

### What Will It Cost?

Who would ever pick this scripture for the end-of-summer, back-to-school, welcome-to-church Sunday?

Welcome! Following Jesus means hating your family!

Welcome! Being a disciple means carrying the cross!

Welcome! Christian living means giving up all your possessions!

It's as if Jesus was trying to scare us all away from his Way.

In an era of declining church membership, this scripture and others like it seem counterproductive. Shouldn't we be touting all the benefits of Christian life, rather than frightening people with its cost? Good marketing attracts people by showing them the outstanding features of the product. Let's talk about how being a Christian will solve all your problems, answer all your needs, and provide great pleasure to your life. And, after all, it's free! God's grace is freely given.

I suppose this is Jesus' way of providing truth in advertising. God's grace is freely given. Make no mistake about that. But being a disciple of Jesus Christ, a committed follower and recipient of God's grace, will cost you something. After all, being Jesus Christ cost him his life.

Let me first clarify the confusing words about hating one's family members, and hating life itself. In our family, the word "hate" was forbidden from use with reference to any other people. It is an emotional word in English, and words matter. No one should speak of hating another human being because when we speak of it, hate takes up residence in our hearts. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock explains that the word translated "hate" is actually a Semitic expression meaning "to turn away from," or "to detach from." It is not the opposite of "love," which is the overwhelming command of the entire Bible. So what Jesus is saying is that in order to fully embrace the challenge of total love of God, look beyond one's family and turn away from self, in order to turn toward his Way. (1990, *Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 181-182) They are still hard words to swallow, and hard to live.

The second price to be paid is the burden of the cross. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his compelling analysis of this, published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship*, during the rise of Nazi Germany. His words are worth a long quotation.

The cross is laid on every Christian. It begins with the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of the encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Since this happens at the beginning of the Christian life, the cross can never be merely a tragic ending to an otherwise happy religious life. When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.  
(Bonhoeffer, 1937, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 73)

Oh, this is serious isn't it? "Here I Am, Lord," we sing. "I will go where you lead me, I'll hold your people in my heart." And then we discover that the people whom God loves are suffering, and to answer Christ's call, we must suffer with them. Our old life centered around self must continually die for this new life lived that others may thrive. For we are not on our way with Jesus to a religious spa, to be pampered and comforted and made beautiful—we are on our way with him to death.

And then there's the third hard saying in this brief scripture. Give up all our possessions. Surely he doesn't mean giving up my house, my home, to live in some sort of commune. Let's be practical. Someone has to own some property. And surely he doesn't mean my family heirlooms. They have memories, and history embedded in them. He can't be talking about my books, or my photo albums, or my music collection, or my cherished artwork! If Jesus wants me to give up my possessions, we rationalize, he must be talking about my old clothes, or the stuff in my garage that I should have gotten rid of long ago. That stuff no longer "sparks joy," so I'll get rid of it. I'll improve my life and be a better Christian at the same time.

Decluttering may be a start, but that's not all there is to following Jesus' advice. There is a Jewish tale about a ship with many cabins setting sail across the ocean. One passenger, in a cabin on the lowest level of the ship, for whatever reason decides to dig a hole in the floor of his cabin. When the other passengers discover what he is doing, they are outraged. "What are you doing?" they shout. But the man shouts back, "It's my cabin! I paid for it!"

And the ship sinks.

(Debie Thomas, [www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/) 9/3/2019)

If we're going to follow Jesus, we must change our attitude toward our possessions. We're all in this together, and by "we" I mean the global community.

Today we will ordain and install elders and deacons to serve in our church in the coming year. I am fairly certain that all those who said "yes" took the time to count the cost of this commitment. Will there be enough time in my life? Is this job a good match for my interests and abilities? What will I have to sacrifice in order to fulfill my responsibility?

Similarly, whether we are taking our first baby steps toward calling ourselves Christian or we've been trying to follow that way for decades, counting the cost is always part of Christian discipleship. Maybe we start with pledging to give an hour on Sunday mornings. That may sound small, but's a bigger commitment than many want to give. Then we find that Christ is calling us to give up some habits and aspects of our lifestyle. Can we pay that price? And then we discover that Christ doesn't want just part of us, he wants ALL of us. Total commitment. A life dedicated to doing the best we can to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. A life devoted to loving God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving neighbors as ourselves. A life given to the life of the world. A life which somehow resembles Christ's life, and shows Christ to the world.

It's the only kind of life worth living, a life of integrity.

And here's the kicker. None of us can do it.

None of us have what it takes to fully live up to what he asks. None of us is able to pay the full cost of discipleship. We are weak, we are vulnerable, and we are broken. Every one of us.

So that's why we need Jesus.

We need Jesus when, like the people of the Bahamas this week, every single possession we have is suddenly stripped from us. No home, no food, no clean water, no electricity, no job, no i.d. papers, no place to go and no one to turn to except God. We need Jesus to call us to be neighbors to our poor neighbors, and give up what we have so others have what they need to put their lives back together. We need Jesus to tell us to count the cost of our excessive fossil fuel lifestyle and see what it is doing to the lives of others. We need Jesus to call us to accountability.

We also need Jesus when we face the reality of death. When he was on his way to Jerusalem, he was on his way to his death. I daresay Jesus loved life as much as any of us, but he faced death with courage and faith. When he asks us to carry the cross with him, he is offering his companionship as we walk toward our death. He is calling us to courage and faith, and through his story, to trust that death is not the end of our story, either. When we are marginally Christian, among the interested but uncommitted crowd, we might have difficulty understanding

this. But as committed disciples of Christ grow towards him in life, we are graced with confidence that he'll be with us when passing from life to death and into eternal life. We need Jesus, because he opens that door for us.

The life of integrity and discipleship that's worth living is possible because the full cost of discipleship has been paid for us, by Christ. That's what we mean when we say his grace is freely given. And then, out of gratitude, we answer his call to discipleship, and discover, by grace, the rewards which far outweigh the costs. Like everything else, the more invested, the more the rewards. The more the struggle, the greater the joy. The more the commitment, the deeper the gain.

So welcome, friends, to the hardest and most wonderful journey in the whole wide world!

Welcome, friends, to the school of the most perplexing and most loving teacher you could ever ask for!

Welcome, friends, to an earthly way of living with an eternal reward!

Welcome to Christian discipleship!

Let's go this road together. Will you join me?