

The Parables of Jesus



By Pastor Mark Friedrich and Ken Chitwood

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Study 1

The Cost of Discipleship
Luke 9: 57-62

Presented by Ken Chitwood on January 3rd, 2010.

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ken.chitwood@hotmail.com

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A Primer on Parables

On face value parables may seem like simple and direct little stories that are easily understood and very cleanly applied. Yet, in the words of Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart, “for all their charm and simplicity, the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to Revelation.” (p. 149)

To commence our introduction on parables let us look to the words of Jesus concerning why he spoke in parables in the first place.

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it…All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

(Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35)

As we read these words of Jesus we must first ask who we ourselves are. Are we those who have been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven or are we those who hearing do not hear? Take heart, for all who know the LORD Jesus Christ as their Savior by the power of the Holy Spirit are those who know and hear the words of Jesus in truth. In 1 Corinthians 2: 6-7, 10-12 we read:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

However, even with the discerning Spirit of the LORD within us we often stumble in our interpretation of his parables and thus in their application to our lives. Too often we allegorize the parables and make them stand for things they do not represent. Or, upon hearing the parable, we note the sting of its implication on the lives of others but forsake to examine ourselves according to its words.

Thus, we must be careful as we study his parables that upon hearing we do indeed hear and upon seeing we do indeed see, by the Spirit of the Living God.

We can ensure this by understanding the parables within their context. This implies both hearing their words within the context of Scripture and the context of the first century Palestinian world in which they were first spoken by Jesus.

In the above verses Jesus quotes Psalm 78. If we take the time to read this Psalm in full we catch that the LORD wants us to give our ears to his teaching and incline our ears to the words of his mouth (verse 1). Furthermore, we will notice that God *spoke* to his people in both word and deed (miracles and signs). So did Jesus. In Jesus' ministry here on earth he endeavored to reveal the truth of the Kingdom of God in word and deed through parables and signs. Thus, as we study the parables we cannot do so in isolation. To do so would be to miss their point entirely. As Pastor Mark said to me one day (and as many others have said), "Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings." The parables, if they are to be properly understood, must be discerned within the fuller context of Jesus' ministry and message through his birth, life, miracles, teachings, death, resurrection and return. They are not simply stories to help us live a good life here on earth. Instead, they are a means by which Jesus reveals the truth about himself and his kingdom.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, an expert in parable studies, stresses that we must know something about the culture of the Middle East to apperceive the meaning of Jesus' parables. This means that we need to listen to the parables with the ear of a Hebrew living in first century Palestine. This, of course, is not an easy task! Through vigorous research and thanks to the study of many others before us we can hope to hear the words of Jesus as they were originally understood and in that way come to appreciate what they mean for us today.

Now to be sure, there were people who listened to Jesus and did not hear his parables for what they were intended to be either. Of course, their problem was often not in misunderstanding Jesus words, rather it was in not letting the parables transform their lives! The point of all the parables is to be discovered in Jesus' *intended response* from the people that hear them.

Just as God spoke to the Israelites and delivered the Israelites with mighty signs and yet they still sought other gods; and just as the people in Jesus' day ignored his teachings and miracles we too can miss the point of Jesus' call on our lives. Even Christians are susceptible to the ways of the world and can easily be snared by them. The parables are Jesus' words to teach us about his kingdom and show us the way of the Spirit for our lives on earth.

As we study the parables it is important that we do three things:

- 1) sit and listen to the parable again and again
- 2) identify the *points of reference* intended by Jesus that would have been picked up by the original hearers
- 3) try to determine how the original hearers would have identified with the story, and therefore what they would have heard

By doing the above we can begin to gain clarification on the parables and thus apply them to our lives within the wider context of Jesus' work of salvation and sanctification in our lives.

With that background, let us start our study of Jesus' parables as they are recorded in the Gospel according to Luke.

The Cost of Discipleship

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 9: 57-62

This passage is best understood within its wider context in the Gospel of Luke. It is part of the "Journey to Jerusalem Narrative" that starts with Luke 9:51 and consummates with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem in Luke 19:28. In fact, most of the parables we will be studying in this series will come from this narrative. Now, less than being a detailed description of his course from Galilee to Jerusalem this narrative serves to specify what it means for Jesus to "set his face to go to Jerusalem" and what it means for a disciple to follow him there.

