

Semicontinuous
Jer. 18:1–11
Ps. 139:1–6, 13–18
Complementary
Deut. 30:15–20
Ps. 1
Phlm. 1–21
Luke 14:25–33

The Cost of Discipleship

Goal for the Session

Heeding Jesus' call to discipleship, adults will evaluate their commitment to following Christ whatever the cost.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Luke 14:25–33

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Rodney S. Sadler Jr.

Jesus demands that a disciple would “carry the cross and follow” him (14:27). As such, this instruction is reminiscent of 9:23, where Jesus instructs would-be followers to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily,” then sets this in the context of losing their lives for his sake. What a harsh word this is for the contemporary Christian community, for we know where Jesus’ way leads. This is a word of obligation to a church obsessed with grace; worse, it is obligation with consequence, for those who refuse the cross are deemed unworthy of discipleship. The message is clear: discipleship costs. In fact, it will cost us everything (see also 12:33–34)!

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Emilie M. Townes

At the heart of discipleship is transformation. The cost of discipleship is not just becoming accumulators of new information about life and living it fully, or changing our behavior in regard to Jesus’ teachings. The cost is engaging in a profoundly radical shift toward the ethics of Jesus with every fiber of our beings. There is no driftwood in discipleship, as we are called to live lives of complete devotion to God. Jesus reminds us in today’s passage from Luke that following him means that we cannot be shallow or uncommitted believers—the adjectives simply do not fit the noun.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Charles E. Raynal

Can the Christian community offer an interpretation of the cost of discipleship for daily life that is plausible and freeing for the people of God today? How would Calvin’s advocacy of freedom from selfishness, commitment to love, honest facing of suffering, and the faithful stewardship of creation and its gifts sound to people inside and outside the churches? The housing and economic crises; the damage to the earth by the burning of fossil fuels; and the hunger, poverty, and pandemics suffered by people in all parts of the world are certainly calling us in the church to give Jesus’ call to costly discipleship a new lease on life.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Ronald P. Byars

It seems important to take Jesus’ exhortation with utter seriousness, recognizing that, for most of us, it poses a problem that needs to be thought through. Certainly it means at least that disciples should travel lightly, not unduly encumbered by acquiring, hoarding, or guarding one’s possessions against the other in her/his need. Certainly it must also mean that, when interests come into conflict, discipleship takes precedence over security.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Luke 14:25–33

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- whiteboard or newsprint
- markers
- pens and paper
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- hymnals or songbooks
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 11, 2022

For Responding

- option 1: pens and paper
- option 2: pens and paper
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2 and Internet-connected device

Jesus sometimes used hyperbole in teaching. He exaggerated to make a point (e.g., “hate” family members). Such exaggeration forces us to face the stark demands of Jesus’ teaching. Commitment to Christ must surpass our love for all others, no matter how dear.

Focus on Your Teaching

For many adults in today’s society, following Jesus may seem to involve few hazards. Adults know that, in some parts of the world, people die for their faith, but those instances may seem remote. Yet some adults in our society are ridiculed—even by family members and friends—for taking their faith seriously. Others keep quiet rather than offend by speaking of their faith in public. Some may never have been challenged to ask, “How deep is my commitment?” Many may welcome the chance to examine ways to renew commitment to our Lord and to consider the implications of costly discipleship.

O Christ, I thank you for your commitment to us shown in the cross. Through your Spirit, deepen my own commitment to you and to your Word. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if you plan to do option 3 in Responding, preview the Web sites on contemporary martyrs (type “Christian martyrs today” into the search field) and choose a Web site that seems most relevant for your purpose.

Welcome participants warmly and introduce visitors.

Form pairs or groups of three and invite people to tell of a time when they felt that someone did not or would not appreciate their witness for Christ. Perhaps that witness was telling about their faith. Perhaps it involved speaking out about an injustice to others. Some may be unable to recall an instance, but others may have had memorable or even painful experiences. After a few minutes, gather as a whole group and have a few volunteers briefly recount their experiences.

Tell participants that today’s session deals with the possible cost of commitment to Christ.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O Lord, give us your Spirit to study, to hear your Word, and to meditate on its meaning for our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

EXPLORING

Invite a volunteer to read Luke 14:25–33 aloud. Briefly discuss people’s initial reactions to the text. Some may wonder that Jesus says that we must hate family members; in that case, refer to the information in the sidebar on hyperbole.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 14:25–33). Have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt. Invite volunteers to read the texts referenced in the excerpt (Luke 9:23; 12:33–34; and 14:27).

Write on a whiteboard or newsprint the heading “Discipleship Requirements.” Begin a list with the points in the readings—hate close relatives, carry the cross, count the cost, give up possessions, give alms, deny yourself.

Form groups of two or three and give each group a marker, pen, and paper. Have them brainstorm other requirements for discipleship found in the New Testament, and have someone write down the ideas. (If any group is stuck for ideas, point them to Luke 6:20–49; 1 Corinthians 5:6–6:20; or Galatians 5:13–26.) After a few minutes, return to the whole group and invite a member of each group to add to the list on the board the points their subgroup has found.

