

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 14:25-33

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This section of Jesus' teaching about the cost of discipleship is the most radical and probably the most original of the various forms of this tradition. It is important to recognize when you are telling this story that the audience is addressed as the crowds that are following Jesus on his journey up to Jerusalem. In contrast to what most commentaries assume, this teaching is not addressed to readers who are reading a text of Luke. It is addressed to people in Luke's audiences who are hearing the story of Jesus going to Jerusalem. Luke's listeners are being addressed as people who are in the crowds who were following him on that journey.

Jesus is addressing people who are interested in him, but who are not disciples. That was probably the historical identity of most of Luke's audiences. Thus, this series of sayings is about the conditions of real discipleship and what is required for following Jesus on his way. The phrase, "following him on the way," is not in this particular story, but it is part of the whole framework of the journey to Jerusalem in Luke. The experience of hearing Luke's story is then an experience of vicarious participation in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

These instructions are very confrontational. There are three conditions that Jesus identifies: the willingness to leave family ties, the willingness to face radical self-denial including martyrdom, and the willingness to give up one's material possessions. The context for Luke's audiences is the aftermath of the Jewish war. The expectations that Jesus identifies are not unlike the expectations, requirements, and conditions of being a soldier in an army. You have to leave your family, you have to be willing to die, and you basically give up your material possessions. Thus, what he describes is not unlike the conditions that were present for those who were recruited for the multitude of armies that were formed in the ancient world.

Joining Jesus' band was becoming part of a movement that was establishing a different kind of kingdom than the kingdoms of the ancient world. These conditions are stated harshly: "If anyone wants to come after me, they must hate their father and their mother and their wives and their children and their brothers and sisters and even their own lives." The word that is used is unambiguously a word that means, "to hate," referring to the opposite of love and attachment. This is about radical detachment from the connections with the world, with normal life and normal human affections. It is about wholehearted devotion to Jesus and to his kingdom, the kingdom of God.

The parables of building a tower and going to war are about sober and mature self-examination. They are meant to encourage people to do serious reflection before making a decision about following him as his disciple. It is not unlike the requirements for self-examination that are present for people who are considering joining ministerial, priestly,

or monastic orders now. These stories either are, or should be, part of their preparation, and are models for what they need to consider.

The tower was a fortification that was built for protection of house or land or vineyards. Sometimes it was by government officials. Herod built great towers. The Herodium is an example you might look up. Or a rich person could build a tower for protection of a vineyard. That scenario is present in Jesus' parable in Mark 12 where he describes a landowner who constructed a vineyard and then builds a tower. The purpose of the tower was so that people could be up in the tower and could have sight lines for the entire land so that they could identify if anybody was sneaking onto the land to steal fruit.

The preparation that was involved in building a tower is all about construction. The basic thrust of the parable is: if you start to build a tower and you build a foundation and then are unable to complete the tower, then other people will come by and make fun of you because you started and couldn't finish.

Likewise the parable of the king is addressed not to private finances but to national policy. It is about calculating whether or not you're able to win the battle or whether you need to sue for peace because the king who is coming has twice as many troops. So the calculation is: What's going to happen and can I finish this? If I enter this battle, is it something that I can win? It's a matter of sober calculation and examination.

The conclusion of this series of sayings is that anyone who wants to become Jesus' disciple must say goodbye to all that she or he has. No one who is not willing to give up all their possessions is able to be a disciple of Jesus. This is the most radical statement of these conditions of discipleship. In telling these sayings, I think the character of Jesus' words is not what you would call tough. This isn't like a sergeant at a military training camp. This is a person who is actively encouraging those who are considering being his disciples and his followers to think about and to be clear about the conditions that are required. It is for those who would be his disciples to count the costs.

The option that is clearly present and is being offered is: don't do it, don't follow. If this is too demanding for you, then don't do it. This is also the exact opposite of the prosperity gospel that is being perpetrated as Jesus' teaching in much of the church now and on TV. That is, if you follow Jesus, you're going to get rich and the condition of discipleship is willingness to take risks so that you can get rich. There could be nothing further from the spirit of this story than this understanding of discipleship. This story is about radical renunciation and the willingness to give up everything for the sake of the Kingdom of God and following Jesus.

A dimension of the story that needs attention is Jesus' saying that "anyone following me must be willing to take up their cross and follow me." This is about the willingness to be a soldier who fights by nonviolent resistance. There is a way in which this saying is the antithesis of being a soldier. The expectation of a soldier was that you take up a sword and kill your enemies and be willing to die in the process. This is taking up your cross as

a sign of nonviolent resistance to the powers of this age and being willing to die as the ultimate conclusion of nonviolent resistance and nonviolent commitment to the government of God in the world.

In the Gospel Jesus provides an example of the way of life required of his disciples. Joining in the journey up to Jerusalem is a journey of learning these ways of discipleship that Jesus is both teaching and modeling in his own life.