Of course, when Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" it does not mean that he entered the coordinates into his GPS and set out on a little site-seeing trip. Nor did it mean that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem in order to ascend to the throne. Many people would expect this of him but throughout his ministry Jesus rejected any move to make him an earthly king. His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

No, this verse speaks to Jesus' knowledge that the time had come for him to make his sojourn to Jerusalem where his full ministry would be accomplished in his suffering, death and resurrection. When Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem he knew he was going to his death (see Luke 13:33-35). Luke 9:51 sets the stage for the most dramatic events of Jesus' life and the most significant moments in history.

Therefore, when the disciples in the above passage either ask or are asked to follow Jesus they are facing the opportunity to set their faces towards Jerusalem with Jesus. And this is no easy road.

Immediately following Jesus' momentous turn towards Jerusalem he is rejected by a Samaritan village (Luke 9:52-56), and that's the least of the rejections, embarrassments and ridicules that he will receive along the way to the grave.

To follow Jesus, to be his disciple, is no easy task.

And that is the thrust of the parable we are going to piece apart below.

There is a cost to discipleship. The journey of Jesus and his followers is not a painless pilgrimage.

What are the conditions of this sojourn?

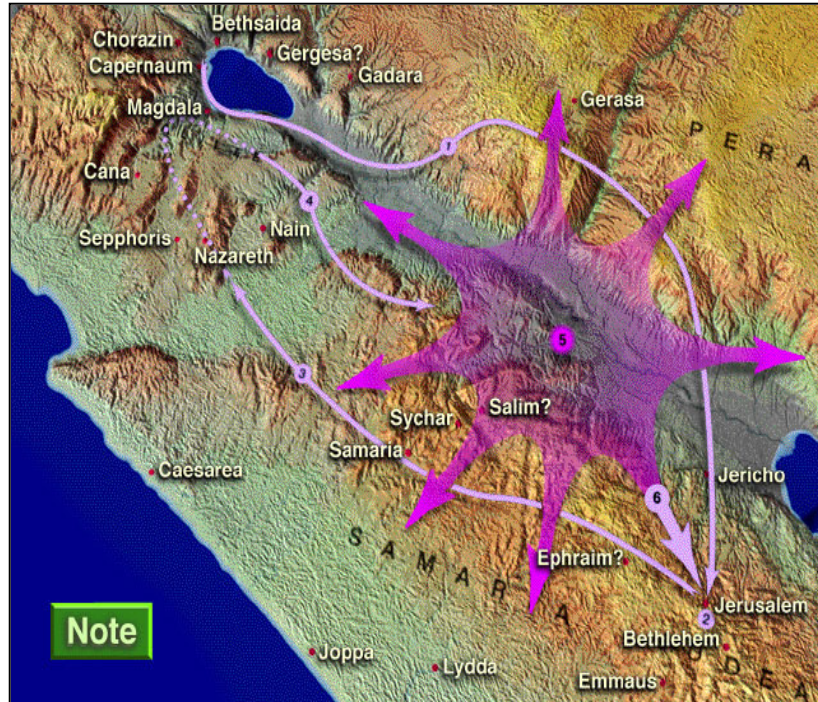
What are the costs incurred?

Let us examine Luke 9: 57-62 in detail and see.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." (9:57)

I like this guy's enthusiasm. Although he was a tad presumptuous, I am always sympathetic towards his brave declaration that he will follow Jesus wherever he goes. However, little does he know what he is asking.

We do not know exactly where this encounter happens, but we can guess that it was somewhere along the "road" or "way" towards Judea from the region of Galilee. Jesus initially sought to enter the land of Samaria, but was denied access so instead he headed through the "land beyond the Jordan" (Numbers 22:1) also known as Perea. This was a beautiful and often politically charged area.



The region of Perea is located around the number “5” which marks where Jesus sends out the seventy (Luke 10:1-12) immediately following this parable. Note its position between Galilee and Jerusalem and east of Samaria.

