

Stories with Intent

THE PARABLES OF JESUS



The Cost of Discipleship

Have you ever made a commitment to an organization or committee without first finding out all that would be expected of you? Or have you ever purchased something without first reading the fine print? In our final collection of parables Jesus lays out his expectation for disciples—that their hearing of his word would lead to obedience in the form of action. He also warns against premature acceptance of discipleship, urging would-be followers to consider the cost. After all, Jesus was not looking for superficial commitment or a crowd of tagalongs. Instead, he required his followers to be totally committed if they were going to follow at all.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) offer a vision of life as Jesus saw that it could be. Jesus knew that it would not be easy for anyone to respond to the call to discipleship. The simple call, “Follow me,” meant such a radical change of life. Knowing how difficult it would be, Jesus concluded these teachings with the parable of the two builders, which warns about the urgency of putting discipleship into practice.

The parable of the two builders vividly draws the contrast between those who put Jesus’ words into practice and those who are hearers only. Everyone had seen houses under construction, and they had also seen houses destroyed by storms. The wise builder “dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock” (Luke 6:48). Thus it is not just that the hearing of Jesus’ words is supposed to be followed up with appropriate action; rather, only in action does proper hearing take place.

Two more parables about discipleship come later in Luke’s Gospel. With **the parables of the tower builder and the king**, Jesus calls each person who would be a disciple to consider in advance what that commitment requires. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples, and the cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some, a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship — following Jesus and learning a new way of life by putting his teaching into practice — is all consuming.

The Two Builders (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49)¹

Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount with the story of two people and the houses they have chosen to build. The metaphor of the building to describe a life is particularly powerful. One person hears Jesus' words and acts on them, putting them into practice. The other hears Jesus' words and doesn't act on them. Two people, two responses to Jesus' message. The first person is like a house that has been built on a rock. Its foundation is strong and secure and can withstand any assault. The second is like a house built on the sand. Its foundation is weak and unstable and will eventually be destroyed by the storm. This final story summarizes the entire Sermon on the Mount.

What is the teaching of the parable? We should first note how the parable functions. With the contrast Jesus sets up an absurd action to emphasize the foolishness of the second man. No one with any intelligence at all would build a house on sand or without any adequate foundation (Luke's version). The point could have been made as easily if the second part of the parable had been introduced with, "Who among you would build a house on the sand?" *No one* would be so foolish. Regardless of what else is involved, the point of this analogy with wise and foolish builders is that **security depends on hearing and doing Jesus' teachings and that mere hearing without doing leads to destruction.**

The message is clear: discipleship occurs in the everyday practices of Jesus' followers. Jesus' words balance the misunderstanding of Paul in today's Christian world that can be distorted into a gospel of grace without ethical demand. Jesus is not suggesting that a new law replace the old; rather, love for and devotion to God must be accompanied by a life that honors God. Or to put it another way, becoming a follower of Jesus is to decide to become a member of his society and is marked by a willingness to live one's life according to the values and beliefs of that society. One becomes part of the people of God. Jesus' invitation is an invitation to an encounter with God and a different way of living life. This life will provide not only strength in the present to withstand the various storms that come our way, but also the final great storm that sees us through to an eternity with God, to and for whom we have lived a life of devotion.

The Tower Builder & The King (Luke 14:28-32)

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus urges reflection on what discipleship means. He cautions would-be disciples (Matt 8:18-22; Luke 9:57-62), and he asks what profit a person has who gains the world and loses life, a question that presupposes the necessity of serious reflection (Matt 16:26; Luke 9:25). In the story of James and John desiring to reign with Jesus (Matt 20:20-23) he challenges them and asks, "Are you able?" Discipleship is no light matter, and the urgency of the call does not diminish the seriousness of the commitment. With these parables Jesus does not seek to deter discipleship, but his goal is not merely to gain as large a following as possible.

With this in mind, these parables are about discipleship and what it required, and the point of the parables is clear. Who would begin to build a tower without analyzing whether he or she had resources to accomplish the task? No one. What king would think of going out to defeat an attacking king without analyzing whether resources were sufficient for victory or whether submission is more advisable? No king would. Just as foolish would be any thought of being a disciple without assessing the impact on one's life.

As Jesus states in Luke 14:25-27, **discipleship changes allegiances with family, requires the willingness to die, shifts the focus off self-centeredness, places one at the disposal of others, and changes the way one handles financial resources.** As many have said before, "Salvation may be free, but it is not cheap."

¹ Both sections are excerpted from Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (369-85)

Applying the Parable²

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? How will it change our own?

