

Counting the Cost **Luke 14:25-35**

What's the difference between getting married and just living together? Some people say the only difference is a bit of paper.

- If you get married, the government provides you with this nice certificate – when you pay the appropriate fee. You can frame it. You can hang it on your wall.
- If you don't get married, you've got to put pictures on your wall instead.

Others say the only difference is the wedding.

- If you get married, you've got your big day. You get all dolled up. You're the centre of attention. You get all these presents. You've got the photos and videos to prove it.
- If you just live together, you miss out on all the hassles of arranging a wedding – and you miss out on the presents and the memories.

But there's actually more to it than that. The statistics show that those who live together before getting married are more likely to get divorced than those who don't. At first, that sounds weird. After all, why do people try living together first? One of the common reasons given is: to see if we're compatible – to see if we can get on well enough with each other to make this thing work. So they go ahead and try it out. It seems to work – so they go ahead and get married. And then the statistics say they're more likely to divorce. How come?

Because what they're trying out is not marriage – they're

simply trying out living together. It's a totally different kettle of fish. The key to marriage is commitment.

- I commit myself to this other person for life.
- I commit myself to give them a higher priority than anyone else.
- I commit myself to be there for them – for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

That's simply not there when people just live together. They're not there until death do us part. They're there as long as it suits them. There's always an "out" clause. It's always a 50/50 proposition – and if I'm not getting my 50%, then I'll go somewhere else. It's self-centred.

But in marriage, it's 100% give. Sure, it's still a mutual commitment. Both parties make the same vows. But the promise that's actually made isn't:

- I'll be there for the 50% that's richer and not for the 50% that's poorer.
- I'll be there for him 50% of the time as long as he's there for me 50% of the time.

None of the promises are conditional. It's: I commit myself to this person full-stop.

The Cost of Following Jesus

That's what Christianity's like. When a person comes to Jesus, what's the basis for the relationship?

- Is it a "living together" type relationship? I'll give myself to Jesus on those occasions when it suits me and when I'm not too busy doing other things. I'll let Jesus tell me what to do within certain religious parts of my life, but He's got no business telling me how to conduct my sex life.
- Or is it a "marriage" type relationship? I commit

myself to Jesus and will serve Him full-stop.

Have a look at what Jesus says in Luke 14:25

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be My disciple."

Looks like the "marriage" type relationship – doesn't it?

When a person gets married, their spouse becomes the new top priority in their life – whether that be the husband or the wife. Genesis 2:24 puts it well:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

In Biblical times, before a person got married, father and mother were the key people in their life. That was the most important relationship. They brought you into the world. They nurtured you. They provided for you. They went through life's joys and difficulties with you. You were probably still living in their house when you got married.

By and large, that's still true today. Sure, a lot of young people move out of home these days well before they get married – sometimes for study reasons; sometimes for work; sometimes just to establish their own independence. Yet, their relationship with their parents is often still their strongest human tie. It's the relationship where they feel the greatest bond.

But marriage changes that. With marriage comes a bond that has a higher priority. It's not that they cease being

your parents – they'll always remain that. But now there's this relationship that pushes them down the pecking order – they now come in at number 2. And, when you have children, they'll move down to number 3.

Imagine you get to the end of the wedding breakfast and, instead of going off together, the wife turns to her new husband and says:

That was a really lovely wedding. I've had a great day. Now I'm going back to my parents' house to get a good night's sleep. In the morning, I need to get a few jobs done around the house for dad. I should have them finished by lunch-time. How about we get together around 2 and we could go to the movies.

That's not how marriage works.

And it's not how being a Christian works either. Jesus lays it on the line here. You want to be a follower of Jesus? Then you must hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters – even your own self. Pretty strong words.

Now, it's fairly clear Jesus doesn't literally mean *hate*. Elsewhere, He commands His followers to love their neighbours as themselves – and it's fairly clear that the word *neighbours* includes relatives. Jesus talks here in terms of comparison. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, then Jesus must have top billing in your life.

- It's not simply a live-in type arrangement where you carry on as usual and you fit Jesus in alongside everything else and everyone else.
- No – Jesus comes into your life as your number one priority and everything else and everyone else now fits around Him. This is the new number one relat-

ionship. This relationship takes precedence over all your other relationships. It even takes priority over yourself.

And this is not simply for the super-duper followers or those who want to be leaders among Jesus' followers. Up to verse 24, Jesus was speaking with a group of religious leaders at a dinner for important people. But, in verse 25, He's left the dinner setting. He's back on the road, still heading for Jerusalem. There are large crowds of ordinary people. It's to those ordinary people that He turns and says: *If anyone comes to Me ...* It's to those ordinary people He says: unless this is the case, you can't be My disciple.

How does it work in practice?

- For some, especially in other parts of the world, becoming a Christian means they'll be disowned by parents. Some parents will go so far as to hold a funeral for their child who follows Jesus.
- For some, becoming a Christian may mean abandoning the dream career their parents had for them and becoming a missionary. That can even happen when you've got Christian parents.
- For some, it may mean long discussions with their spouse about how they're spending their money and whether the holiday budget can be cut back for the sake of giving more to ministry.

