

Hard Truth on Discipleship

✠ **Count the cost.** (vv.1,7-16)

✠ **Anticipate spectacular gains!** (vv.17-21)

In the name of Jesus, who frees us from sin to be slaves of righteousness, dear fellow redeemed:

Have you ever had to make a decision based on *cost analysis*? Before y'all get droopy eyed, even teenagers make decisions based on *cost analysis*. If you want to buy something, let's say a new video game, you're not going to spend the big bucks on old technology, incompatible with your gaming system, right? Doesn't matter how exciting that game might have been years ago; it's not worth it now.

Likewise, it probably wasn't worth more dollars on my first car for an extra fine exhaust system. A few weeks later changing the oil, I looked up through the floor at the underside of the carpet. That old rust bucket needed new sheet metal screwed to the floor. And it would have been nice to avoid that rock in the mountains that rolled the full length of my premium exhaust system, bent the flywheel and punctured the oil pan. Too much excitement for my young bride and me expecting our first child. And don't ever try to sell a "cancer car" out West. You might have to do some *cost analysis* and "junk it."

As Christians, we need to **Count the cost**. That is our Lord's advice in today's **Hard Truth on Discipleship**. But this is cool because after we **Count the cost, Anticipate spectacular gains!**

✠ **Count the cost.** (vv.1,7-16)

Many Americans consider this short letter of the apostle Paul to be most inadequate, expecting Paul to speak much more strongly against slavery. But all of Scripture points to Christ to free us from the slavery of sin. As one professor said, "Paul is not writing a letter to free slaves, but to free hearts."¹

Some historians estimate more than half of the Roman Empire were slaves who could own property and be educated. Blonde haired, blue eyed Anglos were sold in Roman slave markets. Many were better off than peasants in 16th century Luther's Germany. Certainly not as poor as serfs in Russia or victims of human trafficking in America today. The unborn got to live inside their mother's womb, not suffer the brutality of American abortion to reduce poverty and commit genocide against minorities. The Bible condemns murder and the slave trade. Africans kidnapping Africans to sell to their enemies. Europeans transporting slaves to the Americas. Hiring American Indians to hunt down escaped slaves to return to their masters, or selling their fellow Indians for European slavery back in the old country.²

In order to free hearts, Paul's letter to Philemon features three men who were called to **Count the cost**. One is obviously the writer, Paul the Apostle. In his earlier life Paul had been an up and coming Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, well on his way to becoming rich and famous. But then the crucified and resurrected Lord appeared to Saul and convinced him that Jesus is the true Messiah, long promised to the Jewish people. Because God forgave Saul's violent persecution of Christians, because Jesus mercifully made him missionary to the Gentiles, Paul counted everything a loss compared to knowing Jesus Christ as his Savior from the slavery of sin. So here we find Paul "*a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*" Paul is in chains.

In a sense Paul was the opposite of the slave Onesimus. Paul gave up everything including his freedom for the sake of spreading the gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ the Savior of all. But Onesimus had run away from his responsibilities in order to gain his freedom. It seems he stole from his

¹ David Valleskey, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," introduction to SSQ-X, MLC, New Ulm, MN, 7/07/2008.

² Mann, Charles. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*. First published in 2005.

master Philemon in order to finance his trip. Somehow Onesimus the slave ended up in Rome talking to Paul the Apostle who introduced him to Jesus Christ as the Savior of slaves too. See why a Lutheran congregation in South Carolina before the Civil War invited African slaves to worship with them? See why early pictures of the Missouri Synod in Saint Louis have dark faces among the other students in their Lutheran schools? They counted the cost for the sake of African brothers and sisters. Many Christians saw everyone created equal, like John & Abigail Adams who accepted the gift of a slave, then promptly set him free. They were convinced that not a single soul should ever miss out on God's grace in freedom.

Finally there's the master. Philemon had the legal right to execute his slave Onesimus for running away and stealing from him. But Philemon had also come to faith in Jesus Christ through the witness of Paul. In fact, later history tells us that Philemon became the Bishop of Colosse and was finally martyred under the same Roman emperor Nero who executed Paul and Peter on the same day. You see, Philemon had already begun to **Count the cost** for Christ. Life on earth was not worth as much as Jesus.

This is **Hard Truth on Discipleship**: Jesus wants all of us to **Count the cost**. What is Jesus worth to you? More than your job? More than your marriage? More than your family? Jesus will not share first place in your heart with anyone or anything. So he asks seriously, *"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Mark 8:36) Can you see it? **Count the cost** for Christ and then be thrilled to...

✠ **Anticipate spectacular gains!** (vv.17-21)

Cost analysis reveals a far greater wonder, an awesome blessing, to **Anticipate spectacular gains!** As a pastor / professor Luther put it, "When you read this book, you realize what Paul does for Onesimus here, Christ does for us before God the Father. We are all Onesimi, if we believe."³ The Holy Spirit reminds us that Christ Jesus took our place under God's holy law to suffer our death penalty for running away from God to become slaves to sin. Christ's innocent sacrifice purchased our freedom. So Paul can *send back* the runaway slave Onesimus and appeal to his master Philemon to show Christian love toward him. Take him back better than a slave, but as a brother whose sins are also forgiven. Jesus appeals to God the Father to take you and me back into His good graces – all penalties paid. How do you put a pricetag on peace with God, healing from anxiety, freedom for your soul from guilt and fear?

Paul's last words to Philemon are truly amazing. *"So if you consider me your partner, welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me. And if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, have written this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention that you owe me your very self. Yes, brother, I am asking for a favor from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."*

Such gracious, tactful, kindness to a fellow Christ to do the right thing! Can you **Anticipate spectacular gains**? Sometimes it takes a little persuading to get your heart to stop fluttering in fear, stop fretting. So this is how the psalmist preaches to himself in many of the ancient hymns as he calms his heart in the LORD's presence: *"Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you....I am your servant...you have freed me from my chains."* (Psalm 116:7,16 NIV84) Likewise, the hymn writer sings to himself: "Be still, my soul, the Lord is on your side." (CWH 847)

Dear Christian, know that through the grace of Christ your sins are forgiven – blotted out, deprived of condemning power. You have received your freedom by faith with a new heart that hates sin. We all feel the presence of evil thoughts and lusts, yet the dear Holy Spirit keeps reminding us of our baptism – *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. You can tell your old self, "Even though I might get away with this, I want to obey God and honor Jesus my Lord, for I am baptized into Christ. Now as a Christian, I am dead to sin, not under its power."⁴ Free in Jesus! Amen.

³ Quoted by David Valleskey, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," introduction to Seminary Summer Quarter Extension, MLC, 2008.

⁴ Luther's Postil." Lenker, ed. SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, Romans 6:19-23. Baker, 1988, Vol. VIII, p. 160. For *The Preacher's Apprentice (TPA)* sermon study or copies: m.cordes@comast.net . New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.newlifeshoreview.com . 180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126