

The Cost-Conscious Christian

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*"If one of you is planning to build a tower,
he sits down first and figures out what it will cost,
to see if he has enough money to finish the job.
If he doesn't, he will not be able to finish the tower
after laying the foundation,
and all who see what has happened
will make fun of him.
'This man began to build,
but can't finish the job', they will say." --Luke 14:28-30*



Last week, Lonnie Yoder spoke on the gift discernment process in which we identify in each other gifts which God has provided for the purpose of carrying out our mission as His people.

Of course, as those on the gift discernment committee know, identifying those gifts is only half of the task.

Once a person has been identified as having the gifts for a particular job to be done within the congregation, the committee approaches the individual to check out their perceptions with him or her, and seek the person's agreement to serve.

In many cases, this agreement is hard to get --perhaps because of humility or lack of confidence on the part of the person asked to serve-- --perhaps the person doesn't discern those gifts in himself or herself-- --or perhaps there is an unwillingness to spend the time and effort.

When the worship commission asked me to speak on this theme, I certainly had many of these feelings. I don't see myself as a public speaker at all! I'm terrified standing up here. And I'm convinced that there are lots of you who have more to say than I, and are better able to say it.

And it does take effort on my part-- every time I've agreed to speak, I dread it for weeks in advance, and fret and worry over it without many tangible results, and then end up working on my sermon very late Saturday night.

When they called me to ask me to speak, I wanted to think of an excuse to refuse, but I always have a hard time saying "no" to anyone. I have trouble cutting off a telephone salesman making his pitch for storm windows, or siding. So here I am, speaking about responding to the call to exercise whatever gifts God has given us, because I lack assertiveness. The irony of that really hit me when I had to prepare this sermon.



The scripture text which I selected, Christ's parable about the builder of the tower, is one I've spoken on before, about 5 years ago.

It is one that seems relevant to the issue of how we should respond if called upon in this gift discernment process.

Perhaps because of my training as an industrial engineer,

this parable about counting the cost of building a tower always appeals to me.

Industrial engineering is harder to define than other fields of engineering, like electrical engineering or chemical engineering.

Basically, the industrial engineer is responsible for the efficient use of labor, materials, energy, and money, and must be aware of all the costs of completing a project.

He must be aware of not only the costs, but the times at which the payments of the costs are due.

Things like cash flow, the "time value of money", and so on.

So this parable seems to speak especially to the industrial engineer:

"If one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and figure out what it will cost, to see if he has enough money to finish the job. If he doesn't, he will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation, and all who see what has happened will make fun of him. 'This man began to build, but can't finish the job', they will say."

During my visit to Taiwan back in 1983, I saw several times the results of poor planning-- building sites in which the foundation had been prepared, or even the outer shell of the building completed, but then deserted and overgrown with vines and weeds.

Sometimes there is a large billboard sign at the building site, picturing what the builder had envisioned.

The contrast between his magnificent vision on the billboard, and the dreary reality before me was very striking, and only increases the shame and ridicule that the builder must feel.

Furthermore, the builder is not only left with a useless, half-finished tower, not only ridiculed, but is poorer than when he began, having spent what little he had... left penniless.

How much better for him to have not begun his project!

Yes, Jesus' advice can be strongly endorsed by an industrial engineer.

I first preached a sermon on this scripture passage about 16 years ago in which I said that Jesus, in this parable, is telling us that before committing ourselves to follow him, we must count the cost... know what we're getting into.

As I saw it then, an update of the parable, more relevant to us, who don't build many towers, would be something like this:

If one of you is planning to lose weight, he sits down first and figures out what he will have to give up, and whether he really wants to lose weight badly enough to deprive himself of his favorite foods. If he doesn't, he will soon give in and satisfy his cravings and all who see what happened will make fun of him. "This fellow began a diet, but can't stick to it," they will say.

It may sound harsh, but they will say that

the dieter doesn't really want to lose weight so badly after all-- that all who are overweight really choose to be. That they would rather be miserable with their excess weight than deny themselves.

The overweight person must simply weigh the cost and the benefit, choose his priority, and stick to his decision, they will say.

Likewise, the half-hearted Christian misses out on the joy which Christ offers... but he misses out on many pagan pleasures as well! ... like the half-hearted dieter who's always "sort of" on a diet, enough so that he's missing out on the pleasure of eating, but not enough that he can actually lose weight.

This parable of the tower has some good, "common-sense" advice.

But biblical truths are seldom "common-sense" truths.

They are usually very contrary to what our common sense tells us.

Things like loving our enemies, and not being anxious about tomorrow.

Paul wrote, "For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom..." (I. Cor. 1:25) that is, common sense.

We must beware if our understanding of a biblical teaching seems merely to be human wisdom, "common sense"-- we may be overlooking the divine wisdom which it contains!