These other relationships are important. Jesus makes that clear in other places. But, if you want to follow Jesus, your allegiance to Him must be greater than your allegiance to anyone else.

There's a second condition that Jesus mentions. Verse 27

And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

In the first century Roman world, the one who bore a cross was already condemned to die. They were on their way to the place of execution. They had no rights left.

- Thus, Jesus may mean that His followers must be prepared to die for Him. They must be willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel.
- More likely, Jesus means that His followers must view their lives in this world as already finished – not literally, but figuratively. Their self-centred, self-indulgent life is over. They have a new life – the life of God's kingdom centred on God's will and God's purposes and God's agenda.

At the least, that involves a different lifestyle. How does the non-Christian live? At heart, they live for themselves. They may not be as selfish as they could be.

- They may donate time to community service.
- They may give money to charity.
- They may even go on overseas aid missions.

Yet, at heart, they're free to indulge themselves. They can spend their money how they want – buy nice furniture; wear expensive fashions; become connoisseurs of fine food and wine; take overseas holidays; install huge home entertainment systems. Eat, drink and be merry. Enjoy as much of life as you can. There's no sense of accountability – other than obeying the law of the land.

Jesus says to His followers: You're different. You've died to that self-centred lifestyle. It's not that those things are wrong in themselves. They're part of God's good creation. But you now have different values – different priorities. You're no longer focused on what you can get out

of this life for yourself. You've died to that sort of thinking. You're now living the life to come – the life of God's kingdom. And that means working out how to best use the resources entrusted to you – money, possessions, time, relationships, skills, abilities – how to use those for the sake of God's kingdom.

So, that's the least that's involved. More likely, it also involves suffering and persecution. The lifestyle of the kingdom is different from the lifestyle of this world. It's so different that it challenges people in this world. They mock it. They reject it. They abuse those who practise it. As they mocked and rejected and abused Jesus – nailing Him to a cross to die – so they will mock and reject and abuse Jesus' followers. Are you sufficiently committed to Jesus to stay with Him when that happens? Or do you see it as just a "live-in" situation – where you're free to move out if the going gets too tough?

There's also a third condition. It comes a little bit further down in the passage – after Jesus tells a couple of short parables – verse 33:

In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

There's to be a distance from materialistic attachment to this world. It's a common Biblical theme. Matthew 6:24

You cannot serve both God and Money.

1 John 2:15

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

What causes a person to throw in following Jesus? All sorts of possibilities:

- Doubting the truth of the Bible.
- The ridicule of friends and family.
- Not giving up some pet sin.

One of the most common, however, is the seduction of things. It's not that the person sets out to disown Jesus. It's not that they think there's something wrong with Jesus. It's not even that they've had to face persecution. It's simply that they fall more in love with certain things than they do with Jesus. And usually, those things aren't wrong themselves. There's nothing overtly sinful about them. It's just that the person devotes themselves more to them than to Jesus. For some it's a car. For others it's a home or a holiday house. For others it's a computer game, sport, hobby, TV – the list is endless.

It's an issue I struggle with all the time in all sorts of different ways. For example, I like things. I like to collect things. I like to accumulate things. Throughout my life, I've done that with all sorts of things. Currently, the big three are novels, DVDs and stamps. I have the resources to do that. It's not that I've gone into debt to collect these things. And these things have enriched my life in various ways – they've contributed to my education.

But, at the end of the day, I've got to ask myself: was that a good use of resources? Should I have used that money to invest more directly in God's kingdom? If I look at the DVDs we've got. Our collection has over 250 DVDs in it. There's a range of movies, TV series and even some Christian ones. Now, most of them we got cheap. I usually wait for them to come down in price before buying them. Yet, even if we say they average out at \$10 each – that's still \$2500 all told.

And how long would it take me to watch them all? Most of them would be over 100 minutes. Some of the TV series are as long as 18 hours. So, if I were to sit down and watch them all, a fairly conservative estimate would be 500 hours. Does that use of time fit in with the priorities of God's kingdom?

Now, that's brought in the other big area where I struggle with working out what my allegiance to Jesus looks like – namely, time. For example, how should I work out the balance between work and rest?

- God says work six days and rest for one. Our culture seems to be saying work five and rest for two – although I'm not sure our culture applies that to pastors. Should my balance be closer to what God says or closer to our culture?
- And our culture seems to operate on the basis of an 8-hour working day – or maybe 7½. Is that what God had in mind? Or did God expect us to work a 6-hour day – or maybe a 12-hour day? As far as I can tell, the Bible doesn't actually say.
- And what is rest? It seems to me that my culture pushes me to see rest in terms of entertainment – watching TV; going to a show; barracking for my team at the footy; having an exotic holiday. It's often valued in monetary terms – the more I pay for it, the better for me it must be. It seems a self-centred definition of rest – and that has me wondering if it can be right. Or should my concept of rest be more God-centred?
- And how does family fit into the equation?
- And, for you, how does church fit into it all?

If I'm a follower of Jesus, how much time will I spend watching TV? How much time will I spend playing with

my stamp collection? How much time will I spend making sure all my things are properly organised and in their right places and all accounted for?

