



# The Investigator's Gospel

## Session 14 – Chapter 14 – The High Cost of Discipleship

### *Luke 14:25-35*

25 Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 26 '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. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28 '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? 29 For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, 30 saying, "This person began to build and wasn't able to finish."

31 'Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 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. 33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

34 'Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; it is thrown out.

'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.'

**“...hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...”**

This is a hard saying in more senses than one: it is hard to accept and it is hard to reconcile with the general teaching of Jesus. The attitude it seems to recommend goes against the family as a unit, and it also goes against the law of love to one's neighbor which Jesus emphasized to a radical extent.

If “hating” one's relatives is felt to be a shocking idea, it was meant to be shocking, to shock the hearers into a sense of the demands of discipleship.

### **Setting the Scene**

A large crowd had been following Jesus, perhaps because of the great miracles he had performed—raising people from the dead and giving food to thousands, or because he had courageously confronted the religious authorities. For whatever reason, they were following him. Jesus turned around and told them flatly what it meant to truly follow him. They would have to give up everything, even the most treasured relationships with their families, to put Jesus first in their lives.

Jesus was not a salesman. He did not try to soft-sell Christianity by telling people the benefits they would receive, the wonderful experiences they would have, and the reasons they should follow him. Instead, he told them the costs, the hardships, and the difficulties they would experience, and he encouraged them to carefully evaluate the costs before they followed him.

### **Establishing the Context – Similar Sayings of Jesus**

Looking at similar sayings of Jesus helps us to understand the language he chooses to use in the Luke 14 passage.

#### *Matthew 10:34-38*

*34 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn*

*“a man against his father, a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –*

*36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”*

*37 'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

#### *Luke 12:51-53*

*51 Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52 From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'*

The Matthew and Luke passages above begin similarly – Jesus’ warning that his message will prove divisive, even within families. This is not to imply that division is the intent of the Gospel; Jesus did not advocate conflict. He taught his followers to offer no resistance or retaliation when they were attacked or ill-treated. “*Blessed are the peacemakers,*” he said, “*for they will be called children of God*” (Matthew 5:9), meaning that God is the God of peace, so that those who seek peace and pursue it reflect his character.

Also, the message that his followers proclaimed in his name after his departure was called the “gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15) or the “message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). It was called this not merely as a matter of doctrine but as a fact of experience. Individuals and groups formerly estranged from one another found themselves reconciled through their common devotion to Christ.

But when Jesus spoke of tension and conflict within a family, he spoke from personal experience. There are indications in the gospel story that some members of his own family had no sympathy with (or perhaps simply no understanding of) his ministry. Mark records (3:20-21; 3:31-35):

*20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. 21 When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'*

*...31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32 A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.'*

*33 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked.*

*34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'*

*"Even his own brothers did not believe in him,"* we are told in John 7:5.

So, when Jesus said that he had come to bring "not peace but a sword" he meant that **this would be the effect of his coming, not that it was the purpose of his coming.** His words came true in the life of the early church. Paul, who seems to have experienced such opposition in his own family circle as a result of his conversion, makes provision for similar situations in the family life of his converts.

For example, Paul knew that tension could arise when a husband or a wife became a Christian and the other spouse remained a pagan. If the pagan spouse was happy to go on living with the Christian, that was fine; the whole family might become Christian before long. But if the pagan partner insisted on walking out and terminating the marriage, the Christian should not use force or legal action, because *"God has called us to peace"* (1 Cor 7:12-16).

Jesus was warning his followers that their allegiance to him might cause conflict at home and even expulsion from the family circle. It was good that they should be forewarned, for then they could not say, "We never expected that we should have to pay this price for following him!" This was emphasized by the "counting the cost" examples which follow the Luke 14 passage.

There is another important aspect to the Matthew and Luke passages above: Jesus, as he so often does, is quoting the Old Testament, in this instance the Prophet Micah. We know Micah for two primary reasons; in Micah we find *"they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,"* etc (Micah 4), a glorious vision of the coming of the Prince of Peace. We also hear Micah at Christmas: it is he who identifies Bethlehem as the town in which the Saviour will be born (Micah 5).

Micah, then, is a prophet who foresees the coming of the Messiah, and the conditions which both lead up to and follow this coming. And here is the passage which Jesus quotes, and Matthew and Luke follow:

*Micah 7:4-7*

*4 The day God visits you has come,  
the day your watchmen sound the alarm.  
Now is the time of your confusion.*

*5 Do not trust a neighbour;  
put no confidence in a friend.  
Even with the woman who lies in your embrace  
guard the words of your lips.*

*6 For a son dishonours his father,  
a daughter rises up against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –  
a man's enemies are the members of his own household.*

*7 But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord,  
I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me.*

In essence, Jesus is saying, “Don’t be surprised that my teaching brings confusion and division. It is as Micah foretold. Your allegiance to me carries a cost, for it must be a stronger allegiance than to your own family. Nothing – not even family disapproval – should come between you me. Your love for me must be supreme.” This is perhaps the highest expression of “taking up your cross and following me.”

