

Carry the Cross, Count the Cost, and Seek the Lost
Luke 14:25 – 15:10
February 27, 2022
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 14:25 – 15:10

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Introduction

Tom Lin, the President of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, has this life story: “I performed well in high school, garnering accolades for athletics and leadership. I was my class valedictorian and named one of the top 20 high school students in the nation by USA Today... I was even featured in an ESPN television special. And then came the highest honor any Taiwanese parent can imagine: the Harvard acceptance letter. My future was secured. I was the model minority. But when I arrived at Harvard, I heard Jesus’ call to follow Him in a new way. In a Bible Study on Mark chapter 10, I sensed the Lord say to me, ‘I have a mission for you, Tom. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.’

I cannot describe the pain and disappointment on my parents’ faces when I told them I had decided to walk away from job opportunities with six-figure starting salaries to begin fundraising with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. My parents were devastated. We talked, argued, and wept for several days. Finally, seeing my resolve, they got down on their knees and begged me with their palms open: ‘Tom, our lives are in the palms of your hands. Please don’t crush us.’ My mom’s last words of the conversation were, ‘If you do this, I will kill myself.’ My parents who I loved dearly stopped communicating with me. It was painful. My phone calls went unanswered. My letters received no reply. Both of my parents entered into a severe depression and would not speak to me. They stopped going to church and withdrew from their own community of friends. My parents’ silence and withdrawal lasted for years.”

Many years later, Tom’s mother got stomach cancer and God used that to reconcile not only their relationship, but also his parents’ spiritual lives. Eventually, his mother sat him down and said, ‘Tommy, there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you for a long time: I’m so sorry. I know that I caused you so much pain in the past few years. I should have supported you and just loved you. I love you, Tommy.’ He apologized for the pain that he caused too. Later he and his wife told his parents about their plans to start a Christian fellowship in Mongolia, fearful that his parents would be angry all over again. But this time his parents supported him and encouraged him to go.¹

In today’s passage, Jesus makes the startling, jarring statement that *“if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother... he cannot be my disciple.”* While we don’t understand why Jesus would ever tell us to hate someone, perhaps we can get a start with Tom Lin’s story in getting a feel for how putting God and His kingdom first in your life might make it feel like you are hating your family. We’ll dive deeper in that area, as well as a few other areas of discipleship that Jesus calls us to. I have three easy points as we work through a challenging text: carry your cross, count the cost, and seek the lost.

¹ Tim Keller & John Inazu, *Common Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020).

I. Carry Your Cross (14:25-27)

²⁵ Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

What is Jesus doing throwing aside the fifth commandment to honor your father and mother, and Paul's commands for husbands to love their wives? I mean I grew up in a nice Christian family and if we ever said that we hated someone, we were quickly corrected, "We don't hate anyone except Satan." But now I read that Jesus wants me to hate my wife? My kids? My parents and brothers? Sorry, I don't think I could do that for You, Jesus. But perhaps Jesus is not thinking about the fifth commandment so much as the first commandment – "*You shall have no other gods before Me.*"

Jesus often made his point by hyperbole/exaggeration, such as in Matthew 19:24 "*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*" Jesus might have looked around the crowd and seen the largest thing (a camel) and the smallest thing (a needle) and used that to show how ridiculous it would be. Of course, then He winked at the crowd and said, "*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*" (19:26). So here Jesus is making His point so strongly that He is not saying we should actually hate our families. Of course not- that goes against the whole rest of the teaching of Scripture. But compared to our love for Him, our love for family should feel like hate. The New Living Translation has phrased verse 26 as: "*If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else.*" All other relationships need to take a lower priority than our commitment to Him. If we place anything higher than Him, it becomes a god. He's not asking for our preference, a vote of confidence, or some bandwagon-jumping fans. He wants hard-core, come hell-or-high water absolute allegiance.

In my first sermon at CenterPoint after becoming pastor of the church, March 15, 2020, I dealt with the parallel passage in Matthew that taught about taking up your cross, so I'm not going to spend much time on that here. You can look up that sermon if you want to read more. I will say that we are so used to the phrase "carry your cross" that it gets misused:

- A man doesn't like his job, so he says that's just his cross to bear
- A woman's husband isn't very loving and doesn't help with the kids, it's her cross to bear
- Someone has a chronic illness and refers to it as their cross to bear

Those are all difficult things that the Lord will give you strength to bear up under, I'm not minimizing those. But carrying your cross is not those things. It is being ready to die for Him. Jesus was saying that you have to be willing to walk step-by-step with Him through His sufferings. "I'm giving up my life for this mission, are you willing to do the same?" You must be willing to surrender to God's will, and if necessary, feel His shame and suffering too. We must die to our own plans and ambitions and be willing to serve Him as He directs. That doesn't mean everyone becomes a missionary or a pastor, but we follow Him no matter what, willing to die for Him if we must.

