

The childhood of my friend Don was far from easy or idyllic. Raised by an alcoholic single mother during the Depression, he grew up amid drunkenness, neglect, poverty and violence... a tough and troubled street-kid from the Bronx. One time a friend from school invited him to church youth group, where he was introduced to the life and Gospel of Jesus Christ, and whose grace and Holy Spirit began to transform his life. But as his faith blossomed and his walk with God grew stronger, his mother, who hated anything related to the Church or religion became increasingly belligerent against his budding faith. One evening as he was heading off to church for youth group, in a drunken rage his mother threatened, that if he went to church that night, he wouldn't be allowed back home - she wasn't going to have some Jesus-kid living under her roof. Despite her ultimatum he went to youth group anyway, and afterward, waiting at the door, his mother refused to let him in the house. With nowhere else to go, the church pastor took him in. Then he adopted Don, gave him a good home and became his dad, and Don became **one of the most faithful pastors I have ever known**. Now Don did not hate his family, **but Jesus Christ mattered more**, and he certainly understood what Jesus meant in

vs. 26

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

this text, Jesus is not calling for Christians to be hateful, nasty or cruel to our loved ones, but **insisting that our relationship with Christ, our Christian discipleship must be our first priority**. In this case, the word "hate" is a Hebrew and Aramaic expression that does not mean an antagonistic or emotional hostility, but is used in a comparative sense, to love something less, **meaning that our commitment to follow Jesus Christ has to be greater than all our other commitments, including family**. The context of this passage is that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, toward the cross, and large numbers of people are following along, attracted by his teaching, parables and miracles. But they did not understand that he was going there to die, and they were not necessarily committed to him or his ministry or to the high cost and rigor of faithful discipleship, and so Jesus is warning them, it won't be all comfort and ease along the way. When Luke was written, that warning spoke to their situation, for the Church and Christians were struggling with persecution. In that Middle Eastern culture, family or clan was a person's primary identification & loyalty, and to become a Christian often mean turning against family. It was not easy to be a faithful Christian amid such hostility, but Jesus was saying that by grace we become a new creation, and **God's Kingdom becomes our primary loyalty and identity**. That means family, present circumstances and even past mistakes will no longer define who we are or who we are becoming **because God's grace has power to transform beyond all that**. In Florence, Italy, toward the end of the 15th century, a sculptor began work on a large & magnificent piece of marble. He messed it up badly and damaged the marble beyond repair. For decades other artist were brought in, but all of them rejected the ruined block as hopelessly destroyed & worthless, one of them even suggesting that the first sculptor should have been hanged. In 1502, Michelangelo began work on that same slab of marble, and 18 months later completed his statue of David, one of the finest masterpieces anyone ever sculpted.

Discipleship is a part of God's **gracious work of transforming**, broken, damaged and seemingly useless and worthless lives, and discarded leftovers **into beautiful and amazing**... but that requires us to set aside all, to trust God's grace, and to **lean into that power** to heal and change our lives. In the text, the phrase, "cannot be my disciple" is repeated 3 times. More literally "you are not able to be my disciple if you place anything, even your life, before me." It's from the Greek word from which we get our word, "dynamite", meaning that we won't **have the power** to become disciples or **have the strength** to sustain faithful discipleship against the obstacles and distractions of this world. No doubt you've heard the common and **false teaching that if** we are faithful and obey all the religious practices, then the Christian life of faith will naturally go well, that all will be comfortable, pleasing and easy with us, and nothing will be difficult, complicated or demanding. **But Jesus never said or promised anything like that**. In fact, my experience has been quite the opposite, **the situations where I have been most faithful have also often been among the most difficult and costly of my life**. I find that there is nothing easy, or simple, or comfortable about God transforming us, our relationships or our lives. ***I experience Christ and grace amid the storm a lot more frequently than I enjoy Christ amid the spiritual mountaintop and ecstasy**. For that reason, Christ warns his followers to calculate the cost, because the faithful discipleship he desires, comes at a price, and he wants us to trust and follow him, anyway.

vs. 28, 31

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?

Jesus is not willing to be just **one among the many** of our interests, but requires a full commitment and he must be first, for only then will everything else find its way into place. The point is, if we take grace and the call of God seriously, then it'll grow into making a difference in every part of our lives, and God will accomplish far more and better than we could ever possibly do for ourselves... **which means there are consequences to living an authentic faith, and living into a life of discipleship that grace makes possible.**

Also, faithful discipleship is not just giving up our sins & vices, but also all the rest, including even good and desirable things **all of my life surrendered to his will and purpose, in order to follow and have space enough for God's grace and blessings to flourish.** And this is super-important: it's not about some legalistic works-righteousness approach to faith, **for no one by their own efforts or goodness ever earns their salvation or gains special favor.** But rather, committed discipleship with Jesus as our priority, that **helps us open up to the wonder and mystery and power of God's presence and transforming work in our lives...** so that we can keep our focus on Christ and God's healing love, against the compelling obstacles & distractions of this world. And for most of us, the one place in particular, where **we most falter** in our spiritual life involves our wealth, the resources that we love to acquire, accumulate and spend, and that help make us feel worthy, special and secure... so with that in mind, Jesus warns us,

vs. 33 *So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

Unless we renounce all, we will not be able and we will not have the power to follow Christ along the way of discipleship: * so don't love our possessions or accomplishments, not any of them **more than we love our God who gave them to us.** * so don't let this world seduce us or fool us into believing that the more we have the happier we will be, **for true and lasting happiness comes only as a free gift through the graciousness of our God. So today as we come to the Lord's Table, we must remember that it is a place of grace and welcome, of presence and nurture, where we can be entirely open and honest with the Lord, knowing with certainty that we will still always be loved.** So with trusting courage & integrity we can dare ask and consider: "what is God up to and doing **in my life these** where might I be holding back or refusing to yield to Jesus Christ?, or **blocking the power of grace** to transform my life?"... **for God's grace and God's love are powerful stuff,** freely offered to all without limit or reservation, and when they take hold, they always bring amazing and radical change... or as Mother Teresa explained it: that we would become **a pencil in the hand of God that he uses for writing a love letter to the world.**