♦ **The bottom line for the parable of the two builders is this: Anyone who hears Jesus' words and does not do them is a fool.**

- **The parable insists that we change our understanding of salvation so that it conforms to Jesus' teaching and focuses rightly on a relationship with Jesus that produces action.** We must realize that affirmation of faith in Jesus is not enough and that true faith leads to obedience. Scripture seeks that people hear the Word of God, but true hearing obeys. Thus it is not just that the hearing of Jesus' words is supposed to be followed up with appropriate action; rather, **only in action does proper hearing take place.**
- We should remember that the Hebrew word for hearing is often translated as "obey." **Obedience will not happen without choices, commitments, and the Spirit-energized exercise of will.** Salvation is not attainable otherwise. Looking good is not good enough. Knowing right is not right enough. We must actually put into practice what we know is right.

♦ **Why does failing to do Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount show one is foolish and doing them demonstrate that one is wise?**

- Imagine a world — or a community — where people do not abuse others verbally in anger, do not lust or violate marriage vows, always tell the truth, do not retaliate with violence, and love their enemies. All of us would want to live there. The failure to live this way is self-destructive and foolish. Living this way creates stability and peace. But this is to focus on the wisdom of following Jesus for life in this world. The parable is concerned primarily about final judgment. If God's judgment is taken seriously, failure to live according to his will really is foolish.
- But do we have to have judgment? As little as we like the idea, judgment is an essential aspect of Christian teaching. If there is no judgment, we do not need salvation, and what we do really does not matter. But Jesus teaches that life matters. Obedience to Jesus matters.

♦ **The parables of the Tower Builder and the King (Luke 14:28-32) differ greatly from the easy "believism" that marks so much of American Christianity.**

- Many churches urge everyone to believe, to accept Jesus, but make few or no demands on people's lives; the more members the better, even if the message is watered down for "marketing" purposes. These shallow ideas about discipleship create enormous problems for individuals, churches, and societies. We need to do a better job of helping people understand what Christianity really is about. **The concern is not going to heaven, as important as heaven is, but living now in accordance with Jesus' own life.**
- Moreover, **no basis exists to argue that discipleship is not possible for all.** The church implicitly or explicitly has often tried to establish two levels of Christianity, one for the really committed and one for those more engaged with other aspects of life. This "practical" idea has no basis. **One is either a follower of Christ or one is not.** Jesus' invitation is universal: all may and should become disciples. Finding life is dependent on following him, which also means taking one's identity from him. The shape discipleship takes will vary, but there is no lower standard than following Christ — and yes, it is possible for all.

² Snodgrass, pp. 369-85.

♦ **Counting the cost of discipleship is difficult since none of us upon coming to faith has or can have any idea of the future or what sacrifices that commitment to Christ will involve.**

- In a sense, no one can know whether he or she will be able to fulfill a commitment to discipleship. Jesus was not asking for a complete guarantee in advance, however. If he had, no one would qualify to be a disciple. Through these parables, Jesus was simply calling for each person who would be a disciple to consider in advance what that commitment requires.
- To say “Jesus is Lord,” though, does not mean “Jesus is Lord unless.....” Faith in Christ by necessity means discipleship with all its consequences. We are given over to another who shapes our lives. A complete change of priorities, values, and pursuits is required. Paul wrote that in Christ we become not just nice people but new creations (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

♦ **The parables of the Tower Builder and King are about more than considering the cost of discipleship. More significant is the fact that discipleship requires intent, choice, determination, and effort.**

- Discipleship is not some light-hearted affair, and it does not just happen. The fear we may have of human effort must be thrown out, for no discipleship occurs without human effort or *merely because of human effort*. **Discipleship is not about humans striving on their own; it’s the necessary result and consequence of faith in and following after Jesus** (Luke 14:26-27). Relationship with Christ activates and empowers the whole of life, but if we do not choose to act and actually act, nothing happens.
- To reiterate what was said earlier, **the cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency**. For some, a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples.

Discussion

1. Have you ever made a commitment to an organization or committee without first finding out all that would be expected of you? Describe that experience and what you learned from it.
2. Did you grow up attending a church that emphasized application and practice? What did this teach you at an early age? And if not, what was most emphasized (doctrine, knowledge, attendance) and how did this form your initial understanding of discipleship?
3. What is the relationship between “hears these words of mine and puts them into practice” (7:24) and “had its foundation on the rock” (7:25)? What does this say about Jesus’ understanding of his own teaching?
4. How would Jesus respond to those who believe there are two levels of Christianity, one for the really committed and one for those more engaged with other aspects of life?
5. In Luke 14:26, 27, and 33, Jesus outlines conditions under which people “cannot be my disciple.” What are these conditions? What do these conditions have in common, and what do they have to do with the examples Jesus gives in vv. 28-32?
 - What do these conditions have to do with us? What is our response to these sayings of Jesus? Why?
6. Entrusting ourselves to Jesus is never a one-time experience. Shifting from a self-centered lifestyle into a God-centered way of life takes a lifetime. What has helped you to entrust yourself more deeply to Christ?

7. "The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency." What does this statement mean to you, and what has been required in your own life? What does costly discipleship in light of the urgency of the kingdom look like for you and our church today?