Carrying the Cross, Counting the Costs

[25]Great crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and addressed them, [26] "If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? [29] Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him [30] and say, 'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.' [31] Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? [32] But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. [33] In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-33)

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Context and Chosing…or not

Here is the sequence of Sunday gospels in these Sundays of Ordinary Time. After having critiqued host and guests alike at the human banquet of the Pharisee, the Sunday choices for gospels passes over the description and invitation to the heavenly banquet

Luke	Pericope	Sunday Year C Reading
14:1-14	Honor and Humility at Table	22nd Sunday
14:15-24	Invitation to the Great Banquet	*passed over*
14:25-33	The Cost of Discipleship	23rd Sunday
15:1-32	Parables of the Lost and Found	24th Sunday

In the gospel passage containing the invitation to the heavenly banquet, Jesus tells a parable about those who take a banquet invitation too lightly and because of their casual attitude lose their own right

to a place at the table and are replaced by others. This echoes Jesus' previous lament over Jerusalem (13:31-35).

There is an important connection between those verses and our reading. Jesus' story of the great banquet (vv.15-24) introduces the possibility that ties to one's possessions and family might bar, hinder or exclude one from enjoying the feast. Jesus lists those allegiances to family and possessions as impediments to authentic discipleship. Contra this cultural practice of familial allegiances, Jesus speaks of the necessity of a life transformed. These new practices must flow out of a transformed disposition reflecting new commitments, attitudes and new allegiances. That is, the conversion that characterizes genuine discipleship is itself generative, giving rise to new forms of being in the world.

Stoffregen notes that there are also strong linguistic connections. Notice in vv.26, 27, and 33 there is the expression "*cannot be my disciple.*" The word for "can" (or able; *dynamai*) used in the negative (cannot) generally carries with it the meaning of "not being able" to do something. That is, it refers to something that is impossible for one to do; e.g., Zechariah is unable to speak (Luke 1:20,22). He may want to speak, but he can't. However, Luke also uses this phrase to refer to something the person is able to do but chooses not to do: the man who cannot get up and give his neighbor some bread (11:7) and the man who has just gotten married and cannot come to the great dinner to which he had been invited (14:20). In both cases it was possible for them to do the task, but they just didn't want to do it.

How should the phrase be understood in our verses? On one hand, with the invited guest being able to come, but choosing not to just a few verses before our text (14:20), *ou dynamai* in our verses could refer to something that is within the abilities of the crowd, but they can choose to do it or not. That is, it is within their abilities to hate their family members and carry their crosses and to give up all their possessions. They can choose to do this or choose not to do it.

On the other hand, *ou dynamai* can refer to something that is impossible for the crowd to do. That is, it is impossible for humans to meet the demands of discipleship even if they wanted to choose it. A related word, *dynatos* is used in v.31b to refer to the ability of the king's army to defeat the more numerous enemy. If the king believes that it is possible to defeat them, he chooses to go to battle. If he believes that it is impossible to defeat them in battle, he chooses a diplomatic way to peace -- which would be dependent upon the more powerful king's willingness not to destroy the inferior forces.

In addition, Luke has told us near the beginning of this gospel that "nothing will be impossible (*adynateo*) with God." Later, in Luke, after Jesus makes impossible demands on a wealthy ruler, he is asked, "Who can (*dynamai*) be saved." Jesus answers, "What is impossible (*adynatos*) for man is possible (*dynatos*) for God" [18:26-27].

The Cost

Many scholars tag these verses as "The cost of discipleship." They are unique and peculiar to Luke, focusing on the total dedication necessary for the disciples of Jesus. It must be remembered that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and has already predicted his death; so too should the disciples be prepared to leave all behind and make their commitment to the journey that will unfold before them.

Joel Green [564] notes that there are "important topical connections between the current narrative unit and the preceding one. Particularly in Jesus' story of the great banquet (vv 15–24), he had introduced the possibility that one's ties to possessions and family might disqualify one from enjoying the feast. As Jesus turns to address the crowds traveling with him, he lists allegiance to one's family network and the shackles that constitute one's possessions as impediments to authentic discipleship. Albeit for a different audience, then, Jesus posits the necessity of a corresponding transformation of life in both instances. This conjunction of emphases reminds us that the new practices counseled by Jesus in vv 7–14 are not isolated behaviors but, from Luke's perspective, must flow out of a transformed

disposition, reflecting new commitments, attitudes, and allegiances. That is, the conversion that characterizes genuine discipleship is itself generative, giving rise to new forms of behavior."

