless believers who have gone through life without experiencing anything like the kind of cost we've been considering. Isn't that okay?

And so we come to Jesus' third parable in this section from verse 34. *"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."* (vv34-35) Again we could infer all kinds of things from this parable that Jesus did not intend. Just think about some of the uses of salt that have then been superimposed upon Christians. For Example:

- Salt creates thirst: therefore Christians should create a thirst in people they mix with that can only be quenched by God.
- Salt melts ice: therefore Christians we should cause hearts to thaw, which were frozen and hard towards God.

- Salt adds Flavour: if you've got something boring to eat, like anything that doesn't include meat, a bit of salt gives it some flavour. Therefore Christians should be flavoursome and different in an otherwise bland, worldly culture.
- Salt reserves: therefore Christians should be effective in slowing the decay in the world, such as oppression, crime and general corruption.
- Salt is necessary for life: without salt you die. Therefore Christians too have a vital role in spreading of the Gospel, which brings life to those who believe.

While I don't have a problem with these per se, none of them are the point that Jesus is actually making here. The point isn't even the idea of salt losing its saltiness, which one might draw alongside, say, the idea of a disciple of Christ losing their fervour for God. Remember, most parables are very simple and convey a single idea. If we strip this parable down we see it's two parts as follows. First the question: "What use is salt that isn't salty?" Then the answer: "It is of no use." Just think about those things we came up with earlier - creating thirst, thawing ice, stopping decay, adding flavour - if salt is not salty it does none of these things - it's useless.

So as we are counting the cost of discipleship and whether we can see it through to the finish, Jesus says, "If you fail to love me above all else; if you are unable to serve me because of worldly ties; if you are not ready to leave everything when I call - you will be useless as far as discipleship and advancing the kingdom is concerned. You will be as ineffectual as salt that has none of the properties of salt. You cannot be my disciple." If we cannot aspire to and live up to the conditions Jesus lays down for His disciples, we will be of no use as far as making a difference for God is concerned.

### Closing Comments

"*He who has ears to hear,*" Jesus concludes, "*let him hear.*" And while in English it sounds rather weak, in Greek this is a very strong command to listen. Luke uses this phrase in only one other place, in chapter 8 and the parable of the sower - and this is no co-incidence. There we have his followers falling away in times of testing and being choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. Here in Luke 14, Jesus is warning us about just the same things. The life of His disciples is costly - there will be times of testing and because of this many fall away. There is still the draw of riches and pleasures, and the worries that come with life in this world, and because of them many will not reach maturity. Jesus is looking for disciples who will not fall away, who will reach maturity, and who will be effective and useful in spreading the Kingdom of God in this world. "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*"

Those 'large crowds' who heard Jesus speak these words would have included people on various stages in their walk with God, from those who had been following Him since His early ministry in Galilee, to those who have maybe even joined the crowds that very day. And Jesus called them *all* to stop and to count the cost of following Him. Today, He calls us to do the same.

You may have been following Him for years or only days - it doesn't matter. Today, if you have ears to hear, listen to His call to count the cost. He demands first place in our lives, our unflinching loyalty and our absolute obedience.

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I remember many years ago, when I became a Christian, being told to sit down and count the cost, and yet over time, with the cares of this world and the distractions of people and possessions and worldly security, I've found it so easy to forget. There are conditions to following Jesus if we are going to be truly effective as His disciples.

Or you may be just thinking of starting out, of taking that first step to follow Jesus. Listen to what He says and stop. Count the cost first. Consider what God is calling you to. He offers you salvation - a life of love and peace and joy with Him forever - and He offers it freely. But to truly be His disciple, you must be ready for it to cost you everything! Count the cost first.

If you've listened to all this and you're wondering, "How on earth is all this possible - how can we live up to these conditions?" It must begin with a willingness to do so, even if you cannot imagine how. Are you willing to give up everything for Him, to have Him in first place in your life?

And as you ask yourself this question, consider Jesus' willing and the great cost of salvation. Not for us, but for Him. When He spoke these words to His followers, He was walking to His death. In a few short weeks, the Pharisees He had confronted would arrange for Him to be arrested, to be falsely accused at an illegal trial. They would spit on Him and punch Him in the face, before handing Him over to the far more barbaric Romans. They in turn would beat him with sticks, push thorns into his head, and whip Him until His back was torn open. Then they would force Him to carry His cross to His place of execution, and there they would nail him and leave Him to die as people hurled insults at Him and mocked Him.

Jesus went through all this, suffering physically, mentally, and even spiritually as He took the wrath of God for our sin. It cost Him everything, and it costs us nothing. And so He calls us to follow Him, but not without first counting the cost.