
The Cost of Discipleship

DAVE BAST

During this season of Lent, we want to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem on these *Groundwork* programs. We want to go along on his journey to the cross as that journey is described in the Gospel according to Luke. Today, we look at a number of would-be disciples; would-be followers of Jesus; who for one reason or another would not or could not pay what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *the cost of discipleship*. Of course, the real question for me is whether I am willing to pay that cost. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are entering a new season of the Church year, the season of Lent; and we thought, Scott, that it would be appropriate for us to follow Jesus on the road to the cross as that is described in Luke. There is this great central section of Luke; it is really quite long, which all takes place – you sometimes lose sight of the fact as you are reading along, because there are a number of parables and stories and miracles – but it all takes place, as Luke designs it, in the context of Jesus' last journey up to the city of Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it begins in Luke 9:51. I will just read that verse really quickly. ⁵¹As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And that right there in Luke 9:51, that begins a long section in Luke basically extending through Chapter 19, or most of it. Matthew and Luke are very similar to each other. They are both much longer than Mark; they both have a lot of material that Mark does not have. Matthew and Luke have a lot of material in common, but most of the material that you find only in Luke – the parable of the good Samaritan, the story of Zacchaeus, the parable of the prodigal son – most of that material is in this ten-chapter chunk that begins at 9:51, and all of it happens as Jesus makes his way ultimately to Jerusalem, and what that means is this is what happens in Luke as Jesus walks toward that cross.

DAVE BAST

We do know from Luke's own description that he was a careful historian and researcher, and he really dug deep. Again, some scholars think that he may have used the time when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for a two-year period of time, as described in Acts, Luke may have gone all around Palestine and interviewed people and talked to people and gathered all of this material very carefully for the life of Jesus. So, that is where a lot of this comes from, perhaps.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We can be very thankful for that because, indeed, some of the most memorable parts of the New Testament – I just listed some of them – some of the most famous of all parables, that is in this section and they are only found in Luke; not John or Mark or Matthew. So, we can be really thankful. As Jesus sets out in verse 51, as I just read it, Jesus says: I am going to Jerusalem. We know he knows what it means. He is headed for the end of his ministry; the end of his life; and so, he starts walking, and

immediately we have some people who start to try to walk with him.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes, here it is. This is Luke 9:57-62. ⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me,” but he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Very interesting, powerful words. We have these would-be followers or conditional disciples, we might call them. We are going to look at those in the next segment, but just focus now, Scott, on this last phrase. Jesus says, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God;” kind of a mini-parable, maybe?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Interestingly, Jesus is being very strong; almost harsh; far from welcoming people. Can you imagine if people came to any one of our churches today and said, “I would like to become a member.” What would we think of the minister if he said, “I really do not want you to be a member,” or, “You have to do some really, really hard things, and you probably do not want to do it,” and then the person leaves. Well, that is not being a very welcoming church. But is almost as though, having now in verse 51, as we read it earlier, now that Jesus has his eyes on the cross, it is as though this very, very first little story in this segment of Luke that we are going to be looking at has to set the tone. Jesus has the cross in his eyes. That is serious. And so, his words to these people here, these three people who say they will follow him, they seem a little over the top; they seem a little harsh; they seem like they are calculated to drive people away from Jesus. Why would Jesus talk this way? But, maybe at least one of the meanings is, this is serious. Jesus is now headed to the cross, where the Son of God, the Son of all glory is going to die. This is not to be trifled with. So we are getting a tone set here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. Jesus does not want groupies. He really does want disciples, but he knows that you never will become a true disciple if you have not really thought through what this is going to take – what it is going to cost. The whole theme of this program, using that phrase: The cost of discipleship; a very famous phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many of our listeners probably know that name and something of his story; a German pastor who was martyred just before the end of World War II for his courageous stance on the Gospel and against Hitler, and actually participating in plotting to bring Hitler down. But this idea, *The Cost of Discipleship* is a book that he wrote about the Sermon on the Mount, what it really takes to be a disciple, and that is what Jesus is getting at here.

