

Luke 14:25-35

Pentecost 13 + Proper 18C + September 8, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Having What It Takes

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This gospel lesson makes for a great stem-winding, tent-revival kind of sermon. This is the sort of passage that a preacher might use to challenge his hearers to examine where they've backslid in the faith, to rededicate their lives as followers of Jesus, and to purpose to do better in the future. It's the sort of sermon that gets a title like, "Kamikaze Commitment," "Are You Really All In?," or "Have You Got What It Takes to Follow Jesus?"

A tent-revival treatment might go like this. Have you got what it takes? Jesus hits hard, early and often: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." We note the Son of God uses hyperbole like the rest of us; so He's not saying you have to despise your nearest and dearest, just that you'd better love Him a whole lot more. This is a tough issue right out of the gate: do you have what it takes to defy family, if necessary, to follow Jesus? Despite the influence of parents, do you have the faith to resist them if they interfere with your following Jesus? If your kids drift into sin, do you have the fortitude to say, "I love you, but you're wrong?" and continue in your faith despite the pain that it brings? Do you have the commitment to Jesus that you can do such things without second-guessing the Savior? Do you have what it takes?

Likewise, says Jesus, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Along with the pain of choosing Christ over family, there are all sorts of other crosses to bear: suffering in your body, enduring rejection by friends, bearing burdens, foregoing recognition, maybe passing up your own dreams so that others can succeed. There are all sorts of ways that the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh will stick it to you for following Jesus – but as a Christian, it's your duty to keep on going anyway. After all that Jesus has done for you, how could it be otherwise? You'd better dig a little deeper, try a little harder, identify where you've been slacking off in your walk with the Savior, clean up the mess and rededicate yourself to following Jesus. If you're not fully committed, you cannot be His disciple. Have you got what it takes?

This isn't just a one-day change, but a long-term commitment: Jesus says, "For 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.'" Woe to you if you think you're done just because you got "saved," because Christianity isn't like purchasing a life-time membership to a gym that you never actually got to. Following Jesus is a daily thing where you work with dedication for the rest of your life. It's not going to be easy. You'd better be prepared for that. You'd better mentally steel yourself now for what is to come. Do you have what it takes to fight the fight for all nine rounds, to run the race until you finish the course? Do you have that sort of commitment to Jesus?

If you can't muster up that kind of all-in commitment, if you cannot renounce all that you have, if your heart is not fully devoted to Jesus with every door open to Him and His reign, then you cannot be His disciple. You're either a disciple or you're not; and if you're not, then you're tasteless salt thrown on the manure pile.

That's what Jesus says. Have you got what it takes to follow Him?

That's how a tent-revival sermon might begin; and up to now, what I've said isn't wrong. However, how one answers the question, "Have you got what it takes?" is pivotal.

A revivalist would say this: "If you don't have that kind of commitment, then you'd better find it. Jesus has done His part to save you, and now being a Christian is up to you, so you'd better try harder than you are right now." Have you heard any gospel in that statement? I haven't. But it's how the Word gets preached a lot these days, and you end up with predictable results. Whatever sin the preacher specifically targets, parishioners will improve in their behavior ... for a couple of days anyway. Some will believe that they are actually making themselves better and holier, and so they'll keep coming back for more. Others will believe that they aren't getting better, and they'll move on. Eventually, the preacher will stop being effective because he's pushed all the buttons too many times, and he'll move on too.

The problem is a simple one: the whole message so far is law. The law of God doesn't make anyone holy or better, and your renewed commitment to obedience doesn't either. The law of God only shows that you're not holy, and your renewed commitment does the same when it falters down the road.

To the question "Have you got what it takes to follow Jesus?," we have a more honest answer: No. You do not have what it takes to be all-in, fully committed, 100% dedicated to Jesus. If you had that within yourself, there would be no reason for Jesus to die.

But die He did. Why? Because He is fully committed to you. He died on that cross because you were dead in sin and needed to be made alive. He died on that cross because, even though you have been justified by His blood, you still sin – and so His blood covers your sins and still grants forgiveness.

The law would say, "If you don't have what it takes, you'd better try harder." We instead speak the gospel and say, "Where you don't have what it takes, confess it. Trust that Christ's grace is sufficient for you. He forgives your sins, He strengthens your faith and He will deliver you to life everlasting." Instead of telling you that you must overcome your sin if you are to follow Jesus, we tell you that Christ has overcome your sin so that you might be His follower. Confess your sin and trust in His grace.

Let's be clear: I'm not saying, "You're not going to get any better, so why try? Just keep on sinning, because you'll be okay as long as you confess those sins." If that is what you hear, you don't get the gospel. With forgiveness, Jesus sets you free from sin: if you just go on sinning now, you really don't want to be free. With forgiveness, Christ sets you free: you don't go around doing good because you've got to improve your commitment. You do good works because you've been set free to do them – and so you do them out of joy and thankfulness for the life that Jesus has given you.

If we are to mine the text itself for a little bit of gospel, perhaps we can find it where Jesus 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." If Christ is your King, then you are among His ten thousand; and how would you conquer to get into heaven? How would you increase your commitment to God enough to get inside? That victory is beyond *your* grasp. That is why your King has discussed terms of peace with His Father in heaven; and so that you might have peace with God, your King has been crowned with thorns and crucified to set you free.

And once again: as His cross well testifies, Christ is fully committed to you.

You see this no more beautifully than in the baptism of Luke Steven this morning. Has Luke got what it takes to follow Jesus? Hardly. Little dude doesn't have what it takes to lift up his own head, not to mention he was born in sin. So the Lord came to Luke this day and said, "I've died for you, I am risen for you. I forgive you your sins, I make you My own, and I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The Lord preserve Luke in His grace from this time forth and forevermore.

God preserve you in His grace all your life. Have you got what it takes to follow Jesus? Not in yourself. But you have Jesus Himself, who makes you His follower, who gives you His righteousness; and if you have Him, you have all that it takes for everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen