

WEIGHING THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

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Luke 14:25-33

In my personal opinion, one of the most interesting structures that can be found in all of Middle Tennessee is the Parthenon in Nashville. Now, the Parthenon is a replica of the great Parthenon, which is found in Athens, Greece, and as replicas go, the one here in Nashville is probably the best of all the lot.

Now, the original Parthenon in Athens was built 2,500 years ago. It was built as a temple to the goddess Athena and was placed on a hill which overlooked the city, a hill called the Acropolis. I have climbed that hill and have seen that Parthenon. I was there two years ago with my family, and I can say that in Middle Tennessee, we've got the better Parthenon. First of all, you don't have to climb a hill to see it, and second, it's not broken like theirs is.

The Parthenon in Nashville was built in 1897 as part of the celebration of the Tennessee Centennial—100 years of statehood. If you know your Tennessee history, then you know that 1897 is the wrong year. The celebration was supposed to have been the year before, but was held back a year due to lack of funding and construction delays. But anyway, they pulled it together the next year and had a six-month exhibition in the area now known as Centennial Park in Nashville. And at the center was this Parthenon which they built to recognize Nashville as the Athens of the South.

Just as a side note, Memphis also had an entry in the Centennial. They built a huge pyramid next to the Parthenon. And these structures were outlined with electric lights at night, and it was spectacular.

The Centennial celebration went on for six months, and it went extremely well. They even made a profit. And when it came time for it to be over, they tore down all the buildings except for the Parthenon because people of Tennessee had fallen in love with this building. However, it was only a temporary structure and was never meant to last. So by 1920, it was in great disrepair. They essentially rebuilt it with more durable materials like concrete. And so here it is 100 years later and is doing quite well.

Now, this Parthenon is not the only replica of the great Parthenon that exists. They can be found in numerous places. Most notably would be the Lincoln Memorial in Washington—not an exact replica, but you can see the design influences from the original. In Philadelphia, there is a bank which greatly resembles the Parthenon. And I'm going to take a moment and go down a rabbit hole. This really has nothing to do with the sermon itself, but it's very interesting.

That bank in Philadelphia was designed by the architect William Strickland, who has a connection to Tennessee because he designed what the Tennessee State Capitol. This is not all he designed. He also designed the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, which is now Downtown Presbyterian, with the wonderful Egyptian Revival architecture. But coming a little closer to home, what else did he design? In Wilson County? The courthouse—the old Wilson County Courthouse in Lebanon which sadly burned in 1881.

But getting back to our sermon, of all the replicas, there's one that is, I say, the most infamous of Parthenon replicas, and that is found in Edinburgh, Scotland. It is called the National Monument of Scotland. I call it infamous because it was never finished. They started building, and of course, ran out of money. Now, the purpose of this monument was to recognize and honor the soldiers who fought and died in the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815—when Britain and the rest of Europe rose up to fight against Napoleon. When the war ended, there was a movement throughout Britain to recognize the soldiers who had died by placing monuments in various cities. And Edinburgh was one of these cities.

Now, the government wasn't going to pay for any of the monuments because they had used up all their money fighting the war and said any monuments had to be built with private funds. The leaders of Edinburgh came up with the idea of building a Parthenon because they wanted to recognize Edinburgh as the Athens of the North. (There's a theme here.) And since the Parthenon in Greece represented the height of Greek culture and philosophy and education and democracy and all those things, they thought it would be fitting to have it there in their city. They came up with a plan to build a Parthenon on Calton Hill, just north of the city, and they projected the cost would be £42,000. Sadly, they only raised £16,000. But they started building anyway hoping that people would give more money. Construction began in 1826 and continued for three years until they completely ran out of funding. People had lost interest in the project.

And so it stands there today. The original Parthenon has 46 columns. The National Monument in Edinburgh has 12. That's as far as they got. And it stands there today on Calton Hill. You can go visit it. And the Scots are great at poking fun at themselves. They call this place “Scotland's Folly” or “Edinburgh's Disgrace,” or my favorite, “The Pride and Poverty of Scotland.”

I tell this story about this monument because it perfectly illustrates one of the parables that we read today in the Gospel of Luke. And that parable is about building buildings and not finishing them because you don't have enough money and then being mocked. Jesus says in this parable, *For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'*

A tower for the people of the day would have been a very familiar structure. There is nothing special about it. It's a tower you would build in the middle of a field or an orchard so that you could keep an eye on your crop during the growing season to make sure there weren't any predators, thieves, or fire. Towers were commonplace. And so if you needed to build a tower, Jesus says, "You know, you're going to sit down and figure out the cost, make sure you have enough money, because you don't want to run out of money partway through the project and have people laugh at you," which is exactly what happened in Scotland.

Jesus tells this parable in the context of discipleship. As we read, he's traveling down the road, and there is a large crowd with him. We don't know how many, dozens, hundreds possibly. Jesus is traveling from village to village, teaching and preaching, and these people are coming along with him. He says to them, *Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.* That must have been distressing because they were following him and believing that they were his disciples. "We're going to follow this guy from town to town and do what he says. And he's now telling us that we've got to hate our families. That's a lot to swallow there."