Weighing up the Cost

Jesus really lays it on the line, doesn't He? In the two short stories that we skipped over, He encourages people to think seriously about the matter. This stuff about following Jesus isn't for the fainthearted. It's not for those who simply want to dabble around the edges of Christianity. It's not for people wanting to treat Jesus as a hobby. It's seriously challenging stuff. And so, serious consideration should be given as to whether this really is your thing. Verse 28:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

When you start out on a serious project, the sensible thing is to sit down first and to think it through.

- What's really involved?
- Do you actually have the abilities?
- Do you have sufficient resources?

That's the sensible thing to do. Before you commit yourself to a course of action, make sure it looks like you've got a good chance of finishing it. Otherwise you'll display your stupidity for all to see.

Unfortunately, we now live in a society where most people aren't sensible. People live on the basis of the "get now, pay later" principle. The idea of saving up for

something is foreign to their thinking. They see it. They want it. They simply put it on credit. They assume the money they don't currently have will suddenly materialise when the bill arrives some time in the future. And so this story of Jesus doesn't make sense to them. It's not the way they operate. Sitting down and giving careful forethought to how they spend their money simply isn't part of their make-up. It doesn't enter their heads.

And some people take this same attitude over into their approach to Christianity. They think:

Jesus looks like a nice guy. He does some pretty amazing things. He's made a good offer of eternal life.

Looks like a pretty good deal. I think I'll take it.

But they don't look at the whole package. They don't look at the sorts of things Jesus says here.

- Make Jesus top priority.
- Bear your cross.
- Give up everything else.

They don't weigh up whether they're truly prepared to live like that. And, when in the course of their lives they are confronted by Jesus wanting them to do something difficult for the sake of their relationship with Him, they simply give up. They say:

I tried Christianity. It didn't work for me. Instead of getting health and wealth, I got sick. Instead of getting a comfortable, pleasant life, I got suffering. That wasn't what I signed on for.

The real problem was they treated Jesus like a live-in relationship instead of like a marriage. What they were trying out wasn't real Christianity. They may have used words like *Jesus* and *church* and *being saved* – but they remained the ones running the show. They still acted as

if they were god. They didn't properly estimate the cost before signing on the dotted line.

Now, at one level, none of us can truly estimate the cost. When we sign on the dotted line, we don't know the future Jesus has for us.

- It may be a tough work assignment in a factory where Jesus and those who follow Him are ridiculed each day.
- It may be dealing with ongoing bouts of malaria as you labour long hours at missionary work.
- It may be a slow and painful death at the hands of enemies of the cross of Jesus.

And that's like marriage, isn't it? You commit to love this person for better for worse, for richer for poorer in sickness and in health.

- You don't know whether your spouse will endure a long, debilitating disease that will require you to give up your career to care for them.
- You don't know whether your spouse will become an addictive gambler and squander all your money.

But you sign on the dotted line.

At least with Jesus you know for sure He's fully devoted to you – so devoted that He suffered the horrendous judgment of God for you. And you know He's committed to what's best for you – even if it's not what you think's best for you. And you know He won't abandon you – but wherever you are He'll be with you enabling you to live for Him.

Then Jesus provides a second illustration. Verse 31:

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against

another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

On first read through, it's easy to think this makes the same point as the guy who can't complete his tower. Look at the situation carefully. Weigh up whether you can carry this task through. If you haven't got sufficient resources, then don't get started. And that's where the similarity breaks down.

I think this second story makes a very different point. While the two illustrations have some surface similarities, there are also some significant differences.

- This second story's not about will I or won't I. This king's coming with his army. When kings come with their armies, it's not usually for the purpose of having a friendly picnic. Simply ignoring this king and his army isn't a realistic option – unless your purpose is to be destroyed.
- And secondly, this king's got the bigger army. It's twice the size of my army. Those odds aren't very promising – at least not for me with my smaller army. Now, I can try to beat the odds. And if I've got a clever strategy, perhaps I'll try to do that. But if I can't come up with a clever way to neutralise his superior numbers, I'd better take the option of trying to avoid the fight.

This is the other side of the first illustration. That one said: consider seriously the cost of following Jesus. This one says: consider seriously the cost of not following

Jesus. God's judgment is coming. That point in history will come. And when it comes, you'll have to front up to God. What are your options on that day?

- You can try to fight God. You can take your puny army – namely, you – and pit all your strength and power and cleverness and ability against God. Not a particularly clever option, since you're sure to come off second-best.
- You can simply bear God's judgment. You can wait for God's army to arrive and walk all over you.

Or you can sue for peace before God's judgment arrives. You can take Jesus' offer of peace with God through His death in your place.

So yes, consider seriously the cost of becoming one of Jesus' disciples. But also consider seriously the cost of not becoming one.

It's an important issue. To start and give up is not good. Verse 34:

Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Of course, when you do count the cost, you recognise it's beyond your ability to pay. In yourself, you don't have the capacity or the willpower to carry it through. You must throw yourself on God's grace to bring to completion the work He's begun in you.