

Count The Cost
By Jason Huff
Psalm 49:5-20, 1 Timothy 6:6-12, Luke 14:25-35

Today's third Scripture reading is from Luke 14:25-35. Listen now to God's Word. "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'"

Keith Green was a pioneer of Contemporary Christian Music. We still sing many of his songs today like "Create In Me A Clean Heart" and "Oh Lord, You're Beautiful." His words were prophetic, and his songs still make an impact even though he died in 1982 at the age of 28. Keith's music is incredibly powerful in sharing God's redemptive love, but it also pulls no punches. One of his most controversial songs is called, "To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice," and it's written from God's point of view. Here are some of the lyrics: "To obey is better than sacrifice...I don't need your money, I want your life...I want more than Sunday and Wednesday nights, 'cause if you can't come to Me every day, then don't bother coming at all." Keith's wife Melody was concerned that the final lyric was too harsh, that people would feel condemned by it. God is willing to forgive us when we don't turn to Him like we should. But as Melody put it, "For Keith, [this line] was...trying to shake people [awake] who were sleeping through a fire... even though the lyric never really sat right with me, I also wanted to see religious apathy shaken at its core—even in my own life."

That kind of loving spiritual shock is what Jesus was giving to the crowds in today's passage. We have to break it apart and understand what Jesus is saying because, if we take His words in an absolutely literal manner, they are totally out of character. Once we do that, we won't be any less shocked, but we will see just what being a disciple of Jesus takes and how we can be His faithful followers through surrendering our lives to Him.

By this time, Jesus is regularly surrounded by people waiting to hear His wisdom. But today's passage was not something they expected or wanted to hear. Jesus tells the crowd that just coming to Him and wanting to be His follower isn't enough. In fact, Jesus says the only ones who can follow Him are those who hate their families: mom, dad, spouse, children, brothers, sisters. It doesn't end there, either. They must hate their own lives.

Now hate is an incredibly strong word in any language, and it doesn't sound like something Jesus would say. God's message throughout the Bible is one of love, not hate. The Ten Commandments say, "Honor your mother and father." Jesus himself says that the two greatest commands in the whole of Scripture are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus teaches, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." All the apostles who wrote letters describing Jesus' message proclaim that we must love one another. So what is hate doing in here?

In our modern Western world, when we say we hate something, we dislike it and maybe even despise it. But in the ancient Hebrew mindset, the idea of "hate" expressed here is one of loving significantly less, of disregard in comparison to something else. When Matthew deals with this same situation, his Greek says that someone isn't worthy of Jesus if they love anyone more than Jesus. It's a matter of comparison, not hatred as we would think of it. And this is especially important for us today because we have lots of broken families, lots of situations where family members do hate one another, and that's totally against what Jesus wants. Jesus wants us to show compassion and love to everybody, including our families.

But that said, we still can't miss the shocking part. Family was the core unit in ancient Judaism. Your mother, father, siblings, cousins, spouse, children – they defined who you were. In an honor and shame culture, your social status started with your family. To say that your loyalty and devotion was to Jesus rather than to your family – that was radical, shameful.

And that's where Jesus goes next. He says His followers must take up his cross and follow Him. Jesus said this well before anyone knew He would actually die on a cross, but it didn't matter. There was no punishment more dehumanizing in His day than crucifixion. Most people weren't nailed to a cross; they were roped to it, exposed, and it took days for a person to die. If that isn't gruesome enough, the Jews knew Deuteronomy 21:23 which said, "Anyone hung on a tree is cursed." Jesus is implying, "To follow me, you'll face humiliation and punishment and scorn." You can just see part of the crowd snaking away at this point. They expected a grand messiah, but what they got was God in the flesh telling them that following Him would cost them everything.