Wile as an industrial engineer I find myself in agreement with what seems at first to be the message of this parable, there is also something troubling about it. Is our understanding of this parable

consistent with the rest of Jesus' teaching and with our Christian experience?

Does Jesus tell us not to risk failure? Would he advise us to do nothing, if we don't think we can build better than an average tower?

I used the analogy of the dieter, because I've had a weight problem myself. I weight 25 pounds more than when first married, and as a teenager, I was 2 inches shorter but about 15 pounds heavier than I am today.

As a teen, I felt trapped by my weight problem. I didn't need to hear "Eat and you'll gain, deny yourself and you'll lose weight". What I needed was not to hear "law", but a word of "grace".

To be told to count the cost and lose weight or to quit trying wouldn't have been very helpful to me then. And I now believe that my earlier use of this parable is off-base as well.

I read that after Jesus told his followers these two parables, he said, "In the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up everything he has." (Luke 14:33)

I am bothered if we understand this as advice to be too coldly calculating of the costs, to take the attitude of "What's in it for me?"

Certainly we cannot be advised to shop around for a god which can offer us the most, to maximize benefits while minimizing the costs!

Let me use another example. I am a teacher as well as an industrial engineer.

I agree that a student should be aware

of the demands of a course
before he enrolls.

He should not enroll
and later discover
that he has not the prerequisites,
or cannot fulfill the demands on his time.

It is wiser to count the cost
and decide not to enroll
rather than to enroll blindly
and then to fail the course.

And yet,
when a student who has enrolled in my course
approaches me,
and he asks me,
"What must I do to pass this course?"
I feel a disappointment in him.

I am pleased with students
who are genuinely interested in the subject,
and are motivated by their interest
and by their love of knowledge
to study willingly,
not begrudgingly.

Likewise,
we must pay the cost
that God demands of us
willingly, not begrudgingly,
whatever that cost may be.

A rich man once came to Jesus,
asking what he must do to gain eternal life...
asking the cost.
And he was told to first give away his
possessions,
so that he might follow Jesus.

He had asked,
and when he learned the cost,
weighed it in his mind,
and sadly turned away.
This incident has been discussed a lot.
Are we also to give all we possess to the poor,
in order to follow Jesus?
... a troubling thought if we have many
possessions!

Inevitably, any discussion of this story
of the rich young man
results in a more "common-sense" conclusion
such as:
"The man was too attached to his possessions.

He was possessed by his possessions.
His problem was in his attitude.
Only if we are also too attached to our
possessions
does this advice apply to us also--
only **then** must we too give up our
possessions."

And you can almost hear everyone breathe a
sigh of relief.
We surely are not so attached as that,
and need not, like the rich young man,
give up our possessions after all!

I am reminded of the novel, **Catch-22**,
which tells the story of an air squadron
during World War Two in Europe.

One of the pilots, named Orr,
is suffering from stress and fatigue
after many combat missions,
and his mind is nearing the breaking point.

His friend approaches the base doctor
to ask that Orr be relieved of his duties.

Let me read a portion of the dialogue which
follows:

Friend: "Can't you ground someone who's
crazy?"

Doctor: "Oh, sure. I have to. There's a rule
saying I have to ground anyone who's
crazy."

F: "Is Orr crazy?"

Dr: "He sure is."

F: "Can you ground him?"

Dr: "I sure can. But first he has to ask me to.
That's part of the rule."

F: "Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

Dr: "Because he's crazy! He has to be crazy
to keep flying combat missions after all the
close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground
Orr. But first he ask to ask me to."

F: "That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

Dr: "That's all. Let him ask me."

F: "And then you can ground him?"

Dr: "No, then I can't ground him."

F: "You mean there's a catch?"

Dr: "Sure, there's a catch. Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat isn't really crazy."

This advice of Jesus to the rich young man is rather like a Catch-22.

We are required to rid ourselves of our possessions only if we are too attached to them.

But if we seize upon this "loophole" in order to keep our possessions, it clearly indicates that we are in fact too attached to them!

What cost are we required to pay?
Are we afraid that something costly may be demanded of us?
Then we are not really prepared to be his disciple.

After the rich young man walked away, Peter says to Jesus, uneasily, I suspect, "Lord, we have left all we had to follow you..." (Luke 18:28)

We, like Peter, easily recall all we have given up for Him. And we get anxious and start worrying about what else is going to be asked of us.

And since the things we have done for Christ, or what we are threatened with having to do, are in general viewed as gloomy and difficult, Christianity is for us something gloomy and difficult.

And because we don't want to have any more to do than we have done already, we don't want to know any more of Christianity than we know already, which is, as far as we're concerned, quite enough, thank you.

But Christianity does not lie in the gloomy, insignificant things we do for Christ. That is natural religion.

