

Series: Controversial
The Cost of Discipleship

Luke 14:25-27

Sermon by Lead Pastor Larry Renoe
Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado
Sunday morning, February 4, 2024

A reading from Luke 14:25-27: “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them, He said, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.’” The word of the Lord.

Thanks, Nathaniel. After reading the scripture together, all of us who are here in the room are now questioning why we made such an effort to get here this morning. It’s really good to see you. For sure, most of our congregation is watching online. We’re glad you’re joining us, and like Sarah said, hope your pancakes are good this morning, but the others, probably, I don’t know, two-hundred people here in the room, and first of all, yeah, thank you so much for being here. I am so excited about this preaching series, “Controversial, the Hard Sayings of Jesus,” but before we dive in, I want to say this, that the high point of our time together, both online and here, will be our gathering at the Lord’s Table after the message, and so we want to give online people, this hearkens back to when we were in Covid, right? I remember one family used to tell me, “Whenever we did communion, we had a few Cheerios, and we had milk and shot glasses, and that was our communion time,” so whatever you want to use this morning at home, feel free, but we look forward to gathering around the table with this text in mind as we are with Jesus in a bit. So that is where we’re headed this morning.

I wanted to say one more thing. How many sore backs are there in the room? Yeah, Waterstone, and not all churches have the heart of Christ like this, and so I know that many of you did not just shovel one driveway. You shoveled several driveways and neighbored hard this morning, so hopefully your back will just give you thirty minutes of relief as we engage this text this morning. Thank you for neighboring so hard, Waterstone. We are reminded that the purpose of the church is because God loves the world, and He wants the world to know it. That is why we neighbor hard, really, really hard, because God loves the world, sore backs and all.

Here we go. Most people believe that Jesus, whatever else He was, He was a great teacher. Most people would still vote for Thomas Jefferson’s words, “The code of ethics that Jesus brought was perfect and sublime.” Yet when you actually sit down in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and begin reading the red letters, the actual things Jesus said, you come across again and again what are called the hard sayings of Jesus. That title comes from a specific reference in John chapter six, after Jesus said something hard like, “You will eat my flesh, and you will drink my blood.” The crowd said, on hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” When we talk about the hard sayings of Jesus, we mean two things. One, we’re talking about them being hard to understand, and indeed, every time we gather, and we picked this kind of series deliberately for Lent, as we walk through a time of examining our devotion to Jesus, we want to have these sayings, where Jesus reveals in a deeper way who He is and what He wants from us. Some of the things He says, like we’re going to hear this morning, when they first hit you, it is like, “What? What do you mean by that, Jesus? ‘Hate your parents’? What?” They are hard to understand, but then, even more, they are hard to live.

They are hard to swallow. They are hard to absorb into your life, because He is revealing who He is and what intense discipleship means because of who He is.

How do we ever live this out? One writer said that the hard sayings of Jesus are like a piece of hard candy. You do not just put a piece of hard candy in your mouth and bite down without an extra trip to the dentist. No, you have to linger on it and squish squash to the other side of your mouth and reflect and think, and you have to just suck that thing down in order to absorb it into your system. That is the same way we will encounter the hard sayings of Jesus in these next weeks.

For instance, our text this morning, Jesus says in order to follow me, you must hate your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters. Now for any of us, we could underline one of them and say, "That's not so bad," but not all of them, and really? What is going on? Some of us in the room are saying that is absurd. Others of us in the room, especially when it comes to a father and mother, are saying, "It's unnecessary. I already do." Seriously, if that is you, that is a deep pain to carry. A deep pain, and I think that even as we unpack what Jesus is trying to say by saying we must hate our father and mother, if we do it Jesus' way, I actually think hating our father and mother the way Jesus says, is actually going to help us honor our father and mother. So, hold on to that, and we will get there and see the brilliance again of Jesus' teaching.

What I want to do, excuse me. I am struggling with a cold, so I apologize in advance for the cough. That just probably told everyone not to come pray with me after the service, so sorry about that, but I want to get into the text and first movement talk about what this would have meant and how it would have been heard by Jesus' original audience. I want us to try and get back to the shock that it would have been for Jesus to say this. I think after two-thousand years of conditioning, this text doesn't shock us like it should, so we are going to spend some time in the first century and try to understand what Jesus meant as He spoke it to his original audience, and then second, and last, as we come to the table, I want us to ask, "We understand the meaning. How do we apply it now, two-thousand years later in our very Western culture?" What does it mean for us today? So that is where we're going. We will jump in, we'll walk through it and hear it with first century ears, and then secondly, we'll apply it as twenty-first century Christians.

