

## 5. The Parables of the Tower Builder and the King Who Would Go to War

(Luke 14: 28-33)

Our journey through the parables is revealing the deeper meaning behind the simple stories Jesus uses to teach us about the Kingdom of heaven, the merciful nature of God, and the way that Christ's followers should behave. We have seen many parables about banquets, and in particular we read a parable in which a man is throwing a wedding feast for his son, and the people he invites have excuses why they cannot come, so he sends his servants out into "the highways and hedges" to find people to invite. We remember that this is another vision of the Kingdom of heaven as being like a wedding feast, and God is like the host who invites us to share in this bounty. With that parable, Jesus shows us that the Kingdom is not open only to the chosen people of God, but welcomes everyone. His servants will go out into all the world, and find absolutely everyone they can to bring to the banquet of heaven. The Kingdom welcomes all the gentiles, all the peoples of the world.

Just after that parable, we read:

"Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

(Luke 14: 25-27)

We have just heard how the banquet feast of heaven is open to everyone, and it seems that everyone is coming! The great multitudes are listening to Christ. They want to follow Him, and to live with Him eternally in heaven.

Now that so many people are coming along with Him, Jesus has a warning for them. They may think that being a Christian just means hearing Jesus and believing what He says. But actually, it's not so easy to be His disciple. Jesus teaches two specific hard things about following Him: first, you must hate your family and your own life, and second, you must bear your cross.

You must hate your family? Does that sound wrong to you? In the Ten Commandments we learned that we should honor our father and mother! Now Jesus says to hate them? Is it really possible that Jesus wants us to hate our father and mother, our wives and our children and our brothers and sisters and even ourselves? Jesus also teaches us to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves! How are we supposed to love our neighbors and ourselves, but also hate our families and ourselves? Those are harsh words, and at first, Jesus seems to be giving us a very confusing message!

Of course, Jesus is not actually saying that we should literally hate anyone. He really does want us to have soft, loving hearts, and to love all of the people around us. He wants us to be merciful like God is merciful. Jesus is saying that our connection to God, our love for God, has to be stronger than our love for anything else, even for our families and for our own lives. Our love for God must be different and more important than any other kind of love. If we ever choose between pleasing our loved ones and serving Christ, we must choose to serve Christ. We must be ready to walk away from anyone who prevents us from serving God, even if they are our parents or family. It's not that we cannot love our families, but that we should not love them more than we love God. We love God first, and then we love our families.

Why does it matter who you love first? You should be able to love both God and your parents without any sort of problem, but if you think about some of the Saints' stories, you'll remember that some of them have pagan parents who hate Christians! Remember how St. Barbara's father hated that his daughter became Christian, so he attacked her? Barbara chose God, instead of doing what her father wanted her to do. Even if your parents are Christian, maybe someday they will think that you go to church too much, or maybe you will want to be a monastic or a priest, and they won't like the idea. It is good to love our parents and to listen to them, but it's possible that God may have a calling for us that is different from what our parents planned for us. Jesus is telling us to think first of our relationship with God, and then to think of everyone else second.

He also says that we must bear, or carry, crosses. Again, He doesn't mean this literally; He won't create an army of disciples who walk around carrying big wooden crosses on their backs. Jesus will carry His cross up the hill to Golgotha when He is crucified, but He doesn't carry it every day. The cross is a metaphor for pain and struggling and even death. Bearing your cross means carrying some kind of burden. Being a follower of Christ will cause you to struggle in some way. Some Christians are persecuted for the faith, and that is surely a cross. But even those of us who are free to worship as we like will find suffering in the Christian life: whether it is ascetic suffering like fasting during Great Lent; or suffering prayerfully through a serious physical illness or while grieving a terrible loss; or perhaps giving up some of our possessions to take care of others. There will be struggles, and when we accept those struggles and pray about them, we allow God to transform our hearts. Developing a soft and loving heart is not easy. Sometimes it means that your heart will hurt a little, but it will be worth it!

Jesus is telling His new followers that the Christian life is not easy. We must choose God before we choose anyone else, even our parents or our brothers and sisters, and we must be ready to struggle and suffer as God helps our hearts grow ever more humble and compassionate. It's not as simple as just listening to Jesus' teachings and liking them. Being a true Christian involves hard work and absolute commitment.

