



Today we begin a new series of messages, titled *The Road to Jerusalem*. The series will take us to Easter, and in this series we will study some of the events that took place as Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem, as well as some of the people he encountered along the way.

We begin with a passage that sets the tone for what follows in Luke's gospel. Jesus is about to begin his trip to Jerusalem, for the final days of his earthly ministry. To an outside observer, it would have appeared that things were going very well. As Luke says in verse 25, there were large crowds who were traveling with Jesus. Now, honestly, who doesn't want to draw a large crowd? There isn't a church in existence or a minister on the face of the planet who wouldn't love to have that description attached to them – *large crowds were following*. We are in the midst of March Madness, where large crowds are the norm. Imagine what March Madness would be without a crowd! Imagine the Yum Center or Rupp Arena with only a few hundred people! A crowd offers excitement and possibility.

One of the tricky aspects of a crowd, however, is that once you have a crowd, you don't want to say or do anything that jeopardizes the ability to continue drawing that crowd. When you have a handful of people, not much is at stake. But with a crowd, you suddenly have more to lose. For churches, the temptation that comes with a crowd is to become very cautious, taking care not to lose anyone. And yet, in a very interesting move, this is exactly what Jesus does not do. With large crowds following him, Jesus offers words that jeopardize his ability to continue drawing crowds.

Follow along as I read our Scripture text, which comes from Luke 14:25-35 –

**25** *Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:*

**26** *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

**27** *And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

**28** *“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?*

**29** *For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you,*

**30** *saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.’*

**31** *“Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?*

**32** *If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.*

**33** *In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.*

34 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”

35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Do we have any “fine print” readers here this morning? We’ve all received mailings that promise great deals, especially at Christmas, where a flyer might advertise a computer or large screen TV for an outrageously low price, but in the fine print it will say *only one per store*, or *includes no monitor, hard drive, software or anything you actually need to make a computer work*. I especially like the car commercials, advertising a car for \$99 a month and no money down. But the announcer at the end goes through the disclaimers so fast that you can’t hear them say, *offer applies only to people who are filthy rich and make a down payment of \$30,000*. Have you ever read the fine print in a privacy policy? You haven’t, have you? When you set up your accounts online you just click *accept* without actually reading all that legal-ese language, and when they come in the mail you probably toss them straight into the trash.

Our Scripture passage for this morning is one we might call the *fine print* of the gospel. It’s very easy to focus on the Scriptural passages of comfort, encouragement, and beauty. This is not one of those passages. It is a tough and difficult passage, reminding us that life – and faith – can be very difficult. Jesus was never one to underestimate either the difficulty of life or the difficulty of faith. At this point in his ministry Jesus, as he was drawing large crowds, had come to a point where he wanted people to understand that there is an element of faith that is very challenging. In these verses he is careful to present the plain truth to his followers. Truth is not always easy to hear, but we can be grateful that Jesus did not “sugar coat” the facts about life and faith.

Jesus, in revealing the *fine print* of the gospel, helps us to understand how to build the kind of faith and the kind of love that will stand the test of time and the test of any challenge. So how do we build that kind of love?

#### *By Building a Strong Foundation.*

When I was young, in front of our house, on our small farm, was a field extending a couple hundred yards to the road. About half the length of that field, just on the other side of the property line, nestled into a small grove of trees, was the foundation of a never-completed house. As kids, we liked to play around that foundation, which had the block walls in place and the openings for doors and windows. It was a great fort for our pretend adventures. It became a fort, a castle, and all manner of other adventure-related locations for the imaginative minds of a group of young boys. The foundation, obviously, had been there a long time, as there were trees growing in the middle of it and also out of the mounds of dirt that had long ago been piled up in order to level the ground. Many times over the years I wondered about that foundation. Why was it never completed? Did they run out of money? Did they move? No one in our neighborhood that I asked seemed to have any idea. It was a visible reminder of the words of Jesus, that anyone building a tower must first calculate the cost so they can determine whether or not they have the finances to complete the project.

Building a foundation of love is a lot like building a house. You have to have a good foundation if it is going to last across the years. Building that foundation takes work, it takes sweat and effort. It is much more than just memorizing a few rules and regulations that allow a person to give a “correct” theological answer. If you can’t build an adequate foundation, it is impossible to build a strong building.

