

Can Not or Will Not?

(Concluding the Series: Parables of Jesus: Posing the Scandal of His Gospel)

We are now, on this third Sunday in the season of Lent, going to read a weighty text. We are going to read a hard text, a very weighty, really hard text. But as weighty as it is, as hard as it is, as tough as it is, it is very liberating. Trust me: the weighty, hard text is a liberating text. What Jesus is going to say to us sets us free.

Jesus speaks the words of the text on His way to Jerusalem. Where, as He has been telling the first group of disciples, He must... He must be rejected by the religious authorities, be crucified on a Roman cross, and three days later be raised from the grave. Jesus speaks the words of the text between two gatherings around a meal.

Before – at a dinner party on a Sabbath day, in the home of one of the leading Pharisees.

After – at another dinner, where He welcomes “sinners and tax-collectors,” as Luke puts it, and “eats with them,” scandalizing the scribes and Pharisees.

The text is Luke, chapter 14, verses 25 to 35:

²⁵Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, ²⁶“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. ²⁸For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³²Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

³⁴“Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? ³⁵It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (NASB)

Weighty words, very weighty words – but not oppressive. There is all the difference in the world between weighty and oppressive. The presence of the Living God is weighty, but not oppressive. Jesus' words are weighty, but not oppressive. Indeed, they are not only not oppressive, they are positively liberating. Liberating?

“Unless you hate”?

“Unless you give up ...”?

“Unless you carry your cross ...”?

This is liberating? Yes. Deeply liberating.

Why? Because much of the stress we experience in our day is due to not following. Many of us are under oppressive stress in our time because we are not following Jesus, not actually following right behind Jesus. Following right behind Jesus does not result in life-draining stress. Challenge, yes. Being stretched, oh yes! Tribulation, yes. Persecution, likely. But not oppressive stress that saps vitality.

“Come to Me all who are weary and have over-burdened yourselves, and I will rest you,” He says. “Take My yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” In those more immediately inviting words, Jesus is telling us that we are stressed-out because we are wearing the wrong yokes: yokes that do oppress, yokes that tear at the fabric of our souls. Jesus' yoke is easy, Jesus' burden is light. His yoke is His relationship with His Father: a relationship of trust and intimacy and joy. His burden is pleasing His Father: only doing what He sees the Father doing, only saying what He hears the Father saying. Jesus really wants us to experience the resting, lifting power of His yoke and burden.

So He speaks weighty words like those we have in Luke 14. His weighty words are meant to set us free. Set us free? Yes, set us free. Look more carefully at the text!

Three times in the text Jesus says “can not”:

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate their own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and, yes, even their own life, cannot be My disciple” (v. 26).

“No one can be My disciple who does not give up all his or her own possessions” (v. 33).

“Whoever does not carry his or her own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (v. 27).

Jesus speaks the three “can not-s” relative to three little parables:

1. The parable of the builder (v. 28), who needs to be sure he actually has the materials with which to build before he begins the project.
2. The parable of the king needing to defend his reign (V. 31), who needs to be sure he actually has the resources with which to overcome the enemy.
3. The parable of the salt (v. 34). Salt is only useful if it keeps its saltiness.

Jesus speaks His “can not” to help us build well. Jesus speaks His “can not” to help us win the battle. Jesus speaks His “can not” to help us actually be salt; to be the salt of the earth, as He calls us in His Sermon on the Mount.

You cannot be My disciple unless you hate ...
You cannot be My disciple unless you give up ...
You cannot be My disciple unless you carry the cross.

Now, is Jesus saying to us: “Look folks, unless you get with it I will never let you be My disciple”? No. That would go against everything else we know about Him. It would go contrary to His grace, to His extravagant, scandalous grace He reveals in so many other parables; especially in the parable of the Prodigal Father which He tells right after His weighty words. What I think He is saying is this: “Look folks, here is the way it is. Unless you ‘hate,’ ‘give up,’ ‘carry the cross,’ you will not let yourselves be My disciple.” He is not putting up barriers to following Him. He is not trying to exclude anyone. He is saying that we simply will not get up and follow behind Him until we stop giving into the other claims upon our lives. The “cannot” is not from His side, it is from our side. Jesus is telling us that we simply will not follow Him as long as we still want to follow someone or something else.

