

Text: Luke 14: 25-35**Theme: Pick Up the Cross and Follow Jesus.**

It was a mixed bag of people who were following Jesus, and now the size of the crowd that was traveling with him was getting bigger. He could tell that there were some who had thrown in their lot with him and were following along, but they weren't going to make it with him to end. You see, the end was Jerusalem, the end was a cross, but some who were following with him wouldn't care to know anything about the cross Jesus was headed for.

So on this occasion, as Jesus addresses the masses that are following with him, he uses kind of an interesting strategy—we might call it addition by subtraction, or recruitment by discouragement. What he seems to be doing is weeding out what might be called the “bandwagon fans,” the name-only followers, people who are just caught up in the excitement but aren't really there for the long haul.

This is similar to the kind of recruiting that is done by an elite branch of our military known as the Navy Seals. If you visit the Navy Seal recruitment website, here's what it doesn't say, “Everybody is encouraged to give it a try. No matter if you're a out of shape or lazy or weak, just check it out for a little while and if it's not for you, that's okay! We'll tell you nicely. That way, at least you tried.” No, the Navy Seal program isn't interested in bothering with half-hearted, lackluster commitment. Here's what they do say, “This intensive training is designed to push you to your physical and mental limits. SEAL training has been described as brutal, preparing you for the extreme physical and mental challenges of SEAL missions.” Then they are not shy about listing some of the exacting physical requirements you have to be able to do to be considered.

Now let's get one thing straight from the outset. Jesus isn't about to tell all the followers what the physical requirements are that they need to meet in order to get to heaven. He isn't basing his grace on their commitment and performance, but he is warning them about what absolutely comes along with being a disciple of his. Remember to keep those two things straight as we go along. 1. Being a good disciple isn't what's going to get you into heaven, that's the free gift of God's grace. 2. But being a disciple with a genuine relationship with Jesus is going to come with a cost, the cost of discipleship. So what does true discipleship cost? What does the true following of Jesus look like? He begins to tell them, **“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25).** And your initial reaction to that is? Uh? Okay so a true disciple of Jesus hates their family? So much for all this Family Growing in Christ stuff? But this doesn't make any sense. I thought you're supposed to honor your father and mother and love your spouse like Christ loved the church and nurture your children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Is Jesus taking an ax to the rest of his word or is he just having a bad day or what?

What he is doing is making a point! For all the nonchalant followers in the crowd out in front of them who aren't really concerned with listening that closely, he's catching their attention with hard truth and jarring words like "hate your father and mother" and even yourself. On other occasion, he says the same thing in the way we'd expect him to say it, **"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."** (Matthew 10:37). That makes a little more sense.

Jesus is really just rephrasing and reaffirming the 1st commandment and applying it to himself. **"You shall have no other gods before me."** Not your parents or your spouse or your kids, not before or more than me! And you know who Jesus is disagreeing with? A lot of people we know and like, like Princess Diana, who says, *"Family is the most important thing in the world."* Or Walt Disney, or Dennis Quaid, who all say the same thing.

Now realize, I just ripped their quotes off the internet, and they don't really have a chance to explain what they meant in context, but if you believe at face value what those quotes said, Jesus says, **"Such a person cannot be my disciple."** (Luke 14:25).

Then he adds more to it, **"Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."** (Luke 14:26). Now when you think about it, this sentence might almost make more sense to us right off the bat than to them, because we know that Jesus had to carry his own cross part of the way to his crucifixion. For the original hearers, they wouldn't have seen or realized that Jesus was actually going to carry his own cross, but they would have at least known what it looked like for someone sentenced to death to carry a Roman cross, the instrument of the worst kind of execution. Carrying the cross was hard, and brutal, and heavy. That's the kind of life Jesus is calling his disciples to. Life with Christ in this world is not going to be a nice lackadaisical stroll in the park with no expectations of you and no hardships. Instead, **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."** (Acts 14:22). Carrying the cross means a life of denying yourself and dying to the desires of your sinful nature, a daily crucifying of self. Jesus says again, "If you won't do it, you cannot be my disciple."

Now the crowds hearing this hard truth from Jesus would have broken down into basically two groups. There would have been the name-only followers, the bandwagon fans, hitching a ride for a little while, while it was popular. But what would they do once they heard what this journey was really going to be like? As happened throughout Jesus' ministry, **"Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."** (John 6:68) And whoever turned back and stayed that way, they lost their lives forever. There's only one who has words of eternal life and they deserted him.

What about the ones who stayed, who kept following after the others had been weeded out? Those words Jesus spoke called them to intensify their commitment, their following, their discipleship. Jesus called them to whole-hearted devotion, to be ALL-IN.

As you think about what that means to be all in, what is it that your heart latches on to the most that threatens to keep you out or only partially in? What are you least willing to give up in as you walk along with Jesus? That's the question that uncovers your real idols. You know it for yourself better than me. Is it your ties to your family, like we said before? Is it your pride, that refuses to let anyone see you as you actually are and help you. Or is it the stuff you're storing up for yourself in this world? Whatever it is that won't be taken from you until its from your cold dead fingers is the thing that will separate you from God. One more time Jesus says, **“Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.” (Luke 14:33)**

So when we've taken this rigorous self-assessment, and we've failed completely, as we must if we're being honest with ourselves, then what? When we realize our devotion to Jesus is mostly half-hearted, and often worse than that, what are we to conclude? Are we like salt that's lost its saltiness and is good for nothing more than to be thrown out? When we find ourselves in this place, dead to rights and with our battleship sunk, we find ourselves where God has designed the assessment of his law to bring us.

But before you turn away from Jesus in despair, remember again where he was headed. He was headed on a one-way trip to Jerusalem to carry the cross and die, and not just for the elite and the committed and the navy seals of Christianity. He went there with whole-hearted devotion, an all-in commitment to die for everyone, you included, the deserters and the half-hearted followers alike.

And when you look again and see Jesus and his passion for you in the face of your indifference, behold the Savior who gives of himself everything he demands from you. Look at him and see what it is that he has done through that cross. The Trinity has set aside its own first commandment and has put us before himself. The Father has hated the son he loved, forsaking him to die for the children he should have hated. The Son who was forsaken offered perfect service and all-in devotion to God as our mediator. And this, his perfect merit, his perfect attention to everyone of God's demands is what he imparts to you, who follow along after him. Jesus has not called you to carry the cross, lead the way, and save yourself. Rather he has called you to follow him who is your very LIFE on the way that he has paved to salvation.

As you follow behind him, carrying the cross he has set upon your shoulders, the Holy Spirit bolsters your legs beneath you. He strips from your hands anything you cling to in this life and strengthens your grip on the cross of Christ, your death to sin and also your very life in him.

Christ calls us to follow. First, do what he says! Calculate the cost. See what it will be! See the nothingness you let go of and the everything you gain. Put down what you love. Pick up what you loathe. Pick up the cross and follow him. Amen.

**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which^[a] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14).
Amen.**