

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ “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. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “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? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

³¹ “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? ³² 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. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-33)

How Easy is Being a Disciple of Jesus?

Is life easier or harder today than it used to be? That depends, doesn't it? It may not be easier to make your house payments or to find a job today than it was ten years ago. But it's certainly easier to travel to California today than it was during the Gold Rush. My family did that this summer. We flew out there in one day. That was much easier than riding in a covered wagon. It's easier to buy groceries than to have to grow and harvest and butcher and can all your own food. It's easier to go to a doctor and take pain medication and get treated for our illnesses than to simply sweat it out at home and hope that the fever breaks or that the pain goes away.

But is easier always better? Sometimes it is – think of that doctor stuff again. But sometimes it isn't. It's easier to send text messages and e-mails than to deal with people face to face, but sometimes, face to face is the only way to resolve difficult issues. It's easier for college students to find and copy papers on the internet than to do their own research and think critically and draw their own conclusions. But cheating is not better for anyone – least of all for that student who's supposed to learn something from writing the paper. Some things in life are not supposed to be easy. Jesus gives us several examples in our gospel lesson for today. When he pointed to those things, he was asking us to think about something even more important: being his followers, his disciples. **How easy is being a disciple of Jesus?**

I.

Obviously, in some ways, it's easier today than it was when Christians were arrested for their faith and fed to the lions. But that doesn't mean that it's easy. In fact, Jesus' point this morning is that it can be quite challenging. **How easy is being a disciple of Jesus? As easy as a total takeover of your life.**

To make his point this morning, Jesus gave two examples from real life. The first was building a tower. If someone decides to build a tower and pours the foundation then runs out of money before the tower is built, he looks foolish. Right behind my parents' home in California there's a modern day example of this. It's a house, not a tower. But five years ago, when we were there last, the foundation was poured and construction had begun. But the guy building it ran into some kind of financial difficulty. When we were there this summer, the work had not gone any further. Needless to say, the owner doesn't show his face in the neighborhood much.

The other example Jesus gives is a king going to war, in this case, the enemy has twice the forces the first king has. If the king can't figure out how he's going to beat that larger army, long before they're close enough to fight, he's going to try to make peace. He may even make concessions to keep that larger army from attacking him.

When he told stories like this, Jesus was using things about this life to lead us to think more deeply about spiritual things. Both of these examples speak to the cost of being his disciple. And there is a cost to following Jesus while we live in this world. We have to get away from the “easy Christianity” mentality that has taken over the church of our day. I suppose, in part, it's because the church today doesn't face the obstacles that it faced in Jesus' day and in the 300 years that followed. The government is not trying to wipe us out. While society as a whole is unchristian and it brings all kinds of pressure against us, Christianity is an accepted part of life. We build churches and schools. We run colleges and seminaries. Our church body's national

budget for this year is more than 36 million dollars. That's a far cry from Christians hiding in the catacombs to avoid persecution.

Most Americans belong to some kind of church. But so often today, we cruise along without letting that faith disrupt our lives too much. We come. We sit here for an hour. We throw a few bucks in the collection plate. We go home without it ever really making any impact on our lives. When was the last time that something you heard in church changed what you thought about life or how you acted during the week that followed? When you were confirmed – as a adult or a child – you stood up here and you made two solemn promises: first you promised that you would “continue steadfast in this teaching and ... endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it.” Second you promised that you would “conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word.” Did you think about what those promises mean for your life when you made them? Does that actually happen in our lives?

Conforming all your life to God's word would mean that your faith decides how much effort you put into work, every day: your best effort. It means that your faith determines what you say and don't say to your spouse, to your children, to your neighbors, even to people who really get under your skin. It means that every thought and feeling, every action and word is a thought or feeling or action or word that we would have no problem doing if Jesus were standing right next to us. Being a disciple of Jesus means that his thoughts and his word totally take over our way of life. And in America in 2010, that sounds way too radical.

Especially, it sounds that way when God says things we don't like. God doesn't allow us to get divorces just because we're unhappy. God doesn't allow us to move in with our girlfriend or boyfriend without getting married. And God has commands for who we pray with, how we speak to one another, how we raise our children, how important we make hearing his word in our lives, and almost every other area of our lives. Jesus' point this morning is that faithfulness to him demands that we let his word determine how we act and how we think. And don't we all have to admit that we just don't live up to that standard? Even those of us who come to church regularly have to admit that we don't let God's word dominate our every thought. In fact, the more we know all that God says, the more we realize how hard it is for us to live the way God calls us to. Our failure to live as Jesus calls us to is sin. That sin deserves the punishment that God reserves for sin: hell. We all deserve to spend eternity in hell.

