

Free and Costly

David A. Baer

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Text: Luke 14:25-33

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and his movement is really beginning to pick up steam. People are streaming from throughout the whole countryside of Judea to hear him teach about the Kingdom of God—and more than just teach, to see him make the promise of that Kingdom come true here and now through miracles of healing and feeding. They're getting excited now. This Jesus is the real deal, and he's headed to the holy city to put everything right once and for all.

So you can imagine how the disciples react to this turn of events, right? More people means more resources, more energy, more influence—in short, it means more power. If you want change, then same as now, you're more likely to achieve it if you've got mass appeal, if you've got thronging crowds following along behind you and hanging on the every word of your rabbi. So picture the disciples looking out over the hopeful, eager masses, and coming to Jesus overjoyed. "Teacher!" they say, "Just look at what we've accomplished! Isn't it amazing? There are so many people!"

And Jesus says to them, "Oh no, this won't do. Just a minute... I'll fix it," as he heads out to address the crowd.

Whatever Jesus is doing in this passage, he's not trying to win a popularity contest.

Let's leave aside the specific things Jesus asks of them, just for a moment. I know this may cause some disappointment, but I promise you, we'll get back to the subject of hating your family and giving up all your possessions in just a minute! But first, I want to talk about the two images Jesus puts before the crowd.

"Which of you," he asks, "intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?"

I grew up outside Washington, DC, and the iconic landmark that looms over the city, the Washington Monument, seems like it's always been there, but the first stones were laid in 1848, and then construction halted in 1854, when funds were exhausted. Political infighting within the society responsible for construction meant no further donations were forthcoming up through the Civil War, and it wasn't until 1879 that construction resumed.¹ To this day, you can see the line where the construction paused for a quarter century. During the Civil War, and after, some people pointed to the unfinished Washington Monument as a metaphor for a country that was still itself unfinished, until the struggle for the integrity of the Union and the abolition of slavery could be won. What does it cost to finish a tower? What does it cost to complete the construction of a nation conceived in liberty? Do we have what it takes to accomplish what we've set out to do?

Jesus is right that we do well to consider the costs before we begin to build

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Washington Monument," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Washington_Monument&oldid=913697350 (accessed September 7, 2019).

something. He's right that an unfinished work is often an object of mockery or pity. It's one thing never to have made the attempt. It's quite another to rush headlong into a foolish undertaking that is more than you can reasonably handle. Know what you're getting into, Jesus says. Know what it will cost you, and search yourself to see whether you are able to pay that cost.

The story about the kings going to war is exactly the same. They know the size of their army, and their scouts can tell them the size of the enemy's. Think... can you win a battle if you're outnumbered 2-to-1? Do you throw yourself into a struggle you know you're going to lose, if it means sacrificing so many lives that depend on you, all for nothing?

There's a Kenny Rogers song that says it best: "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run."²

What Jesus is describing is what has come to be called the cost of discipleship. There is no matriculation fee, no deposit required at the door for those who follow him. God's love, God's grace, a new beginning—it's free for the taking. But those who want to continue with Jesus on the way need to know what it will cost them. They need to be aware, or they'll be rushing foolishly into a commitment they aren't prepared to keep.

And so Jesus sketches out these costs: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." The sad reality is that many of the early followers of Jesus were cast out of their families—disinherited, disowned, and shunned. What Jesus is asking here is not that his disciples literally *hate* their families, but that they be prepared to lose their family relationships as the cost of being part of the new community gathered around Jesus.

That specific situation is not something too many of us face, but here's something that's more common, and maybe you've experienced it... Oftentimes family members will try to manipulate committed Christians by throwing the obligation to love in their face. You're not allowed to hold me accountable, you're not allowed to talk about how I've hurt you or others, they say, because you're supposed to love and forgive. That's a line someone used on me once, and I answered with Paul's words to the church at Corinth: "[love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6). Love that looks the other way, that pretends that hurts don't exist, is not love.

What Jesus means when he says that being his disciple means hating those who are close to us is not that we should cut people out of our lives for no reason. What he means is that sometimes you have to sacrifice your investment in a relationship out of love for God *and*, ultimately, out of love for the other person, who is acting hurtfully out of their own anxiety and brokenness.

On the other hand, people in the early disciple community also found a new family in each other. Although their birth families had rejected them, they found new sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, who not only prayed for them and welcomed them, but who clothed and fed them, tended to their illnesses, and visited them in prison. But in order to make this work, they held all their property in common. In fact, in the book of Acts, which is the sequel to Luke's gospel, and a continuation of the story we read from today, there's a story about a couple who is struck dead because they concealed part of their property when they came into the community of the followers of Jesus! Holding on, holding back what you owned was a way of holding yourself apart from the fullness of relationship in this new family, and it was a deadly serious thing.

We don't do this anymore. (Though there are exceptions! Koinonia Farm, in Georgia, founded by civil rights activist Clarence Jordan, required its members to give

2 "The Gambler." Written by Don Schlitz. Dist. United Artists, 1978.

up their possessions and share everything as the early church did.) But Jesus' warnings about the danger our possessions pose to our commitment as disciples are *everywhere* in the gospels, and they still ring with truth today. What do the things we own represent to us? Do we honor God with them, or do they hold us back from trusting God and the community of disciples? Where do you experience strong feelings in relationship to the things you own? What do those feelings teach you about your relationship with God and your life as a disciple?

Our place in God's household, God's kingdom is free but costly at the same time —the cost is a willing spirit, ready to offer our lives to God's work of re-making the world. Jesus is right to ask us to consider the cost. I take comfort in this, though... The God of Jesus is the same God who took Jeremiah down to the potter's house and showed him an artist lovingly and painstakingly shaping clay on the wheel. God's intention for us is always the same—God wants to be our God, and God wants us to be God's people. God molds us and shapes us. Sometimes we push back. Sometimes we don't want to be shaped a certain way. Sometimes our relationships or our possessions give rise to tough lumps that resist the shape God wants us to have. But it's also true that the potter keeps working. God keeps working, on you, on me, on the people we love. We may be lumpy, flawed vessels, but thanks be to the God who keeps working, the God who sees the hidden beauty, the goodness yet to be revealed, the God who is not finished with us until we reflect the glory and goodness of our Creator, whole and alive and beautiful. Amen.