## **Family First?**

All the passages above strongly indicate that giving one’s family second place to the kingdom of God is one way of taking up the cross. Jesus’ closest followers included some who had family and had left them to follow him; Mark 10:28-30 is clear on this point:

*28 Then Peter spoke up, ‘We have left everything to follow you!’*

*29 ‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus replied, ‘no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life.*

We are told that when Jesus called James and John to follow him, “*they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him without delay.*” We can imagine that this was more common than not. After all, some twenty or so years later, Paul points out that while he makes no financial demands among those to whom he ministers, the “*other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Peter*” all travel with their

wives, and thereby incur expenses (1 Corinthians 9:5). These families seem to have survived the years apart, while the apostles followed Jesus without them.

It is correct to see these passages as a restructuring of priority – the Kingdom of God comes first – but it would be wrong to conclude that following Jesus means an end to family ties or responsibilities. Jesus harshly criticises those who fail to care for their needy parents (Mark 7:9-13). Later in the New Testament period, when family life was acknowledged as the norm for Christians, it is made clear that *“if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Timothy 5:8).

It is natural for men and women to make what provision they can for their nearest and dearest. Jesus’ emphasis lay rather on the necessity of treating the kingdom of God as nearer and dearer still. Because of the natural resistance on the part of his hearers to accepting this necessity with literal seriousness, he insisted on it in the most arresting and challenging language at his command – so we have the uncomfortable use of the word “hate.”

### **“Hate” as “Hyperbole”**

When Jesus returns to the theme in Luke 14, he ramps up his rhetoric from *“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;”* to, *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother...”* “Hate” in this context is comparative; “to love less” is more in keeping with the intent. In this regard, Eugene Peterson captures the sense correctly: *“Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple.”*

### **A Hard Conclusion (Holman Apologetics Commentary)**

*Must we really hate our loved ones in order to follow Jesus? Rather than setting up hatred of family as a literal ethic here, Jesus used rhetorical language to address which allegiances should have priority. One should love God and pursue him as top priority. So the call to “hate” did not have a literal hate in view. Otherwise, he would be contradicting his own teaching that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.*

*The call to hate simply means to “love less,” as seen elsewhere in Scripture. The image is purposefully strong, highlighting the priority of setting God as your highest pursuit. All other concerns must take second place to following Jesus (Luke 8:19-21; 9:59-62; 12:4, 49-53; 16:13). Matthew 10:37-39, Luke 9:24, and John 12:25 make a similar point, though Matthew softened the emotive force of Jesus’ statement by having him warn against the dangers of allowing love for family to be greater than love for him. This is the meaning of Luke as well, though he presented it in much starker terms.*

*To set Jesus’ statement in context, we must recall that, at the time, many would view a Jew who chose to follow Jesus as a traitor, resulting in potential alienation from*

*his family. Given this fact, anyone who desired acceptance by family more than a relationship with God might have weighed the outcomes and decided against following Jesus. This is the irresolution Jesus was warning against. Disciples must be willing to follow him even if it means losing all else.*

*Jesus warned the would-be disciples that they must be clear about their true allegiance. Jesus' point was that those who wanted to be his followers would have demands placed upon them. The task would not be easy. Sometimes relationships would be strained, and even severed.*

In our increasingly secular world, families are often forced to make difficult choices. Many important activities for children – particularly sports – require Sunday commitments. It is hard to deny our children these opportunities. Often, families lose the practice of attending church altogether, to the detriment of their family's faith life.

The same is true with members of the family working on Sundays. Not simply adults working shifts, but many young people have part-time jobs which take them away from regular worship on Sundays. Much conflict can arise when parents insist on their children participating in church, rather than sports or part-time work.

So much of life as followers of Jesus involves the setting of priorities, many of which are difficult to live by. In this passage, Jesus is pointing out that just as property can come between us and the kingdom of God, so can family ties. The interests of God's kingdom must be paramount with the followers of Jesus, and everything else must take second place to them, even family ties.

Discipleship involves a degree of self-sacrifice – sometimes a small degree, sometimes large. While under-emphasized in our church culture today, self-sacrifice is a primary theme of the New Testament, in both the teaching of Jesus and the remainder of the New Testament. There is a cost to faithfulness! As our society becomes increasingly secular, Christians are faced with ever more difficult decisions.

There is a cost in following Jesus. It is not a joyride, nor is it a passage to health and wealth. Jesus promised his followers a kingdom, but he also said that they would face difficulty and suffering because of their faith. He did not paint an unrealistic picture for his followers. Those on the fence needed to count the cost. When a builder doesn't count the cost or estimates it inaccurately, his building may be left half-completed.

What are those "costs" to believers? Christians may face loss of social status or wealth. They may have to give up control over their money, time, or career. Following Christ does not mean living trouble-free. All people must carefully count the cost of becoming Christ's disciple so that they will know what they are getting into and won't be tempted to turn back when the going gets tough.