You have heard me say it many times: we are all disciples of someone, or some ideology, or some way of life. Every author, every filmmaker, every politician, every newspaper editor, every TED presenter, every plumber, lawyer, teacher, doctor, entrepreneur. Every person in every city in every nation is a disciple of someone. Which means, the question is never, “will I be a disciple?”

The question is always, “whose disciple will I be?” In His weighty words, Jesus, Saviour of the world, Lord of the universe, is saying to us, “Look, I really want you to be My disciple. I really want you to know the fullness of life found in following Me. But here is the deal: you will not get up and follow Me into that fullness, into the Kingdom of God, unless you come to terms with all the other claims upon your life.” In His weighty words, the Creator become one of us is saying to us, “Oh how I want you to enter into and enjoy the intimacy I have with My Father! I died on the cross to make it all possible. But you will not get up and follow Me into My Father’s heart unless you come to terms with all the other claims upon your heart.”

It is not that we **can not** be His disciples. It is more that we **will not** be His disciples.

What amazes me is that, according to Luke, Jesus speaks His weighty, hard words, to the multitudes, to the large crowds that were hanging around Him. I would expect Him to speak such words to those who had already decided to be serious about Him. But no, Jesus speaks them to the crowds, to the seekers! Jesus does not do what we think He ought to do. He does not soft-peddle the cost of following Him. He does not let people kind of warm up to the idea, let them get their feet wet, and then tell them what they have gotten themselves into.

Jesus never deceives anyone about the cost. He never lures anyone in with less than the truth. He is always up-front. Or, as New Testament scholar George Caird put it, Jesus is always “relentlessly honest.” [Saint Luke, 178]. “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. I will lead you into abundant life. But you will not follow Me into that life unless and until you come to terms with the other claims upon your life. It is not that you can not follow Me. It is that you will not follow Me.”

I know that Jesus' "cannot" offends the spirit of the age. But what else is He suppose to say? How can it be otherwise?

What helps is to realize that Jesus is expressing Himself in a typical Middle-Eastern way. That is, He is putting things in the extreme in order to get our attention. He is drawing as sharp a contrast as possible to get our attention. Thus "hate," "give up all," "carry your own cross." Is He really advocating literally hating our loves ones? Is He really telling us to literally give up all we have? Is He really wanting us to literally walk around with a cross on our shoulders?

The fact is, He is going deeper than "literally." He is speaking in such an extreme way to call us to deep, deep renunciation. He is calling us to renounce, at very deep levels, at very deep levels, all the claims on our lives that keep us from living His joyfully liberating claim on our lives. He is expressing Himself in such an extreme way to arrest us—and then to free us. "Hate," "give up all," "carry your own cross."

Spend some time with each of His three exhortations, and see how each liberates us.

"Hate." "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ..." (v. 26). Jesus cannot possibly mean what we mean by "hate" in light of the fifth of the Ten Commandments: "You shall honor your father and mother." He cannot possibly mean what we mean by "hate" in light of His new commandment, "Love as I have loved you." "Hate" is a Middle-Eastern way to say, "the scales have now tipped." "Hate" is a way to say, "Your love for Me will need to be greater than your love for your loved ones if you are actually going to follow Me." Thus the Good News Bible renders Luke 14:26, "Whoever comes to Me cannot be My disciple unless he loves Me more than He loves father and mother ..." Matthew records Jesus saying on another occasion, "Whoever loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me" (10:37).

Yet we must not blunt the sharp edge inherent in the word "hate." Jesus is calling us to more than a relatively greater love. He is saying that our loved ones no longer have the final authority in our lives. A very radical word in the first century! A very radical word in any Middle-Eastern setting! A very radical word in the settings from which many of us in this room come!

