

I once had someone tell me the problem with the church in America is that it has gotten off message. He went on to say, “The church is supposed to be about traditional morality, family values, and patriotism. If the church gets back to these things, it will have a lot of people again.”

I’m not sure if the church would gather a lot of people with a message of traditional morality, family values, and patriotism, or not. I am sure that is not an adequate statement of what the church is all about. Nor, do I think the goal of the church is to fill our buildings. Don’t get me wrong, the church is called to make more disciples of Jesus, but that is not the same as simply filling the seats to capacity.

The church is about discipleship. It is a community where we find and proclaim the message of the gospel of Christ. It is the family of God in which we are called to repentance, and to receive forgiveness so that we can live the kind of lives God created us to live. Sometimes that will attract a lot of people. Sometimes the message of the gospel will cause people to turn away.

Large crowds were following Jesus. So he turned to them and said, “If you want to follow me, you’re going to have to be willing to leave behind your family.” I’m not sure that is exactly the family values message most people want to hear.

Jesus said, “If you want to follow me, you’re going to have to be willing to risk your life. In fact, you might even face a shameful death.” Bearing your cross, was not an abstract concept for the crowds that followed Jesus.

Jesus said, “If you want to follow me, you’re going to have to be willing to part with all of your possessions.” I have heard that a lot of the prosperity message churches are growing. This is probably not a verse they spend a lot of time with.

Either Jesus did not know how to win friends, or he was not concerned with attracting crowds for the sake of attracting crowds. He was not running a political campaign. His chief aim was not popularity. He was leading people to eternal life, and the way to eternal life meant that they had to follow him.

Jesus then told a couple of brief parables to explain what he was talking about. He said that anyone who intends to build a tower would not start until he figured out if he had enough money to build it. When someone starts to build, they first count the cost of building.

This may well have been an obscure warning about a building project that had been going on for a while in Israel. Herod the Great had started a program to rebuild and decorate the Temple in Jerusalem. His sons were carrying on the work Herod had begun. In the prior chapter of Luke’s account of the Gospel, Jesus had already spoken of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. All of the work that Herod and his sons had started would come to nothing. If the people put their hope and their pride in the structure of the Temple, they would be disappointed.

Then, Jesus spoke of a king planning to go to war. He said that any wise king would first sit down to figure out if he could win the battle. If he could not win the battle, it would be foolish to go to war.

This too may be an obscure warning. There were those whose nationalistic aspirations led them to hope for a battle in which they could overthrow the Roman occupation. It was a battle they could not hope to win. It was a battle that they eventually did choose to fight, and the consequences were disastrous.

Jesus warned the people who were following him to count the cost. We can count the cost in a couple of different ways. The way that we usually count the cost is to ask what it is going to cost us to become disciples of Jesus. Some of those who did choose to continue following Jesus were rejected by their families. Some were abandoned by their husband or wife. St. Paul wrote about how to handle that in First Corinthians. Some of those who continued to follow Jesus did lose everything they owned. Some of those who continued to follow Jesus did have to take up their cross in a literal way.

What might it cost us to be disciples of Jesus? It might involve losing friends or being estranged from parts of our family. It might mean less financial security, turning down a promotion, or even changing careers. It could even mean losing our lives. Have we ever stopped to count the cost of being disciples of Jesus? There will be times when you will have to make a conscious choice to follow Jesus, and that decision will cost something. I do not know what it will cost, but it will cost something.

One way to count the cost is to examine what it will cost for us to be disciples of Jesus. Another way to count the cost is to ask what it will cost us to turn away. What would the cost be if we were to turn away?

Jesus ends his teaching with the warning, "Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? If it is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they will throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Again, this warning sounds somewhat obscure. If the people refused to follow Jesus, they would be left with their unfinished tower or their disastrous battle. The cost of discipleship might be the loss of some of the things of the world. The cost of turning away would be their own destruction.

I wish I could tell you that following Jesus will be easy, but that would not be true. It will cost each of his disciples something. I can tell you that following Jesus is the way to salvation, not just eternal bliss in the hereafter, but salvation here and now, as you find the authentic life God created you to live. Count the cost, not just of following, but also of turning away. The cost to follow Jesus is high. The cost of turning away is disastrous.