Invite a volunteer to read the “Where?” excerpt. Have the group discuss what might be meant by “a profoundly radical shift toward the ethics of Jesus with every fiber of our beings” and how this might be related to taking up our cross. Ask: Is it possible for anyone to be a “shallow or uncommitted believer”? Be sure that participants understand that our salvation is not earned by our ethical behavior or other good works, but rather that our actions are a response to Christ’s taking up his own cross on our behalf for the forgiveness of sin.

Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt. Invite the group to select one of the crises mentioned in the excerpt—housing and economic crises; damage done by fossil fuels; hunger; poverty; pandemics—and discuss what cost might be involved if they were to commit themselves fully to this issue.

Lead into Responding by having a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt. Ask the group to name instances in which the church or individual Christians have shown willingness to risk their own security in order to do what is right.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Commitment in Daily Life** This activity gives an opportunity for adults to renew their commitment to following Christ whatever the cost.

Provide pens and paper, and ask participants to think of one new way they can show commitment to Christ in daily work, leisure, or prayer. It should be a way that will cost them something in time, effort, or finances. Have each person write a commitment promise to Christ, describing what they intend to do, and a short prayer they might pray about their promise. Encourage them to take the sheet home and use it in daily devotions and to follow through on their promise.

**EASY
PREP**

- 2. Commitment in the Congregation** This activity gives an opportunity for adults to renew their commitment to following Christ through increased involvement in congregational activities.

Have the group brainstorm the costly discipleship activities your congregation is involved in, and explain why they think these opportunities evidence costly commitment. (Members might vary on assessing the cost involved.)

Distribute pens and paper, and invite each participant to plan a way to show commitment through deepening their involvement in one of these activities. Invite them to write down details of the activity—how to contact the person in charge, dates and times of the activity, the role they believe they could take, and so on. Encourage participants to follow through on their commitment.

Saints are examples of faith. In remembering such individuals we can see how God strengthened and sustained them, and so our own faith can be strengthened.

- 3. Commitment to Prayer for Martyrs Today** In this activity adults will renew their commitment to learn about and pray for those who follow Christ in circumstances of persecution, suffering, and death. Have participants read Resource Sheet 2 (Following, Whatever the Cost) silently and then discuss what it would take to make a witness such as that of Perpetua.

Access your chosen Internet site. Have the group discuss the information provided and the value of prayer for those who suffer for the faith. While prayer may be the only thing you can do for them, it is also the most powerful way to sustain Christian brothers and sisters in critical times.

Make plans to pray regularly for those who suffer for their commitment to Christ. You might plan to meet ten minutes early for the next five sessions and to pray for those who are persecuted. Or each person may pledge to pray every day for the next month for those who suffer persecution. Make specific plans to carry out the commitment.

CLOSING

Have a few participants say how the session has affected their commitment to Christ.

If you did not do option 3 in Responding, have a volunteer now read the story on Resource Sheet 2.

Together sing or say “Just as I Am, Without One Plea” or “Here I Am, Lord.” Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O Christ, you gave yourself for us without reservation. We would commit ourselves to you. Use us to pray and to serve you without reserve in our daily work, our congregation, our family, and wherever else we might be. In your name we pray. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 11, 2022, or e-mail it to the participants.

September 4, 2022
The Cost of Discipleship



Adult
Resource Sheet 1

Focus on Luke 14:25–33

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Following, Whatever the Cost

Saints are people to whom we look as examples of faith. Throughout the centuries many such people have shown deep commitment to Jesus that led them to follow Christ despite the terrible cost and suffering they endured.

In the early church, many Christians suffered for their faith. Roman emperors considered themselves divine and demanded that people worship them, usually by sacrificial burning of incense, as a sign of patriotism and loyalty. Various emperors instigated persecutions of Christians who claimed allegiance to the true God and refused to worship the emperor as divine.

Perpetua

In 202 CE Roman Emperor Septimus Severus began a severe persecution of Christians in northern Africa. A catechetical group and their catechist were arrested in Carthage. The members of the group were 22-year-old noblewoman Perpetua, Felicitas and Revocatus (two slaves), Saturninus and Secundulus. Soon the group's catechist, Saturus, joined them in house arrest and baptized each of them. One of the slaves, Felicitas, was eight months pregnant. She was glad when she gave birth prematurely and the baby was adopted by a Christian family. Romans did not execute pregnant women, and Felicitas very much desired to make her public witness along with her friends.

Perpetua had an infant son, whom she nursed in prison for a time before handing him over to her family to care for. Perpetua's pagan father regularly visited her in prison and begged her to renounce her Christian faith so that she would live. But Perpetua remained firm in her commitment to Christ.

On March 7, 203 CE, at the games to honor Caesar Geta, the condemned Christians were scourged, then led to the amphitheater to face wild beasts. They carried their heads high as they marched into the arena to make a final witness for Jesus. Attempts were made to force them to dress as pagan priests and priestesses, but Perpetua resisted and was allowed to retain her tunic.

Perpetua entered the arena singing a psalm. After being tossed by a wild heifer, she rearranged her tunic and pinned up her hair so that she would look her best in this triumphant hour of witness to her Lord. Having survived the heifer attacks, Perpetua and Felicitas walked hand in hand to the spot where swordsmen waited to end their lives. The young novice gladiator assigned to Perpetua was trembling, but Perpetua guided to her throat his hand that held the sword.

