

## ***What It Costs to Become a Christian***

### **Luke 14:25-35**

In one sense, the thrust of this passage is obvious; in another sense, it is somewhat uncertain. Transparently, the explicit point of the passage is that anyone who wishes to be a Christian must give up everything. Practically, however, given that conversion makes little change in our family status, our careers, or our possessions, how exactly does Jesus expect us to apply this text? Clearly, those who move into the inner city, into rural Appalachia, or to a developing nation must leave behind family, career, and possessions. But what about the rest of us? What practical difference does it make for us to believe in Jesus?

#### **Day 1: Luke 14:25-27 Large crowds vs. true followers**

As we have seen in previous passages, Luke often portrays a significant context with a brief, pregnant stroke of the pen. “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus...” He does not elaborate the point of this observation, but it is readily inferred. Two points, actually.

First, large crowds were following: Jesus is succeeding spectacularly. Yet he does not feed this adulation. Instead, he challenges it with a call to commitment. Secondly, the crowds were “traveling with” Jesus, who then explains the necessary requirements for those who wish “to come to” and “follow after” him. Which is to say, there is an important distinction – in fact, if not in vocabulary – between accompanying Jesus, and following him. Jesus will set out that difference in the verses which follow. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that Jesus is not satisfied with popularity, and does not cater to the crowds in order to maintain his approval ratings. Instead, he differentiates superficial appreciation from serious commitment, and challenges the crowd, even at the cost of turning some people off. Jesus wants committed followers, not hordes of hangers-on.

This is an important lesson for contemporary churches in a market-driven society. We must beware not to tone down Jesus’ words in order to win more adherents (in that case, who is influencing whom?). Level of commitment is as important to Jesus as the number of commitments.

#### **Day 2: Luke 14:26 Jesus over family**

The importance of family – and which family relationships are most important – varies from culture to culture. Traditional Confucianism

prioritizes five relationships, in this order: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friend-friend. That is, in Confucian cultures, (a) state matters more than family; (b) father-son relationship, more than husband-wife (!); (c) sibling relationships are non-egalitarian (!), and, (d) family matters more than friends (unlike much adolescent American culture). Whatever our human culture and our take on these relative priorities, Jesus does not permit any culture or person to prioritize human relationships over relationship with him.

While all Christians may give formal consent to the priority of our relationship with Jesus over our human relationships, it is not clear that this priority actually works itself out in our daily lives, or even how it should look. Practically speaking, what does it mean for us to prioritize Jesus over family? Does it affect the people we date or marry (or even whether we date or marry)? Does it influence the number of children we have, or whether we opt for adoption or home-grown? Should it affect the amount of money we spend on our family vs. on donations to kingdom causes? Does it influence the size of our homes relative to our donations for the homeless? Should it impact the town we live in and the taxes we pay to live there, in the hopes of a good education for our children vs. the amount of tax dollars spend on the education of those who live in poor areas? Should it affect the number of activities we enroll our children in, and the amount of time we spent ferrying them from one to another, vis-à-vis the amount of time we spend in ministry? Practically, what does it look like to prioritize Jesus over family?

### **Day 3: Luke 14:26-27 Jesus over self**

A middle-aged friend asked his father, "Did you enjoy your career?" The father's retort: "What kind of stupid question is that? A career is not something to be enjoyed; it's a way of putting food on the table for your family." This captures the essence of the difference between pre-60s and post-60s America, and the difference between OBC and ABC, or between first-generation immigrants and second-generation Americans. It also explains why your parents likely wanted you to study medicine or engineering, while you may have preferred a more 'enriching' college major, such as psychology or English literature. Since 1960s America, self-actualization has been a major theme in American culture. Many, like me, are even recruited to Christian ministry by appeal to self-actualization: "Make your life count! Make a difference!"

In such a culture, what can Jesus expect when he calls us to love him more than our own lives, or to carry our cross in order to follow him? In his own era, the meaning was at least literal: believers faced persecution, torture, and sometimes execution. But what does this mean for us, who rarely ever have to risk danger, or even endure a drop in our enjoyment of life, in order to follow him? In fact, most evangelistic presentations explicitly motivate potential converts by promising that Jesus actually improves life's various satisfactions, not just in the distant future of heaven, but also in the immediate present. Don't we intuitively look to God to increase our enjoyment of life? In what ways does he actually require us to choose him over life? What cross do we ever carry? Can you identify any time in the last year when following Christ cost you some fundamental satisfaction in career or some pleasure in life?

#### **Day 4: Luke 14:33 Jesus over possessions**

The NIV translation could possibly be improved at two points here. For one, the Greek word *hyparchōn* commonly refers to material possessions. So Jesus is likely adding a third requirement to discipleship: not only renunciation of family and of self, but also renunciation of possessions. For the other, instead of the NIV "Anyone of you who does not *give up* everything he has," Luke's Greek word-choice underscores the correlation between *coming to* Christ and *leaving behind* possessions: "Anyone who does not *bid goodbye to* everything he owns cannot be my disciple."

Again this raises the same core question of application: Concretely, what does Jesus actually expect? He could have said – but does not – that we must (a) *be willing to give up* (b) *anything* (c) *when* he specifically asks us to do so. Instead, he says that we must (a) *actually give up* (b) *everything* (c) *in order* to follow him. It is not transparent what exactly this means. Ultimately, though, precision may not be necessary. Perhaps it is sufficient to note that being a Christian must at least cost us *something* by way of our possessions, without needing to say precisely how much or exactly what. Which raises the obvious question: What possessions have you ever unloaded for the sake of the gospel? Which could you give to help those in need? What purchases have you decided against, so that you could give more to the spread of the gospel or to care for the needy?

#### **Day 5: Luke 14:28-33 Think it out ahead of time**

Jesus tells two parables, each to make the same point. Only a fool lays a foundation, without first determining whether or not he has sufficient

funds to complete the superstructure. Only a fool starts a war that he has not first determined he will win. In other words, if you cannot finish, do not even start.

This is a much sharper warning than we are accustomed to hearing, or to giving to potential converts today: “Don’t profess faith in Christ until you have thought through its ramifications! First be sure that you are willing to give up all that you have! Don’t start what you cannot finish, or you will gain nothing, lose everything, and just look stupid for trying.”

Of course, it is not as though we give up everything in return for nothing. For one thing, Jesus gave his life for us, so anything we sacrifice for him is only fair recompense in exchange for what he has already given for us. Besides that, Jesus himself promises subsequently, “No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:30). Nevertheless, giving up something we treasure can be a challenge, so we rightly take to heart Jesus’ warning that we cannot have it both ways: we cannot have both him and all our stuff. So we do well to consider carefully before choosing him.

**Day 6: Luke 14:34-35 Those who start but do not finish are useless.**

Given the point of the two preceding parables, what do we say to those who come to Jesus, and then find the cost too high and equivocate between pressing on or turning away? The same thing Jesus said.: To start and not finish renders one worthless.

Ancient salt in its natural state was generally compounded with impurities, such as gypsum. Over time, moisture could cause the salt to leech out, leaving only the untasty impurities. While many substances that decompose are still useful as soil amendments or to mix with fertilizer, not so these impurities. What remains is just tossed out. Jesus urges potential converts to count the cost before they embrace the faith, because God will count the cost afterwards: anyone who comes to faith, and then refuses to give up whatever Jesus demands of him is tossed out of the kingdom.

Are you currently being useful to God? Or are you prioritizing your family over Jesus, your personal satisfaction over his kingdom, or your possessions over his work?