
Prayers

To God

Pray in thanksgiving for the wonderful and powerful guidance of the Lord, so that you may know the pathway you are walking and be confident in it

For self

Write down a list of everything that either has filled or will fill your day, and as you do so, pray for the other people you will meet or interact with.

For others

Weekly theme: Child abuse

Father Almighty, deal gently with those who have suffered abuse, especially the horrors of sexual abuse. Let Your people not forget the needs of those who have suffered, and let them not forget the need for vigilance and care in dealing with this evil of our world. Challenge us to expose all evil, we pray, and not be afraid to deal with the horror of sexual abuse properly and promptly. We ask this in Your name, merciful Lord. **AMEN**

Meditation

What is worship?

Is it that which lifts the soul to heaven above?

Yes, and remember,

the hand of God does the lifting, nothing else.

What is faith?

Is it having faith in God and living by the Bible?

Yes, and remember,

the Lord alone will change the heart and make it so.

What is prayer?

Is it praise and thanksgiving, confession and request?

Yes, and remember,

The Lord is honoured and blessed when truth is spoken.

What is the Gospel?

Is it the truth of Christ's salvation, preached in earnest?

Yes, and remember,

The message will change us and we must show this.

Bible Passage

Luke 14:25-35

²⁵ Now large crowds were accompanying Jesus, and He turned to them and said,

²⁶ ***“If anyone comes to me but does not reject father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself, he cannot be my disciple.***

²⁷ ***“Whoever does not bear the burden of the Cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.***

²⁸ ***“For which one of you, wanting to build a tower, will not first sit down, work out the cost, and see whether he has enough to finish the work? ²⁹ For if he lays a foundation and does not have enough to complete, all who see it will begin to mock him ³⁰ and say,***

‘this man began to build but couldn’t finish!’

³¹ ***“Or what king, when considering waging war against another king, will not first sit down and work out whether with ten thousand he can face battle with someone opposing him with twenty thousand? ³² And if he cannot, he will send a delegation and ask for peace terms while his opponent is still far away. ³³ So then, if you do not give up everything you have you cannot become my disciple!***

³⁴ ***“Now salt is good, but if salt has lost its concentration, how can it be made salty again? ³⁵ It is fit neither for the land nor for the compost heap; it must be thrown out! Let those who have ears, listen!”***

Review

Jesus speaks here with a sense of concern. He was heading for Jerusalem with a sense of destiny and knowing what awaited Him; there was little time left to spread His Father’s words, the Gospel message of love, to people who desperately needed to hear it. Much of His teaching here is not new; for example, Jesus had already called His disciples to absolute commitment, as was obvious when He first called them (Matt 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:27). So when He calls out to the crowds to reject family and follow Him (14:26,27), He is spreading the Word of God wider; His words may well fall on stony or thorny ground but Jesus is intent on doing His Father’s will. Certainly, if we bear all this in mind, we will perhaps understand the sense of urgency and shock in what Jesus says here.

From verse 26 to the end, Jesus teaches without a break on the theme of discipleship. Roughly speaking, verses 26 and 27 are about the priority of discipleship, verses 28 to 30 are about the cost of discipleship, verses 31 to 33 are about the reality of discipleship, and verses 34 and 35 are about the ultimate consequences of discipleship. Of course, there are other ways of assessing and presenting this sequence, and there are other nuances to Jesus’ teaching I have not identified. Nevertheless, this structure will help us considerably.

Luke has already recorded an incident when Jesus’ family came to take Him away and stop Him teaching, but they failed (Luke 8:19-21, Mark 3:21). Something of this incident must have remained in his mind, because later, when He taught about God’s judgement, He spoke about the divisions this would create amongst families, *‘father against son and son against father ...’* (12:53). We know from the rest of Jesus’s teaching that He valued the family and

accepted it as God's foundation for society (see Matthew 19:5f. 19:19f. Mark 10:19f. Luke 12:13), but the point here in verse 26 is different. He tells everyone willing to hear it that life's secret is to love God absolutely, that is, to love Him first and to the exclusion of all else, including family. This stark message seems shocking, for where does this leave our family relationships? But to stop us being distracted by what we imagine of this teaching, I ask you to bear in mind what Jesus was actually doing and why. He was not delivering a homily on family relationships, He was appealing to people to love their Maker and Saviour more than anything else, and to give Him absolute priority so that they might receive His love in return.

Jesus's message about carrying a '*Cross*' (14:27) is no less controversial. Here, Jesus delivers to the crowds a negative version of teaching first given to the disciples; '*take up your Cross and follow me*' (9:231). The message has changed; whilst for the first disciples it was a dramatic call to do the unique and challenging work of God, the crowds now hear it as a warning that if they do not engage with the suffering of their Messiah they can no longer be God's people! Jesus says that those who follow God are not people of a certain heritage who follow certain religious practices, but people who suffer in the world to do God's will and follow Jesus with complete dedication. This was no new message, for Isaiah had said the same centuries earlier (Isaiah 42-55, the great '*Servant*' poems), but in Jesus, this prophetic word of God comes true!

