

## ***Grace Is Free, but It Ain't Cheap***

Luke 14:25-33

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I did some airfare shopping the other day. Believe it or not, cheap airfares don't come cheaply. You may be able to fly round trip to New York for around \$250, but it's probably going to cost you a lot more than \$250. To start with, most airlines charge for checked baggage, usually \$25 for the first bag, \$35 for the second—that's for one-way travel. Some are even charging for carry-on luggage. And now the airlines are assessing surcharges for peak day travel, so to fly during a holiday or on busy business travel days, you may have to pay between \$20 and \$60 per person extra, round trip. If you want a bulkhead seat, you may have to pay anywhere from \$19 - \$39 extra, per flight. With all these fees, a family of four could end up paying between \$360 - \$600 more for their trip, adding \$90-150 per person in fees and surcharges.

Suddenly \$250 isn't such a great deal. Before you click "purchase" on that great internet airfare, you'd better make sure you know what it's really going to cost.

The same should be said about the Christian faith. "If you're going to follow me," says Jesus, "you'd better know what you're getting into." And this is what you're getting into, he says: You have to hate your fathers and mothers, wives and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself, in order to be his disciple; and you have to take up your cross of suffering and shame, in order to be his disciple; and you have to be willing to give up everything in order to be his disciple.<sup>1</sup>

The language Jesus uses is shockingly strong. But it has to be strong language, because large crowds are following Jesus, and chances are, many are following Jesus from wrong motives. Some probably see Jesus as the one who will liberate them from Roman tyranny. Some may selfishly see Jesus simply as one who can work a miracle for them or for their loved ones. Some may think that they're going to ride the coattails of Jesus' ascension to power and somehow gain a personal advantage.

But none of the people in the large crowds that were following Jesus knew that he was going to Jerusalem so that he could be crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. None of the people in the large crowds that were following Jesus knew that there would come a moment of decision in which they would be forced to choose between Jesus and anyone or anything else that would compete for their loyalty. None of the people in the large crowds ever thought that the grace Jesus promised so freely would end up costing them so much.

Jesus had to shock them into realizing what following him really meant. So he used strong language like hating family, and enduring suffering and shame, and giving up everything.

You have to know that Jesus was speaking in hyperbole, especially when he spoke of hating our family. Jesus isn't saying that we are to despise our parents or our spouses or our siblings or our children. The Aramaic word he uses for "hate" is not primarily a feeling word. It is primarily a word about priority. It

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke 14:26, 27, 33.

means to abandon or to leave aside, the way a sailor needs to abandon a sinking ship or the way a general needs to leave aside distracting things to win his battle.<sup>2</sup>

This really doesn't weaken the meaning of what he says—it just helps us see that following Jesus means we must be willing to leave any other personal loyalty aside. It means that there is nothing and nobody we are to love more than we love Jesus. Jesus knows that he is about to begin a movement that will demand that people have to choose between him and family, for his is a movement that takes us in a different direction. Following Jesus necessarily will take us with him through Jerusalem, to the cross of suffering and sacrifice and shame. Following Jesus will mean that we endure the ridicule of a world that rejects him. Following Jesus will mean that we must be willing to stand against a strong tide of injustice and immorality and greed. Following Jesus will mean that we must be willing to let go of selfish desires and vain conceits, and consider others' needs before our own.

Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to pay the cost of following Jesus?

When he was the chaplain at Duke University, Will Willimon one day got a call from a very upset parent. It seems that the father was upset because his gifted daughter who had at one time been bound for graduate school and a career in engineering, had just informed him that she had now decided instead to do mission work in Haiti. "It's absurd," said the irate father, "that my daughter with a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering from Duke University is going to chuck it all and dig ditches in Haiti."

Willimon tried to calm the father. "Well, I doubt that she received much training in ditch digging from our engineering department, but your daughter is a fast learner, and so she'll probably get the hang of it in no time at all..."

The father wasn't in the least bit amused. "I hold you personally responsible for this," he shouted through the phone, implying that Willimon's ministry had influenced the young woman to make her decision. But as the conversation went on, Willimon pointed out that the well-meaning but obviously unprepared parents were clearly the ones who started the ball rolling. They were the ones who had baptized her, who had taken her to Sunday School and church to hear about Jesus, they were the ones who let her go to all those youth group meetings and trips. Willimon said, "You're the ones who introduced her to Jesus, not me."

"But all we really wanted to do," protested the father, "was to make a good Presbyterian out of her."<sup>3</sup>

What is it we expect when we say we'll follow Jesus? What do we want for our children when we say we want them to follow Jesus? Are we willing—for ourselves or for our children—to be advocates for the poor in a world that likes to turn a blind eye to poverty? Are we willing—for ourselves or for our children—to make friends with people who are different (you know, the kind with strange piercings and multiple tattoos, with hair that looks more at home on a clown than on a person, with skin of a different color)? Are we willing—for ourselves or for our children—to join arms with a pastor in rural Columbia who is the target of drug lords or even the military, because the gospel he preaches threatens their way of life? Are we willing—for ourselves or for our children—to forego those new clothes or that new car or the bigger

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<sup>2</sup> From a sermon illustration weekly e-mail I receive from [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com)

<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, September 10, 1995, p. 45.

house, so that our resources (which really aren't ours in the first place) can be freed up for others who have true need?

What is it we expect when we say we'll follow Jesus?

The invitation comes to us freely. The forgiveness and salvation that Jesus offers to us are by grace alone, a gift that none of us can ever earn. But the life we live by accepting the invitation and embracing the salvation—well, that's something else altogether.

The grace is free, but it sure ain't cheap.

Martin Luther once said, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

He's right, you know.

But then, Jesus already told us that, didn't he?

Amen.