

Let me first start by saying that Jesus is lucky my kids weren't in the crowd the day he spoke these words on faithful discipleship because if they were, they would have reminded him, "Hate is not a nice word and we don't say 'hate'." Which is true for many reasons and is an idea I think to be generally good practice. Hate carries a lot of baggage. Hate has resulted in much harm throughout history. Hate is a strong word to insist upon. And I think that what makes this passage so challenging is that being told to hate doesn't line up with a lot of what we've come to know and believe about Jesus.

I mean, how do we reconcile these words with other things Jesus has said? Things like, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Or even more, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The fact is, that when something like this text doesn't match up with what's consistently presented in the Gospels, we should stop for a moment and wonder what this is really all about. And it seems pretty clear that Jesus isn't actually wanting us to hate our family or hate our very lives. At least not in the sense that we understand hatred. No, it seems that Jesus has something else in mind – something he's trying to impress upon the crowd about following him, what it means to take up this journey of being his disciple.

Back in 1937, as the National Socialist Workers Party was rising in both power and prominence in Germany, Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt compelled to write down his own thoughts on what it means to be a follower of Christ. You see, it was clear to Bonhoeffer that the religion known as Christianity was being co-opted in name only by the Nazi party, but whose actions and rhetoric were a far cry from the substance and call of faithfully following Jesus the Christ. He titled the book, "Discipleship".

A lot of people are familiar with the work, but perhaps know it better by its English version, *The Cost of Discipleship*. But here's the thing: I think we do a disservice to Bonhoeffer's argument by adding "the cost of" to its title. And I know that maybe it sounds like I'm playing semantics right now, but it changes the tone of his work; it shapes our reading to think of discipleship as strictly a costly thing – something above and beyond, something that comes at extraordinary cost, reserved only for those brave and bold few who are most willing, most committed.

And it's this kind of thinking that leads us to believe that Jesus really is telling us to hate our families, to hate this world, to hate our very lives. Only those most committed could really do that. But is that really what Jesus is asking of us here? Because if that's the case, then we have to acknowledge that the way of Jesus is no different than anything else in our lives. Because everything has a cost. Life itself is costly and the choices we make – from the big to the small, the impactful to the insignificant – it all comes with a cost. You decide not to wear a jacket on a cold, winter day – there's a cost to that. You decide to eat fast food every day – there's a cost. You decide to get married and have a kid (or three) – believe me, there's a cost! How you spend your time, talents, and resources? Cost.

Every decision we make has a cost. And the thing is, the fact that our decisions come with a cost doesn't make them inherently good or bad. It's just important to recognize that discipleship is no different from any other choice we make – it's costly, just as life is costly. But perhaps what we really should be considering is not just the cost of our choices, but the benefit of them. What is the benefit to wearing a coat on a cold, winter day? What is the benefit to having a family? What is the benefit to managing and budgeting our time, talents, and resources? What is the benefit to taking up the cross and following Christ?

Because if discipleship is only viewed from the point of what it costs, then it's just another impossible task for us to add to our long list of things we can't do ourselves. Discipleship and the marks that define it become a checklist – one that we will use and abuse, either to feed our own self-righteousness or to wield as a weapon to the harm of others. If discipleship is only about the cost, then Jesus' words here are an indictment on all of us. They are a criticism of how much we've failed the God who expects so much more from us. If discipleship is only about the cost, then the cross which Christ took up, the cross which he bids us to carry, becomes only about punishment and sacrifice and will power and payment of a debt that we couldn't pay ourselves. It becomes a heavy burden that will inevitably only lead to death – either Christ's or our own.

But what if this isn't a condemning word from Jesus? What if he's not heaping on guilt and shame of not being faithful enough? What if it's not solely about the cost, but about what is to be gained through discipleship? What if it's an invitation to trust that the way of Christ really does lead to fullness and abundance of life? What if even the cross we are called to carry is transformed by this way of Christ, no longer a source of shame and costly, debt-paying sacrifice, but the very image in which our hope is grounded upon? What if it's not about hating things or the people in our lives, but recognizing their limitations – that even for as good as family and friends and life in this world can be, they cannot give us what Christ himself gives us?

It is a lot to love and serve in the way Jesus did. It's a lot to be forgiving and merciful and gracious. It's a lot to give of your time, talents, and resources to meet the needs of others before yourself. It's a lot, no doubt about it. And yet, the way of Jesus is not so heavy as all of this. Because when we love and serve, life thrives. When we are forgiving and merciful and gracious, life gets another chance. When we use our time, talents, and resources to build others up, we are more fully alive together. When we walk in the way of Jesus, we realize that the cost, which once seemed so great, is nothing compared to the freedom we have in Christ. So my friends in Christ, by all means, weigh the cost. Consider what it looks like to follow in the radical way of Jesus. Consider what you might lose. And then, when you have considered all things, when you have seen the path to truly living, then take up your cross and journey into newness and wholeness and abundance of life with Christ.