

## FULL CONTACT CHRITIANITY

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Luke 14: 25-33

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I played football in high school for 2 and a half years until I broke my knee and couldn't finish out the season of my junior year. That's a story for a different time but the thing I'm remembering this morning is some advice that my coach, Mr. Gowin, gave to me about tackling.

I was a lineman in a rural Indiana school district, so I had to play both ways, offense and defense which took, I learned, totally different skills and techniques. On offense there were rules about how you couldn't hold the guy across the line from you, and you couldn't knock him down and then fall on top of him to keep him from getting up, you can't block someone from behind, silly stuff like that.

On defense, however, such rules were virtually nonexistent. The only rule for defense in those days was "tackle the guy with the ball." If you didn't grab his face mask, just about anything else was allowed. That's probably why I liked playing defense better than offense.

Coach Gowin's coaching style was that of a teacher. He showed you how to do it and explained why his way was a better way. Then, he had you do it until you got it right. And his advice on tackling was as simple as it was instructive and helpful.

### ***Commit to the tackle.***

That was it. You can never successfully tackle a running back coming at you full speed if you just reach out for him with your arms. You can't stop a 250-pound full back running at you like a rampaging bull if you doubt yourself. You can never break through the line and sack a quarterback if you try to run around his blockers.

"Boys," he would say, "Football is a full contact sport. You have to commit fully to the tackle. Stake out your ground. Flex your knees. Open your arms. Dip your shoulder. Keep your eye on his belt buckle and lean forward into him as you collide. Lift him up and put him down on the ground. There's no other way to do it."

I remembered Coach Gowin (probably the best coach I ever had) and his tackling advice every time I read this morning's Gospel lesson. This is where Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that there is no such thing as a halfway commitment to him. If we are going to be Christians, he says, he wants us to commit all the way, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. All in. Go big, he says, over and over again, or go home. Christianity is a full contact sport.

The thing about a full contact sport, however, is that there is a high degree of probability that those of us who participate fully in it are going to get hurt, or even injured in one way or another.

So, we would do well to count the possible cost before we sign up and collect our uniform.

## PEOPLE WHO COUNTED THE COST

In the past decade, high school football enrollment has declined 6.6 percent, according to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations. Last year, twenty high schools, nationwide, dropped the sport altogether. Experts say that reasons for the drop-in participation include cost, single-sport specialization, and demographic shifts. And very high on the list of reasons, injury concerns.

People are counting the costs of football on the family's financial and temporal budgets and on the health of the players and some, it seems, are wondering if the cost is too high.

The concern about injury is widespread across football culture, from Pop Warner kids' leagues to the NFL. And nowhere is it impacting the sport more than at the high school level. Ramapo High School in Franklin, N.J., keeping with a recently passed New Jersey law, allows full contact in practice for only 15 minutes per week. And last year they won the state championship.

Counting the cost doesn't necessarily mean giving up football, but it may mean changing the way we approach the sport. Head-to-head contact is out. Face-in-the-numbers tackling is out. No more cross-body blocking. Even the possibility of a concussion sidelines a player until he is proven to be healthy. Everywhere we look in the sport of football people are counting the cost of the old practices and making changes.

And well they should.

People are still talking about Indianapolis Colts quarterback, Andrew Luck who, in 2019 suddenly and unexpectedly announced his retirement from the game at the age of 29. Just two weeks before the start of the regular season, he said that the seemingly never-ending cycle of injury, rehabilitation, and pain was taking too great a toll on him and on his relationships. He wanted more of a life than football was giving him.

Those who keep track of such things say that Luck gave up something like \$58.13 million in salary and bonuses plus an unknown amount from commercial endorsements. He says that the cost is too high.

Granted, Andrew Luck's sacrifice is relatively modest when we consider that he's already made just under \$100 million from football but, as Tim Green points out, to get to the professional level of the sport it has to have been just about the only thing you've ever wanted to do and, in some cases, it's the only thing you can do.

At that level, football isn't just a game you play, it's who you are. It defines you and it's the prism through which you see life and the world. Take it away and many athletes find themselves lost and adrift

And yet, Luck says, the cost was just too high.