I am surprised the crowd did not stone Jesus to death right there and then! First century Middle-Eastern culture is built around the absolute authority of the father. The father virtually dictates how and when the children live until the day the father dies. In some similar cultures it is the mother who holds such sway. While living in Manila, I worked closely with a young Filipino man who was wrestling with the call to pastoral ministry. Over a period of months, we together discerned that the Lord was indeed calling him. But he told me he was not able to respond. "Why?" I asked. "Clearly, Jesus is calling. Why will you not go for it?" "I cannot," he said. "Why not?" I pressed. "My mother has not given her permission." The young man was 33 years old!

In such cultural settings, Jesus' weighty words are liberating words! For Jesus is saying, "the only permission you need to follow Me is Mine." So too in North America. Jesus' words put us all in our places. It is so easy for loved ones and close friends to become idols, to take the place in our lives which only the Living God rightly occupies.

I know this very keenly, on a number of levels. I love my dad and mom. My dad is gone now, enjoying life with the Risen Jesus in ways He never imagined he would. My mom is still living in this world, suffering from severe Dementia, no longer knowing who I am. But although my dad is gone and my mom is “not there” anymore, I still hear their voices. Know what I mean? But as important as their voices are, they have to give way to the voice of Jesus. My dad is my dad ... not my Lord. My mom is my mom ... not my Lord. I can look to them for guidance. But they do not have the final word. The final word belongs to Jesus. Right?

Turn the tables. I am my son David’s dad ... but I am not his Lord. I am my daughter Christy’s dad ... but I am not her Lord. I am my daughter Marissa’s dad ... but I am not her Lord. The only one worthy of their unqualified allegiance is Jesus. My job as parent is to help them know Jesus and prepare them to follow Him wherever He calls them to go. I have dreams for their lives; and now for their kids’ lives. But so does Jesus. His dreams take precedence. His dreams are better than my dreams. And I have to relinquish mine to His, even when such relinquishment might mean the death of my dreams. I have to be ready for Jesus to disappoint my dreams for them so that He can fulfill His dreams for them. I am their dad ... but not their Lord. When I embrace Jesus’ weighty words, I actually lighten up — and am a better dad. Less demanding, less controlling, more open, more attentive to the stirring of the Spirit in their lives.

I will always remember the day I left home for University. Just as I was about to board the airplane, my dad stuffed a small package in my coat pocket. After I had taken my seat in the plane, I opened the package. In it was a small pocket New Testament. On the inside cover he had written these words: “This is the story of a Man who can do more for you than you dad.” I think something like that is what Jesus is getting at when He uses the word “hate” relative to the claims of others. Jesus now has the last word. My dad was loving me by relinquishing me to Jesus. My dad was loving me by calling me to love Jesus more. It is what we are to do for one another in the Body of Christ — relinquish one another to Jesus’ call.

Yet again, we must not blunt the sharp edge. Jesus’ weighty word “hate” goes even deeper. I think He is also saying to us, “you will need to break with the dysfunction of your family system.” Now we are talking liberating! Oh, how all the “stuff” keeps us from freely following Jesus into His Life. “Hate” captures the intensity to which Jesus frees us to break with the “stuff.” “Hate” expresses the resolve to which He frees us to break all those tapes; all those tapes whirling in our souls about who we are. Jesus is saying: “I will now tell you who you are. I will now be the source of your identity and security.”

It goes deeper still! He is saying that in order to follow right behind Him we need to come to terms with our fear of rejection. Oh, do I know this well! There are times when I cannot bring myself to do what I know Jesus is calling me to do because I fear how others are going to judge me. He wants the best for me, and for you. I know that. But I do not choose the best because I fear being criticized by others. The apostle John tells us that many of the Pharisees came to believe in Jesus; they came to believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. But, says John, they would not say so, “lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of humans rather than the approval of God” (12:42-43).