It was politically charged because it was the long hold-out of the Jewish rebels known as the Maccabees. However, it eventually fell into Roman hands and in the time of Jesus was controlled by the brutal Herod Antipas. According to Jewish historian Josephus it was in this region where Herod had a fort where John the Baptist was beheaded.

When the would-be disciple declares he will follow Jesus it is important to understand what type of following he is talking about. The Greek word used here is *akoloutheo* (ακολουθεω) and is often a word used to talk about discipleship. However, of special note is the word used for “go.” Typically, the word *erchomai* is used, in this instance though Luke carefully uses the word *aperchomai* (απερχομαι) or “go away” or “go from” or “go after.” It is in this latter translation that we get a hint of what these words meant in a Hebrew context. Most likely the would-be disciple used an Aramaic form of הלך אחרי or *hahlak acharai* meaning to “go or follow after – usually to follow a leader of people/political leader.”

Most likely, when this man asks to follow Jesus he is asking to follow Jesus the potential political Hebrew king. Jesus knows this and responds in a way that the man would have readily been aware of, yet we misunderstand frequently.

And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”(9:58)

This verse seems almost self-interpretive. It is easy enough to observe that Jesus is using simple metaphors for the journey of Jesus as a poor man with no home…right? Pastor Nkosinathi Biyela rightly notes the irony that “The creator of foxes, of birds and of all places under heaven has no place for his own head to rest.” (Sermon. Mabola, South Africa, March 2009) It is true that at various points in Jesus’ ministry he had no place to stay, but there are various other times where he did have a home where hospitality was readily showed. So, although it may refer to the fact that Jesus and his disciples are not guaranteed a place to eat, sleep or rest we cannot speedily infer that it does, especially since Jesus sends out the seventy and gives them commands of conduct when they stay in houses along their way (Luke 10: 5-7).

Harry Wendt and Kenneth Bailey propose an alternative interpretation that I believe hits the mark and fits the context of the passage. Instead of referring to the poverty of Christian discipleship Jesus uses verbal symbols in order to speak secretly (but also, not so secretly) about the political situation of his day.

“He seems to mean by the foxes and birds of heaven those wicked, cunning and impure powers, the herds of demons...We affirm that he did not say this about the material and visible birds....As long as the foxes and birds have holes and dens in us, how can Christ enter? Where can he rest?”

-Cyril of Alexandria

During the days of Jesus the words “fox” and “birds of the air” had symbolic meanings.

The word “fox” was a symbol for the Ammonites, a racially mixed people who were related to the Israelites. Similarly, the family of Herod Antipas was a racially mixed Israelite hybrid. The term Ammonite was often used in first-century Palestine to refer to those from mixed racial backgrounds.

Furthermore, Jesus uses the term “that fox” to refer to Herod Antipas in Luke 13:32.

In intertestamental (the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament) literature the words “birds of the air” were often used to denote the Gentile nations.

Thus, the gist of Jesus’ curt reply might well be “Everybody is at home in Israel’s land except for the true Israel.” The true Israelites have long been disenfranchised by other people in their own land (Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Medo-Persians, Greeks and Romans) and Jesus declares that it will be no different with the Son of Man who will be without a place to stay (*kataskenoseis* – κατασκηνοσεις “like a tent”).

This would come as a shock to the would-be disciple who so willingly declares his allegiance to Jesus’ cause. Clearly expecting to join the ranks of the expected Messiah King Jesus, this man would have been quite lambasted to hear Jesus reply stating the Son of Man would have no permanent place to dwell in the land of Israel. If the words of Daniel 7 were to be true there would be no way that the Israelites would not rule over the nations when the Messiah came.

“The would-be disciple who claims to be willing to follow Jesus wherever he goes is presumptuous in his declaration, thrusting himself into apostolic honor without realizing that to follow Jesus is to take up his cross.”

-Cyril of Alexandria

Jesus responds to this man with words that challenge his motives and ours as well. If we want power in this world then it is better to align ourselves with the “foxes” or the “birds” of our culture and not with the Son of Man; for his kingdom is not of this world, but it is far more worthy of our discipleship.