Before we start down the road of discipleship, though, Jesus advises us to

II. Count the Cost (14:28-35)

²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one

of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. ³⁴ "Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? ³⁵ It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Following Jesus is deeply rewarding and connects us with our Creator and loving heavenly Father. But it is not easy, I hope that no one has ever told you that the Christian life was a walk in the park. Jesus Himself didn't sugar-coat the requirements and the hardships that would be in store for those who decided to be His disciples. He wanted those who responded to Him in faith to know what they were getting into so that when opposition and difficulties arose, no one could say they hadn't been warned. You never had to read the fine print with Jesus, He would tell you plainly what you were signing up for. He told us that we need to think through whether we are willing to accept His terms. Every great feat in life comes with sacrifice; every Christian needs to know that there will be a high cost so that when things get rough, they won't be tempted to turn back.

So two examples Jesus gave are of a man building a tower and a king going to war. Both need to know that they can follow through what they started or they shouldn't even begin. A half-built tower that the owner can't complete will lead to mockery, and an army that can't win a battle should pursue peace instead. Jesus was not counseling for or against war, merely giving us a picture of how hard we should weigh our commitments before we jump into them. [Now, I lay out my sermon texts months ahead of time, so I obviously did not choose this text as coming the week that Russia invaded the Ukraine. Apparently, Putin has considered the cost of invasion and decided it's worth risking alienating and provoking the rest of the world, or maybe he just doesn't care. The brave people of Ukraine have counted the cost and decided it is worth it to defend themselves. World leaders are weighing whether they will join in the economic sanctions or actual combat. Let's please keep praying for wisdom, protection, and a quick resolution to this conflict.]

The teaching about salt losing its saltiness in verses 34-35 is aimed at the disciple who thinks that he or she can go halfway in. That he can commit some of his life to Jesus, but hold much of it back and follow the world's ways of doing things in many areas. Verse 33 says you have to renounce everything, be willing to walk away from anything tying you down and keeping you from pursuing Jesus wholeheartedly. The only thing that makes salt lose its saltiness is when it is mixed with other things that make it bland and tasteless. If you're not willing to commit your whole life to Jesus, you have diluted your saltiness and will not be a very effective witness in this world.

Let's move into chapter 15 and see one more way that disciples can reflect the heart of Jesus:

III. Seek the Lost (vv. 15:1-10)

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Both of these parables start with loss. One loss seems pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things: one sheep out of ninety-nine. Most people could live with losing one out of a hundred sheep. The other loss seems more substantial, 1/10th of this woman's savings. I think we'd all get up off the couch and search high and low to find a tenth of our wealth. I think the point is that, whether what got lost is substantial or not, it doesn't matter to Jesus. It's time to find it, because to Jesus, every lost soul is precious beyond measure. And so both the shepherd and the woman go to great troubles to find what's been lost. And both call their friends and neighbors together to rejoice with them, they have such delight in recovery.

Jesus says that that is a picture of God. He seeks out lost sinners and then gathers the angels around and says, "Rejoice with me, for this lost sinner has been found." Not that God ever "loses" anyone in the sense that He misplaces us, but we are lost in sin, found in Christ, and brought back to God through repentance. The story of the lost sheep was also a rebuke of the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day. They were the shepherds of Israel and how much did they care about any who would be lost? It was pretty much summed up in verse 2 that they were grumbling that Jesus was receiving sinners and eating with them. The lost sinners in their minds were the lowdown, the dirty, those who were unworthy of their time or attention. If they got too close and ate with them, the leaders themselves would be unclean and corrupted. In their minds, the sheep should rescue themselves; it was their fault they were lost in the first place.