Christianity is *super* natural. It speaks to us of the wonderful things, the incredible works that God, in generosity and love, has done for us.

We can never have enough of such a religion. We can never tire of learning about it and of meditating on it. True Christianity is a religion of joy and wonder and never-ending thanksgiving for all that God does for us.

Paul was able to write, "For His sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ." (Phillipians 3:8)

Having experienced Christ, he has learned that what he earlier valued is, in reality, mere "garbage".

And, on the other hand, he wrote: "Whoever does not have the spirit cannot receive the gifts that come from God's spirit. Such a person really does not understand them; they are nonsense to him, because their value can be judged only on a spiritual basis. Whoever has the spirit, however, is able to judge the value of everything." (I Corinthians 2:14,15)

On what basis, then, can we count the true costs (and benefits) of following Christ until we have already become His disciples?

After we have fellowship with Christ, and have become his disciples, our values are turned upside-down. What we once valued, we will see as garbage fit only to be thrown away. And we will realize the value of God's gifts, which we once could not understand and saw as nonsense.

And yet this parable about the tower seems to imply that we are to count the cost **before** we are given this new perspective! This seems to me to be a paradox.

It is surely "common sense" for the builder to count the cost of building his tower. But if the Christian, by analogy, is the builder, let us carry the analogy further.

Suppose that the builder lives in a kingdom whose last remaining days are few, and with it, its currency, because a new kingdom is about to overthrow it, to replace it. Knowing that his money is soon to be worthless changes the situation entirely. It "throws off" all of his previous calculations.

I don't mean to imply that the costs to be considered consist only of our possessions.

In the final analysis, the cost of following Christ is our lives. And we can't avoid paying that cost, whether or not we follow Christ-- the only question is how we spend it. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, "Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand." (Ecclesiastes 5:15)

It is as though we are given our portion of life in our outstretched hands, and life is like fine sand, trickling through our fingers. The harder we try to hold on to it, the more it trickles out. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25) Eventually, despite all our best efforts, the last grains trickle out.

When we count the cost, we mustn't fool ourselves into thinking that we have the option

to somehow ultimately avoid paying the cost. We cannot avoid the payment of this cost. We can only choose to what or to whom we pay it. We cannot hold on to it... we can save it only by laying it down.

I have still another problem with my original interpretation of the parable of the tower: Notice that the builder in the parable doesn't worry about **whether** he wants to spend his money on the tower-- the question is, rather, whether he **has** the resources!

We, on the other hand, cannot very well count the cost of following Jesus, because we cannot assess what cost we are able to pay-- nor in many cases, what cost we will be required to pay.

It is not a matter of deciding how much willpower we have. It is not like deciding that we have enough willpower to give up smoking, or to go on a diet to lose that extra weight that we've accumulated during the holiday season.

For we must not merely depend upon our own strength, but upon the grace of God, which enables us to pay the cost of discipleship. Left on our own, we will surely fail, but God provides us with the resources we lack.

Unlike the builder in the parable, the question for us is not whether we have the resources to be a disciple.

If Christ lives in us, so that our will is made to conform to his, then we need not strain to bend our will, to exert our willpower.

You may not believe this, but I took a seminary course in preaching once.

We were taught that our sermons were to have an introduction, three main points, and a conclusion.

Dr. Buttrick, my teacher, would have been merciless in grading this one. I'm sure it's not clear what my main points are, let alone whether there are three. So let me try to summarize here what I've tried to say:

The parable of the builder of the tower, like all of the parables which Jesus told, contains an element of "common sense".

But I have problems with the obvious interpretation which sees it as a warning to take seriously the cost of following Christ before we make a commitment.

1. The warning doesn't include a "word of grace" for those of us who are "slaves of sin", feeling trapped in our circumstances.
2. It is encouraging us to be cost-conscious, focusing on what we do, rather than focusing on God's gifts to us.
3. It ignores the fact that our value system before experiencing God's Spirit will be completely reversed after experiencing His Spirit in our lives.
4. We can't really avoid paying the cost which is, ultimately, our life.
5. For the builder in the parable, it is not a question of being **willing** to pay the cost, but of being **able**.

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What purpose then did Jesus have in telling this parable and the one which follows? In verse 33, he says, "Likewise..." (KJV), or "In the same way...." (NIV)

"any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."

But the RSV translates the phrase, not "Likewise...", but "Therefore...". And I think that this one word made a big difference in the interpretation of the parables.

I believe now that Jesus is saying here that it is He who is counting the costs, instead of advising us to count the costs.

At the time he tells these parables, Jesus has been teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God for perhaps two years.

His message has created many enemies for him-- not only among the Pharisees and religious leaders, but political enemies as well.

Herod has already jailed and later beheaded John the Baptist. Now he has heard reports about Jesus, and "wants to talk with him", according to Luke 9:9.

