

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Hard Truth*

Service Theme: *Put Down What You Love; Pick Up What You Loathe*

**Sermon Theme: The Discipleship Self-Assessment (Sept. 4, 2022)
Luke 14:25-35**

For the first major battle of the Civil War, large crowds traveled. A crowd of people trekked from Washington D.C. to the battlefield of Bull Run outside Manassas, VA to watch--with picnic baskets and opera glasses. They must have expected a relaxing summer outing, capped off by an easy Union victory and a quick end to the war. But when the bullets and artillery started flying, and panicked Union soldiers fled the battlefield, the crowd's "fun day out" transformed into a sobering realization that this wouldn't be a quick, easy spectator's war.

The same happened for the "*Large crowds [who] were traveling with Jesus*" in our sermon text. Who could blame them for excitedly following! They'd probably experienced, or at least heard about the amazing miracles he'd performed. They'd listened intently as he taught with so much authority, wisdom, and charisma. They'd heard the rumors that this Jesus was the Messiah who would defeat their enemies and restore Israel's power. So following Jesus seemed like an exciting, easy way to positively impact their lives!

But when Jesus turned and addressed that enthusiastic, but unthinking crowd, it must have felt like bullets and artillery started flying. Because Jesus made it very clear that following him as his true disciple would be anything but a relaxing summer outing.

Basically, Jesus invited the crowds to take a discipleship self-assessment. For those who were considering following Jesus, it was an opportunity to ask themselves, "Do I really want to be Jesus' disciple?"

Am I cut out to follow him?" And for those already committed to following Jesus—like his disciples and Apostles—it was opportunity to self-assess, "How is my discipleship going?"

Through Jesus' words, we also have the opportunity to take **The Discipleship Self-Assessment**. If you're not entirely sold on following Jesus, this is an opportunity to ask yourself, "Do I really want to be Jesus' disciple? Am I cut out to follow him?" And for those of you who are already Christians, maybe even lifelong followers of Jesus, this is an opportunity to self-assess, "How is my discipleship going?"

In this self-assessment, Jesus gives us four main questions to ask ourselves. First, "**Do you hate everyone and everything else?**" Wait, that can't be right, can it? Following Jesus means we have to hate everyone and everything else? Well, Jesus tells the crowd, "*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.*"

However, when you let all of Scripture interpret Jesus' words here, it's clear that Jesus isn't telling us to literally hate our family, friends, and our own life. He can't be, because God's Fourth Commandment literally commands us not to hate our parents, and God's Fifth Commandment literally commands us not to hate our own life. And Jesus himself teaches that the whole law is summarized by loving God and loving our neighbor. So what's Jesus saying?

Matthew's Gospel records similar words from Jesus, which can help us decipher Jesus' meaning. There, Jesus teaches the crowds, "*Anyone who loves his father or mother...his son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.*" Jesus isn't calling for a psychological hatred of other people, or our life. Rather, we need a total commitment that prioritizes Jesus over everything else, even our closest relationships.

Jesus telling us to "hate" those people we love catches us off guard, because today, we usually equate words like "hate" or "love" to strong emotions. But the Greek word "agape," the kind of love God calls us to have for our neighbor, isn't about emotions. It's the kind of love

that shows love to a person through action, even if you don't feel a strong emotional love for them! Likewise, when Jesus tells us to "hate" those people, he's calling us to prioritize following Jesus over them—despite the strong emotional feelings of love we might have for them.

So, the first point of the discipleship self-assessment: Do you prioritize following Jesus over everyone and everything else in your life? Or are there people or things in your life you always allow to muscle Jesus out of that priority place?

Jesus' second self-assessment question is, **"Do you carry your cross?"** As Jesus tells the crowd, *"Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."* That might seem like a hard thing to assess. Do we have to carry heavy wooden torture devices around with us to be his disciple? It would confuse people in Jesus' day too. The cross was the primary weapon the government they despised used to intimidate them. So what does Jesus mean?

The visual speaks volumes. Crosses were heavy, painful, and caused unfathomable suffering. So, when Jesus instructs us to carry our crosses, he's telling us that following him will bring heavy, painful suffering and struggle into our lives. Christian "crosses" are basically any sort of suffering, hardship, or persecution we experience because of our faith in Jesus. From Christians beheaded for not denouncing their faith; to being mocked by their university professor for trusting the Bible; to being shunned by co-workers for calling out their sinful actions; to missing out on the Sunday morning beach outing because you went to church; to denying the desires of your sinful nature or the sinful mindsets and movements of this unbelieving world. Those are all examples of Christian crosses—suffering you could avoid if you denied Christ.

That's the second question of the discipleship self-assessment: Do you willingly suffer and sacrifice to follow Jesus? Or do you bear a small, gold cross around your neck, but repeatedly lay down the Christian cross, hiding your faith or refusing to live in it, because following Jesus makes your life more difficult, challenging, or painful?

Jesus' third self-assessment question is, **"Have you counted the cost?"** With two parables, Jesus shows the necessity of doing so. First, imagine you want to build a tower. You'd be a fool to grab some bricks and start building. As Jesus points out, *"Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?"* If you don't count the cost in advance, you might end up with a half-completed foundation that's an eye-sore and a laughing stock—kind of like the downtown Berkman II building was for so long!