It is here among the crowds of people that Jesus continues to teach discipleship to would-be disciples. Jesus makes no attempt to lure them, rather he makes clear that the way is not easy. Several phases reoccur in these verses:

> "*If any one comes to me* [and does not] *... he cannot be my disciple*" (v.26)
> "*Whoever does not ... cannot be my disciple.*" (v.27)
> "*everyone of you who does ... cannot be my disciple.*" (v.33)

The three conditions laid down concern renouncing family ties that would prevent one from becoming a disciple, bearing one's cross, and forsaking possessions. Between the second and third sayings twin parables illustrate the folly of failing to consider the cost of an undertaking: the tower builder (vv.28-30) and the king going to war (vv.31-32). The form of the question points to the expected answer for each, "No one, of course" (*cf.* 11:5, 11; 14:5; 15:4, 17:7). Verse 33 is the conclusion: we must renounce all that keeps us from the fullness of discipleship.

Hating One's Family?

Jesus' command of love makes it unthinkable that he commands hating one's family all the while commanding to love those we do not know and are even our enemy. As Culpepper [292] notes, one should understand the Semitic hyperbole always uses stark differences so that the contrast is more clearly seen. The term *misein* (hate) denotes attitudes and modes of action rather than emotions. The point is not how one feels towards one's parents, but rather one's effective attitude when it comes to the kingdom." This becomes clearer in 16:13, "*No servant can serve two masters, he will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*." This continues Luke 12:49-52 regarding division with the household caused by the proclamation of the reign of God.

Other scholars argue that "hate" is a Semitic expression meaning "love less" or "put in second place." For instance: Genesis 29:30–31 says Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and in the next verse, Leah is said to be "hated." This sense of "hate" aligns with Matthew 10:37: "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me...*" — a softer but similar idea.

Others emphasize that Jesus is making a provocative statement underlining the cost of discipleship. In this view, "hate" should be felt in its emotional weight—as a shocking but intentional call to absolute commitment. It reflects the radical reordering of priorities demanded of discipleship, even to the point of seeming betrayal of one's family or self. Jesus may be using hyperbolic speech to emphasize that the kingdom of God demands everything—and nothing can take precedence.

Some scholars interpret this saying in light of the urgency of the coming Kingdom. In a time of eschatological expectation, Jesus called people to leave everything behind (cf. Luke 9:57–62). Relationships, social norms, and family roles all had to be subordinated to the mission. This could explain why Jesus also warns about counting the cost before following him (Luke 14:28–33)—the stakes are eternal.

"Hating" one's family and even one's own life can be seen as symbolic of dying to the old self. Following Christ involves a kind of spiritual severance from one's previous identity and loyalties. This is consistent with Pauline themes (Gal 2:20; Rom 6:6) of dying with Christ in order to live anew.

New Life, New Allegiances

In addition, this saying likely had a practical application in the lives of the first generation of Christians. The first generation of Christian missionaries and evangelists were highly itinerant.

Discipleship entailed a willingness to leave home and family with minimal provisions (*cf.* 10:1-2; 18:29). The starkness of Jesus' language about "hate" makes clear that the choice itself is stark and demanding.

The demands of leaving behind familial ties in favor of right relationship to Jesus (v.26) as well as the demand to leave behind possessions that burden one from the fullness of the relationship with God (v.33) are not keyed to severing of family relationships or entering destitution, but rather ask a distancing from the high value that the culture places upon these things. The mere claim that one accepts Jesus and his teaching is a far cry from a radical shift in fundamental allegiances away from family and clan. For example, the teaching about invitations (vv. 12-14) makes clear that the cultural expectations and obligations of hosting and attending sets up a pattern of allegiances that makes a claim upon a person resulting in the exclusion of all outside the bounds of family, friends, and social/business peers. Discipleship demands moving from those norms to the norms of the Reign of God in which one openly invites those "outside the camp."

Just as Jesus has been reminding the Pharisees and scribes (vv.1-24) about the right behavior (orthopraxis) consistent with the Reign of God (belief as orthodoxy), so too are *the crowds* being reminded that the same is demanded of them – and it has implications and repercussions in one's life. The listeners are not encouraged to abhor their families, their parents, but to reform one's identity from service limited to the family/clan to an identity open in service to the Reign of God. In other words, to reorient oneself within the new community dedicated to God's purpose.

