

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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COUNT THE COST

Luke 14:25-33

The Lord Jesus was not a salesman. He never tried to sell Christianity. He never asked people to follow Him by telling them only the benefits they would get. On the contrary, He often told them about the difficulties and the hardships they would experience as disciples, and He encouraged them to think carefully about the consequences of following Him.

Two parables in the gospel of Luke put the question of cost in the context of discipleship. It is the twin parables of the man who wanted to build a tower and the king who wanted to go to war. They are only found in Luke in a passage that is often entitled ‘the cost of discipleship.’ Luke 14:25-33.

*Luke 14:25. Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,
26 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.
27 "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.
28 "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it --
29 "lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,
30 "saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'
31 "Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?
32 "Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.
33 "So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*

Causing a stir

Here we read that a great crowd had been following Jesus, maybe because they had seen Him performing miracles or confronting courageously the religious leaders. For whatever reason, they were following Him. And Jesus does the one thing that is guaranteed to turn the multitudes away. He says to them, ‘If anyone of you come to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, his wife, his children, his brother, his sister, whoever it is, you cannot be My disciples. You can be in the crowd, but you cannot be My disciples.’

Those are strong words which probably caused a stir among the people. To hate one’s father and mother? The language is absolute: if a person does not hate his parents, he cannot be Jesus’ disciple.

It is interesting to notice that Jesus' enemies did not try to quarrel with His words on this point. That would have been a good opportunity. They could have said, 'Jesus, you have just taught the breaking of the 5th commandment. Because the 5th commandment says that you shall honor your father and your mother. And you say, 'You shall hate your father and mother.'"

Why didn't they take this chance to argue with Him? Because everybody understood what Jesus meant. The Lord was not advocating the neglect of family responsibilities. In speaking of hating, he was expressing Himself in a startling way in order to make a point. Everybody knew that Jesus was using a Hebrew idiom where 'to hate' means that you love God so much more than anyone else that in comparison to loving Him, everything else is so secondary that it can be compared to hating them. Your love for God must be so complete and wholehearted that your love for family members would be pale in comparison, pale to the point of being like hatred.

There is a cost

Jesus' point was that those who wanted to be His followers would have demands placed upon them. It is not going to be easy because the priorities of the kingdom must take precedence over all other commitments, even family commitments. Jesus expressed the same thing in an equally surprisingly way when a disciple came to Him and said, 'Lord, let me first bury my father.' Jesus said, 'Follow Me; let the dead bury their own dead' (Luke 9:59-60). The Lord Jesus was speaking of priorities to someone whose father was about to die but who was making his family an excuse for not following Him.

The call to 'hate' needs to be put in the context of its first-century setting. At that time, a choice for Jesus meant alienation from the family. If somebody wanted acceptance of family more than a relationship with God, it would be very difficult for that person to come to Jesus given the rejection that would inevitably follow. There could be no casual decision for Christ because it automatically came with a cost. It is not necessarily the case today in countries labeled as 'Christian' where one might associate with Christ for cultural reasons rather than for true spiritual ones. For the Jew of the first century, the decision to follow Jesus implied that family relationships would be severed and that could be interpreted as 'hating' his own family.

But the cost of discipleship is greater than that. Jesus speaks of 'hating' even one's own life and of taking up the cross. 'Whoever does not hate his own life cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross cannot be My disciple.' The image of cross-bearing is another way of expressing willingness to 'hate one's soul' in self-sacrifice as a result of following Jesus. The crowd knew very well what it meant to 'carry the cross.' They have seen criminals being forced by the Romans to carry the cross on which they would die. Jesus gave this teaching to get His audience to think carefully through their enthusiasm for Him. Association with Christ means total submission to Him, perhaps even to the point of death.

Costly and free?

This passage has posed problems for some Christians. And they have an honest question. We read in the Bible that God gave His Son to be crucified and whoever accepts Him has eternal life. And here we are told that you cannot be His disciples, you cannot accept Him, unless you lose everything, including your own life. How can it be? The apostle Paul says plainly that *the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23). Salvation is a free gift from God. How can salvation be free and still cost you everything? That is the question.