Jesus tells a couple of stories to show why giving ourselves over to God is necessary. Would a man start building a tower without first knowing if he had the money to finish it? Or would a king go to war against an opponent with 20,000 men if he only had 10,000 to send into battle? Would he negotiate for peace if he knew the potential cost? At first, it seems that Jesus is saying that we should count the cost of following Him before doing it, that we should know what we are getting ourselves into. But that's not actually the case. Spiritually wise persons realize they don't have the resources to save themselves. There's not enough money to build a tower to heaven; there's no way for us to get into God's Kingdom on our own merit. We are the king who's low on men and supplies and facing a battle far greater than what we can handle. The only way we can enter God's Kingdom is not by fighting to preserve our own kingdom but by total surrender to His. When Jesus tells us that we must give all we have over to God to be His disciple, He's not making a suggestion of the cost; he's telling us the terms of peace. If we don't surrender our lives totally to God, then we are still at war with the One who made us.

The purity of this kind of surrender is what Jesus is talking about in the parable of salt and saltiness. When we think of salt, we think of this stuff that comes out of a shaker that never loses its saltiness. But in ancient Israel, salt came from the Dead Sea. You'd take a bucket of water and let it evaporate, and you'd have salt crystals left. But they weren't chemically stable, and when they got mixed with clay from the sea and other minerals, sometimes they truly lost their saltiness. Jesus is showing us that surrender to God is an all-or-nothing proposition; mix in anything else, and you've got a recipe for disaster.

For us today in America, surrender is a dirty word. We have this thought that we are, in fact, independent of other people, that our minds are totally free and our actions are totally our own, and that if we surrender to God, we surrender our freedom and our independence. But we are far more dependent on one another than we realize. Someone's choice to raise gas prices changes my decision where to go on vacation. That affects hotels and restaurant owners, which affects their suppliers, and on and on it goes. We are only as free as the choices everybody else makes. God wants us to surrender ourselves to Him and commit to His ways so that we can have true freedom.

The kind of total commitment that God is asking for isn't that uncommon. When someone signs up for military duty, they are pledging more than a 40-hour work week. Their training teaches them how to defend one another and work together as a unit. They may be sent to the battlefield on a moment's notice. They are trained to sacrifice themselves, if they must, so that others in their squad will live. Our country salutes our soldiers on Veterans' Day and Memorial Day because these men and women give everything for our safety and protection.

But truthfully, we commit ourselves to all sorts of things. A report in the last year found that the average American watches TV for over five hours a day. Many people, when they aren't working, are watching television...that's a commitment. Work itself is a commitment; many of us work or once worked a job that demanded we be at a certain place at a certain time doing certain tasks that someone else chose for us eight or more hours a day. Perhaps the most obvious commitment many of us make is marriage. The vows we take connect us to another person for a lifetime with promises that say we will stick together through sickness and health, wealth and poverty, joy and sorrow. It's a promise that we will always care for one another.

The problem isn't that we don't understand commitment; it's that we don't want to stay committed for the long haul to anything that might limit our freedom. In our society, commitment only lasts as long as it's convenient. The military is a demanding commitment, but most don't make a lifelong career out of it. That's true of most jobs these days; we feel lucky now if we work for the same company more than a few years. The average American isn't loyal to brands, nor do we feel like stores or manufacturers are loyal to us. Perhaps the breakdown of marriage is the most telling. Society no longer sees marriage as sacred or binding. If the ancient Israelites who valued commitment had problems giving themselves over to God completely, it's no wonder it causes us so much grief.

So let's say we're going to do what God asks and give everything we have to Him. What's involved in this total surrender? Does it mean that we're in church 24/7? Does it mean that we can't do anything "fun" any more? Does it mean I live in a box because I've given away everything? We might think of these things as part of surrendering to God, but it doesn't fit with the rest of Scripture. The passage doesn't give us clear answers on "how to surrender," but the rest of the Bible does, and we can find three things that lead us on the path to true and total surrender: *taking every thought captive, abandoning our idols to the Holy Spirit, and knowing the role of the church in our surrender.*

The first step is taking every thought captive. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 says this: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Paul is encouraging us to examine everything we do and everything we think and conform it to God's desires for us.