(We may safely assume, I think, that Herod did not have in mind a friendly chat about theology over a cup of coffee! Interrogation in a police state is an entirely different kind of encounter!)

The situation in Galilee, which Herod rules, becomes so dangerous for Jesus that he leaves, going north to Lebanon.

Now, up to this point of his ministry, according to Luke, Jesus has not revealed his identity as Son of God, or Messiah.

It is my own belief that, without denying the divine nature of Jesus, as a man he had human limitations.

I believe that during his ministry,

during the many hours spent in prayer,
his own understanding of his identity,
the significance of his ministry,
and his future death and resurrection
were formed and developed.

This understanding began
at the time of his baptism,
and the form that his ministry would take
was revealed to him
during his period of temptation in the
wilderness.

His understanding of himself and his ministry
continued to develop,
and there, in Lebanon, became very clear to
him.

He retreated into Lebanon, hiding from
Herod...
concerned not so much with the threat to
himself,
but with the threat this made to his ministry.

Was his ministry,
in which he had devoted so much time and
effort, his very self,
going to be a failure,
the disciples scattered,
and his vision of the Kingdom of God
never to be,
destroyed by Herod?

He must have agonized over these questions
during his days in Lebanon,
days spent in meditation and prayer.
He must have, at this time,
like the builder in the parable,
"counted the cost" of building the "tower".
Not so much the cost to him, personally,
but whether he had the resources around him
to complete the building...
whether the community he had gathered
would be able to withstand future events.

Because we have already read
how this story ends,
we easily overlook the drama of this moment.
But let us try to imagine ourselves
there in Lebanon with Jesus.

Was his ministry to end in failure after all?
Or, in the image of the second parable,
would his smaller army be able to prevail

over the larger army which was rapidly
approaching...
the "powers and principalities" of this world?

Christ was without sin,
but that is without merit,
unless there was the possibility of sinning.
Likewise, Christ conquered evil,
but that victory is cheapened
if there was not the possibility of failure.

As was the case later in Gethsemane,
Jesus agonized over the situation.
And there, in Lebanon,
is a turning point in his ministry...
There is the mountain-top experience
which we call the Transfiguration.
And for the first time
he is confessed as Messiah by human lips.
Jesus had spent a couple of years
proclaiming God's Kingdom,
but not his own Messiahship.
Peter is not just parroting back
what Jesus had taught him,
when he said, "You are the Messiah..."

Jesus tells Peter that
"...flesh and blood has not revealed this to
you,
but the Spirit of God." (Matthew 16:17)
... the Spirit that had revealed it to Jesus also.

And then Jesus began to teach them
what his Messiahship would bring...
about his future suffering and his resurrection.

Jesus has counted the cost of building the
tower,
and evaluated the resources required
to complete the building of God's Kingdom.
The costs are indeed very high--
"**Therefore,**" he says,
"none of you can be my disciple
unless he gives up everything he has."
(Luke 14:33)

And from this point,
he begins his journey to Jerusalem,
passing secretly through Galilee,
to confront the powers of evil,
prepared to suffer and to die.

Far more importantly
than facing suffering and death, however,
he is going to risk the failure of

his mission in the world.

Warned again about Herod's seeking to find him,

Jesus replies:

"Tell that fox: 'I am driving out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I shall finish my work.' Yet I must be on my way today, tomorrow, and the next day... It is not right for a prophet to be killed anywhere except in Jerusalem."
(Luke 13:31,32)

Once, on his way to Jerusalem, we are told in this chapter of Luke's gospel that large crowds began to follow him. And he turned and told them these two parables, of the builder of the tower and of the king preparing for battle.

He said, in effect,
"What are you following me for?
I am in this world to build.
I am in this world to do battle.
You are no good to me
Unless you are of the right quality.
I do not want followers coming after me for their own sake.
I want those committed to me and to my mission.
It is quality I seek, not quantity...
disciples on whom I can depend."

"**Therefore**, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up everything he has."
(Luke 14:33)

Following Jesus will be costly, but costly in the currency of the old kingdom, which is passing away, which is, after all, mere garbage to be thrown away, as Paul said, not even to be compared with the gifts we receive in exchange as members of God's new Kingdom.

Let's not cling to the currency of the old kingdom, and be left on the outside of His new Kingdom.
Are we hesitating, **counting** the cost?

Or,
can Christ **count** on us to help build His new Kingdom?

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### *Prayer*

Lord, following you appears costly-- frighteningly costly.  
But, we cannot turn away.  
As your first disciples said,  
"Lord, to whom would we go?  
You have the words that give eternal life!"  
As your disciples,  
we want to learn from you.  
Teach us the true worthlessness of what we must give up,  
and the true value of your gifts,  
so that we may pay the costs gladly,  
without counting them or hesitating,  
in order to become members of your Kingdom.

Amen!