

Why you are here today? I would like to believe that you came to church today for the preaching. Jayne and the choir members would like to believe that you are here for the music. But we’ve all been around long enough to know that’s probably not the case. There is no doubt a gentleman here who is in attendance because his wife or mother made him come. Maybe she went with him to a ball game last week, so it’s *quid pro quo*. Or maybe there’s a young man here hoping against hope that he could meet a special young lady here at church. There are probably as many reasons as there are people here today. But of all the possible reasons for being here this morning, let’s assume for a moment that you are all here *because you are trying to follow Jesus*.

This Sunday you could have slept late—lots of people do on Sundays. You could have gone to the lake or played golf. It’s a good day for that. But perhaps you are here in worship because you are trying, in your own little corner of the world, to follow Jesus—to be his disciple. And it’s my job to help you do that through God’s instructive inspirational Word. So, why this Scripture, you may be asking?

Not exactly a “church growth” passage, is it? I can imagine some Pastor Nominating Committee meeting with a candidate for their church. “Reverend, tell us something of your understanding of church membership.” “Well, the first rule is you must hate your father and mother, your wife and children, your brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Then you must be prepared to die for the cause. As Jesus taught us, anyone who is not prepared to give up EVERYTHING cannot be a member.”

“Uh-huh. Well, thank you, Reverend. We’ll be in touch as we continue our search.” Is that the kind of church that would appeal to you? A few, perhaps. But most are drawn to something more Norman Rockwell-ish with a Sunday School class full of little girls in pretty dresses and little boys with soccer balls on the front of their shirts, all of them folding their hands in prayer; families lined up in a comfortable pew in the sanctuary with light streaming in the stained glass windows; a graying (ahem), gentle pastor who is a friend to everyone. That’s what appeals to most church going people.

Then we hear Jesus: unless we hate our families, carry our crosses, and give up all that we have, we cannot be his disciples. So why don’t we all—you and me—just turn in our resignations right now? Clearly, none of us has what it takes. As one commentator says, “If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying: Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they’re not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed—if you really do follow me—it will probably get you killed. Why don’t you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “High-Priced Discipleship,” *Bread of Angels*, Cambridge, MA : Cowley Publications, 1997, p. 461)

How are we to understand Jesus’ words? The first thing is to look at the context. The passage starts out by saying, “*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus...*” This itinerant rabbi had become so popular that suddenly, like a rock star, all the groupies had begun to gather. They had heard about his preaching and teaching; they had definitely heard about his miracles; they wanted to get close to this incredible character

and experience the unusual energy that seemed to surround him. Talk about goose bumps! Some of the more serious ones no doubt thought that perhaps this indeed was the Messiah the nation had longed for, the one who would deliver them from the hand of the Roman legions. One way or the other, it was time to party!

But Jesus is less than encouraging. He tells them their high hopes may be writing a check that reality cannot cash. There is more to this disciple business than meets the eye. He suggests that they go home and do some serious thinking about whether or not they are ready for commitment. To tell you the truth, I suspect many who heard him that day were as puzzled by what he said as we are.

What is all this about hating our parents, our children, even our very lives? The best way to understand it is to realize that Jesus was using a figure of speech we don't use anymore. In Aramaic, the word we translate "hate" has nothing to do with an emotion. It was a way of expressing priorities—so if I say, "I love Pitt and I hate Penn State" (or vice versa), it would not mean I feel hostile toward one school or the other, but simply that one of those was my first choice. In Jesus' day, the way you stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying you loved one and hated the other. It had nothing to do with feelings. The issue was personal priorities.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He knows what lies ahead. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, Luke knows even more. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "When he wrote his gospel, Christians were already being persecuted for following Jesus. To have a Christian in the family was *dangerous* for everyone, because the Romans were brutally thorough. If they found one believer in a household they would arrest everyone, so it really was true that turning toward Jesus meant turning away from your family, whether you wanted to or not. Once you made following Jesus your first priority, everything else fell by the wayside—not because God took it away from you but because that is how the world works" (p. 47). We are given that choice.

A while back when Will Willimon was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, he got a call from an upset parent, a VERY upset parent. "I hold you personally responsible for this," he said. "Me?" Will asked. The father was so upset because his graduate school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to ("throw it all away" was the way the father described it) and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A BS degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti." "Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months," Will said to the irate dad.

"Look," said the father, "this is no laughing matter. You are completely irresponsible to have encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible," he said. As the conversation went on, Dr. Willimon pointed out that the well-meaning but obviously unprepared parents were the ones who had started this ball rolling. THEY were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School, let her go to a Presbyterian summer camp. Will said, "You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me." "But all we ever wanted her to be" said the father, "was a Presbyterian."

One of the keys to understanding Scripture, especially difficult passages like this one, is to remember who is speaking and what we know of him or her from previous encounters. The speaker here is Jesus, one we have come to know as caring and compassionate, one who goes out of his way to be welcoming, even to

those whom society would shun. Suddenly, we are confronted with words that sound for all the world as if he wants to push us away, to erect a wall of expectation too high to scale. How should we understand him?

I think this is really a matter of Jesus refusing to lead us on. He doesn't want to lie to us. He refuses to make his way sound easier than it is. Discipleship makes a difference—in the way we live. It makes a difference in the way we die.

You may recognize a name from history, William Lloyd Garrison, the crusading abolitionist of the early 19th century. Garrison was once complimented on the distinctiveness and fineness of his handwriting, which at one time had been so poor as to be almost indecipherable. His reply to the compliment was, "I set to work to improve it when I became a Christian, for I resolved that I would make my Christianity reach into every detail of my life." (Robert McCracken, "Commitment Unlimited," *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. XII, Clyde Fant and William Pinson, eds., Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971, p. 87).

Jesus said, "*In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples*" (v. 33). Would you call yourself an "admirer" of Jesus? Would you say you're a "disciple" of Jesus? Discipleship can cost all that we have, all that we love, all that we are. And I believe that is less God's doing than our doing. We're the ones who set our own priorities.

The real danger of discipleship is that *it changes us*. It changes everything. Discipleship might mean leaving hearth and home for service somewhere on the other side of the globe—like Bill Quinn shared a couple weeks ago. Or it could mean a ministry in a dangerous neighborhood of the inner city. It could mean getting up early on a Saturday morning to do yard work for an elderly neighbor or helping out with our food pantry to feed the hungry. It could mean something as simple as making certain you are here for Sunday School from week to week because you know that the Greek word we translate as *disciple* really means "learner." Being a "learner" makes a difference in how we live.

A young pastor in a small Oklahoma town writes, "I met 77 year old Frank on the street one time. He knew I was a preacher, but it has never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just shook hands and visited with him, but he went on the offensive and said, "I work hard, I take care of my family and I mind my own business. Far as I'm concerned, everything else is fluff." What he was telling me is this: "Leave me alone, I'm not a prospect." So that's why the church and the whole town were surprised when old Frank presented himself one Sunday morning for baptism. I baptized Frank. The talk in the town was, "Frank must be sick. Guess he's scared to meet his maker." The day after his baptism, I asked him: Frank, you remember your little saying: "I work hard, I take care of my family, I mind my own business?" He said, "Yeah, I remember." I said, "Do you still say that?" He said, "Yeah." So I said, "Then what's the difference?" He said, "I didn't *know* then exactly what my business was."

As we began this morning, I asked why you were here. My sincerest hope is that it's because you *know* what your business is. Amen!