Questions for Consideration:

-What powers of this world pull for our allegiance? Why are they so alluring?

-Do you let the power of this world hold sway over your life or do you let the kingdom of Christ reign over your decisions?

To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (9:59-60)

In verses 59-60 we have an altogether different scenario than the preceding verses. This second possible disciple of Jesus does not offer his services like the first (hence the use of the Greek *heteros-ετερος* meaning "other of a different kind") Rather, Jesus invites him by saying, "Follow me!" Again, the word for "follow" is the word used often to mean "become a disciple." The tense of the verb in this instance (present, active, imperative) is a sort of command. It is not a tense that speaks to a present reality (the person is not already following him), but to a matter of volition or possibility. This man is given the opportunity and invitation to follow Jesus, the Savior of the world. How does he respond?

Whereas the previous would-be disciple solicits pity from me many sympathize with this new recruit. After all, why does Jesus *not* allow this person to go and bury their father?

Throughout the Middle East today there are many sons who will stay at home until their parents die. Before that, the son is responsible for the affairs of the household when their older parents cannot assume responsibility for them. Thus, the young man is stuck serving the needs of the family until the father and mother both die. This was true in Jesus' day as well – except for disciples.

In Jesus' time there was an established culture of discipleship. At least from A.D. 70 young Hebrew men would study and memorize the Torah (the Law/the Pentateuch) by the age of 13. After that, if they were deemed worthy, they would study the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures in stages called Bet' Midrash and Bet' Talmud. Along the way they would be invited by a rabbi (from Aramaic *rabboni*, meaning "teacher") to "follow" them and learn from their ways. Although most likely not fully formed in Jesus' day there certainly was a primordial form of this discipleship training regimen in Judaism. We can note that John, the Pharisees and the Scribes all had disciples. For most of them there were some prerequisites for discipleship. Not so with Jesus. Often he would call on the least of the society; fisherman, tax-collectors, prostitutes and the like were all invited to "follow" Jesus.

When any rabbi or leader asked a young man (young women were not included in a leader's band of disciples – spare for Jesus' ministry) to follow them it was such an honor that the young man was allowed to supersede the law of the day and follow the rabbi without taking care of the affairs of the household. That is, as long as he had permission from his household to do so (more on that later).

Consequently, when Jesus asks this man to “follow” him there should be no hesitation on his part (look no further than Luke 5:27-32 or Mark 1:16-20 for examples of the typical response to Jesus' call). However, this man's response reflect his inner disposition. It is not the attractiveness of Jesus' offer that does not elicit the proper response. As a substitute, it is the man's bond with the culture of his day and the expectations of his community, family and friends that prevent him from being able to willingly follow Jesus.

This man did not follow Jesus because he was afraid of what others would think. He thought, “Surely, if I leave my household with no one to take care of things I will be ridiculed, looked down upon and ostracized.” Now, his thoughts were probably dead on, but also dead wrong. They were dead on because most likely others in his community would look down upon him. He was dead wrong because that is not the point.

We do not live this life on earth to please others and meet their expectations. Over and against the will, the feelings or the culture of our communities we must follow the will of God in Jesus Christ.

The call of Jesus on our lives is far more important than any limitations that culture may place on our beleaguered lives. Jesus came to set the prisoners free and counted among these prisoners are those bound up in the opinions, remarks and put-downs of others. We cannot let popular opinion or the pervading culture of our day sway us from the path to Jerusalem where we take up our cross and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23-27).

Jesus calls on us today just as he called on this young man. He calls us on us to “go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Here, the imperative to depart means to go far and wide to proclaim the kingdom of Christ. It might be paraphrased as “depart from your former life, your former hang ups and in its place go and pronounce everywhere in the assembly of the world the Good News of the kingdom of God.”

This departing from our former lives means that in serving the cause of the kingdom we cannot do it by any other means than literally following Jesus in all his ways. Living a life of discipleship is not possible without the work of Christ in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago at the cross and from the grave for in his death our former selves die with him and in his resurrection we rise with him as disciples (Romans 6:1-14).

