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Parables: Counting the Cost

By Bryan Hodge

"It cost something to be a real Christian. There are enemies to overcome, battles to be fought, sacrifices to be made, an Egypt to be forsaken, a wilderness to be passed through, a cross to be carried, a race to be run. Conversion is not putting a person in an arm-chair and taking him to heaven; it is the beginning of a mighty conflict, in which it cost much to win the victory." ~ J.C. Ryle

"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." ~ Acts 14:22

"No one having put his hand to the plow, and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." ~ Luke 9:62

Let us consider two "counting the cost" parables.

Counting The Cost (Luke 14:28-33)

The setting (Luke 14:25-27): multitudes of people are following Jesus. However, he wants them to understand that much is expected of a true disciple. He says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). The word "hate" is a hyperbole used to emphasize priority (cf. Matthew 10:37; Genesis 29:31). He adds, "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). James Burton Coffman commented, "Cross-bearing is widely misunderstood. It is not old age, poverty, taxes, illness, or bad weather, or any other discomfort of life that comes unavoidably into the lives of men. It is the acceptance for the sake of the will of God, or some burden or burdens, otherwise avoidable, but which are undertaken out of a pure desire to fulfill the Master's purpose" (Commentary on Matthew, p. 257, studylight.org). It is worth noting that one occasion which Jesus mentioned a disciple's cross-bearing is in context of Peter's attempt to discourage the cross (cf. Matthew 16:21-24). It was Jesus' determination to do the will of the Father that put him on the cross (cf. Matthew 26:39, 42, 51-52). We need to possess the same determination. Charles Hodge wrote, "Jesus had his cross; I have mine. It is easy to promote his; it is also easy to neglect mine. If I do not accept mine, I cannot possess his... salvation can never be 'come in Savior, but stay out Lord.'" Martin Luther King Jr. well said, "The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear" (The Agony and Glory of the Cross, p. 155).

The Parable (Luke 14:28-33): (1) Would a wise man lay a foundation for a tower, without knowing if he had the money and resources to complete it? Rushing in without thought could be a waste of money. It could lead to much mocking. It would be an embarrassment. (2) Would a wise king go to war with another king without first carefully considering his military's comparative strength, strategy, terrain, and opportunity for success? Rushing in without thought could lead to unfavorable peace terms even before the fighting starts.

The Application: Jesus says, "So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). He wanted his would-be disciples not to thoughtlessly rush into discipleship, but to do so understanding that there is a cost. Some things are better not to even begin, than to begin and not complete (cf. 2 Peter 2:20-21).

It seems to me that at times, we approach things entirely wrong in our effort to evangelize. We beg and plead with people to become Christians. We try to win them over by our friendliness. We paint a rosy picture. We end up with swelling the church with the lukewarm and not dedicated. Jesus, however, was demanding, and he warned of the cost. "If any one desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life (physically - B.H.) shall lose it (spiritually - B.H.), but whoever loses his life (physically - B.H.) for my sake will save it (spiritually - B.H.)" (Luke 9:23-24). Consider also Jesus demands in Luke 14:26-27 and Luke 18:22.

Four Kinds of Servants (Luke 12:41-48)

The Setting (Matthew 24:36-51): Jesus informs his disciples that they need to stay ready. His return is certain; it will happen. His return is uncertain; the time is not revealed. He says, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only... Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour the Lord is coming... Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:36, 42, 44). It is in this context the parable is set forth (Matthew 24: 45-51).

Luke's context also concerns the Lord's return Jesus says, "Blessed are those servants whom the Master, when he comes, will find watching... Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:37, 40).

The Parable (Luke 12:42-48): Four servants are considered: (1) The faithful and wise steward (12:42-44). This servant is found to be faithfully doing his duties when his master returns. The master promotes this servant making him "ruler over all that he has." (2) The rebellious and cruel steward (12:45-46). This servant is not prepared when his master returned. Moreover, during his master's absence, this servant mistreated other servants, both male and female. He also lived a rebellious and prodigal lifestyle. The master put him to death, cutting him in two (an ancient form of punishment, see 1 Samuel 15:33; Daniel 2:5; 3:29; Hebrews 11:37). (3) The knowledgeable but unprepared steward (12:47). This servant - while not cruel, or rebellious, or in open rebellion - is not prepared for his master's return for his master's return. He knew what he was to do, but did not do it. The master beats him with many stripes (an ancient form of punishment, see Acts 16:23; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:23; 11:24). (4) The ignorant unprepared steward (12:48). This servant is unprepared. He is unprepared because he did not understand what it was that he was to do. He is punished with few stripes.

The Application: (1) We need to be ready, for we do not know when the master will return. (2) The slowness of the return will cause some not to obey (Luke 12:45; cf. 12:38, 40; Matthew 24:48 cf. 25:5, 19). Jesus warns us it may be a long while. (3) The Bible seems to teach degrees of punishment (Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 86:13; Matthew 23:14; Mark 12:38-40; Luke 12:42-48; Hebrews 10:29), greater sin (Exodus 32:21; 2 Kings 17:21; John 19:11), and stricter judgment (James 3:1). (4) One need not be extremely wicked to face punishment. Being unprepared is enough. (5) Ignorance of God's law is not an excuse (Leviticus 5:17; Hosea 4:6; Luke 12:48; Acts 3:14-15, 17, 19; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). However, it may mitigate the severity of punishment (Luke 12:48). (6) "For everyone to whom much is given much will be required; and to whom much is committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:48). This indirectly answers Peter's question, "Lord, do you speak this parable only to us, or to all people?" (Luke 12:41). "Yes, it applies to all. However, Peter you disciples have been especially blessed. I have especially high expectations of you."

Guy N. Woods once remarked, "If it can be shown that in the solemn hour, the people who appear in that tribunal will be required to answer for their actions in proportion to the guilt they sustain, and if it can be further shown that this guilt will be proportionate to the privileges and opportunities they enjoy here, I will have shown you that this, the United States, and this the 'Bible Belt' of this great land will be, beyond doubt, the worst place from which to go to the judgment unprepared, since the opportunities we enjoy here are surely equal to the best in the world and certainly superior to most" (Shall We Know One Another in Heaven, p. 28). Think about it!