

Commitment Isn't a Moment, It's a Thousand Steps

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Date: 13 September 2026

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[0:00] We're going to Luke 14, 25 and 35, through 35. Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them.

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. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?

Or if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying this person began to build and wasn't able to finish.

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. When he first sits down and consider whether he is able with 10,000 men to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000.

[1:14] 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.

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. 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. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

A few years back, when I was pastoring Resurrection City, I became interested in alternative worship styles.

And by alternative, I mean alternative to my own experience, alternative to the gospel rhythms of my childhood and my teen years, and alternative to the Christian contemporary music that I was exposed to in evangelical spaces in my first years as an adult.

[2:28] Specifically, I was interested in what worship music could look like when it was deeply connected to place. Consequently, when I heard about a church out in PG County that moored its music in the go-go lineage of this area, I got in my car as quick as I could, and I visited that church.

Sure enough, what I experienced there musically pulled me not only toward history, but into this grounded sense of place. It was like nothing I had experienced up to that point.

But unfortunately, as I think about that church service, what my body recalls is not worshipping to go-go. Instead, what my body most recalls is experiencing the most aggressive altar call of my life. And y'all, I grew up Baptist. I'm ordained Baptist. I know about altar calls. I know about them, okay? Those long, drawn-out altar calls that are just like, you know, the blood will never lose its power, sung 15 times over.

And you're like, the blood might not ever lose its power, but my voice will. Okay. But this altar call, it put all of those to shame. Because at the end of the service, the minister on stage asked all of the visitors to stand up.

[4:02] If you're a visitor, that will not be happening to you, okay? Asked them to stand up. So I stood up. And then there were these people that I hadn't noticed in the room.

They were kind of stationed around the room. I guess they were ushers. And they started going directly up to the people around the room and saying, have you been saved?

Like, with like a foot of distance. Like, you know, just like here, okay? And then the people around me who went to the church also started to stand up.

And they just kind of surrounded me with like a circle of, have you been saved? And I'll be honest. My body was like starting to go to fight or flight. I was like, okay, like, what is happening?

I was like, I'm a pastor. I've been saved. I've been saved, okay? I've been saved. I mean, it was extremely intense. And while that experience is extreme for sure, there are so many churches that

seem to believe that crossing a line or walking down an aisle or saying a few words in a prayer one time is a supreme moment of the Christian life.

[5:17] While I'm not actually opposed to altar calls for prayer, I think they can be really important and really good. We are inviting people to something.

If you've been around here for a while, you know that we tend to be very gentle around these matters. If you stay around here, you'll notice that we tend to tackle complex topics in our preaching, like we did with our summer series on Afrofuturism and the parables.

Even so, I don't ever want us to miss one simple truth, one foundational truth that I believe those dramatic altar calls are trying to get at.

Following Jesus requires dramatic, divergent commitment. It requires something radical, something out past convenience and comfort.

So on this Sunday, I'm not going to be up here very long because I know some of us have this game to get to. And it's a Sunday where we've just finished a sermon series.

[6:36] We're going into a new one next week. I just want to simply remind us of the beauty and the cost of discipleship. See, if you notice in our passage for today, Jesus did not want the crowds attracted by his teaching to be drawn into an unsuspecting commitment.

He did not ask them to sign on the dotted line before reading the fine print. No, Jesus, Jesus gets right to the heart of what is required of a disciple with some language that for many of us almost needs a trigger warning.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate, and whoever does not carry their cross, those of you who do not give up everything you have, this is rough language for us because too many of us know the call to hate family as the first step into high control religion.

Far too many of us have encountered the call to hate our lives before we even knew our lives, before we knew our personalities and our unique gifts and our own innermost desires and intuitions. Heard it when we were too young or too inexperienced to protect ourselves against what amounted to an acceptable form of manipulation. Too young to have encountered the reality that the language of hating our lives is about releasing the best laid plans that we concoct apart from God and not about killing parts of ourselves.

[8:29] So much of this passage from the call to carry our cross to the command to communally share our possessions has too often been used to validate some pastor's addiction to dominance and uncertainty.

That sad truth can make it hard for us to absorb a teaching like this, a teaching like the one that we find in this passage. Yet Jesus is clear that there is a cost to discipleship.

The cost is voluntary. It's not compulsive. But it's there. It will and should change your life.

Rick Valotis, a pastor of New York, puts it like this. This is a quote I've used. You've probably heard me use it before. He writes this when considering the lives of the early Christians who followed Jesus' outpost empire.

The Desert Fathers, Mothers, and later monastics remind us that the way of following Jesus requires a steadfast refusal to get caught up in the pace, to get caught up in the pace, power, and priorities of the world around us.

[9:56] We are called to have our lives shaped by a different kind of power, pace, and priorities offered to us by God.

A different pace, a different relationship to power, a different ordering of priorities.

Jesus disinvites us from the pursuit of middle class American values, from the pursuit of becoming merely nice people, instead offering us the possibility of becoming new creations that image God in the world.

Now, interestingly, in the center of this teaching, Jesus asks his audience to consider these two parables. The first is of a person building a tower, and the second is of a king going to war.

The punchline of both is that before beginning such projects, any sensible person would estimate the cost of either so as to avoid embarrassment at best, or loss of life and defeat at worst.

[11:13] This year, our sermons have been intentionally revolving around what it looks like to have a heart re-enchanted by Christ, a life that is tender to the mysteries and passions and romance of faith in Jesus.

Yet as we accept the invitation to get caught up again in the adventure of discipleship, Jesus reminds us here of two things that we need to remember in order to journey well.

As a disciple, you are building a tower brick by brick. As a disciple, it will sometimes feel like going to war, full of fear at times, full of adrenaline at times.

It will be radically inconvenient to be radically committed. It will take patience and increasing tolerance for risk and rejection.

It will not look like walking down an aisle once, but instead it will look like a thousand steps in the direction of Jesus. Here at the table, we're in a season of building two.

[12:34] We're building this discipleship culture as a church that also comes with inconvenient requests. The request to show up with your presence here on a regular basis.

The request that you take the next right step to grow up in Christ. That you link up building connections and spiritual friendships with the folks in this church on purpose.

That you step up to serve and offer your gifts to build up the body of Christ. And that you open up by sharing whatever financial resources you can and whatever of your heart you are inclined to wall off.

Next week, we're going to begin a new sermon series based on the book of 1 Corinthians. And I do predict it will be quite a roller coaster.

We're going to talk about Christian rivalry and the stewardship of the body and singleness in marriage and divorce and that fun topic of the disputed role of women in church. But this week, I just wanted to stop by, as the old folks would say, to kind of stop us, to pause us, and to remind us that in all of it, in all of it, there is a cost to following Jesus that goes against our modern sensibilities.

[14:05] A cost that will mean real tension and sometimes real opposition. A cost we have to account for as many of us build in this new year of kids going back to school and the city kind of speeding up.

A cost that demands conscious commitment and intentional yes that has to be reaffirmed over and over again throughout the course of our lives. But I also stop by here today to remind you that there is so much beauty to this following, to these vows renewed and celebrated because God did not enter the process of rescue, reconciliation, and redemption in your life without being able to complete it.

And Jesus did not set his face for Jerusalem, allow himself to be nailed to a Roman cross, and surrender to the forces of death without being prepared to say, it is finished.

We serve a God who finishes what she starts, who rips life from death, even when the cost seems too high, who raises us from the tombs of our own making, and we thought there was no way out. We serve a God who fills us with the spirit and promises to bring us into a spacious place where there is irresistible joy.

[15:46] May we be those who are not surprised by the cost. May we be those who never resist the beauty.

Amen.