

Discipleship with Meaning

Luke 14:25-33

READ Luke 14:25-33

Does this sound familiar? It should, because it is the same message that Jesus delivered to roughly the same people, including us, 5 chapters ago about the cost of discipleship. He told us then that real discipleship required our relationship with God to be our highest priority – a higher priority than our relationships with our families, a higher priority than our personal needs or desires, a higher priority than satisfying those concerns that the world around us might be telling us are important. There is an old saying about how to make sure your audience retains the message you are trying to convey: 1. Tell them what you are going to tell them. 2. Tell them. 3. Tell them what you told them. Jesus may have invented that instruction method, because not only is He repeating those lessons about priorities here, He is going to add steps 4 and 5 and more as He tells them – and us – what He told them about priorities over and over and over. If Jesus thought it was important for those folks to hear this message again, I'm thinking it won't hurt us either. Human nature hasn't changed since then, and neither has the human tendency to set our priorities on the basis of what we want and what makes us feel good right now, without reference to the better choices that God puts before us all the time. It is a fairly simple message: if we are going to receive the fullness of the love and mercy and forgiveness and grace of God that God pours out over us all the time, we must give our relationship with God our highest priority. That is a message worth repeating.

Three different times in this passage, Jesus addresses choices that we all face, every day, in which our choices can work to keep us from being disciples of Jesus Christ – choices that keep us from the fullness of right relationship with God – and in each instance He says that if you make the wrong choice, you cannot be His disciple. Hard words, with unmistakable consequences.

First, Jesus talks about our relationships with each other, and to make His point most vividly, He uses the example of our relationships with those closest to us. Scholars tell us that the word that is rendered as “hate” in this passage is not so much about an emotion as it is about actions that we take that show the relative value we place on something. Here is

that priority thing again – do we value our relationships with any of those people more than we value our relationship with God? Placing our relationship with God at a higher priority than our human relationships does not mean that we abandon or discard those other relationships. Jesus reinforced the value of human relationships when He named the two greatest commandments: to love God first, and to love each other. The best way we can demonstrate our love for each other and honor our relationships with each other, especially with those closest to us, is to love God first, and make our relationship with God the model for our relationships with each other. Imagine how all our human relationships would be different if we first saw each other as children of God, worthy of love and mercy and forgiveness and grace because that is how God sees us.

Then Jesus talks to them – and us – about self-sacrifice. The reference to carrying a cross would have sent chills up their spines, especially if they had grasped that Jesus meant for them to be following as He carried His cross. They were not thinking about following Jesus to His execution; they were thinking about following Jesus to His glory. We still have a hard time with the reality that the cross was His glory, and that through the cross, Jesus freed all who would choose it from the power of sin and death. In the hymn “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”, we sing: “I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face; content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss, my sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.” That is the self-sacrifice that Jesus is talking about here, the willingness to choose the hard path for no reason other than it is His path.

Then Jesus tells two parables about careful planning and decision-making to make this point: the choice to be a true disciple is not to be made lightly or unadvisedly. We need to understand what we are buying into in Christian discipleship – to fully grasp the meaning of the commitment, and to fully grasp the benefits of life in right relationship with God. Some will hear and understand, and will choose something other than life in Christ. It is not a rational choice, but people make it every day. That choice may not be a definitive rejection or acceptance of God in one big announcement, but is more likely to be expressed in the accumulation of the little decisions we make all the time when we choose our ways and our will over God’s ways and God’s will.

At my other work, we have a building that is named “The Learning Center”. It is a pretty plain building, mainly just a large classroom with offices and a coffee break room. We do a lot of training there, but very little of the training includes a test at the end. Without a test, it is really hard to know if the training that we deliver is translated into actual learning... and when you occasionally see someone making a choice to do something that is directly contrary to the training they have been given, that tells you that there was not enough learning going on.

We can think of the teachings of Jesus in the same way: how can God or anyone else tell if the teaching has become learning... if we are demonstrating by who we are and what we do that we are giving our relationship with God our highest priority and realizing the abundant life that comes with it. William Barclay tells the story of a college professor who was being introduced to someone, and the person said something like, “Oh, I’ve heard your name many times. My friend was one of your students.” The professor replied, “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.” Ouch. But that is the difference between a disciple and someone who has heard the teachings of Jesus, maybe over and over and over, yet not allowed the teaching to become learning – learning that transforms us from who we are to the people that God made us to be.

The conclusion of this passage about the character of salt may look like an aside or afterthought, but it is really what holds the whole discussion about priorities and choices together. I have no idea how salt could lose its saltiness, but if it did, it would no longer be salt. In the same way, discipleship without commitment, discipleship without self-sacrifice, discipleship without proper priority on our relationship with God is not discipleship at all – is as valueless as salt without saltiness – and is not even worth the effort of throwing it on the manure pile.

We are all called to be salt – to have the distinctive character of disciples: committed, self-sacrificed, focused – and to flavor the world around us with the grace of God that we have received and that flows through us. Whether we answer that call or reject it is up to us, but it is simple. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Amen