



## GH2020-3: Carry Your Cross And Follow (Luke 14:25-35) by Boon-Sing Poh

“Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:27).”

Luke 14:25-35 is most instructive on the subject of discipleship. The incident recorded occurred at a time when multitudes were coming to Jesus Christ. Instead of encouraging them to come to Him, the Lord uttered teaching that appear shocking, that would have had the effect of discouraging the people from following Him.

The passage shows that the Lord was not looking for a big number of people to follow Him but for genuine believers. We will learn what constitutes true discipleship. This will have practical implications. One implication concerns how we carry out the Great Commission. The Great Commission is that great command of the Lord given to the local church to plant other local churches. It is recorded in various parts of the New Testament, the fullest account being Matthew 28:18-20. There, we are commanded to go into the world to make disciples of all the nations, to baptise them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and to teach them to observe all the Lord’s commands. If we have a wrong understanding of what constitutes discipleship, there would be no point for us to proceed to the next parts of the Great Commission, namely to baptise and to teach the ‘disciples’.

Another implication is that seekers — that is, those who are thinking of becoming a Christian — will be mislead in their understanding of discipleship. Wrong teaching will lead to wrong behaviour along the way. If they come to faith in Christ, their Christian life will be adversely affected in some ways. More seriously, they might have a wrong concept of discipleship and go about professing to be believers when, in fact, they are not truly converted.

We see now the importance of understanding what constitute true discipleship. From our text, which is Luke 14:25-35, we draw out four main points about true discipleship. These points may be stated as: “Not big numbers but genuine faith (vv. 25-26)”; “Not self-effort but the cross of Christ (v. 27)”; “Not half-heartedness but total commitment (vv. 28-33)”; and “Not temporary zeal but persevering faith (vv. 34-35)”. Let us proceed to unravel each point step by step.

### **1. Not big numbers but genuine faith (25-26).**

The first main point about discipleship is that it consists not in big numbers but in the genuineness of faith. Without true faith, there can be no true discipleship.

This was not the only occasion when the Lord appeared to discourage the multitudes from following Him. There was another occasion when this happened. The incident of the Lord feeding the five thousand followers in Galilee, with five barley loaves and two small fish, is well known to many. That miracle is recorded in all four gospel. After that incident, the Lord would feed four thousand followers at the Decapolis with seven loaves and some small fish.

Our focus is on the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee. Multitudes followed the Lord after that miracle. In John 6:26-27 we have the Lord's response to the crowd who came looking for Him. He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him." The Lord went on to say, in versus 43-44, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." The reaction of the people is given in John 6:60, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" The outcome is worth noting. We read in John 6:61-66,

When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.

The Lord did not hold back on the truth that no one can come to Him except he is drawn by the Father. The Lord did not hold back on the truth that genuine faith in Him is needed to have eternal life. Furthermore, He did not hide the fact that He knew there were unbelievers among those who followed Him. The outcome of such forthright teaching was that many of His disciples stopped following Him. They showed no genuine discipleship. They were coming to the Lord for the wrong reason, namely to gain materially from Him.

It seemed that with time, the crowd was building up again. Multitudes followed the Lord as He entered Jerusalem. This was when He turned around to give this teaching. He says, in Luke 14:26, "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." Here, the Lord is again demanding true discipleship from those who follow Him. It is obvious that the Lord is not asking us to literally hate our family members, and even ourselves. Rather, He is using a strong contrast to emphasise the point that we must put Him first in our lives even though we love our parents, our wives and children, and our own lives. Elsewhere, He uses similar strong language. For example, in Matthew 5:29-30, He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." There will be problems if we take the Lord's words literally. If an eye causes us to sin, we pluck it out. If a hand causes us to sin, then chop it off. Every part of our body is going to cause us to sin, and we will have to remove every part. In the end, what are we left with? We know that having any part of the body removed will not prevent us from sinning — in thought, word, or deed. A blind person sins, and so does a lame person.