But, of course, that is not how Jesus saw them. He saw them as fallen sinners in need of love and grace who would be cause for celebration when they were found and brought into the light of God's grace. That was unimaginable to the Pharisees and the scribes. It's one thing to say that God would receive a repentant sinner, it's another thing to say that God seeks out sinners. Those are two different things! God could sit back and say, "Someday they'll realize how lost they are, they'll clean themselves up, and then come back to me. I'll take them, why not?" The Pharisees would add, "Make sure they grovel a lot; make sure they know how wretched they've acted." But God has been called the "hound of heaven" by the poet Francis Thompson. He pursues lost souls to bring them home safely, not to grind their noses in their sinfulness, but to adopt them and restore them. In our natural states we are spiritually dead, Romans 3 says that "*no one seeks for God.*" So He comes for us.

Later in Luke 19:10 we'll hear that, "*the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*" In John 10:11, Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" 1 Peter 2:24-25 - "*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*" Jesus both lived His human life and died on a cross as a rescue mission - to find and claim His sheep. He died for what we call the invisible church - all of those who will come to faith in Him; but He also died for each individual soul, each precious, lost sheep. Because He had lived a perfect life, His death was counted by God as the sacrifice that would pay the penalty of death for our sin. His wounds heal us; because of Jesus' sacrifice, we can be found and redeemed, given eternal life with our Creator God.

Kenneth Bailey wrote a book called *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* that I'll probably quote from next week as well. About Jesus' discussion of the man who goes after the one sheep, he tells us that not only is that wonderful for the one lost sheep, but it reassures the ninety-nine other sheep as well: "It is the shepherd's willingness to go after the one that gives the ninety-nine their real security. If the one is sacrificed in the name of the larger good of the group, then each individual in the group is insecure. He knows that he also is of little value. If lost, he will be left to die. When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he thereby offers the

profoudest security to the many.”² We have a Shepherd who loves His sheep so deeply that He goes to any length to reclaim them. We can rest and rejoice in His love and wonderful care for each one of us, knowing that He loves us that intensely as well.

Conclusion

C.S. Lewis, as you probably know, was a professor of classics at Oxford University, a man who devoted his life to reading and understanding the great works of literature, as well as producing some wonderful books of his own. But here’s what he said about literature in general: “The Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured Pagan... the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world.”³ That’s quite a statement from an academic and a bookworm. One person’s salvation is more important than the entire Library of Congress! How much value do you put on one lost soul, one lost sheep?

I’m sure that most, if not all of us, here would say that, “Of course, we highly value every lost soul.” But our lives often betray that statement. I have a really hard time saying, “Yeah, look at my life, look how much I share Jesus with lost people.” Because I really struggle with that. If there’s someone here who is awesome at doing that, I would love to talk to you and find out how you do it. There is a man named Shabu who teaches evangelism seminars. He also goes out in Philadelphia every Thursday night with a small team of people just looking to hand out Gospel tracts to people passing by to have conversations with them – that is one way to seek out the lost. I’ve tried that – I’ve shared my faith with people sitting next to me on airplanes, sat at malls and talked to people who came by; it’s hard work (it’s a nightmare for introverts) and often feels discouraging. Our great prayer is that seeds get sown that God will water and bring to fruition.

The style of evangelism that many of us engage in takes much more time and patience: we cultivate relationships with our neighbors, our fellow students, our co-workers, people with common interests. I used to be part of a basketball open gym group where I tried to develop friendships in the hopes that I could get breakfast and eventually share Christ with the guys who played. Then I joined a board gaming group at my local library to develop relationships there. We have tried to have our neighbors over for dinner or events in every house we lived at in the hopes of sharing our lives and eventually our faith with them. But long-term evangelism can be hard! I’ve had people move away or distance themselves from me as I was trying to cultivate a relationship with them.

The bottom line, though, is that we have a God who searched for us, who sent His Son in the form of a human being to seek and to save the lost. His heart to reclaim and rejoice over the lost soul is a beautiful picture of His love for His people. We can choose to be callous and indifferent to lost souls and dismiss them as hopeless sinners, and wonder why God would even care about them, like the Pharisees did. Or we can join God in His rescue mission and look for ways that we can seek out and share Jesus with the lost. It can be overwhelming, so just start with one person that you know is lost. Pray for them, pray unceasingly for God to bring them to a saving relationship with Himself. Then look for opportunities to share with them and pray that God would put other believers in their life who would share God’s love as well. And know that Jesus is the great Shepherd who will draw His sheep into the fold. When we do that, we are true salt in the world, not in danger of losing its saltiness. We are His hands and feet, disciples who have counted the hard road of following Jesus.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), p. 31.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 10.