Let's put the text on the screen, Luke chapter 14, verse 25. We read this. Sorry, Helmut, I'm jumping ahead a little bit. Let me go back because Helmut, you're right on this. Let's go back to Luke chapter 9. I want us first to see where this is in Luke's flow of thought, where it occurs in the book of Luke, this gospel of Jesus. If you go back to Luke chapter 9, what happens in Luke is a very significant conversation. In fact, it happens also in Matthew and in Mark, where there is this hinge conversation when Jesus, his whole ministry turns and is now really focused on one thing. Here is the conversation; "Once when Jesus was praying in private, and his disciples were with Him, He asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life,'" so we hold there for a second. What we are seeing Jesus do is to begin to really focus in here on his disciples, and He is preparing them for a significant turn in the conversation, because the disciples, especially Peter, actually get it right here. Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Messiah," and we are surprised that Jesus doesn't say, "Right, and go tell everyone. Go tell everyone. You figured it out," but notice what happens next, in verse 21. Peter answered, "God's Messiah." Verse 21; "Jesus strictly warned them." This is the surprise. "Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone, and He said, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and must be killed, and on the third

day, be raised to life.” So, the surprise is that the disciples figure it out, who Jesus is, the Messiah, but don’t tell anybody, and then He says, “Not only that, but this is how it is going to end. I am now on a straight path. I am walking the road to my last week in Jerusalem, and everything now is focused on that.”

Then, instead of, “Don’t tell anybody,” notice what He tells the disciples to do in verses 23 and 24. “Then He said to them all, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily,’ present tense, “and follow me, for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” What is interesting, as we think about this preaching series, you are going to soon understand that most of the seventy hard sayings of Jesus occur after this conversation. Does that make sense? Do you understand what that means? That means that the way Jesus calls, and the way Jesus forms his disciples is in the shadow of the cross. It is in the heart of the road to laying down his life in love to save the world. Jesus forms his disciples on the road to the cross.

So, another turn happens when we get now to Luke chapter 14, verse 25, because remember, in Luke 9, He’s talking to his disciples. Now, chapter 14, whom is He talking to? Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them, He said, and we’ll go to the set in just a moment, but I want us to see the turn. He was talking to his disciples, and He’s saying to them a very hard thing; “I am on the road to the cross, and if you are with me, you are on the road with a cross.” But now He turns to the large crowds, the potential pool of disciples, the people who were intrigued enough with all they had heard about to go and see Jesus and hear Him preach. They thought, “Wow, this is a phenomenon in our culture. We should see what this is about,” and what you would think Jesus would do with his methodologies is to say, “When we get to the crowds, we better make it,” What? “Seeker-driven.” “We better.” Oh, thank you Paul. Thank you. May the Lord bless you and keep you and make his face shine upon you. Thanks. “We better make this non-offensive. Let’s just water it down. These are the crowds after me. We want them to get into the church. We want them to become Christians. We want them to stick around.” He does not do that. Why?

I think what Jesus wants to do as He begins to call disciples from the crowds is to say there are not two levels of Christians. There are not those level of Christians, maybe called the fringe, maybe called the “creesters,” Christmas and Easter, they are the people that think Jesus, I like to call them the Doobie Brother Christians; “Jesus is just all right with me.” They are the people who think with Jefferson, “What a great teacher, and He might even be the Son of God, and when I am in trouble, I will pray to him,” or “When I really want to lay down something good, I will do it for Jesus,” but they are not really in the mix. They have not picked up a cross. They have not said that Jesus is my soul reason to exist. They are the Doobie Brothers; “Jesus is just all right with me.” What Jesus is doing is saying there are no two levels. There is not the fringe and the core. There are not the Sunday morning Christians and then the rest-of-the-week Christians, that are all out and all in.

If you could say it this way; did you ever go on vacation, and you book a room online? It has this great price, and so you book it, and then you go to check out, and what happens? There is the resort fee, and there is the local town tax fee, and there is the fee for having Mike and Ike’s candy in the room, and there are all these different fees, and it ends up being \$100 more than you booked it for. There is the fine print. Hear me well; with Jesus, there is no fine print. With Jesus, He does not turn to the crowds and say, “I will give you an abundant life,” and then turn to his disciples and say, “but there will be a cross.” He tells everyone, “What you win them with is what you win them to,” and He says to them, “If you want to come after me, you pick up a cross.”