In the same way, we must understand that the Lord is not asking us to literally hate our loved ones. In fact, when we become true followers of Jesus Christ, we are enabled to love our

parents, wives, and children more than before our conversion. That is because, when converted, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit from within to appreciate them better. Our hearts are made tender so that we value people around us, and those close to us, even more. We will love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we will love our neighbours as ourselves. However, the Lord is always first in our lives.

Another example of how the word “hate” is used can be found in Luke 16:13. There, the Lord says, “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” The Lord does not mean that serving God whole-heartedly require us to literally hate our employer on earth. He is not saying that we are to be loyal to God while despising our human employer. Rather, He is emphasising the point that our loyalty and commitment to anyone on earth cannot supersede our commitment to God. God must always be first in our lives. Among all loyalties, loyalty to God has the priority. Whenever there is a clash of loyalty, we should choose to be loyal to our God. Thankfully, it is not often that we face a situation of having to make a choice like this. However, true discipleship requires that we put the Lord first in our lives, all the time.

The Lord had weeded out those who came to Him for the wrong reason, after the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee. He now weeds out those who are not prepared for total commitment to Himself. He is not interest in large numbers of people following Him but He wants those who follow Him to be true disciples. “Not big numbers but genuine faith” is the first lesson we learn. Despite this clear teaching, there are many churches that continue to use numbers attending the church as the measure of success. They look for quantity at the expense of quality.

This applies to us on the personal level as well. You must be careful not to choose to attend a church simply because it has a large congregation. Rather, you should choose a church that is faithful to God’s word, in which the people are sincere and clearly love the Lord. That church will not be perfect, for there is no perfect church anywhere. The church is what you make it to be. You are yourselves not perfect and you will contribute to the imperfection of the church. However, what we are saying is this — choose a church that is faithful to God and His word, instead of a church that is big but shows no concern whether there is true discipleship in the people who attend.

Another application is in our evangelism. We must not seek a mere profession of faith in those we are reaching out to with the gospel. Our aim is to produce true disciples, not many professing believers whose faith is questionable. We know that salvation belongs to the Lord alone but it has pleased the Lord to use us as His instrument to bring the gospel to others. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel that we proclaim to convince and convict the hearers, so that they are finally converted. We want to see a genuine work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the hearers. We do not want to be shoddy in the work of proclaiming the gospel and in assessing the conversion of the hearers. Let us look for true conversion rather than be anxious about having a big number of professing believers.

## **2. Not self-effort but the cross of Christ (27).**

The next main point is, “Not self-effort but the cross of Christ”. In other words true faith is focused on Jesus Christ who died on the cross. Verse 27 says, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” This teaching is found also in Luke

9:23. These words make one stop to consider two points. Before you start following Jesus Christ you must know who He is, and you must know why you want to follow Him. Our attention is directed to the person and work of Christ. This is basically the gospel, which the apostle Paul summarises as “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” in 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Jesus Christ claimed, on many occasions, that He was from above while we are from below. He is the Son of God who has come to take upon Himself perfect human nature by being born from the virgin Mary. He is called “Jesus” meaning “Saviour”. He is “the Christ” meaning “the anointed One”, that is, the One appointed by God to be the Saviour. He called Himself “the Son of Man” because that is the title of the Saviour in the Old Testament whom God promised would come to save His people from their sin. He is the only Mediator between God and man. There is no other saviour apart from Jesus Christ. We claim this not because we are bigoted but because it is the teaching of the Bible. The person you want to follow is none other than the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