So, he uses this phrase: No one who has put his hand to the plow. In other words, somebody who started out on this course; he has taken on this job, and being a follower of Jesus is really a job, it is a life work. If you look back, you have disqualified yourself. I am sure that is literally true. I have never tried to plow behind a mule, or in any other way. I am not a farm kid, but you cannot plow a straight furrow unless you are looking forward and moving forward. So, that idea of looking back, that is a revealing thing about a person, isn't it, that backward glance?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you wonder; it goes to people's allegiance or their goal and their level of commitment, as well as maybe their true feelings. Goodness knows, Jesus struggles enough with his own disciples to keep them with him, even though he keeps talking about death and dying and sacrifice in ways the disciples often do not seem to want to hear about in his inner circle. But now, these outsiders are coming, and Jesus is basically saying: Look, the only way you are going to be really able to follow me to where I am going is if there is an incredible level of commitment here, and I am going to use some over-the-top language, maybe – we will talk about that more in the next segment – to make the point, but the odds of somebody making all the way to

the cross, if they keep looking around or looking back or they have five other things they want to do first... I was thinking about this passage earlier. You would wonder, wouldn't you, about a groom at his own wedding who kept looking away from the bride and looking at all of the bridesmaids? How long is this marriage going to last if he cannot take his eyes off of the other women now at his wedding? And that is what Jesus is saying: Look, if you cannot keep your eyes one hundred percent on me, once you see where I am going, you are going to be gone anyway. You will not go to a cross. This is serious business where Jesus is going.

DAVE BAST

So, let's take a look when we come back at these would-be followers; these conditional disciples, we might call them – disciples who want to lay down some conditions – and see how Jesus responds to each of them.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are today beginning a series for the season of Lent, in which we are going to follow Jesus in Luke's Gospel, as Jesus, starting at the very end of Luke 9, makes his way to Jerusalem and to the cross that awaits him there. We have seen, Dave, three different people have come up to Jesus offering to follow him, but saying they want to say goodbye to their family or they had to go to a funeral or something else had to happen, and Jesus rebuffed all three and said: If you are not one hundred percent with me right this moment, then you are not fit.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly. So, let's look at them in turn. The first one is a very enthusiastic fellow, and he comes up to him and he says, he blurts out excitedly, "Lord, I will follow you wherever you go." It is kind of unconditionally, I am yours. I will go where you go; I will do what you do; and Jesus has this rather off-putting response, as if to say to him: You really do not know what you are promising, here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

"I am not going anywhere," is what Jesus says, "I am going nowhere."

DAVE BAST

Right: I have nowhere to go; I do not even have a place to lay my head – foxes have holes and birds have nests – I do not own a home; I do not own a car; I do not own property; what I own are the clothes on my back; which is literally true when he comes to the cross. The only thing he had to leave behind...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Then he did not even have that, right.

DAVE BAST

Was the robe that he wore. So, as if to say to this guy: You better stop here; time out, and think about what you are really saying, because I do not think you understand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is possible that Jesus had insight here that he sensed that this man's motives were: Hey, this guy is going to take it to the top. This guy is going all the way. This guy is going to the White House. I want to get into his entourage now so that I can be with him when he comes into his own. So, Jesus might have seen through that motivation and said: You want to stick with me, that is fine, but be aware; I am on a downward spiral here to sacrifice.

DAVE BAST

There is a good quote from John Calvin about this fellow. Calvin writes: He wishes indeed to follow Christ, but dreams of any easy and agreeable life, and of dwellings filled with every convenience; whereas, the disciples of Christ must walk among thorns and march to the cross. So, I think you are exactly right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Okay, that is this guy. The second guy is a little tougher. The second guy comes and says: I want to follow you. Or Jesus says: You follow me.