As Dr. Michael Middendorf says, “Discipleship brooks no compromise, according to Jesus…Jesus has set a standard different from contemporary expectations.” Jesus calls on us today to “Start a new action! Get involved with me today!” We are saved, to be sure, but will we answer the call of Jesus to depart our earlier habits and in their places pursue the way of Christ?

“A person who wishes to become the LORD’s disciple must repudiate a human obligation, however honorable it may appear, if it slows us ever so slightly in giving the wholehearted obedience we owe to God..”

-Basil the Great

Cyril of Alexandria once commented that, “the law of Moses, in the first place, commanded that you shall love the LORD God with all your soul, all your might and all your heart.” The Hebrew word for “all” (*kol*) means the very whole and totality of that which it is describing. Jesus desires all of our love, all of our souls, all of our strength and all of our will to be conformed to his path.

Are we ready for that type of devotion?

Are we ready to pay that cost of discipleship?

Questions to Consider:

-Consider for a moment the things that are holding you back from wholehearted discipleship…

-What social responsibilities prevent you from following Jesus today? What cultural hang ups and duties could you lay aside for the kingdom of Christ? How is discipleship in Jesus’ footsteps “different from contemporary expectations”?

Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” (9:61)

Remember when we were talking about the expectations that a son will stick around until the father died, before leaving and living his own life? We noted that there are exceptions to this rule, particularly when it comes to following orders of religious devotion. Even today in the Middle East sons are allowed to leave the home if they are committing themselves to a strictly religious life; all they have to do first is ask permission (although with modern Westernization more and more children are leaving the home for more secular pursuits and only have to ceremoniously ask permission to leave). In instances of terrorism a radicalized Muslim will simply place a phone call or send an e-mail to their family letting them know he will no longer contact them, he is now sold out for his Islamofascist cause (this was the case with Nigerian Al-Qaida terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab who just over a month before his failed martyrdom in Detroit contacted his parents one last time).

This man is not simply asking to say goodbye – it would be hardhearted of Jesus to refuse such a heartfelt request – rather he is wondering if he can first go back and ask permission to go and follow such a religious pursuit. But why does Jesus not even allow the request for a blessing, still isn't his denial of this man's request a little strict! Even Elisha is allowed by Elijah to exchange the customary words with his family in 1 Kings 19: 19-20.

Jesus again overturns the cultural expectations of his day. The *apotaksasthai* (αποταξασθαι) or “greetings, salutations and blessings” were very important in the ancient world (for example, people would greet each other with the blessing “Shalom” or “Peace, welfare and wholeness”). They were the very fabric of Jewish social life. So why does Jesus overturn them?

For those who want to “greet their families” or “seek permission” have their hearts tied to something other than Jesus. In first century Palestine it meant this man was tied to the heart of his family – where the authority of the father is supreme. To follow Jesus means to give our *all* and to solely follow the will of *the* Father.

We cannot seek to follow Jesus without abandoning all that lies behind us in our former lives (meditate on the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:17-32). The bonds of our culture are not worthy of our time, effort or allegiance in

the light of what Christ brings. As Christ's disciples we, like Paul, are to count the former things of our lives as rubbish (Philippians 3:4-11). That means that anything that keeps us from advancing in the kingdom of God and keeping our eyes on Jesus must be cast off (Hebrews 12: 1-2), in the extreme case this may even mean family (if, and only if, they are preventing our conversion e.g. with family prescriptions in the Middle East and China).

In the words of Wendt, "The Talmud states that a father and his son, or a master and his disciple, are regarded as one individual...Jesus insists that loyalty to his Kingdom and its all-consuming demands supersede all other loyalties, including loyalty to family."

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (9:62)

Any of us who have ever plowed before know what Jesus is talking about here. The person plowing will use one hand to hold the plow, control the depth of the slice and to lift it over impediments such as rocks. With the other hand the plowman directs the animal pulling the device along. All the while the plowman must peer past the metal and the animal to insure they are plowing a straight line. In the Middle East it is still common for there to be four plowings. This was also true in South Africa where I lived for a while. Those plowing would first plow wide furrows to break up the soil. Second, small furrows are produced in order to provide proper drainage. The third plow is for more close set furrows and finally a fourth plow is done after the sowing in order to cover the hand sown seed. Certainly, plowing is no easy undertaking.