What adds to the confusion is that salvation is sometimes preached as though it is like receiving goodies. And faith is just a matter of stretching out your hand to get those goodies, the free gift. It is that simple. I would call that 'salvation by fancy.' To fancy something means to have a desire

for something. You use it for a desire that does not last long. For example, you can say that you fancy BBQ chicken today. You suddenly have the feeling that you want to eat that kind of food. So you go and get it. In the spiritual context, you hear this preacher speaking about the beauty of salvation and the benefits you can get from it. It is so wonderful! And you are told that it is being offered to you as a free gift. So you fancy it at that moment. You want it. Then you make a decision to trust Christ for salvation without thinking too much about the repercussions of such a decision. Too many people have come to Christianity in that way, with little idea of the sacrifice their commitment will involve. And very often, it is because they were not told.

We cannot reconcile the teaching of free salvation with a salvation that costs you everything if we have a wrong understanding of faith. The definition of faith as stretching out your hand to get a free gift is not found in the Scriptures. In the Bible, faith is always in somebody. I stress the word ‘in’, in somebody. The emphasis is on the relationship that faith implies. Faith in Christ means that you have a special relationship to Him, to the gift. And it is not just any kind of relationship. The relationship that is mentioned here is that of a disciple to a master.

Look at Jesus’ opening words in this passage. ‘If anyone comes to Me...’ The expression ‘come to Me’ refers to the entering into a relationship of trust. This is what faith is about, trust in another and entry into relationship with that person. And here, we are talking about a relational discipleship, a relationship that involves a disciple and his master.

As with any relationship, faith is an ongoing affair. It cannot be reduced simply to a matter of decision – deciding to stretch out your hand to get the free gift.

Faith: a relationship

Some years ago, a church organized an evangelistic campaign using this key sentence: ‘Salvation is as easy as drinking water or eating bread.’ And they also quoted Jesus. The first quote is John 7:37. ‘If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. I shall give him water.’ The second quote, as you might have guessed, is John 6:51. ‘My body is the bread from heaven. You eat this bread and you will be saved.’ So, if you want to be saved, drink that water and eat that bread. That’s all you have to do. It is as simple as that.

When you listen to their explanation, you get the impression that having faith simply means that you take this water and this bread, and you put it in your mouth. If you do that, you will live forever. You will have eternal life.

Look carefully at what Jesus said. *If anyone thirsts, let him **come** to Me and drink. He who **believes** in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.* Notice the words ‘come’ and ‘believes’. You come to Jesus in faith. There is a definite personal relationship to Him. Coming to Jesus is not like coming to a shop in order to get something. ‘Come to Me’ means ‘acknowledge Me as King.’ Come to Him and submit your life to Him. That’s what Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-29. ‘Come to Me. Learn of Me. Take My yoke upon you. And then you will have peace.’ Come to Jesus means to take His yoke upon you. It means that you establish a relationship with Him in which you acknowledge Him as the Lord of your life.

The same is true about the bread. To eat of the bread of life means to appropriate Christ as one’s life. It is a figure of belief for no one will eat what he cannot trust to be edible. That’s why He says a few verses earlier, *He who believes has everlasting life* (John 6:47). The one who has faith, the one who eats of this bread, will live forever. And to have faith means that you have a relationship with Jesus. In that relationship, you submit yourself to Him as Lord. He is the Master, you are the disciple.

Now we can understand why a free gift can be so costly. God’s gift to us is in the person of Jesus. God so loved the world that He gave His Son. But Jesus is not some kind of present that you

can put in your pocket. He is not a package that you can just grab and bring with you. He is a person with whom you enter into a relationship. And what is the nature of that relationship? As Paul says in Philippians 2, God gave His Son to be the Lord so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow down to Him. That's how He gave His Son. He gave Him to be our Savior and our King. And as King, Jesus would not accept any place other than first place in a person's life. Therefore following Him requires a total commitment to Him. You must put Him first. If Jesus does not have this position, then you cannot be His disciple. Three times in succession, the Lord repeats the refrain 'cannot be My disciple' (Luke 14:26, 27, 33). Put positively, only those who are willing to renounce all for the sake of Christ can truly be called disciples.