DAVE BAST

He actually invites him, yes, that's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. And then he says – and what is wrong with this, I have to think off the top of my head – Lord, let me go bury my father. And Jesus says something sort of nonsensical: Let the dead bury their own dead; which they cannot do. But, what is wrong with wanting to go to your dad's funeral? Grief is not wrong, is it? We have been holding funerals in the church ever since. Have we been not following Jesus because we do not just leave the dead where they fall? That does not seem to make sense on the face of it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is an enigmatic saying, and some commentators have suggested, well, he is using dead metaphorically, or let the spiritually dead take care of the physically dead. Let others who... I do not know; I think Jesus is intentionally a bit mystifying in this reply to this man. What does seem clear here is the imperious nature of the need to follow. Jesus has issued the invitation; that is very important, I think, in understanding this exchange. So, Jesus has given the command, actually. He says – it is in the imperative mood – follow me. And nothing can come in between our response to that command and its issuing. We are going to see in the next segment where Jesus spells out the cost of discipleship. One of the things he says: If you love your parents more than me, you cannot be my disciple. And he meant it to shock, because in a culture where nothing, really, was greater than filial responsibility – the duty one had to one's parents and one's family – Jesus is actually saying: No, in fact, I trump even that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I heard a really good sermon a while back, some years ago by the great preacher and teacher of preaching, Fred Craddock, and the title of the sermon was *The Gospel as Hyperbole*, and Craddock said that often when Jesus wanted to get his point across the most vividly, he would use a statement that is not literally true; it could not be literally true. It is hyperbole; it is an exaggeration. So, Jesus would often reach for hyperbolic statements as a way to say, in a sense, you cannot over-exaggerate how important the Gospel is. Now, you do not take the hyperbole seriously. You do not think that that verse about the log in your eye would only apply to you if you literally had a tree sticking out of your head. No, you understand what it means. It just means do not make more of other people's problems than your own; and so, also here it would be wrong to say: Oh, Christians cannot have funerals. I guess that is it; Jesus said no. We just have to keep serving him and never stop long enough to grieve. No, that would be the wrong way to take it; but, we should not use that fact – that this is probably a hyperbolic statement – to undercut the truth of it; this is serious and you can never finally and always say to Jesus, "I will be with you in a minute, Lord."

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

"Yes, let me do this first, Lord."

DAVE BAST

That is what the third person says: Hey, I will follow you, but I want to first go home and say good-bye. And again, you think, "Well, what is so bad about that? Of course we can say good-bye; maybe we will never come back. Say farewell to his family and those whom he loves. But the problem with all of these conditions is the assumption that you can be a disciple of Jesus on your schedule and on your terms rather than his. These guys think that Jesus will be there waiting for them when they come back, "First I have to take care of

this business; first I have this responsibility.” There are a lot of people like that, Scott. I know you have met them as a pastor; I have met them as a pastor; people who want to say in effect, “Yes, I will believe, but just not yet,” or, “Yes, I will be committed completely, but first I have to – you know, I have my career that I have to pay attention to – I have my kids I need to raise – oh, yes, and we are hoping to buy a vacation place, so I need to work a little longer on that – and then, when everything is right; when I have my life all squared away, then I will commit to Jesus; and he says: Huh uh. That is not how it works.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The danger, of course, is if you try to make Jesus too convenient, you might end up making the Gospel too convenient, and what is less convenient than sacrificial living, and living like Jesus did by taking up your cross and following him, as he said earlier in this same chapter, in Luke 9? So, the danger is that we will short-change the Gospel, and that is what we mean when we talk about the cost of discipleship. We will dig a little deeper into that in the final segment in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and today we are digging into Luke – this great central section of Luke – we began with the end of Luke Chapter 9; Jesus’ words with some would-be disciples, and now we want to turn to Luke 14, where he really spells out, in a very similar way, many of the same themes that we have been exploring as he talks about what it is going to cost to follow him.

So, we have Luke 14:25-33; three times in this passage he uses the phrase: Anyone who does not do this; or whoever does not do this cannot be my disciple. So, the first time, in verse 26: If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

And then, in the next verse: ²⁷Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

And then finally, verse 33: So, therefore, anyone of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. There it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in between there, he keeps making the analogy of saying: If you are going to build a house, you have to have all the money and all the goods. How embarrassing to get halfway through the house and you have run out of material; you have run out of wood; what a dumb thing, to have a half-finished house. Or, what king would go to war and forget to take his soldiers with him? You did not calculate; you did not count the cost. What Jesus is saying here in Luke 9 and 14, and therefore, this whole segment that we are going to be in for quite a few weeks, Dave, in this series during Lent, is Jesus is calling us to be serious and to see all of our lives; every part of it as saturated with the Gospel. There are no parts of our lives that are free from Jesus’ claims or free from Jesus’ touch. I sometimes think that we do tend to forget that.