See? It is not that we cannot be His disciples. It is that we will not. So He calls us to come to terms with the fear of rejection. He calls us to renounce in our souls the lordship of other people. He calls us to die to our fear of the judgment of other people. So we can experience the joyful freedom of Jesus’ lordship.

“Hate.” Weighty word. But oh so liberating.

“Give up” (v. 33). “None of you can be My disciple if you do not give up all your own possessions.” Yikes! All? Give up all? Hold a huge garage sale, and sell all the furniture, the TV, the computer and iPhone, the car, the condo, my books? Cancel the savings account and give it up?

“Give up all” is Jesus’ extreme way to say “renounce the claims of ...” Our possessions put tremendous claims on us, claims which can keep us from living out Jesus’ call. Right? “Give up.” Renounce the claims your possessions have on us and place them under My claim. That is the key: place them under Jesus’ lordship.

While he was serving as pastor of a large church in Buenos Aires, Juan Carlos Ortiz wrote a little book simply entitled *Disciple*. Juan Carlos Ortiz is famous for a courageous move he made at the beginning of his ministry in Argentina. He preached a barn-burner message for his candidating sermon. People loved it and voted to call him as pastor. The next Sunday he preached exactly the same sermon. People loved it again but were a bit concerned. The next Sunday he again preached the same sermon. People said, “Well it is a good sermon ... but what is going on?” The next Sunday, the fourth Sunday, he preached the same sermon. The deacons asked Juan Carlos to meet them in an emergency session after worship. The lead Deacon said: “Pastor Ortiz, we really like your sermon. It is very good. But we are wondering, do you have another?” Juan Carlos responded: “Yes, I do. And I will preach it when you have acted on the first.”

In his book, *Disciple*, Ortiz reminds us that Jesus has everything we could ever want: joy, peace, healing, security, eternity ... everything. But it will cost us. So Ortiz imagines the following conversation:

We say to Jesus, “OK, I want what you have to give. How much does it cost?”
“Well”, He says, “It’s very expensive”
“But how much?” we ask.
“Well, a very large amount.”
“Do you think I could buy it?”
“Oh, of course. Everyone can buy it.”
“But didn’t you say it was very expensive?”
“Yes.”
“Well, how much is it?”
“Everything you have.”
After waiting awhile... we make up our minds.
“All right, I’ll buy it.”
“Well, what do you have? Let’s write it down.”
“Well, I have ten thousand dollars in the bank.”
“Good – ten thousand dollars. What else?”
“That’s all. That’s all I have.”
“Nothing more?”
“Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket.”
“How much?”
“Well, let’s see – twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty dollars.”
“That’s fine. What else do you have?”
“Well, nothing. That’s all.”
“Where do you live?”
“In my house.
Yes, I have a house.”

“The house, too, then.”
He writes that down.
“You mean I have to live in my camper?”
“You have a camper?”
That too. What else?”
“I’ll have to sleep in my car!”
“You have a car?”
“Two of them”
“Both become mine, both cars. What else?”
“Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars.
What more do you want?”
“Are you alone in this world?”
“No, I have a wife and two children ...”
“Oh, yes your wife and children, too. What else?”
“I have nothing left! I am left alone now.”
He exclaims,
“You yourself, too! Everything becomes mine – wife, children, house, money, cars, --
and you”
Then He goes on. “Now listen – I will allow you to use (and enjoy) all these things for the
time being. But don’t forget that they are mine just as you are mine. And whenever I
need any of them you must give them up, because now I am the owner.” (In *Disciple*, p.
34)

“Give up all.” All Jesus wants is all. That’s all. All.

Now, how can I know that I have in fact surrendered it all to Jesus? This is tricky heart stuff. How can I know that I am not playing games when I say I have renounced the claims possessions place on me? It is very personal, I know. But the Scriptures give us one objective measurement. It is giving, in particular, giving the tithe, giving away the first 10%. If we can give the tithe, it likely means we are laying the rest at Jesus’ feet.