Jesus goes on to say, *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.* So now we've upped it just from hating your family and friends to execution because although Jesus hadn't been crucified yet, the people would have been very familiar with the imagery of the cross because it was the horrible form of execution used by the Romans. Many of those crucified had people walk by and ridicule them. We see this at Jesus' execution. People mocked him as he died like he were an unfinished tower. Jesus is saying, not only do you have to hate your family—set them aside—you've got to sacrifice your life as well. This passage—this very difficult reading—is about discipleship. It's about the cost of following Jesus.

And that's why Jesus tells these two parables. We, as human beings, like to figure out the cost of things. And so he tells the first story about the tower. "If you want to build a tower, you're going to figure out the cost. You don't want to run out of money halfway through." And the crowds here, they go, "Yeah, that makes sense."

Then he talks about two kings, which is something that people wouldn't necessarily understand intuitively, but they can see what's going on. He tells a story about a king who's at war with another king. The first one, as he prepares for war, sits down and he calculates the cost. "How many soldiers have I got? How many soldiers does he have? I've got 10,000. He's got 20,000. The odds don't look so good, do they? Maybe I shouldn't go to war against this other king because I could lose. And if I lose, I could lose everything. So maybe it's better just to send out a peace delegation to work out some sort of agreement where I might have to give up a little, but I'm not going to lose everything."

Again, like building a tower, we sit down and we figure out the cost. You all do this in every aspect of your life. You figure out the risk and the benefits, but mostly the risk. Jesus concludes this reading saying to the people, *So therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.* Jesus is telling them that they must hate family, risk their lives, and give up everything. This is getting tough.

Why were those people following him in the first place? They saw a lot of upside to following Jesus. First of all, he's been talking about the kingdom and they think, "If I follow this guy, he's going to help me improve my relationship with God and maybe get me into that kingdom." Second, they've heard that Jesus performs miracles and they think, "If I get sick or hurt, he can heal me." Finally, he feeds people as well. He fed 5,000 without blinking an eye. "Wow, get free food along the way." And I'm sure there was some thought about monetary advantages because of Jesus talking about abundance. "If I follow this man then my life is going to be great."

Jesus was offering hope. But the people weren't taking into account the total cost of following Jesus and giving their lives to God. As I said, human beings plan, we budget, we count the cost, we weigh the risk. We don't want to run out before the project is complete. Even in circumstances of love, some people will get a prenuptial agreement, won't they? Because in the event that love doesn't work out, they want to protect themselves. They want to have a contingency plan.

In this reading, Jesus says that if we want to follow him, we've must hate our families. That's strong language, isn't it? But I don't think he's actually saying that we have to hate our family, no matter how toxic some of our family can be. It's not that we hate them. It's that if we give ourselves completely and wholly to God, if we love God with all of our heart and mind and strength, then relatively speaking, the love that we have for those closest to us—the greatest love in our life—compared to love for God, it's going to look like hatred. Comparatively speaking, it's still good, but the love for God is so great that anything else is just less than. So it's not that you hate your family, it's that you love God fully in a way that maybe you can't love people.

Jesus is saying we must love God so much that any other relationship looks like hate. There's no holding back. We have to give ourselves wholly and completely to God. We must give everything. And he ends, as I said, saying, *So therefore none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up and renounce, give up all your possessions.*

There are two words I want to look at that are important here. The first is *give up*, a word which is often translated *renounce*. To give up your possessions is not just getting rid of what you have. It means *renouncing* their importance in your life. "These things that I'm taking out of my life, have no meaning for me anymore."

Jesus is telling the people that to be his disciple, to be a follower, it is necessary to renounce all that holds us in this world. He's not just saying, "You know, give it to Goodwill," but renounce its hold on your life. You must empty yourself completely.

And the second word is *possessions*. We must renounce our possessions. And again, possessions are not just the stuff that we have cluttering our house. It also means one's means of living. Your possessions are the things that define who you are. It's the stuff that keeps you going. If you're a cowboy, you've got to give up your saddle, as your saddle defines you. If you're a violinist, you must give up your violin. If you're a surgeon, you must give up your hands even. You must give up everything that defines you in this life and give yourself to God. To be a follower of Christ is to be always ready to say farewell to any person, position, or possession that compromises your allegiance to God. That is the cost of discipleship, to give up everything, to renounce everything, to empty yourself. You cannot hold back. We can't come here and be complacently cultural Christians and call ourselves disciples of Christ. We must give wholly. We can't write a prenup with God. We can't rely on a safety net or a contingency plan. There's no holding something back here just in case.

You need to come here to be challenged and not just to be comfortable. If your goal is to gather in this place on a Sunday to hang out with your friends and hear your favorite songs, then you're in the wrong place. You're not following Christ. You're just walking along beside Him, hoping that something good will fall off the table. To be a disciple of Christ is to give ourselves fully. As the commandment says, we are *to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind*, and hold nothing back. That is discipleship. Amen.