I heard a sermon that Barbara Brown Taylor preached some years ago; she had this wonderful analogy, where she said, “We all expect that if you hear that George in our congregation lost his job – he was fired very suddenly and he has a wife and children – you would expect the pastor to go over and say, ‘George, I am so sorry. Let me pray with you. I heard you lost your job; that is terrible,’” but, Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Suppose that we heard that George had just gotten a major promotion. He was moved up very, very near the top of his firm. What would George or the rest of us think if the pastor called and said, ‘George, I heard about your promotion and I would like to come over and pray with you about it because I am really afraid that this is going to tempt you to short-change church, and that you are not going to be able to serve the kingdom or see your family. I am really concerned about what this new success means in your life.’ We would say, ‘Well, wait a minute! Let’s celebrate! We do not have to worry about what this means for George’s faith,’” and Barbara Brown Taylor’s point was: That is how you think if you think not everything belongs to Jesus. If you do not really realize that this is an all-encompassing way to go at life now, you cannot compartmentalize.

Jesus, here in Luke 9 and 14, is calling us to be serious and to see everything as being touched by the Gospel and involved with it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the common link between these two passages that we have read is the shocking nature of Jesus' demands. I use the word *imperious* from the Latin word that means to command; the word from which we get imperial or emperor. Emperors give commands and that is exactly what Jesus is doing here. He means to shock us when he says things like: No, do not go bury your father; you come and follow me. No, do not go say good-bye to those at home; you come and follow me. No, if you do not hate your parents and your wife, you cannot be my disciple. Yes, that is over the top. It is a bit of Hebraism, you know, it is a bit of a colloquial figure of speech that they would use. Instead of saying I prefer this to this, they would say: This have I loved and this have I hated. But what he is saying, when we get down to the bottom of it and strip away the linguistic kinds of details is, I need to come first in your life, and I need to come before family; I need to come before success; I need to come before the job promotion, and if these things take you away from me, you have to give them up; that is part of the cost.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Another story from another well known preacher, William Willimon; William Willimon for many years was the chaplain and the main preacher at Duke Divinity School at Duke University, and he said that over the years sometimes he would preach a sermon and the Spirit would work through that sermon and it would change a student's life, and it would turn some students around, and he said he would often get phone calls from upset parents who would call him and say: Listen, Reverend Willimon, our daughter was going to become a doctor. She was premed. She had interests in medical research. She was going to go places, and then she heard you preach, and now she is going to be a missionary to Haiti. Your Gospel has messed up her whole life. Thanks a lot. And Willimon says: Well, I think the Gospel is supposed to mess up our lives. I think the Gospel is supposed to interrupt what we wanted to do because its claims really are quite total. We should expect the Gospel to do that kind of thing in people's lives, like it happened to some of those students. I am afraid that oftentimes we do not see that, or we do not even expect it in our own lives, which maybe shows we, too, have made it a little too convenient.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, we have referred a couple of times already to the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his phrase, *the cost of discipleship*, and how he himself paid it to the full in his own life, but he says in that book that when Jesus calls a man or calls a person, calls a woman, we would say today, he bids them come and die; and that is exactly the point of Jesus' phrase about taking up the cross – bearing the cross. That does not just mean putting up with arthritis or a crotchety relative or something like that. A cross-bearer in Jesus' world was a condemned person; a person on the way to execution, and what Jesus is saying ultimately is what he says throughout. We have to die to self in order to live for him. That may mean our ambitions, our dreams, our plans, our hopes, they all take second place to his command.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here it looks like Jesus is literally chasing people away, and we can say that is not a good strategy to grow the church, Jesus. You cannot keep chasing people away; but at the end, Jesus is not hoping that these people will say, "Ah, well, thanks for the head-ups. You are right. I do not want anything to do with you!"

DAVE BAST

Thanks for warning me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

"Whew, that was close!" No, no; of course, the goal here is to make people say, "All right, Jesus, all right. You are going to a cross and I am going to follow you no matter what it costs, I am going to follow you."

DAVE BAST

Right, because here is the point to remember: If there is a cost to discipleship, there is a greater cost for non-discipleship, for not following. Let me just close with something else he says, also from Luke 9:

²³He said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵For what does it profit one if he gains the whole world and loses himself?” So, that is the cost of not following, and we would do well to bear that in mind as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to keep digging deeper into scripture; so, go to our website. It is groundworkonline.com, and there you will have an opportunity to post some questions and let us know what you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-cost-of-discipleship>

Printed on June 3, 2026