This doesn't mean that we live as criticizers but as critical thinkers. If we love God more than anything else, we want to please Him with our thought lives and choices. In our modern world, well-intentioned people, the media, even our parents or spouses or children, say that certain kinds of stealing are justifiable, that living together and sex outside of marriage is fine as long as people love each other, the list goes on. But to love God totally, we've got to examine everything by Scripture. We take our thoughts captive and judge them by the light of God's desires for us, and then mold them into godly thoughts. It may force us to take difficult and unpopular stands, but that's the way to be salt in a world that's lost its taste for God.

To think critically, to turn our thought lives over to God, we have to be in contact with God daily through prayer and Bible study. We need to know Him and how He desires His followers to act. How can soldiers know their marching orders if they aren't in touch with Headquarters? How can we know our thoughts are godly if we haven't been asking God? And it's not supposed to be difficult or strange. Praying and reading the Bible aren't just things for the pastor or the "good" Christians. God wants to work in each one of us so we might be completely His, and surrender means giving that time to Him so that we might know Him.

Second, surrender means abandoning our idols to the Holy Spirit. We get in trouble with this one because most of us don't worship the things the world worships, like power and fame and sex appeal. We may struggle with some of them like greed – but we have a nasty habit of replacing society's gods with other gods that we think are nicer and more positive, gods like family, friendship, and hard work. The Pharisees that opposed Jesus worshipped the rules they had created. Most of those rules were good, but they took the place of God.

We need to throw away the good idols that take God's place. Have you ever found that there's no time for prayer with the kids because everybody's running to this practice or that event? Those distractions have become an idol. Have you found that you only make it to church occasionally because your family wants to hang out together on Sunday mornings? Believe it or not, then family has become an idol! Time in the Bible get shoved aside for watching TV or a good book? Entertainment can be your idol too!

All of these things can be good, but if Christ tells us that we have to be willing to sacrifice everything to follow Him, these good things are just as much a hindrance to us as the bad things. And what we find is that when we do spend time in prayer and the Bible, when we make God the central core of our day, when we talk to Him even while we work or as we study, the time we do spend in our activities and with our family and friends is redeemed. We don't go to bed thinking that we should do better tomorrow, because our day is flowing out of our relationship with God.

If we really value our families and their salvation, we've got to give up the idols that distract us. In the confirmation class, I've heard, "Mom and Dad used to pray with us at dinner and at bedtime, but now that we're not little kids, they don't. Maybe they don't believe what they said they believe." When I heard that, it just broke my heart. Parents, we've got to show our kids our total surrender to God so they will join us in faith. Because good things like sports and music practice and drama and even school studies can distract them from what really matters: a solid foundation in Christ. We want our kids to succeed, but finding God and finding salvation is the only thing that really matters. The best way for us to show our kids love is to show that we are sold out to God. To make a difference in the lives of those that matter most to us, we've got to stop idolizing the good and worship the living God.

Finally, we need to know the role of the church in our surrender. I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Well, does Jason expect me to be here every day?" And the answer is, "No." The church isn't the place we live out Christianity. The church serves two purposes: a hospital and a training ground. It's a hospital where people who are spiritually sick come to be made whole. Sin is killing us and God has the only cure that works. He wants to redeem us and restore us and give us everlasting life. Our treatment takes a lifetime, but each week we worship and take to heart what God is saying to us, the deeper the healing goes. It's also a training ground. We come to church to learn how to be God's faithful people in our world. But just like anything else, education is useless if it's not put into action. The church is where we learn about the faith we practice in our homes and our workplaces and our community. It's good to be here as a group of believers because we encourage one another and strengthen each other, and it's easier to surrender ourselves to God when others around us are doing it and modeling it. We need the church to prepare us for surrender, to teach us to be the pure salt that brings the flavor of God to those around us, but the work of surrender lies outside these doors.

God wants every part of us, every day. Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him." The irony is, when we give ourselves over completely to God, we wind up richer in the end. In Matthew 9, Jesus promises, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." Once we've counted the cost and realized that total surrender is the only solution, we learn that surrender is the key to real freedom, the freedom that God alone can give, the freedom to live the joy-filled life God always intended for us to have. Let's pray.