Jesus continues to use teaching first given to the disciples (14:28-30). Around Him were crowds, following along and fascinated, but with little intention of doing more than listening to Him. He wanted to get these people to take Him seriously, so He returned to the theme of building He had used in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had then compared a man who built his house on sand with one who built on rock (Matt 7:26), the message being that the life and faith of God's people must be founded on the rock of Christ. But now the message has a wider perspective; He asks, why build without '*enough to complete*' (14:29)? Who thinks, foolishly, that they can build on Christ without committing everything they have to the project? This is the true cost of discipleship!

There is more; Jesus adds to this ultimate challenge of discipleship by likening it to war (14:31-33). He speaks of a king preparing for war and 'counting the cost' of what lies ahead, but what is He saying, and who are the kings? Usually, the 'kings' in Jesus' illustrations represent great leaders, or even God Himself, but here, He means you and me, people of God who are preparing to face the battles of life.

Jesus' picture requires that we first accept that we face an enemy, and this is scary. In general, the church in its evangelism does not present 'battle' as a feature of Christian life, for fear people will run a mile! But in truth, all life is a battle because Satan is the enemy who oppresses all humanity, and who dislikes people committing to God. We should nevertheless never forget that God's 'hosts' are always greater than Satan's, and as with Elijah facing the Arameans, God is always at hand with His army (2 Kings 6:17)! It is one thing to talk about such things, and it is quite another to accept the reality of this battle and to fight it, with God, and victoriously. This is Jesus' point about the truth and reality of discipleship.

We now come to the enigmatic passage about salt losing its '*saltiness*', or as I have translated it, '*concentration*' (14:34,35). Earlier, I suggested that these verses would be about the ultimate consequences of discipleship, and this idea can help us unpick this very difficult illustration. We know what salt is, but most of us have little idea of how it is made, or the use of various grades of salt (purity), though people in earlier times clearly used different concentrations of salt for different things. Jesus' message to the crowds is therefore straightforward enough; if people's fervour for God has been lost, then it is gone; it will not be brought back by wandering around listening to a favourite teacher! In saying this, Jesus is trying to get the people in the crowds to face their own responsibilities before God; He is asking them to consider what they really want from Him, from their Messiah.

This is an extraordinary sequence of teaching about discipleship, and I suggest that few of us can read it without being challenged. Jesus may have been speaking to the crowds, urging them to respond to Him, but His message goes to the heart of what it means to follow Christ, even today.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V26 ‘does not reject father and mother’

Other translations:

‘does not hate his father and mother’ (NIV)

‘does not hate father and mother’ (NRSV)

Nearly every translation uses the word ‘hate’ in this sentence, and there is no doubt Jesus meant to speak strongly here. However the Greek word can also mean ‘reject’ (see Romans 9:13 - ‘I loved Jacob but rejected (hated) Esau ...’), and ‘hating’ and ‘rejecting’ are aspects of the same sentiment. I have decided to use the term ‘reject’ because this can help us get a better picture of what Jesus means here (see ‘review’).

V27 ‘whoever does not bear the burden ...’

Other translations:

‘anyone who does not carry’ (NIV)

‘whoever does not bear’ (ESV)

This is only a small point but it is significant. The Greek word translated ‘carry’ or ‘bear’ conveys the idea not just of ‘taking something along’, but of having to use great effort in the process. For this reason, I have chosen to use the phrase ‘bear the burden’. It is the only phrase in English that does justice to the Greek, and it adds greatly to the meaning of the text (and the phrase ‘bear your Cross’ in English has come to mean precisely this).

V31 ‘he can face battle’

Other translations:

‘he is able ... to oppose’ (NIV)

‘he could go up against’ (CEB)

The Greek here reads something like this; ‘if he can with ten thousand go to meet with twenty thousand’. The sentence is clearly about preparations for a battle, so I have decided to translate the phrase accordingly.

V34 ‘salt has lost its concentration’

Other translations:

“but if it loses its saltiness (NIV)

'if salt has lost its taste' (NRSV)

This is an awkward sentence to translate, but the Greek word that is often rendered *'lost its saltiness, or taste'* is usually one that refers to human lack of character, and sometimes means 'foolish'! I have decided that because we do not speak of the 'saltiness' of salt itself, it is best to translate as 'a lack of concentration'. This relates well to the fact that in ancient times people used different qualities of salt for different things.

Further Comments

Bearing a Cross

As we saw in the notes above, the idea contained in verse 27 is that of carrying a weight. The Cross is no philosophical thing or any religious duty; neither is it always the same thing to one person as to another. To Jesus, the burden of the Cross led to His personal death in horrific circumstances, but for us, the burden of the Cross might mean something very different. For example, long term Christian service, or patient witness against all odds.

The words used by Jesus indicate that bearing a Cross will not be easy, but the Cross we bear is not simply ours, it is His. So if someone must suffer as a Christian because of persecution, they bear not merely their own persecution, but the persecution of the Gospel in the name of Jesus.

