

The Cost of Discipleship
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Luke 14:25-33

September 8, 2019
By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

The title for today's sermon is taken from a classic theology book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He opens that book by writing about "cheap grace" and "costly grace." He calls cheap grace "the deadly enemy" of the church. He writes,

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' (a peddler's) wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices.... The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. (p. 45)

Cheap grace, where everything can be had for nothing. That's what Jesus was confronting in the controversial text from Luke 14. Have you ever been troubled by what Jesus said there? Let me remind you:

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.

Must we "hate" our dearest loved ones and even life itself in order to be a Christian? Something inside each of us screams, "No!" doesn't it? That expectation—that I would hate my wife of 39 years, hate my three daughters, and hate other family members—is offensive to me and sounds more like an cult preparing to pass the Kool-Aid jug around. So what did Jesus mean?

I turned to one of my old professors whom I hold in high regard, Dr. Alan Culpepper. He wrote the Luke commentary for *The New Interpreters Bible* commentary series. He identifies a few things that help us make sense of this teaching. First, he says "Jesus' ethic of love

makes it unthinkable” that Jesus would expect us to hate anyone, especially our family. He also points out that Jesus was speaking to “large crowds.” Not just crowds. Large crowds, where a variety of motives were represented. Dr. Culpepper calls this an example of “Semitic hyperbole,” Jewish hyperbole or exaggeration. It would be like me saying, “It was so hot yesterday I thought I would melt!” While it certainly was hot yesterday, I wasn’t really in any danger of melting. That’s southern hyperbole. That would be my way of say, “It was really, really hot yesterday.” While it wasn’t literally true that I might melt, there was a kernel of truth in that statement.

The purpose of this language in Luke 14, spoken to a large crowd, was to force the people to consider the cost of discipleship. Jesus knew where this would end. For himself. And for his followers. He wasn’t recruiting revelers for a joy ride. He wasn’t soliciting help for a benevolence campaign. He knew he would challenge his followers to radical acts of love and kindness. He would challenge them to confront the stale, legalistic practices of their religious leaders. He would challenge them to defy Pilate and Caesar and all their minions. Jesus knew his followers would need extraordinary devotion to the mission, devotion so strong it would be like hating your loved ones.

Years ago someone said that if we could dress up a chimpanzee in a suit, put a tie around its neck, and teach it to walk the aisle, it could join most Baptist churches. Now, that was another example of hyperbole, but embedded in the hyperbole is a kernel of truth. Have we made it too easy? Have we taken costly grace and reduced it to cheap grace? Have we taken life-transforming religion and domesticated it to polite, civil religion? This controversial text exists to remind us that there is a cost to discipleship.

By the way, do any of you know how Dietrich Bonhoeffer died? He was in Germany during the rise of Hitler and Nazism. In 1939, his American friends got him out of Germany, but Bonhoeffer knew where he belonged and what he had to do. He had to return to Germany and confront the evil. He returned to his homeland and participated in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested, along with his sister and brother-in-law, by the Gestapo. He was taken to Buchenwald and then to the concentration camp at Flossenburg. On April 9, 1945, by

special order of Heinrich Himmler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging, just a few days before that concentration camp was liberated by the Allies.

Bonhoeffer knew. There really is a cost to discipleship.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we are humbled by the cost some have been called upon to pay, knowing that probably will never be expected of us. Help us nevertheless to understand the cost of discipleship and to be as dedicated to your mission as you were. Amen.