Faith: a response to God's call

'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother...' Can you think of someone in the OT who is an example of this kind of discipleship? Abraham. We can think of a faith like Abraham. In fact, Paul uses Abraham as a definition of faith in many places. What was Abraham's faith? It is like these words of the Lord Jesus. When God called Abraham, Abraham left. It says in Genesis 12:1 that he left his country, his family, his father's household – he hated them – to go to a land he knew nothing about. He left everything to obey God's word. Abraham was truly a disciple who had a relationship with God. He had faith.

We have here another aspect of faith. Faith is the response of a person to God's call. That is how we open up a relationship with God. When God said, 'Go,' Abraham went. By his response, he entered into a relationship with God. Jesus calls you now. He says, 'Come to Me. Follow Me. But I'm warning you. It is not going to be easy. In following Me, I become first. Your father and mother, and everybody else whom you love and will continue to love have to be second. And they are going to object to that.' Then you say, 'Yes, I know, Lord. But I still want to follow You.' That is faith. Faith is precisely the response to Jesus' call to discipleship. When you say 'Yes, Lord,' knowing what your decision entails, you have established a relationship with Him.

Remember. Salvation is not a package. Salvation is Christ. And in order to be saved by Christ, you must enter into a relationship with Him. Now, the way to enter into a saving relationship with Him is by responding through faith to His call. There is no other way.

Assess the cost

The Lord Jesus does not want disciples who do not know what they are getting into when they decide to follow Him. There is a cost, a cost that each follower must assess before he makes up his mind to throw in his lot with Jesus. In order to highlight this point, Jesus teaches two parables. The first one is about the building of a tower, and the second one, about a king going forth to war.

'Suppose,' Jesus says, 'that a man decides to build a tower on his land. He begins the construction but somehow he did not count the cost involved in materials and labor. Not long after, he runs out of money and has to abandon the project. He ends up with a useless building in his hands.' What an embarrassment to start a project and not be able to complete it. Such is the danger for a disciple who does not assess what it means to follow Jesus. The man should not have undertaken his construction project until he knows if it is affordable and can be brought to completion. So should it be with discipleship: we do not make any decision before assessing whether we are ready to take on the personal commitment and sacrifice required to follow Jesus.

Even more serious is the position of a king who must decide whether or not to go to war with another king. The king has fewer troops than the enemy; in fact, he has only half the troops. Ten thousand against twenty thousand. He needs to consider very carefully if he can reasonably win before committing his troops. If it is clear that he cannot win, then he should ask for terms of peace in order

to avoid what could be a massacre and humiliation. So also the disciple must think through the consequences of a decision to follow Christ. It would be foolish not to consider what it will take to be a disciple.

The parables of the tower-builder and the king were not meant to discourage anyone from discipleship. They were meant to teach us that becoming a disciple is the most important commitment that a person can make and it deserves to be given at least as much thought as we would give to any important decision in life. If wise people calculate their chances of success in major endeavors, how much more must we assess seriously the requirements of spiritual commitments.

Truly committed followers

Not only this commitment involves ‘hating’ family and one’s own life, it also involves ‘hating’ material possession. After the two parables, Jesus says bluntly, *So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions* (Luke 14:33). The disciple is to distance himself from materialistic attachment to the world. He must give up everything for Jesus. ‘To give up all’ does not necessarily mean literally to abandon all. The actual implementation of that verse will vary from person to person, and from situation to situation. For some, this may be literal. For others, it may be a willingness to hold loosely to material possessions. It is nevertheless a very serious warning. For everyone, it means this: preoccupation with money has a disastrous effect on the possibility to come to terms with the discipleship demands of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is not interested in having half-hearted followers. Too often, the call to discipleship is to receive the great benefits and advantages promised by God. Those who come to Christ only because of the benefits of Christianity may not be as committed as they should be. They enter into discipleship with enthusiasm but in times of trouble, they don’t last. To rush into discipleship is like a builder who cannot complete a planned project or a foolish king who enters a war he cannot win.

Discipleship cannot be based on sham emotions and shallow enthusiasm. Yes, there are eternal benefits and advantages, but salvation involves an unbelievable cost. What is the cost? The disciple must make Jesus the number one priority of life. This means that he must surrender everything to Jesus – his family relationships, his possessions, even his own life. In other words, there must be a total commitment. This is what Jesus asks both the disciple and the potential disciple to consider very carefully.