Then, you must be clear why you want to follow Christ. The Lord had weeded out those who came to Him for material gain. Today there still are people who come to Jesus Christ to gain health or wealth for themselves. We must not come to Christ to gain health or wealth. There is a legitimate place for God’s children to pray for healing from sickness, and for provision in life. God is not obliged to give health and wealth to those who are not His children. We become His children not by the good works we do, or by our effort at keeping God’s law. You may do much good deeds and engage in many religious rituals, such as prayer and fasting, but none of these human efforts will save you. The good you do will never be good enough to make up for the sins you have committed against God. All your effort at changing over a new leaf, or cleansing yourselves, will not succeed in changing your nature which is sinful. That is why your attention is directed to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Why is it that Christ here says we must bear our cross? Why doesn’t He say we are to carry our pots and pans, or our ploughs, or — in today’s language — our laptop computers, or our handphones, or plentiful money? The reason is that He does not want us to lose sight of His cross — that is, His death on the cross — which would happen before too long. The Son of God came to this world with a specific purpose to accomplish, namely to die on the cross to save His people from their sin. When John the Baptist saw Him coming, he pointed to Him and said, in John 1:29, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Those who heard John the Baptist at that time readily understood the imagery of the Lamb of God. The Jews had been taught to offer up an unblemished lamb — one that was not lame, not blind, nor spotted — to God as a sacrifice for their sins. The lamb would be brought to the temple where the priests prayed, then slaughtered the lamb, and burned the carcass on the altar of burnt offering. The blood would be sprinkled on the altar in the temple and various other prescribed places. This was to show that the one who brought the lamb deserved eternal damnation for his sins against God, and that the lamb was being put to death on his behalf instead.

While Jesus Christ is from above, we are from below. We are descended from Adam and Eve who were created by God from the dust of the earth. It may be said rightly of us, “dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). We have inherited the sinful nature of Adam and Eve such that we all sin against God in thoughts, words, and deeds. The good works we do can never make up for the sins we have committed against God. All our effort can never make our sinful nature clean. That is why we need Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, to die in

our place to pay for our sins. Only a perfect person can die acceptably in our place to make up for our sins. Only the perfect Son of God who has become perfect Man could die to save us. We are told in Matthew 20:28 that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. The word “ransom” shows that payment was made to save His people. We are told in Acts 20:28 that God has purchased the church with His own blood. The blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross of Calvary makes our hearts clean. Another way of saying it is that the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us who believe in Him — it is counted as ours. It says in Romans 3:28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” We learn from Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

The Lord is reminding us that the life of a disciple begins with salvation by grace, though faith, in Him alone. You have no ability to save yourself, or others. You must cast yourself on Christ alone to save you. You must rely on His finished work on the cross of Calvary for your acceptance with God. In Matthew 7:14, the Lord says, “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” To be on the road to eternal life, you have first to go through the narrow gate. It is as though you can barely squeeze through the gate, which represents faith in Jesus Christ. It requires repentance, that is, a turning away from all sins. You cannot carry any hidden sin with you. You cannot bring any of the world’s possession with you. You must not rely on anything other than Christ’s blood to cover your sin. The cross of Christ is necessary and sufficient for your salvation. Once you pass through the narrow gate, you are to take up your cross and follow Christ. This we will consider in the next main point.

We must trust in the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of souls. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17).” It is God’s chosen way for His people to be called out of their life of sin to live the life of true discipleship.

### **3. Not half-heartedness but full commitment (vv. 28-33)**

We come back to Luke 14. In verse 28 to 33, two illustrations are used to bring home the point that in true discipleship, there is no half-heartedness. Instead, there is total commitment to Christ. There are those who hear the gospel and become interested to hear more. They are not converted yet, but a spiritual hunger is stirring in them. They are challenged by what they hear. They might put up defences in themselves in order not to believe. At the same time, they want to find out more of the Bible’s teaching. They have become seekers!

We have seen how the Lord weeded out those who came to Him for the wrong reason of seeking material gain for themselves. On another occasion, He challenged those who procrastinated in following Him. This is recorded in Luke 9:57-62. There was one who said he was willing to follow the Lord wherever He went. The Lord said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head.” The Lord was saying to him, “Do not give a false impression of your enthusiasm, for I know you are not ready to follow Me because of your love of ease.” Another said he had to bury his father first. Yet another said he must bid farewell to his family first. All of them were giving excuses for not following the Lord immediately.