Carry One's Cross

The expression *carry his own cross* is a metaphor of discipleship. In terms of dedication, one is to live as already condemned to death, "oblivious to the pursuit of noble status, find no interest in securing one's future via future obligations from others or by stockpiling possessions, free to identify with Jesus in his dishonorable suffering" [Green, 566].

Many scholars interpret "carrying the cross" as a vivid metaphor for complete renunciation of self-will and self-preservation. Roman crucifixion was public, humiliating, and painful. In the Roman world, carrying one's cross was literally the path to execution—a condemned man would carry the beam of his own instrument of death. So Jesus' words suggest that following Him requires being willing to lose one's life, ambitions, or status. It is a stark image suggesting to his followers that a disciple should expect to walk as Jesus did: a path of suffering, shame, and possible martyrdom.

Luke places this saying before Jesus' own crucifixion, and many scholars see it as foreshadowing the Passion narrative. Jesus is not just teaching; he is inviting disciples to follow him on the same path he will walk. This gives the phrase both a prophetic and participatory tone—to be a disciple means to share in the cross-bearing mission of the Messiah. Later in Luke 23:26, Simon of Cyrene is literally made to carry Jesus' cross—perhaps reflecting how disciples might be asked to carry his cross or their own.

Given that our pericope ends with this stark conclusion: "*In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:33) some hold that carrying the cross is not simply about enduring suffering, but about detaching from anything that competes with Christ—whether possessions, relationships, or one's own ego.

It is also noteworthy that Culpepper (293) offers a comment on the expression "carry one's cross" in our everyday language:

> The language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross

bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. This commitment is not just a way of life, however. It is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life.

Seriousness of Commitment

These two parables are unique to Luke and are without parallel. Jesus draws attention to a simple observation: a prudent person would not begin a project until being sure it can be finished – neither a builder nor a king. In the first parable Jesus says, "Sit down and consider whether you can afford to follow me." In the second he says, "Sit down and surmise whether you can afford to refuse my demands." In the same way, God has not entered a redemptive process without being prepared to complete it. Jesus did not set his face to Jerusalem (9:51) without knowing and being prepared for his own Passion.

The two parables move from the lesser to the greater. In the first, the threat is that of embarrassment before one's peers and neighbors. In the second, the consequence is the defeat at the hands of an enemy. In continuing the movement to the even greater, the implication is that one's network of family or simply membership in a religious tradition is inadequate to assure one's status before God. What is required is fidelity to God's only Son.

One might ask why Jesus offered two parables. One answer is that He wanted to emphasize the universality of the message. The two stories feature very different characters: a private individual (builder) and a ruler (king). This may suggest that the call to discipleship applies to all—whether ordinary or powerful, domestic or political. Discipleship is not limited to a certain social class or role.

The two parables also allow Jesus to address two different kinds of costs. The first parable (tower) is about voluntary action: the man chooses to build. The second parable (war) involves an imposed situation: the king faces a threat from another. Together, they reflect that the cost of discipleship involves both: (a) what we choose to undertake for Christ and (b) what challenges come upon us as a result of following him.

Perhaps the pair of parables repeats earlier messages of Luek 12 and 13. The first parable is about our commitment to Christ. The second may also be about God's coming judgment—Jesus, the "king with 20,000," is approaching. The wise course is to surrender to him while there is still time. This understanding turns the second parable into an eschatological warning, not just advice on strategy.

Both parables stress deep reflection and consideration before acting because, at its core, following Jesus requires the most serious of commitments. Without deep commitment there is the danger of beginning discipleship half-heartedly, only to give up when concerns of the world envelope you or the path ahead gets hard (cf. Luke 8 the parable of the sower and the seed).

Habits of the Soul

Discipleship is thus an all-consuming vocation. It must be accepted with mature deliberation. Discipleship is not periodic volunteer work on one's own terms and at one's convenience. Yet what are the marks of discipleship?

Brian Stoffregen notes that in the book *Power Surge*, Mike Foss lists "six marks of discipleship for a changing church" which he expects members to practice. They are:

- daily prayer
- weekly worship
- Bible reading and study
- service in and beyond the congregation
- spiritual friendships – inviting others to the faith and passing on the faith

- giving time, talents, and resources

As Catholic we would include celebrating the Sacraments as part of weekly worship. That being said, what are your habits of the soul that open you to the wonder and mystery of God's active presence in your lives, that keep you focused; that fix your attention on the things of God?