But even though these are reasonable interpretations of what it means to bear a Cross as a disciple of Christ, we cannot escape the Biblical theme of being willing to die in order to do God's will. Throughout the Bible, this theme arises with regularity as a significant theme of God's salvation story. For example, Abraham must be willing to kill his son to show God that his faith is real and true; he does not have to do this, but only because God intervenes. Then in the New Testament, the famous writer and evangelist, Paul, often speaks the language of 'dying to self' (e.g 1 Cor 15:31), he says enigmatically *'for me to live is Christ, to die is gain'* (Phil 1:21).

At the end of His Gospel, Luke includes the famous story of Simon of Cyrene, who is passing when Jesus is on His way to the Cross, struggling, with the wooden beams across His back. He says this, *'they put the cross on his back and made him walk behind Jesus carrying it'* This is probably the most powerful description of discipleship to be found in the Gospels.

Fighting and giving all

Jesus' description of discipleship as like fighting a battle (14:31-33) contains one important feature. We follow Jesus' logic when He describes the importance of assessing whether a battle is worth fighting (14:31,32), in particular the adding up the numbers to assess the likelihood of victory. The clear implication of this is that with God there are far more resources than Satan can muster, but we will only defeat him if we employ God's resources and do not rely upon our own.

Right at the very end however, Jesus says something different and surprising; *'so then if you do not give up everything you have you cannot be my disciple'* (14:33). We might have expected Jesus to say that unless we truly value what God can do for us we cannot win, or unless we use everything we have against our enemy we will not win, but this is different. What does it mean?

I reckon that Jesus knows the power of the enemy to use human resources against people. It is therefore necessary for us to submit everything we have to God, and receive it back

again from Him if we are to be successful in battle. Another way of putting it is like this; the tools in our armoury are useless if they are not 'anointed', that is, dedicated to the Lord's work, and we must submit everything to Him for this anointing.

This is a challenging thought, for the sheer extent of what many of us have either in possession or gifts or opportunities is considerable. But we are on the right track if we consciously work to submit all to the Lord.

Discipleship

Application

Radical discipleship

This passage is one of the most strongly worded of Jesus' challenges to discipleship. Putting together what we find here, it teaches that our focus on God must be absolute and committed, we are not to think we are disciples unless we give our complete attention and commitment to God's work, we are to pursue His path despite suffering and to be willing to engage with the enemy in battle for the good of the world and God's eternal purposes. In other words, we must stop taking religion lightly and follow Christ with radical discipleship like this.

There is every reason for God's people to continue the life of the church with its open doors to people in the community and worship services that appeal to people across a wide social range, but unless such a radical Christianity is at the core of the the life of the church it will fail in its fundamental task. Many Christians have difficulty with some or all of such radical faith, and as a consequence, some who claim faith wish also to hold teaching such as this at arms length. They will talk about what this means, or question it, or suggest alternative interpretations, but resist the plain meaning of Jesus' words. I am of the opinion that Jesus would simply appeal to us to take what He said, believe it, and put it into action.

Bearing the Cross - suffering

This passage is entirely consistent with the rest of Scripture in emphasising suffering as the authentic path of discipleship. You cannot 'bear the burden' of the Cross without it causing some degree of personal suffering, and the Christian is called to receive this as Christ accepted His pathway to Calvary.

There are those who emphasise the work of God to bless His people and fulfil their needs, and suggest it is God's intention for His people to be happy and blessed in this life as an indication of what can be expected in the next. It is suggested that healing, wealth and blessing are to be expected as God's reward for faithfulness here and now. Personally, I remain to be convinced that this is a full reflection of Jesus' call to practical discipleship; His' talk of battle sounds relatively lightweight if we do not take 'hits' along the way and accept that we must suffer to deal with such things. This is what it means to 'fight'.

Perhaps our understanding of this is a matter of degree, for on the one hand, we can never expect to escape the troubles of this world, but we must surely find real elements of God's blessing even in this life pointing us towards our heavenly destiny. Some will find more, some less. In the meantime, every Christian should be willing to do exactly what Jesus says, which is to bear the Gospel against all odds, even to the point of suffering, not in order to gain a reward now, but do what God requires of His people, pure and simple.

Ideas for what to do

- Read through this passage carefully and consider what Jesus may be bringing to your attention today. Resolve to deal with what is being revealed to you and do not forget the Lord's challenge.
- Pray for God's people the church. Pray that it will present a clear picture of the love of God in Jesus Christ, which is both attractive enough for people to respond to and true to the Gospel record.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about discipleship? What do you find here that challenges you to think there is more than you have already discovered?
2. What does it mean to you to 'bear the burden the Cross' of Jesus Christ?
3. To what extent is life like a battle, and how does Satan attack God's people? How strong are you in battle against the evil one?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have called me to be Your disciple, and I have promised to give You the whole of my life in service. Forgive me for feeling at times that what happens is not quite like this, especially when I am not sure that what I do is worthy of Your call. Come to me by Your Holy Spirit, Lord, and fill me again so that I give myself completely to You. AMEN