I believe there should be disclaimers on some things, such as a marriage certificate, saying sometimes things will be difficult. There should be a disclaimer on faith and upon love as well. Perhaps that is what Jesus does in this passage – he is providing a disclaimer. There is no *bait and switch* with Jesus. He is saying it will be difficult to follow him. He certainly could have added that it can be dangerous to be his follower as well. Reading through the book of Acts we certainly see the danger that

befell the apostles. Every one of the twelve, with the exception of John, was martyred for their faith. Reading through the book of Acts things become dangerous for the church in general. We read of the apostles being imprisoned, and of the first Christian martyr of record, Stephen. As we progress through the book of Acts we read of the looming trial of Paul, in Rome, where he was eventually martyred for his faith. The early centuries of the church is filled with periods of persecution of the followers of Jesus. It continues today. In parts of our world it remains very dangerous to be a follower of Jesus, and some estimate that more people have already been martyred for their faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than at any other period in the history of the church. China, where the church is booming, is cracking down in increasingly harsh ways as a way to inhibit the growth of the church. The government of China – officially atheistic – has tried to stop the church but is unable to do so. In about twenty years China will have more Christians than any other country, in spite of persecution. In the Middle East, where our faith was birthed, there is great persecution, and many believers have found it necessary to flee their homes in order to survive. The followers of Jesus in such areas of the world are well aware of the dangers of being a follower of Jesus. We are blessed – so blessed – that we are not persecuted for our faith. I know that some people say Christians are persecuted in our country but we have no idea what persecution really looks like, certainly when compared to the parts of our world where being a follower of Jesus can put one at risk of death.

Jesus wanted people to carefully consider the implications of faith and love to their lives, and what it meant to follow him. What would they do when they discovered it might bring difficulty upon them? What would they do when they discovered he was not interested in becoming a political messiah? What would they do when they discovered they would not receive everything they wanted and their lives are not magically made simpler and easier?

### *Be Remaining Faithful, Always.*

My MacBook is now eight or nine years old. A while back I went into the Apple store to ask a question about fixing a problem and the young man helping me referred to it as “vintage.” Vintage? At the time it was six or seven years old, so I asked the young man, *what does that make me? Ancient?*

There is a reality that companies don’t want us to know, and that is that their products are not made to last very long. Are you familiar with the concept of *planned obsolescence*? *Planned obsolescence* is the idea that manufacturers “plan” for their products to last for a shorter period of time so they can sell more products. Imagine a car that lasts fifty years, an appliance that lasts sixty years, and clothing that not only lasted, but stayed in style, for several generations. If products last a long time, sales decline. When Tanya and I married, her parents gave us a washer and dryer set that lasted twenty-five years. I had replaced a few heating elements in the dryer and both were still in good working order, but over the years the hard water had eaten away at the bottom of the washer, necessitating replacement. Guess how long the next set lasted? Only a few years! We are now on our third set, and we hope they will last longer.

We live in an era of disposability and impermanence, and in a disposable, impermanent society, everything is in danger of becoming merely temporary and disposable. The question that lurks behind this passage, does anything last? And, sadly, we learn by experience that not everything does last, and I’m not talking about products, but much deeper and more important things, such as relationships. Even love, sadly, can become temporary. Not every relationship survives. Not every friendship survives. Not every marriage survives.

What lasts? Jesus talks about building a love that lasts, and moving beyond the temporariness of so much of life. There are, certainly, a lot of fads that capture our imagination, and these influence our attitudes just the same as so many of the other temporary and impermanent things of life. Remember the WWJD bracelets from not too many years ago? *What Would Jesus Do?* It was quite a big fad. Well, for starters, he probably wouldn’t get caught up in a fad.

At one point in time, as I spoke with couples before their weddings, I noticed a change in the thinking of some of them. It became increasingly common to hear them speak of their commitment in language that was temporary, not permanent. It was expressed in phrases such as *we'll be together as long as we can make this work* and *we'll love one another as long as we are happy*. Now, I know things happen and marriages end; I'm not condemning anyone for a marriage that comes to an end. I am saying, however, that entering into a marriage with an attitude that has an uncertain sense of commitment is not a healthy way to enter into marriage.

*By Embracing the Challenge of Love.*

In this passage, Jesus is not telling us we need to hate our families, although we all have our moments, don't we? Those first verses can be a bit of a jolt, because the language sounds so strong – *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple* – that they are sometimes misunderstood. The language Jesus uses in those verses is his way of framing the deepest kind of love we can imagine. It is the deepest, greatest love of all – the love we call *agape*, which is the divine love of God. This is the love to which we aspire, and compared to the often stumbling, limited human love, the love of God, by way of comparison, makes all other loves seem very slight indeed. It is a divine love that lifts us above the pettiness, the conflicts, and the struggles of life. It is a love that allows us to love the unlovable and forgive the unforgiveable. It is the love that enables someone to sacrifice for another – even to the point of laying down their life, as did Jesus. It is extremely challenging, yes, but this is the love to which we are called.

Don't ever underestimate the reality of hatred and evil in this world. We hear of it every day and sometimes we experience it. Hatred and evil has, and always will, push back against love, especially God's love. It is not always easy to be a follower of Jesus, and in some parts of our world, it is difficult and very dangerous. We must pray for our brothers and sisters who live in such difficult circumstances, and we must be certain and build a foundation for our faith that will see us through until the end.

How do we build a love that lasts? We build a love that lasts by seeking to do what we have always sought to do – to be like Jesus; to live like him and to love like him. To be like Jesus is to hold on to love regardless of what might come our way or happen to us. So let's do it – let's build a love that lasts!