In 2019, retired NFL fullback Le'Ron McClain tweeted a nearly incoherent, profanity laced cry for help on a Saturday morning.

McClain, who played in the NFL for seven years for the Chiefs, Ravens and Chargers, took to social media to share his feelings in a moment of what seemed to be tremendous pain. The message raged about his sometimes-frightening thoughts, anger, and frustration that even though the NFL had settled for millions of dollars in a law suit designed to help current and former players who suffered head trauma from playing football, all he has seen is paperwork.

One cannot help but wonder, if we asked Le'Ron McClain if his career in football was worth the price he is paying now, what he would say.

The sport of football is changing, some say evolving, as current and retired NFL players lead us in counting the cost that it demands on the players' bodies and minds.

Perhaps my football metaphor is a little overdone. We hear of people who have counted the costs and made changes in their lives in all kinds of ways and places.

Leslie Scott (62) was the top salesperson at a large car dealership in Florida, making a high six-figure salary when she realized that her lifestyle might be killing her. Her boss was misogynistic and abusive; he hated women, especially bright, successful, assertive women. Her husband was jealous of her salary, which was higher than his and he was often sullen and mean. The pressure to, every month, sell more than she did last month was sending her home exhausted every day with chest pain and a tick in her eye.

Then, at 42 years of age, she realized the price of success, as the world defines it, was too high. With two daughters just about to finish school, she quit her job and escaped to a cabin by a river where she lived simply, on her savings and child support from her then ex-husband for a year. That was when she finally concluded that life was not meant to be so difficult, so painful, and surely there was another way.

In her memoir, she writes: "I hiked, kayaked, read, wrote and unpacked my emotions. It was restorative. After nine months, I found a job in the recreation industry. It was a departure from what I had been doing, but I loved it. One weekend, I hired a seaplane pilot to drop me off in the wilderness for a hiking trip. We fell in love, and he later trained me to fly a plane."

"After a few failed attempts, I started my own bath and beauty company, Walton Woods Farm, which has become a multi-million-dollar international brand. If I hadn't found the courage to start over, I'd probably still be stuck in that car dealership today working for a tyrant. I would not have met my wonderful husband, started a business, and would not have achieved my childhood dream of becoming a bush pilot."

In today's gospel lesson Luke admonishes those who seek to follow Jesus to count the cost of true discipleship. What will they do as a result of their cost counting? Will they give up and go home? Or will they acknowledge and accept the demands that the gospel will place on their lives and change accordingly?

## HATING OUR MOTHER AND FATHER? REALLY?

This morning, Luke gives us one of those scenes that could be easily acted out as a little sketch or mini-play. We find Jesus traveling, on foot, and not just with his chosen twelve, but with “large crowds.”

I can’t speak for all preachers but I know that I would have been elated to see large crowds shoving and pushing their way into the sanctuary to hear my sermons. And my bishop would have been happy, too, right? I mean, how else can we measure the effectiveness and success of a pastor except by the size of the congregation which is supposed to be constantly growing in attendance and their giving?

Jesus, however, is not so sure this is a good thing.

We can almost hear the exasperation in his voice as he turns around and faces the crowd. He realizes that they aren’t here to give but to get. They are following because they want something from him. So, he decides to set them straight and he does it in strong language.

*“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”*

Don’t get all caught up on the word “hate.” Biblical scholars tell us that this is typical “Semitic hyperbole,” a gross exaggeration used to make an important point. And the point Jesus is making has to do with having a detached posture toward what the world tells us is important. Yes, we should love our families and our lives but we can’t let them become idols that replace God in our hierarchy of values.

Jesus continues: *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* Clearly, this is a post Easter reference aimed at the early church. Christianity requires sacrifice and maybe even suffering not unlike that which Jesus underwent. To be Christlike is to share in his power and glory but it is also to share in his suffering.

Jesus now offers two metaphors for those who might think his language too harsh:

First, he gives us the example of a builder who, before he builds a building, sits down and estimates the cost so he doesn’t get in over his head.

