

The Hard Words of Following – Luke 14:25-33

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What are some of the hardest words to hear, words you might grimace at or shed a tear when hearing them?

“Have you gained weight?” Not what you want to hear.

“It’s not you, it’s me.” Many a break-up has started with those words.

“We need to talk.” Which means that harder words are coming.

“Your card has been declined.” Those aren’t enjoyable to hear.

“Brace for impact.” You never want to hear the pilot say those words.

The words that evoke pain and loss are probably the most difficult: Your mother has died. Or, your child’s surgery didn’t go well. Or, I’m sorry but we have to lay you off. Or, I’m not angry, just disappointed.

There are many other words that are hard to hear. Each of us probably remembers words that are burned into our brain and never to be forgotten. They’re just so impactful. Sometimes, they make us completely re-route our lives. Sometimes, they make us question who we are or what we should do.

When we read the gospels, Jesus offers hard words. And there may not be harder words than in this section of Luke 14. In it, Jesus offers more than one reality that is really difficult to hear.

First, he says, “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 word “hate” isn’t a word that anyone is encouraged to use. It’s a strident word that is used to portray the worst feelings we can have about another person.

We most often use it often in the context of things we don’t want to do or things we just don’t like. “I *hate* going to the grocery store on Saturday.” Or, “I *hate* it when I stuck in traffic in the afternoon.”

But when we hear Jesus use the word hate here in this context—“Anyone who doesn’t *hate* his mother or father...cannot be my disciple”—he’s not just talking about what annoys us. He’s getting at something much more serious.

Why would he use that word in the context of family relationships? After all, this is the guy who is constantly preaching about the importance of loving—loving God, loving your neighbor, even loving your enemy.

We can’t take his words here literally, can we? Hardly anybody would. And yet, he does get our attention with the purpose of emphasizing how following him shouldn’t be middle of the pack when it comes to our long list of allegiances. Hating family in order to be a disciple is more than just hyperbole.

The word “hate” is sometimes used in the Old Testament to mean “love less.” For example, in the book of Genesis, the phrase “Leah was hated” is often interpreted to mean that Jacob, who had two wives, Rachel and Leah, “loved Rachel more than Leah.” A similar definition seems to be the case here in Luke. Jesus is saying that those who want to follow him must love all others less.

It’s about where our allegiance lies. As much as we love our families and even life itself, our first allegiance is to Jesus. And that’s hard to hear.

The second provocative comment Jesus makes in this text is at the very end: “None of you can become my disciple *if you don’t give up all your possessions*. Two words stand out here. Not only is he saying we have to sacrifice our possessions, but ALL of them.

In my midweek video this week, I spoke of the great difficulty of doing such a thing, and I asked you what you just couldn’t give up to follow Jesus. I think all of us would have our short list, right? What about things like cars, or houses, or jewelry? Would we give it all up? And not only the physical objects we treasure, but the other possessions we hold dear, like our loved ones or our health. Would we give it ALL up?

That command is hard to live up to.

The verb for “give up” in Greek (*apotassetai*) is often translated as “renounce,” but it can also mean to say farewell or goodbye. If the latter is the case here, for Luke, to follow Jesus is to always be ready to say farewell to any person, position, or possession, that compromises our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

And in the middle of this passage, Jesus also throws in one more attention-grabbing phrase: “Whoever doesn’t *carry the cross* and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Carrying crosses were physical challenges back in the day — heavy and burdensome to carry it on your back. And then, of course, the suffering that would ensue after being nailed to it. Unspeakable suffering.

Jesus just puts it right out there: Following him comes with more than inconvenience. There’s suffering and sacrifice.

At the very least, the harsh words of Jesus here in Luke 14 get our attention and make us think about what it costs us to be a disciple.

Like a builder, Jesus said, who first discerns the cost of how much it takes to build a tower before he builds it or like a king who tries to figure out how many troops it will take to defeat an incoming foe, we have to count the cost of following Jesus.

And that cost is steep. It requires a good bit of sacrifice—loving others less than we love Jesus, being prepared to say goodbye to whatever interferes with our allegiance to him, and suffering for Jesus' sake.

Now, as I try to do every week, I ask myself, "Where's the good news here?" Hating family to be faithful, casting off all other influences in our lives, suffering for Jesus' sake? This doesn't exactly give off comforting and consoling vibes.

Jesus called this denying oneself.

And denying oneself *contrasts sharply with the modern self-help movement, which focuses on things like self-esteem, self-awareness, self-sufficiency, self-control and self-empowerment. The irony is that any discipline aiming to improve the self always involves the death of self in some way.*

This is the paradox. You can improve yourself as a person. No problem. But you're going to need to let some things go. Growth, even life itself, requires letting go of the very "self" we're trying to enhance.

Whether it's breaking bad habits, adopting healthier routines, or cultivating deeper relationships, improvement often demands the death of old ways, old mindsets and old identities. True transformation requires dying to self, rather than elevating it. (Homiletics Online)

God calls us to discover our true selves, what we can become, and to let it flower generously in some specific activity at his gracious invitation. And to deny yourself does not mean nipping this process in the bud. Instead, says Francis Dewar, "allowing this flowering may mean forgoing popularity, or status,

or your good name, or money, or power, or security; the kind of things that advertisers try to persuade us are essential. In other words, it will mean denying the self that runs after or clings to these things; that part of our nature that we call our ego will need to be subdued and crushed — a painful process, very painful, but not a destructive one. It is the grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying (John 12:24), that it may bear a rich harvest.”

So, self-denial as a way toward greater self-realization is, well, a good thing.

Also, consider this: earlier in Luke, while speaking of the demand of discipleship, Jesus states that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (9:24). Here, we see that being a disciple of Jesus leads us to a death that opens a door to real life. From this perspective, the **cost** of discipleship is better than the **loss** of discipleship. And that’s good news.

And this: Jesus issued these tough words to not just a few select people. He issued them to the masses. He was travelling with the crowds in this text, we are told. In other words, for Luke, we do not take the journey of discipleship alone. Denying ourselves is not just an individual thing; it’s a community thing. We can do it together. And that’s good news.

And this: our journey is only possible because of Jesus’ journey, a faithful journey of accomplishing our redemption on the cross that transforms and sustains our journey. Simply put, it is God’s grace that makes our journey of discipleship possible. Also good news.

Following Jesus is difficult, some would say even impossible. And yet, it’s filled with grace and blessing. Amen.