Then Jesus pictures a king whose enemy is marching toward him, armed for war. *"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? 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."* If he doesn't count the cost in advance, he better send out the white flag before he's destroyed!

Likewise, disciples of Jesus need to count the cost—understanding in advance the kind of sacrifice and suffering we might endure for following Jesus. Why does Jesus say that's necessary? Because if we haven't, we'll be shocked and unprepared when confronted with the cost!

Kind of like when I bought Kelly's engagement ring. I knew what kind she liked. I'd extensively researched the 4 C's of diamonds. But I hadn't counted the cost of how much I wanted to and was able to pay for her diamond! I had a general idea, but when the pressure and emotions were high as the saleswoman showed me how the big diamonds sparkled, and how good they would look on my future wife's finger—I chose a diamond more expensive than was reasonable. Thankfully, they later let me to downsize to a more affordable diamond after a panic attack brought me to my senses.

Likewise, if we understand what it could cost us to follow Jesus, when the pressure and emotions run high, we won't be shocked or unprepared to face them, because we're expecting them! And that makes us so much less likely to jettison Christ, because we'll either

experience what we've been expecting, or be pleasantly surprised if the cost was less than we expected. That's the third question of self-assessment—have you counted the cost of following Jesus? Or have you been following oblivious to the cost?

Finally, Jesus' fourth question of discipleship self-assessment is, **“Are you salty?”** As he tells the crowd, ***“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor the manure pile; it is thrown out.”*** It's pretty obvious when something is salty, right? You don't dig into your McDonald's fries, or get ocean water in your mouth and wonder, “Hmm...is that salty?” No! When you taste salt, there's no mistaking it!

Likewise, when God calls us to be the “salt of the earth,” our lives are to be so powerfully and distinctively different, so set apart from the rest of the world in our thoughts, words, and actions that people shouldn't ever wonder, “Hmm...is that a Christian?” As Jesus' disciples, our lives should be so salty, so Christ-like, that there's no question who we follow! That's the final question of self-assessment—is your life salty? Or has your life become a bland, tasteless assimilation with the saltless world, worth nothing but being thrown out?

So, how's your discipleship self-assessment look? Honestly, mine has a lot of red marks and low scores. You don't have to say it out loud, but I hope you have, or at least will do some serious self-assessment about those four points of your discipleship.

Or maybe you're wondering, “Who in their right mind would do this? A life of sacrifice, struggle, and standing out? If that's what it'll cost me to follow Jesus, is it even worth it? Like the spectators at Bull Run, or like many in the crowds who followed Jesus, should we scatter when we realize that following Jesus won't be a nice, summer picnic?

I mean, is Jesus petty or jealous, needing to feel validated and important by insisting that we put him first over everyone and everything else? And why should suffering pain and persecution be necessary to follow him? And shouldn't we be free to live however we

want, instead of needing to be distinct from the rest of the world? Why does discipleship need to be so costly?

Because he loves us. Jesus insists that we prioritize him, not because he's petty, but because prioritizing him is the only way we can have life! And Jesus tells us to take up our crosses, because he knows how to use our struggle and suffering to construct our character and perseverance, and draw us closer to him who gives us life. And Jesus calls us to live a salty life, because only by walking his paths are we free to live in the way he guarantees will be blessed!

Friends, you can willingly and joyfully follow Jesus, even if it's costly, because what we get in return far outweighs what we have to give up. We use the phrase “This is life or death” often, but it's usually not. But whether we follow Jesus in faith really is life or death. As God told the Israelites through Moses, ***“I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.”***

Being a disciple of Jesus will give you life, because Jesus is the ultimate disciple. Everything Jesus includes in this discipleship self-assessment he has already done-- to give us life. Jesus willingly left his heavenly home, setting aside an inseparable triune relationship with Father and Holy Spirit so that he could prioritize following the Father's will and winning us life, even “hating” his earthly life in order to die for the sins of the world. Jesus willingly carried the ultimate cross to suffering, death, and hell, so that he could give us life. Jesus thoroughly counted the cost, knowing from eternity everything it would cost him to give us life—and to him, you were worth it. He lived the saltiest life ever, showing love to those who hated him. Standing firm on God's truth when everyone else acquiesced. Caring for the poor and needy, when everyone else took abused them. Calling the weak and the flawed to follow him, when everyone else ignored them. We can willingly, even joyfully count the cost of discipleship when we know the one we follow has already paid the cost in full.

And because Jesus' discipleship self-assessment was perfect, even if yours is filled with low scores and red checkmarks like mine, even if you haven't been the kind of disciple Jesus calls you to be, through his perfect discipleship, and through faith in him, you are a perfect discipleship in God's eyes!

That good news leads some people to think, "Awesome! If Jesus has already been a perfect disciple for me, I don't have to pay the cost of suffering, sacrifice, or struggle to follow Jesus." But for true disciples, that good news motivates us to be that much more committed to following him! Whatever it might be, we can willingly count the cost of discipleship, because we know it's worth it for the riches we've received from him. Because we know who we follow—the one who counted the cost, and paid it in full, to give us eternal life. Follow him, fellow disciples, and live!