Here, the Lord challenges those who are half-hearted in their commitment to Him. The first illustration concerns a person who builds a tower without first considering whether he has

enough money to complete it. Wouldn't it be a big embarrassment if he completes the foundation and is unable to proceed farther because his money has run out? The next illustration is that of a king who goes to war against another king whose army is twice the size of his. Wouldn't it be a great embarrassment when he discovers that he cannot win and has to sue for peace? Both these illustrations show that the persons concerned had to give up because they did not count the cost in advance. As applied to following Jesus Christ, we are to understand that total commitment to Him is essential. No half-heartedness will do, otherwise we would give up following Him before long.

Seekers are challenged concerning their commitment to Jesus Christ. They are interested in following Him but they have not fully committed themselves to Him. This is when they are challenged to count the cost of discipleship. How does this fit into our understanding that salvation is of the Lord alone?

We have noted that salvation is totally the work of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time, you are called upon to come to Christ by faith. You are called upon to repent of your sins. Repentance and faith belong together and cannot be separated. When there is genuine repentance, there will be true faith in Christ. Similarly, when there is true faith in Christ, there will be true repentance from sin as well. Theologically speaking, repentance and faith together constitute conversion. We have seen that faith is the gift of God in the Ephesians 2:8-9 passage — “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Similarly, the Bible teaches that repentance is a gift from God. We shall look at one passage only to prove this. Other passages may be referred to, but Acts 11:18 is sufficient for our purpose. It says, ‘When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”’ The believing Jews of the church in Jerusalem became convinced that just as repentance had been given to them by God, so also it has been given to the Gentiles. We see now that just as faith is a gift from God, so also repentance is a gift — it is granted, that is, given, by God.

A similar thing happens once you are converted. New life has been given to you, at the same time that you have to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).” You have to feed yourself on God's word and pray together with God's people. You have to worship God together, and partake of the Lord's Supper. You have to attend to “the means of grace”, while God uses these means to sustain your faith. In our present passage, the seekers are challenged to not only trust the Lord alone for their salvation, but to continue trusting the Lord alone in their life of faith. Their resources for continuing in the life of faith are found in the Lord alone. They are not to trust the Lord partially while trusting in their own ability to continue in the life of faith. Total commitment to the Lord is essential to complete the life of faith.

This is where we must link total commitment to Christ with carrying our cross, mentioned in the earlier verse. We have focussed on the cross of Christ which is linked to the cross we have to carry. We must now pay attention to the cross that we have to carry. We must note also that in so far as *our* cross is concerned, suffering for the faith is expected. There will be self-denial and self-sacrifice needed in the life of faith. Temptations will come our way, and persecution will come to us because of our faith. These deserve separate treatment, which is done elsewhere. Here, we only note that it is not possible to live the life of faith without total commitment to the Lord. The two illustrations used by the Lord are intended to bring out the

necessity of trusting in Him alone to finish the life of faith. It is not a call to count whether we have resources of our own to finish the life of faith. This, we believe, is the correct understanding of the Lord's teaching. It cannot be that we begin the Christian life by faith alone and then continue the Christian life by trusting in our own strength and abilities.

Putting things together, you see that God is sovereign in salvation, at the same time that He uses means to accomplish His purposes. He uses His children to proclaim the gospel to all alike. Among our hearers, we do not know who are elect and who are not. Our duty is to proclaim the gospel to all. We are to proclaim the gospel as clearly and as convincingly as possible. At the same time, we are conscious that it is the Holy Spirit alone who will give spiritual understanding to the hearers, and convict them of their guilt before God. The Holy Spirit then makes them willing and able to turn to Christ in faith. This, as we know from John 3, is what is called the new birth — or regeneration. On the part of the hearer, he is held responsible for his response to the gospel. If he hardens himself and refuses to repent, he will be doubly guilty compared to those who have not heard the gospel. If he repents, it is because the Holy Spirit has worked in him to enable him to do so. In the same way, God uses the means of challenging the seeker to count the cost before embarking on the journey of faith. Is he willing to trust the Lord fully, or will he trust in his own resources to live the life of faith? The seeker who finally casts himself totally upon the Lord for salvation will trust the Lord to sustain him in the life of faith.