A man plowing his fields in Southeast Asia.

In order to complete this process the plowman must be wholly focused on the task before him. To lose focus for one minute may mean that the plow is taken off balance by a rock, that the furrow is not straight, that the drainage system is damaged and the field will flood or seeds are not covered and left exposed to birds.

Thus, when Jesus speaks these words we can clearly see his point. As

disciples of Jesus we cannot look back. The Greek word used for “look back” is *hopiso* (οπισω) and it means “to go home, look back or go backward” and was often used to refer to those who grow recreant to Christ or his teaching and cease to follow him.

Of course, many of us often will be tempted back to our former ways. This does not mean that we lose faith every time we fall into our former sins. However, if we habitually do so we are unfit for the spread of the kingdom. Living a life of sin and living a life proclaiming the Word of Christ in word and deed are mutually exclusive. We cannot live one while also living the other.

Following Jesus requires focus, discipline and development in the ways of the Spirit. Through regular study, devotion and meditation on the Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Sacraments we can trust that Jesus will restore us daily and continually set us right on the path to plow forward for the kingdom of God.

With that in mind hear the words of Jesus as Eugene Peterson paraphrases them in *The Message*, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s Kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.”

Questions to Consider:

-How are you called to follow Jesus and proclaim his kingdom? What kind of focus do you afford this calling?

-How does Jesus strengthen you personally in Word and Sacrament for the work of the kingdom?

-How can you “seize the day” for the kingdom of Christ?

Conclusion

Luke does not write down the responses of the three would-be disciples of Jesus. We do not know whether or not they applied Jesus’ words to their lives. As Arthur Just Jr. states, this suggests “that more important than the question of whether *they* heeded Jesus’ words is the question of whether *you* – the hearer or reader of Luke’s gospel – will respond in faith and persevere on the journey with Jesus.”

Will we heed his words?

Harry Wendt says in concluding his section on these parables that, “[B]ecoming a disciple of Jesus is not ‘signing up for the course’ to get a little information. It is the cementing of a lifelong relationship to a Person.” Indeed, there is a higher cost to discipleship than sitting through an hour long Bible study with Ken or Pastor Mark!

Joking aside, let us contemplate the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who lived the way of Jesus to the point of persecution and execution at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. In his devotional classic, *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer declares,

“He [the disciple] wants to follow, but feels obliged to insist on his own terms to the level of human understanding. The disciple places himself at the Master’s disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then discipleship is no longer discipleship, but a program of our own to be arranged to suit ourselves, and to be judged in accordance with the standards of rational ethic.”

Likewise, H.G. Wells in “The Outline of History” says,

“Jesus was too great for his disciples...he was dragging out all the little private reservations they had made from social service in the light of the universal religious life. He was like a terrible moral huntsman, digging mankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived hitherto. In the white blaze of His kingdom there was to be no property, no privilege, no pride and no precedence, no motive and reward but love. Is it any wonder that men were dazzled and blinded, and cried out against Him?...For to take Him seriously was to enter into a strange and alarming life, to abandon habits, to control instincts and impulses, to essay an incredible happiness...Is it any wonder that to this day this Galilean is too much for our small hearts?”

Indeed, Jesus is still too great for us. We may feign following Christ but soon we look back and lose our way. We do not cast off our former ways and instead deny Jesus in word and deed every single day of our lives. We are fallen and failed disciples. By his grace Jesus forgives us and renews

us again to follow him once more. Through the power of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament we learn and grow as disciples of Jesus.

Yet, we who receive such grace must endeavor to not receive it cheaply. Again, it is Bonhoeffer who opines,

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. 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.”

This grace cannot stand over and against the cross-life of Christ where we with him set our face to go to Jerusalem. That is living according to the way of Jesus, which is what Bonhoeffer calls “costly grace.” That is the call on our lives today.

“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 pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, 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 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 a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Costly grace is the sanctuary of God; it has to be protected from the world, and not thrown to the dogs. It is therefore the living word, the Word of God, which he speaks as it pleases him. Costly grace

confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

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