The second thing I think we need to understand as Jesus is turning now, is when He comes to chapter 4 and verse 26, we read now when He begins to teach, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters.” Now I have underlined the father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters. What Jesus is doing here, not only with his language, but as we see, He is very targeted on what is the highest cultural value of his time. In the ancient world, your family was your honor, or if it was not doing well, then it was your shame. Your family was your purpose in life. Your family was your security, and covering your family was everything. It was everything, and so Jesus, being the teacher He is, being the Lord of heaven that He is, takes direct aim at the highest value in his culture and says, “You have to hate your father and mother.” More on the word “hate,” in a moment, but you notice how He does it. Father and mother; that is your childhood. “Wife and children,” that is your middle age. Brothers and sisters, for good or for bad, are with you through the whole thing. What Jesus is saying is, “What I am breaking into is your life’s agenda, the whole thing,” and what He is saying is, “You cannot come to me with your life’s agenda as your cultural values define it and say to me, ‘I will just fit you in where I can.’” Do you see what He is doing? He is putting his cultural values off the rails, and He is saying “If you want to walk with me, I need to be your highest, deepest allegiance.” Jesus is derailing his culture, and that is why it is provocative, and He uses this kind of language, and then it goes on to talk about the word, “hate.” He actually uses the word, “hate.” We have to unpack this language a little bit, because what He is doing here is being very deliberate, going after his culture’s highest value. He could have said this in a much different way, but He wanted to be provocative, and He uses the word, “hate.”

Now we, in the Semitic domain of the meaning of this word, it really has two meanings. The first meaning of the word “hate” here has the idea of actively aggressive, psychological hate, where you either write someone off and never speak to them again, or you aggressively, violently go after them and hurt them, and you take your vengeance out on them. Neither one of those are what Jesus is using the word “hate” to speak of here. He is using the second meaning of the Semitic domain that it has, because the word “hate” can also mean and did mean in his culture, the idea of preferential love. An illustration of this is idea in Genesis 29, when Jacob, the great forefather of Israel, married two wives named Rachel and Leah. Do you remember that Jacob loved Rachel? He worked seven years for her, to win her hand in marriage, to get her father’s approval, and it seemed like a day. He was in love with Rachel. With Leah, he got swindled and taken advantage of and had to take her first, and the text in Genesis 29 twice says that Jacob hated Leah but loved Rachel, so what does “hate,” mean there?

It does not mean that he wanted to kill Leah or ignore her for the rest of her life. What it means is that he preferred Rachel and hated Leah. Now he loved Leah in terms of sacrificial giving. He cared for her as the mother of his children. It is a tender moment when he goes to bury Leah. He cared for Leah, but here is the point. The way that Jacob loved Rachel compared to the way that he loved Leah looked like hate for poor Leah, because he was so captivated by Rachel. In the same way, the way that we are called to love Jesus, compared to the way that we love our mother and father, wife and children, and brothers and sisters, should look like hate when it comes to them. We are to love Jesus Christ so deeply that when it is compared to any other love in our life, there is a huge, huge difference. Wow.

Let’s bring it to a point. We have the theme like this. It is when, when if we’re to see God, Helmut, it is that slide. Sorry, I am losing poor Helmut at every turn. If we are to see God, we will give him our highest love and our deepest allegiance. That is what Jesus’ original audience heard. Can you

imagine how shocked they must have been? If you want to see God, Jesus must be the highest love and the deepest allegiance of your heart.

One more thing before we prepare to go to the table and talk about the application. The other thing, I skipped it earlier. I think it is important to go back to it. Not only is Jesus very deliberate with his word choices about hate, the comparative hate between Jesus and anything else, but also is He very deliberate about where He centers his teaching. If you go back to verses 26 and 27, and we have underlined them, notice what Jesus says; “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers, sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple, and whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is controversial here, not only by the word “hate,” but also by the self-referencing of his teaching. Let me say something that I think we see again and again in the teaching of Jesus. It’s very self-centered. Now, I probably stunned some of you. Some of you want to come after me, even with my cold, and say, “Wait a minute. Are you calling Jesus self-centered?” No. Hear me well. I am not calling Jesus self-centered. He’s the least self-centered person that has ever lived. What I am calling his teaching is self-centered, that He was the referential point for all of his teaching.

I think again, with our two-thousand-year-later perspective, we have heard this so much, this does not shock us like it would have shocked the first century people. Can you imagine sitting down to coffee with a friend, you find out his name is Jesus, you do not really know Him, but you sit down with Him, and you start talking, and you begin to unburden a little bit about your life, but then after five minutes, this friend named Jesus says, “Well enough about you. What about me? Who do you say that I am?” Oh, and by the way, how you answered that question is going to determine your eternal destiny. Would you want to have coffee with that person again? How would that strike you? Yet Jesus again and again and again talks about devotion to Him. It is so different from every other religion, now and then, so different. Every other religion is, “Oh, if you want to connect with God, you’ve got to do the pillars, or you’ve got to do that path, or you’ve got to do those practices.” Every other religion is about a path, a set of practices or pillars. Christianity is about a person who says, “If you want to live, it is with me. I am the way, the truth and the life. There is no other way. It is me, me, me. That is the only way you are going to live. Me.”