That's what we deserve. But God has given us something different: he gave us Jesus. Jesus alone lived the way God calls us to live. Jesus alone paid the full price of discipleship. He gave his life for us. He left behind heaven itself so that he could live and suffer here for us. When he gave his life, he paid for all our sin and failure. He paid for all the things that we withhold from God. He paid for all the parts of our lives that God's Word has not ruled over. And he set us free. God has wiped that sin out of his mind and heart. Now he calls us beloved. He calls us his children. He calls us holy and innocent and righteous, even though the most superficial examination of our lives would reveal sin. God calls us that because of Jesus. And because of Jesus, he will not send us to hell. He will bring us home to live with him in heaven forever.

But that forgiveness does not change God's call to live for him. There is a cost in this life to being Jesus' disciple. Because we are forgiven, because Jesus gave himself to save us, because God has already loved us and made us his, God calls us to count the cost and dedicate our lives to him. To suffer persecution without falling away. To take his word seriously and to make it rule every aspect of our lives.

II.

You may have noticed that up til now, I've skipped over the most striking part of this reading. In fact, when we hear the first thing he said this morning, it's hard for us to believe those words came out of Jesus' mouth. 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.”** What does Jesus mean by that? He's talking about the cost of being his disciple. **How easy is being a disciple of Jesus? As easy as a complete change in our priorities.**

What does “hate” mean? One of my earliest memories – I must have been about four – is of a time when I trying to get my mom's attention and my little sister interrupted me. I don't remember what I wanted or what she wanted. But I remember that I had been trying and trying to get my mom's attention and just when I finally had it, she interrupted me. I was so angry that just saying, “I don't like you” wouldn't have been enough. I thought for a moment and the words, “I hate you” came out of my mouth. It was probably the first

time I ever said that word. I don't even know where I learned it. My mom got really upset. She told me that hate means that you want someone dead. Of course, then I felt bad because I didn't really want my sister to die.

My mom's definition might be a little too specific, but not by much. Is that what Jesus means here? Of course not. Jesus himself told us that the person who hates their brother is a murderer. Jesus himself tells us to love our neighbor. Jesus told the people of his day that they couldn't take the money they were supposed to use to support their elderly parents and give it to the church. So clearly he wants us to love our parents. He told us to bring our children to him so that they have eternal life. So clearly he wants us to love our children. He told us to follow him so that we reach eternal life, so clearly he wants us even to love our own lives. So what does he mean? Well, he's contrasting love and hate. And his point is that our love of God should be greater than any other love we have. God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit must come first. He calls that "hating" our families and even our own lives to underline the first place our love for God should have.

That's a very practical concern. While we're here on Sunday morning, it's easy to say that God comes first. When we stand up to join the church and everyone expects that kind of confession, it's easy to make. But it's hard to live. Sometimes those families that God himself gives us can pull us away from God. What do we do then? What do we do when they don't respect our conviction of what God has taught in the Scriptures? What do we do when the person we're dating wants us to move in and makes it clear that the relationship is over unless we do?

It's sad but true that in this life, sometimes people we love demand that we choose between them and God. If we love them more than God – using Jesus' equation here – then we're hating God. If we let them govern our lives, if we let the desire for peace and harmony with them and the desire that they love us override what we know God tells us, we are putting them in God's place. We are worshipping them as a false god. For that, there's only one verdict in God's court: hell.

Again, many of us have to admit that the hardest place for us to confess and live our faith is in front of the people we love most in this life. God knows that. So he sent Jesus to save us even from that sin. He sent Jesus to die and pay and then to rise again. He sent him to wash us in his blood and make us clean. That forgiveness is ours.

Now, my friends, count the cost of discipleship. It's not easy being a disciple of Jesus because we live in a sinful world. For as long as we live here, the devil will pull on us, the society that we want to embrace us will pull us away, the sinner in our own hearts will long to be one with those we love rather than one with God. But for as long as we live here, Jesus will be with us in his gospel. He will remind us that he died for our weakness and our desire to put someone else in God's place. He will remind us that he rose to save us. And he promises to stand by us and strengthen us as we wrestle with how hard it is to follow him here. And he promises that he will bring us home to be with him in heaven. Then it won't hard anymore. There will be no cost to following Jesus. We will enjoy the love of God and perfect fellowship with each other forever. So as you wait for that day, be faithful. Count the cost. And follow Jesus. Amen.