Reflection on Life's Aspirations

From Culpepper [293-4]

> Have you ever made a commitment to an organization or committee without first finding out all that would be expected of you? Have you ever gotten caught by purchasing something or joining a book club without first reading all the fine print? Jesus warned would-be followers about the cost of discipleship.
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> Some churches, preachers, and TV programs present the gospel as though they were selling a used car. They make it sound as easy as possible, as though no real commitment were required. Jesus' call was far different. He was not looking for superficial commitment or a crowd of tagalongs. Instead, he required his followers to be totally committed if they were going to follow at all.
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> The language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. This commitment is not just to a way of life, however. It is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life.
>
> In a sense, no one can know whether he or she will be able to fulfill a commitment to discipleship. Jesus was not asking for a guarantee of complete fidelity in advance, however. If he had, no one would qualify to be a disciple. Through these parables, Jesus was simply calling for each person who would be a disciple to consider in advance what that commitment requires.
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> Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith has progressed steadily in recent years. As a result, many see no tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of middle-class Americans. On the contrary, a complete change of priorities, values, and pursuits is required. Paul wrote that in Christ we become not just nice people but new creations (see 2 Cor 5:17). When Jesus turned and saw the crowd following him, he was not impressed by his own success. He was not interested in the casual, easy acceptance the crowd offered.
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> The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some persons a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed. No partial commitments are accepted.

Notes

Luke 14:25 ***traveling with him***: The journey on the road to Jerusalem continues. That *great crowds* followed him may be held to support the view that he was travelling through Nazareth. But Luke does not say where this teaching took place, only that Jesus *turned* (cf. 7:9; 9:55; 10:23; 22:61; 23:28) and spoke to the crowds.

Luke 14:26 ***hating his father***: The language here is strong – Matthew softens the text with "*to love more than.*" The term *misein* (hate) denotes attitudes and modes of action rather than emotions. The point is not how one fells towards one's parents, but rather one's effective attitude when it comes to the kingdom. This becomes clearer in 16:13, "*No servant can serve two masters, will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*." The OT is also quite stark pointing out the priority of God over familial bonds (*cf.* Ex 32:27-29; Deut 33:9; 1 Kings 19:19-21)

Hate is a Semitic expression meaning "to turn away from, to detach oneself from," rather than our animosity-laden understanding. In Genesis, we read in one verse that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29:30), but in the next verse, it literally says that Leah was hated ("unloved" in NRSV, see also v. 33). Leah was not hated like we usually use the word, but Jacob simply loved her less than he loved Rachel. Jacob didn't have an intense dislike for Leah. In fact, he had seven children with her after these verses! (Stoffregen)

How does one understand Jesus' word especially in the light of the commandment "Honor your father and mother" (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). Some scholars argue that 14:26 constitutes the annulment of the commandment, while others point out that this is unlikely in the light of Luke 16:17 (*It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for the smallest part of a letter of the law to become invalid*) and that the rabbis were well aware of the fact that the Torah sometimes presented conflicting claims, a situation that did *not* entail a deconstruction of Torah but the subordination of one commandment to another. Jesus' requirement has been explained as echoing Deut. 33:9, where Levi's devotion to the Torah is highlighted. Levi is reported to have said of his father and mother, "I regard them not," because "he ignored his kin, and did not acknowledge his children; for they observed your word, and kept your covenant." The fact that Deut. 33:9 is quoted in Jewish texts suggests that Jesus' stipulation does not contradict Torah.

Luke 14:27 ***not carry his own cross***: Luke's use of *heautou* (his own) stresses the need for a personal acceptance of the role. Understood here is the each of Luke 9:23 "*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*." Although we read about Simon of Cyrene carrying a cross, the words used for his actions (*airo* in Mt and Mk and *phero* in Luke) are different than the word in this text (*bastazo*).

Luke 14:29 ***unable to finish***: in the narrow door text (Lk 13:22-24), the seeker is not strong enough to enter through the narrow door. Here the builder is unable (lit. "not strong enough") to finish the building. When we can finally admit that "I can't," then we are open to God's "I can".

Luke 14:31 ***king…another king advancing upon him***: this recalls the battle between the kingdoms suggested in Luke 11:18-20

ask for peace terms: literally, "ask for the things leading to peace."

Luke 14:33 ***renounce all his possessions***: The word translated "renounce" is *apotasso*. The other occurrence of this word in Luke comes in 9:61another would-be followers says, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home." Usually *apotasso* is translated, "farewell" or "good-bye".

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