You read through the gospels, and one of the hard sayings we are going to come to in a few weeks is when He is talking to a rich young millennial who has sold his computer businesses, now has billions and billions of dollars and is set for life, and maybe has a son named Elon, but He, Jesus says to him, “Look, you want to follow me? You want to be saved? You have to sell everything.” What He is saying is, “I am more important than every cent of your wealth. Will you follow me?” Another time early in the book of John chapter 3, there is a boomer that comes to him named Nicodemus, and he says, “How do we really know God? How do we know him?” and they have this dialogue, and at the end Jesus says, “Look, if you don’t know me, you will perish. Me, me, me.” It is Jesus. Jesus is the way to salvation.

So, let’s take stock here of where we are, and then we want to talk about two applications. What Jesus is doing is He is telling that first century audience at this conversation on, “When you understand now that I am the Messiah, I am actually now going to begin to show you how I am going to save the world, and it isn’t going to be through military armies, and it isn’t going to be through political power. It is going to be through me going to Jerusalem, where I will die on the cross and be raised again on the third day, but that is where we are going now, and it is not just for the disciples anymore. I have told

you. Now it is the crowds and anyone,” and Jesus saying, challenging the highest value of his culture, saying, “Whatever they are telling you is a way to live, they are wrong. It is me. Follow me.”

Okay, I am with you. Jesus. I heard that. If I was in the first century, man, John 6, probably, I do not know. That is a hard saying.” What does it mean for us now, two-thousand years later? Two things. First of all, we hear Jesus teaching this hard saying. It means that discipleship is costly. It is costly. Verse 27, Jesus talks about a cross, “and whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,” a cross. A cross. Again, two-thousand years later, we hear this every Sunday. It doesn’t shock us. We get used to it. I think one thing that will happen again and again these next eight weeks with the hard sayings is we will see how controversial Jesus was, and how He needs to be again.

A cross; what is a cross? A cross is a symbol of execution. A cross means that you are under arrest, and you are sentenced to die. If you saw someone in the ancient world carrying a cross, what would you think? You would think, “That is the last time we are going to see that person alive.” Do you know what you wouldn’t think? You wouldn’t think with that cross, carrying it, “Oh man, this cross is heavy. This is so hard. I would like to ask for something different.” When you are carrying the cross, you are under arrest. Your life is no longer your own. That is what a cross means. Jesus says, “Pick up the cross and follow me.” What does that mean? That means something for the inside, for our hearts, and it means something outside, for our lives. The heart, it means this; just as Jesus in his day went after the highest value in his culture, the family, and He began to say, chisel away, “It is not family that is going to save you. You have to love me more than family,” what is the highest value of our culture in our day and age? I would submit that individual autonomy is the highest value of American culture. What is individual autonomy? It means this; “No one has the right to tell me what to do with my life. No one has the right to tell me what to do with my body. No one has the right to tell me what to do with my money. No one has the right to tell me what to do with my sexuality. No one has the right to tell me what to do with my gender. No one.” That is us, and do you know what Jesus would reply? “You are under arrest. I do have the right to tell you what to do with your body and with your money and with your sexuality and with your gender and with your life. I have the right. I am the maker of heaven and Earth. I am the Lord of all. I have the right, so the way that you love me, compared to the way that you walk in your culture, it has to look like hate.”

Oh, my goodness. We ourselves are so often falling into this frog-in-the-kettle kind of thing, like, “I have the right to this, the right to that.” People say, “I love Jesus, and I want to be a Christian, and I will even go to church, but I want to live life the way I want to live it. I deserve to be happy. I deserve to get this or that.” I don’t know. Did we put this quote on there, Helmut about? I was reflecting on this. It starts this way. I think it’s possible to construct a Christian faith. Here’s what I came to after poring over this again and again. I don’t know if we have it. I don’t know if I got it on a slide. I think it’s possible, if you agree, to construct a Christian faith that has become so comfortable that it is a long time since we have heard Jesus say anything that we disagree with. I want to read that again, and you sit in it with me. This is our culture. I think it is possible to construct a Christian faith that has become so comfortable that it has been a long time since we have heard Jesus say anything that we disagree with. Why? Because we tend to build life around the way we see it and the way we want it, and Jesus says, “The goal of your life is not for you to live your views. The goal of your life is to live my views,” Jesus’ views. That is the goal, and you pick up the cross, and you are either all in, or you are not, and you walk away.