Secondly, he gives the example of a king who is intent on going to war with another king but wisely, evaluates his resources and compares them to those of his enemy so he doesn’t find himself retreating from an overpowering force. Finally, he closes with one more thing from which we must be detached if we hope to truly follow Jesus and that is our possessions. We can’t love Jesus and love our stuff at the same time and, if the only way we can truly love Jesus is to get rid of our stuff, then get rid of it we must.

## THE COST, TODAY

Most biblical scholars agree that the Gospel of Luke and Luke's second volume, Acts, were written in about 85- 90CE. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in those days.

The Roman Emperor was Domitian. Scholars are not in agreement over the reign of this, the youngest son of Vespasian. It was, for many years, assumed that he was a cruel and heartless persecutor of Christians, an assumption based mostly on his exile of St. John to the isle of Patmos.

Beyond that, however, there is no record of widespread persecutions under his reign. The worst that can be said of him is that he didn't step in to defend or protect Christians from more localized persecutions which were commonplace at that time -- everything from refusing to do business with Christians and banning Christians from joining labor guilds to arrest and even torture.

Luke is simply making the case that Christians who believe that they should have a special place in the hierarchy of power and privilege simply because they are good people are going to be severely disappointed. Yes, sometimes the Christian life can be marvelous and filled with rich rewards. But it can also bring pain and suffering upon believers. That is the world in which we live and we'd better be ready to face it, to "carry the cross" if we want to call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

Christian laborer Saleem Masih, 50, was killed in Nekapura village in Punjab's Sialkot District, said human rights lawyer Sardar Mushtaq Gill. Masih reportedly tried to rescue a Christian boy who was threatened by two Muslim men who attacked him with knives because he was a Christian. "He was rushed to the hospital, but did not survive the wounds," the attorney said.

In another case, a Muslim man who said he abandoned Islam and "put his faith in Christ" after experiencing a vision in a mosque in eastern Uganda has been hospitalized after his own relatives beat him, demolished his home, and abducted his wife and children.

Muslim extremists in Nigeria now forbid Christians from farming, and punish defiance with shootings, kidnappings, and threats against families. Thousands remain displaced, living in overcrowded shelters with no food or medical care. Despite military presence, extremist Muslim militias continue to terrorize rural Christian communities with near total impunity. In a nearby community, entire Christian families were found burned alive in their homes. "They came from all sides," said one survivor. "Shooting and setting houses on fire. Anyone who ran was shot."

Meanwhile Christians in the United States claim they are being persecuted because they have to obey the laws or because they aren't receiving special consideration about where they are allowed to place their icons and other symbols of their faith.

But the opposite is, in fact, the case. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, writing for the Washington Post in 2017, put it plainly and succinctly: "Christians are vastly over-represented in national politics, not underrepresented. While roughly 67 percent of the U.S. population identifies as

Christian, 87 percent of Congress identifies as such... The proportion of Christians in many state legislatures is even higher. Every member of the Supreme Court appears to be religiously affiliated – one Jew, two Christian protestants, and six Roman Catholics -- and no atheist has ever sat on that court. That over-representation means that either Christians have superior access to the mechanisms of electioneering or that being Christian is such a boon to candidacy that most people claim to be Christian regardless of their personal beliefs. Either of these possibilities fully precludes the possibility that Christians as a group experience formal marginalization or informal scorn that bars them from the halls of power. The opposite is true.”

No, when we sit down and count the cost of being a follower of Jesus, the thing that makes it difficult and painful in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century is not how we are treated by non-Christians but the very nature of Christianity, itself. If we are to be Christians we are called to put our political affiliations, our lifelong prejudices, our personal preferences, our favorite things, our prized possessions, and even our very lives behind us.

We are called to walk that very difficult road whereupon we love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, lay down our swords and shields, defend the widow and the orphan, feed the hungry, visit the sick and the imprisoned, give water to those who thirst, welcome the refugee, and do it all with love in our hearts and a smile on our face.

Only when we have emptied our hands and our hearts, will we be able to pick up the cross which Christ offers us, the cross which has changed history and the world, the cross which can change us, the cross which allows us to call ourselves, Christian.

**AMEN**