Counting the cost. Looking before you leap. Whatever you want to call it, Jesus illustrates it with two pictures that are easy to understand: a man about to build a tower and a king about to go to war. In both cases, the man would do well to sit down and consider what the cost will be before making the decision to build the tower or go to war.

The illustration of the tower might make us think of some people very early on in the Bible who didn’t stop to consider the cost. Some time after the Flood, a group of people decided that they wanted to build a tower, but they did not sit down and estimate the cost.

Now I am not saying that they failed to consider whether they had enough materials necessary. They may have very well counted that cost. But the cost they failed to take into account was the cost of going against an express command of God. After the Flood, God had commanded the people to spread out and fill the earth. But by building this tower, they were stating their plan to go against that command of God and to all live in the same area.

God did allow them to lay the foundation, but he did not allow them to finish it, confusing their languages so that completing the project became impossible. So there it stood, half-finished, allowing anyone who saw it to ridicule the builders, saying: They began to build and were not able to finish.

As embarrassing and humiliating as that would have been for the builders, its effects were not as long-lasting as the eternal effects of failing to count the cost of our salvation, or maybe I should say, as the eternal effects of failing to correctly count the cost of our salvation. What I mean is that the vast majority of people believe that there is a cost to salvation. And of those who believe that, the vast majority make an attempt to count the cost of their salvation.

However, they do it primarily based on what seems right to them. And many of them assume is that it really could not cost THAT much, right? Not that it would be easy – you would certainly need to put in some time, go to some effort, have more good works than sins. But they figure that it is doable and that if they try hard enough in their lives, they have the ability to not only lay a pretty solid foundation, but also come up with the necessary amount of the currency known as good works to build a pretty impressive tower that will reach all the way to heaven.

Are you inclined to feel that way - that, while you are not saying that your tower of good works is as tall and as impressive-looking as you would like, you believe you have what it takes to get there.

If you do, that is some bad math because it eliminates an entire side of the equation. It forgets the cost of paying for sins - a cost that we cannot possibly pay. It ignores the fact that so much of our lives have been a battle against God himself, a rebellion against him.

And that is a foolish battle to undertake. It is one whose odds make the numbers
that Jesus uses - 10,000 vs. 20,000 - seem almost even by comparison. It is much better that we humbly confess the imbalance, the impossibility of winning, much better that we confess our sinfulness and that we do as Jesus said: Ask for terms of peace.

Of course, it is a bit too late to expect favorable terms or perhaps even any terms at all. To have foolishly waged war against God for so long and then to suddenly decide that we want to be God’s friend after all, can we really expect that God will take us up on the offer? Especially when he has already so clearly drawn a red line - one that we so boldly and so publicly crossed?

If God were to simply grant us peace, with no consequences, with no cost, it would make him out to be not only weak, but also a liar, in a word, unholy. No, God had to get what he had demanded - perfection - and he had to give what he had promised as the wages of sin: death.

So he sent Jesus to this earth to accomplish it for us. And we can be sure that Jesus counted the cost. The one who is able to count the hairs on our head was also able to count the sins in our past as well as our sins in the future. He was able to do the math necessary to count the cost.

And in counting the cost, he considered that he was severely outnumbered in this battle. He considered that he was going to go into battle alone against the devil and all his many evil angels. He considered that he was going to go into battle against an army led by a commander named Satan who had won every war, defeated every enemy it had ever fought, a commander who was clever enough to draw every opponent into the quicksand of sin, leading to certain death.

Jesus knew that this would cost him a lifetime of being assaulted by and resisting of temptation, and then, if he survived that unscathed, unwounded, unblemished, the cost would come at the hands of God himself, suffering the horrors of hell as a payment for our sins. He counted all that cost, added it up, looked at the impossibly large number that resulted, and decided to go into battle anyway.

Why? What made him decide that the cost was worth it? We did. No, not because we were so innately valuable. Just the opposite! He knew that we had nothing to offer to make ourselves righteous and sinless before God, and therefore he knew that he would have to do it all.

So, because of his great love for us, that is what he did. Armed only with the sword of the Spirit, he countered and defeated every one of Satan’s attacks in the wilderness and for the rest of his life. Then he gave up his life, paying the cost of the guilt of our sins. In doing so he did not just defeat the mighty king called Satan, but he also built for us a tower of righteousness that leads all the way to heaven through faith in him and he calls on us to follow him there.

Jesus does, however, urge us to consider the cost of doing so. He does not do so in order that we can decide whether or not the cost is worth it. No one who believes that Jesus has earned eternal life in the glories and perfection of heaven where we will see him face to face - no one who truly believes that could possibly question whether the cost of following Jesus through this life is worth it!

But it is possible to be surprised at the cost. Given the lengths to which Jesus went and the cost that he was willing to pay in order to give us an eternity of joy in heaven, we might be inclined to feel that our remaining time on earth will be much the
same way, no difficulties at all.

Or we might even think that if Jesus wants us to be in heaven that badly that he was willing to do everything for us as our Substitute and Savior, he does not want anything more from us than some occasional, literal lip service in church on most Sundays.

Neither is the case, which is something that Jesus makes very clear in the opening words of our text, and something that is borne out by the lives of his 12 disciples, as well as the lives of his true disciples today.

Jesus says: **Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.** Yes, in the book of Revelation Jesus said that the crown of eternal life will be given to those who are faithful to him until death, but first comes the cross. First comes the sufferings that come from attempting to crucify our sinful flesh and to live a life that is Christian in a world that is not. First comes the need to take things that are near and dear to us and, if they are keeping us from or even hindering us in our following of Jesus, hate them and view them as evil in the same way that Jesus himself once referred to his beloved disciple Peter as Satan when he stood in the way of Jesus' taking up his cross.

Note, that when Jesus tells us to hate our fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, he is not talking about hatred in a malicious or evil-minded sense. He is talking about not letting people pull us away from Jesus. It is as Jesus also said: **Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.** In other words, Jesus comes first.

Sadly, the path to heaven is littered with the spiritual corpses of those who began to build a tower of faith but were not able to finish.

The devil will not leave us alone any more than he left Jesus alone. He will come at us relentlessly and attempt to defeat us.

But unlike Jesus, we will not fight him alone. In fact, we will have Jesus himself there with us. He who has promised to be with us always has also promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, the Comforter, to be with us, to strengthen us, to give us what is necessary to not only maintain, but to build upon the foundation of saving faith that he has already given to us.

And we know how that Comforter/Counselor works. He uses the Word of God. He will counsel us to avoid the pitfalls that the devil places before us. He will counsel us to continue to build on the foundation of [the teachings of] the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone, as Paul writes in Ephesians.

He will comfort us with the assurance that we have a Good Shepherd who walks with us as we carry the crosses of this life. He will comfort us with the assurance that, while the crosses are temporary, the crown of life is eternal. Amen.

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