So, Jesus goes right for our culture's heart, and He challenges our individual autonomy and says, "You are either carrying a cross, and you are with me, and the goal of your life is my views on all those issues, or you are not," so where is your heart? Then secondly, I think what the idea of carrying a cross in life on the outside means is that life is going to be challenging at times, because Jesus is such a weight in our life. It is going to be deeply challenging. I think sometimes and probably some here this morning who often think, "Wow, when Jesus comes in, if He just comes in, my life is going to go a lot smoother." No, if anything, your life is going to be weighted and in more tension, more of the time than it ever was before. Why? Because Jesus is often calling us like this; "Are you carrying a cross? Do you love me more than any other relationship in life? Do you love me more than the values of our culture? Do you love me?" That is a weight on your life. That is a tension that will bring pain and struggle to your life. It is called a cross. You are under arrest. You are his. Your life is not your own. So even when we go out and live the cross and neighbor our neighbors, it is hard, and if you love the world like God loves the world, and that is the goal, it will break your heart. It will break your heart.

Neighboring, we are talking a lot this year about neighboring. We are saying again and again that God loves the world, and He wants the world to know it, and so that is why we go, and we neighbor, and we talk about Jesus, and we demonstrate Jesus again and again. I have been asking you to send me your neighboring stories. I hope some of you will keep sending them. I got one a couple weeks ago I wanted to share, because it fits so well with this idea. If you choose to love the world, you will end up with a broken heart. This is from one of our saints here named Ruth Durgin: "At the very beginning of Covid four years ago, at our last service that we were in person, Waterstone threw out the idea to bring some toilet paper to your neighbors." Remember those days? Remember those lines at Costco? "Thinking it a good and light-hearted way to connect at this hard time, I did. All four neighbor groups laughed and took them with the warm intention I offered. Widow Ava exclaimed, 'That's exactly what I needed.' So started two years of regularly bringing surprise treats to their four doors. It was an unobtrusive way to check on how they were all faring, and thus developing another layer of connection. Knowing all of my neighbors in their advanced ages, upon my asking, they were willing to give me the contact numbers of their faraway children. Wayne and Nora across the street have always been very private, but as their elder infirmities and sicknesses increased, they accepted help a tiny bit more. This past year, cancer and other aging weaknesses hit them both, and they of course insisted on staying at home, very sadly." Loving the world will break your heart. "Wayne and Ava, ninety-five years old, both passed away in December, within ten days of one another. I was so glad to see them in their hospitals before they died. A celebration was held in their home last weekend. I am sad and will miss this sweet couple gone so quickly, who graced my life with their friendly and gracious ways." Carrying the cross to love this world will break our hearts.

So, what does it come to? It comes to this kind of love that Jesus is offering to us, this mission of cross carrying is the love that we have been looking for all of our lives. Look what that love endured on the road. This means it will always be there for you. This means his love ultimately will not fail you, and it will carry you. This means that his love can never be worn out by our different and wrong and frustrating choices. It never gets worn out. Jesus loves us. I am telling you; marriage cannot give you this kind of love. Your successful professional life cannot give you this kind of love. International acclaim cannot give you this kind of love, and some of us, a lot of us in this room have never had any of those happen, and we don't believe it, but when you get to the pinnacle of everything, that is not the love of Christ. You will see how far short all other loves fall, and it is then, and it is then that we need to hear

Jesus' words. He wants it to be emotional. He wants it to be intense. "Love me. Love me." Are you crying this morning? Do it with Him. Are you longing this morning? Do it with Him. Are you hurting? Do it with Him. Are you joyful? Do it with Him. He is the love you have been looking for all of your life.

As we come to the table, I am going to pray a prayer, and then I will give the words of institution, and in between, you will have moments of quiet, moments of music, but ask yourself, after hearing the hard sayings of Jesus, "Jesus, are you the fairest of all? Would the love I have for you look so different than the love I have for anyone else and everything else?" It is that love that we want. Let's pray.

This is a prayer of George Whitfield, from 1741; "Oh, my dear friends, these are matters of eternal moment. I did not come to tickle your ears. If I had a mind to do so, I would play the orator. No, but I came, if God should be pleased, to touch your hearts. What shall I say to you? Open the door of your heart, that the king of glory, the blessed Jesus, may come in and erect his kingdom in your soul. Make room for Christ. The Lord Jesus desires to eat with you tonight. Christ is willing to come into any of your hearts that will be pleased to open and receive Him."

39:40 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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