Here is how I like to put it. We tithe not only because of all the needs around us. We tithe not only because we want to play an active role in the furthering of God’s kingdom in the world. We tithe not only because it is commanded in the Word. We tithe because we need to. For our soul’s sake, so that we do not make an idol out of money and possessions. This is why for some of us, 10% is not enough; we need, for our soul’s sake, to give away even more.

“Give up all.” Jesus is saying that we will not follow right behind Him into the joyful fullness of His lordship unless we renounce the claims our possessions have on us, and transfer ownership to Him.

I love that line in the Palm Sunday story: “the Lord has need of it.” Some un-named disciple of Jesus had placed his possessions at the feet of Jesus, saying, “any time You need anything, just send a messenger saying, ‘the Lord has need of it’.” The time had come. Jesus needed the donkey. He sends the message: “the Lord has need of it.” And the un-named disciple let the donkey go.

“Hate.” “Give up all.” Weighty words. But oh so liberating!

“Carry your own cross” (v. 27). “Whoever does not carry their own cross cannot be My disciple.” Literally? Walk around all day with a cross on our shoulders? Of course not. As you know, in some parts of the world, some folks literally do so. On Good Friday in the Philippines ten to thirteen men will carry crosses along the highway going north of Manila. And at noon will be nailed to those crosses, suffering for three hours.

To what is Jesus calling us in His weighty word? I think He is saying that we need to be prepared to accept some form of suffering as we follow right behind Him. I think He is saying we need to be prepared to suffer something of the hostility He endured. If we follow Him in the work of peace-making, for instance, we just might experience the same resistance and ridicule He did. If I am not willing to risk taking some hard-knocks I will likely not follow His way of peace.

I think Jesus is also saying that we need to be willing to suffer with Him as He suffers with the world. We cannot get close to His heart without getting close to what is on His heart. The further we press into His heart the more we enter into the pain of the world which He has made His own pain. If I am not willing to feel pain with and for others I will likely not follow closely behind Jesus.

But I think Jesus is mostly saying that we need to renounce our own claim to self-lordship. Someone has pointed out that the only people who carried crosses in the first century were those who were on their way to their own death! To “carry your cross” means choosing to die. To die to being lord of your life. To “carry your cross” is to declare that you are no longer in charge. To “carry your cross” is to relinquish the need to always have it your way. If I insist on clinging to my own plans for my life, how can I possibly follow closely behind Jesus; how can I possibly seek first the Kingdom of God?

This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to remind people: “When Jesus bids a man, ‘come, follow Me,’ He bids him come and die.” “When Jesus bids a woman, ‘come, follow Me,’ He bids her come and die.”

“Carry your own cross.” A liberating word. Liberating? Yes. Because we were never intended to bear the weight of being lord. We were never intended to carry the unbearable weight of being lord of our lives. Jesus’ weighty words free us from the crushing weight of being our own master.

“Carry your own cross.” Resurrection only happens in cemeteries. “I have been crucified with Christ,” says Paul, “and it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

“Hate.” “Give up all.” “Carry your own cross.” Does Jesus really need to express it such extreme ways? Yes.

For like the builder in His parable, Jesus is building a grand building, a new humanity in a new creation. And like the king in His parable, Jesus is engaged in a battle, for the souls of humanity. And like salt, we need to remain salty. Jesus knows that we will not join Him in the building project and in the battle, we will not be healing salt for the city, if we keep giving into all the other claims on our lives. We simply will not do what He calls us to do.

Once more: it is not that Jesus is saying, “you can not be My disciple.” He is saying, “you will not.” He is not saying, “Well foey on you if you do not renounce all other claims on your life.” He is saying, “you will not actually follow Me into what I have for you unless you come to terms with all those other claims on your life.” Missionary Jim Elliot said it best: “He is no fool who gives up what he can never keep in order to gain what he can never lose.”