To illustrate the difficulty of becoming His follower, Jesus offers two very short parables. The first one is called *The Parable of the Tower Builder*:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it — lest, after he has laid the 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)

When we set out to live a Christian life, we are like tower builders. We are planning to do something big and complicated, so we have to gather everything together and make sure we have what we need. Do we have all the stones we'll need? Do we have money to pay our workers? Have we made a good plan, and are we really able to do it? We don't want to start building a tower and then find that we didn't have enough to finish it! Half a tower is no good. If we can't build the whole thing, then we've wasted the stones and the labor we used for that first half, and people will see that we didn't do a good job of planning ahead. In our spiritual lives, we have what it takes to begin, to start following Jesus around and listening to His teachings -- but are we ready to do what it takes to finish the job? A Christian must be ready to give up everything for Christ. If we cannot pledge all of our hearts to God, then there is no point in beginning, because we won't be able to finish.

The second parable about sacrificing everything in order to live a true Christian life is called *The Parable of the King Who Would Go to War*:

Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

(Luke 14: 31-33)

If a king is leading his soldiers to war, he is putting their lives on the line. He has to be really ready to fight that war and win it. If he knows he cannot finish the fight, that he cannot possibly win, he should not take his soldiers to war and let them all die! Losing a war is a really bad thing -- there is a loss of life, and also the country may lose land or even get taken over completely. So the king should think ahead like the tower builder does: do we have everything we need to win this war? Can our soldiers beat their soldiers? If they cannot win, then instead they can send someone to negotiate peace. A good king only goes to war if he is committed to winning that war. In our spiritual lives, we have to be prepared to persevere, to be tenacious like the widow facing the unjust judge. As we begin our Christian lives, we have to be ready to give everything that we have, and we have to be ready to hang on and fight! It's hard to live a truly Christian life, so we must be ready in advance to give it our all.

What sorts of things are we asked to give up as Christians? Archbishop Dmitri of blessed memory explains it this way:

The degree and manner of sacrifice may vary from person to person, but we may say that there are two or three questions that must be answered honestly by everyone who regards himself as a Christian or desires to be one: Am I willing, first of all, to give up whatever I discover, in an honest examination of conscience, that is more important to me than my relation to God Himself? Am I willing, at least to begin with, to give up my abundance, above all of possessions, or do I love them so much that I am unwilling to share them with others who may really need them? Am I willing to give up my position or standing in my community or in society, if my confessing Christ would jeopardize it?

(Archbishop Dmitri, *The Parables*)

As we set out on the Christian life, we have to really search our hearts to see if there is something that we love more than God. Is there something that is very hard to give up? It could be stuff that we love, or money, or maybe we don't want to lose friends by declaring that we are Christians? It could be something different for everyone.

For us to truly love God, we must love Him more than anything else -- and we must be ready to give up everything else. But in exchange, we gain eternal life with Him!

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## QUESTIONS:

Does Jesus really mean for us to hate our father and mother and sisters and brothers? If not, what does He mean when He says that?

- *When He says this, Jesus is telling us that our love for God has to be stronger than our love for anything or anyone else. So we need to love God more than we love even our families or our own life. He wants us to know that being a true Christian involves hard work and absolute commitment.*

What does the parable of the tower builder teach us?

- *It shows us that we need to pay attention in our spiritual lives, to make sure that we are ready to do everything it takes to build a strong spiritual life, not just halfheartedly start and then run out of energy or commitment. We must be ready to give up everything for Christ.*

Archbishop Dmitri (of blessed memory) talks about some of the things that these parables help us to think about, that Christians need to give up. Can you remember any of his three questions? If so, which is the easiest for you to answer?

- *Archbishop Dmitri asked us to think about three things: 1) if we are willing to give up anything that is more important to us than our relationship with God. 2) if we are willing to give up our abundance (especially of our stuff), or if we love our things so much that we don't share them with those who really need them. 3) if we are willing to give up what we are known for in our community or in society, if it gets in the way of our faith? All three of these are very important.*

## **FOR DISCUSSION:**

*In the Orthodox Church, we know about giving things up for the Faith, don't we? We fast! Every week we fast for two days, giving up some of our favorite foods to help our body and soul to focus on following Christ. Besides food, is there anything else that you have sacrificed or given up so that you can follow Christ and/or successfully battle earthly things that want you to stop following Him? Talk about that together. How did/does it feel to give those things up? What happened/happens when you choose to follow Christ instead of just doing whatever you want?*