

# Counting the Cost

Jesus told two short but powerful back-to-back parables regarding discipleship and the need to think carefully about the cost of following Him.

The first parable says:

*“Which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’”*  
(Luke 14:28-30)



The phrasing beginning with “which of you” is a rhetorical question, which expects the response to be “no one.” The unspoken understanding is that no one with any sense would build a building without first estimating the cost and determining whether they had enough money to complete it.



Throughout Scripture we read of various towers. Some seemed to be built for military purposes:

*I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower. (Habakkuk 2:1)*

*For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up ... against every high tower, and against every fortified wall. (Isaiah 2:12-15)*

*You have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. (Psalm 61:3)*

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe. (Proverbs 18:10)*

Sometimes towers were used for agricultural purposes:

*He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. (Isaiah 5:2)*

*He began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country." (Mark 12:1)*



In the context of this parable, Jesus was most likely referring to a tower that would be used for agricultural purposes. The landowner has good intentions. Building a tower will be beneficial to him. In addition to being able to better protect his crops or animals from thieves and predators, he will also gain respect from his neighbors for improving his property. However, if such a man is foolish enough to not estimate the costs and calculate whether he has sufficient resources to complete his tower, he will be seen as foolish and suffer ridicule.

In the culture of that time, being held in honor was very important, while shame was to be avoided at all costs. The consequence of such poor planning would be that everyone who saw the uncompleted building would mock the man by pointing out his failure and foolishness.

When Jesus said that the man who didn't count the cost of constructing his building would be mocked, the inference was that he would lose his prestige, be the town's laughingstock, and be ridiculed. Jesus was challenging those He was calling to follow Him to consider the commitment they were going to make, and what it actually entailed—to weigh up the cost of discipleship, and to make a wise and well-thought-out decision, rather than a commitment they wouldn't be able to keep.





The twin to this parable says:

*Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. (Luke 14:31-32)*

While this second parable makes the same point as the first, the decision of the king risks the lives of ten thousand soldiers, and his own as well, so the stakes are much higher. The man who doesn't count the cost of the tower only faces shame and ridicule, whereas the king faces the possibility of losing his life, the lives of many soldiers, and his kingdom.

Although the risks are greater in the second parable, the same point is made. The king must wisely assess the situation. He has only half the number of troops as his adversary. In order to win, his troops would need to be much more skilled than the soldiers they would face. They would also have to be extraordinarily brave to confidently face an army twice their size. In addition, he'd also need to consider whether it's possible that they could have some other kind of advantage—familiarity with the terrain and weather conditions, better supply lines, a more friendly civilian population, etc.—to compensate for the disparity in numbers. The king must decide whether the conditions exist for his soldiers to win the day, and whether this is a battle worth fighting.

The king would need to sit down first and deliberate before making such a decision. The Greek word translated as deliberate in this version of the Bible is translated in other versions as *consulteth*, *decide*, *take counsel*, and *sit down with his counselors to discuss*. A wise leader would both ponder the matter himself and listen to the counsel of others. If it becomes clear that the risk is too great and the likelihood of defeat is high, then he would be wise to de-escalate the situation while the superior army is still a great distance away. In such a case, the king would send a delegation to the superior army to request terms of peace.

The first parable makes the point that someone considering being a disciple of Jesus should count the cost, to see if they have what it takes to be a disciple. This second parable advises one to consider the chances of success before deciding to make an important decision such as committing to discipleship. These parables both challenge a person who is contemplating discipleship to assess their situation, so that when they make the decision to follow Jesus, they do so having carefully thought it through.



When we read about Jesus calling His first disciples, we are impressed by how they dropped everything and followed Him.

*While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-22)*



While they did immediately follow when He called, this call wasn't necessarily their first encounter with Him. In the Gospel of John we read that Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, met Jesus and spent the day with Him. The next morning he found his brother Peter, and told him "We have found the Messiah." (John 1:38-42) There is no

Indication that Peter or Andrew followed Jesus at that time. In Luke, we read that Jesus was teaching on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret when He noticed two boats close to the shore and the fishermen on the shore cleaning their nets. Jesus got into one of the boats, which belonged to Simon (Peter). When He was finished teaching, He told Simon to go out to where the water was deeper and cast his net. When he did, he caught a large number of fish and



Asked James and John, his partners, to come into their boat and help. It is at this time that we're told that Peter left everything and followed Jesus. (Luke 5:1-11)



Elsewhere in the Gospels, we see examples of how Jesus cautioned those who wanted to follow Him by pointing out the cost of discipleship:

*A scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."*

*Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:19-22)*

Jesus was not seeking for masses to follow Him. He was searching for those who would follow Him, not because of His popularity, feeding the hungry, and doing miracles, but because they deeply believed in who He was. He warned them to face the potential consequences of discipleship, to think about the demands it would make, and to make sure they understood what it required. Then, having considered all the potential challenges, hardships, and sacrifices, He called them to make the informed decision to follow. He wasn't trying to discourage people from choosing discipleship, but He was encouraging them to thoughtfully consider what it means.

Making the choice to follow Jesus is a choice to restructure our lives in conjunction with His teachings. It means changing the way we think, prioritizing what we give our time, energy, and money to. It changes our relationships and how we interact with others, as we are called to

become less self-centered. It's a call to radically reorder our lives, so much so that we are willing to die for Him if need be. It's a lifelong commitment, and one that shouldn't be made lightly. As Jesus illustrated in these parables, anyone making the decision to be a disciple should take a hard look at what it means, assess the potential impact on their life and the lives of their loved ones, recognize the challenges, and then, if they are up for it, wholeheartedly make the decision to follow Him.

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