The person who understands this truth will be extremely thankful to God for his own salvation. Was not that how we felt when many of us were converted? We thanked God for our salvation and knew that He has been good to us who are so undeserving! The challenge to you is to trust Christ whole-heartedly. Do not let other loves hinder you from putting Christ first in your life. Do not let anything, or anyone, hinder you from full commitment to Christ.

#### **4. Not temporary zeal but persevering faith (34-35).**

A final illustration is used by the Lord to bring home the necessity of persevering faith instead of temporary zeal. In those days, the salt used was not the pure sodium chloride that we use today. Instead, the salt was mixed with gypsum and other minerals. There was the tendency for the elements in the salt to interact with one another when exposed to the air, so that it gradually lost its saltiness.

Salt was used for two basic purposes — first, to flavour food, and second, to preserve meat. Most food would not taste nice without some salt added to flavour it. Meat had to be preserved as there was no refrigerator in those days. When salt lost its flavour, both functions could not be performed well. It was either poured on the pathway to prevent vegetation from growing, or strewn over the dunghill to prevent flies from gathering. When the flavour of the salt was totally gone, it was not even fit for these lowly purposes and had to be thrown away.

The illustration of salt brings out two lessons on the Christian life. Firstly, we are to be useful and fruitful in our service to God. We do not want to be like salt that has lost its flavour. Before conversion, a person generally thinks of himself first. Self is at the centre of his life. He is always thinking of what he can gain out of any situation. He thinks of his own welfare first. He thinks of the good of others only after his own needs have been secured. He gives to others only from what is left over. He hardly thinks of God's glory, if at all. When converted, the person's world view is reversed. He thinks of glorifying God first. He thinks of the good of others, and especially the church, next. He does not neglect his own good but that comes

last in his order of priorities. In practice, we often have to help ourselves first, and set a good example for others. However, we are here referring to the change in our overall thinking when we are converted. A true disciple of Christ would think of being useful and fruitful in the service of the Lord, instead of what he may gain from following Him.

Secondly, the picture of salt shows that our faith in the Lord should be a lasting one. It is a common phenomenon to find enthusiasm and zeal in those who are new in any venture. New brooms sweep clean! There are those whose zeal for the Lord decreases with time. Their love for the Lord grows cool. The things of God no longer excite them. When that happens, there is the danger of becoming an apostate, that is, one who drops away from the faith. We are warned of apostasy in Hebrews 6:4-8,

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen[a] away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Those who drop away from the faith, and do not repent before they die, show that they were never true believers. The Lord is looking for true belief. He wants us to count the cost of discipleship, and that includes a willingness to follow Him all our life. As noted earlier, the Lord uses means to achieve ends. He preserves His people by His sovereign power through the use of means. As we make use of the means, we are able to persevere in the faith to the end of our lives. The means include reading the word, hearing it preached, attending the Lord's Supper and the church prayer meeting, and having fellowship with God's people as we serve the Lord. Through these "means of grace" we are able to abide, or remain, in Christ. We are reminded of John 15:5-6, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

These, then, are the two qualities looked for by the Lord in those who want to follow Him. They must desire to be fruitful in His service, and they must continue following Him all their lives.

## **Conclusion**

We have drawn out four main points from Luke 14:25-35. True discipleship involves: (i) not big numbers but genuine faith in Christ, (ii) not self-effort but trust in the cross of Christ, (iii) not half-heartedness but full commitment to Christ, (iv) not temporary zeal but persevering faith. Salvation is wholly the work of God in Jesus Christ, from beginning to end. Everything needed to begin the life of faith, and to continue in the life of faith, is found in Jesus Christ who died and rose again to save His people. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary is central to the good news of salvation for sinners. One who desires to be saved from eternal damnation in hell, who longs for eternal life instead, must carry his cross and follow Jesus Christ.

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