

## *Giving up*

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*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*

- Luke 14:25-33

Imagine Jesus with a clipboard. And imagine that attached the clipboard is a checklist that could be titled, "Requirements for real spirituality." The checklist includes three separate qualifications, each of which Jesus names in today's gospel.

**Spirituality qualification #1:** *"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."*

**Qualification #2:** *"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

**Qualification #3:** *"None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*

Imagine Jesus, with his clipboard and checklist, walking along the front lines of the crowd that has been growing larger and larger as he proceeds on his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. By this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has gone viral. Thousands have been swept up into the momentum of the Jesus phenomenon.

But Jesus must have been wondering to himself, as he looked over their faces, *"How many of them actually understand what I've been talking about and demonstrating? How many of them, as a result of all this effort, will actually make any connection between their heads and their hearts and their hands?"*

We may be able to imagine Jesus, still with the same clipboard and checklist, showing up to look into the faces of those of us who gather in Christian churches today. We can imagine that Jesus doesn't often find anyone who satisfies all three of the stringent criteria on that checklist from today's gospel.

But one man whose story I've followed for almost two decades may come close—or at least a lot closer than I. By the year 2000, Zell Kravinsky was a college professor from Philadelphia who had also amassed a real estate empire on the side. Still only in his mid-40s, and with three young children to raise, he gave away 99% of his net worth, over \$45,000,000, to various charities. All that Kravinsky withheld for himself was a modest house for his family, and two older cars that were already paid off, and the modest income from his wife's part-time medical practice.

Even as Zell Kravinsky was giving away his \$45,000,000, he became possessed by the idea that he wasn't doing enough. After reading an article about people who die from kidney disease because donors can't be found, he decided to make an undirected donation of one of his kidneys, so that some other human being out there in the world – previously unknown to him – might have life and have it more abundantly.

Responses to Zell Kravinsky's give-aways were predictably intense and conflicted. An article in the Los Angeles Times was titled in the form of a question: "*Generous to a fault or faulty generosity?*" The author concluded that " ...logic leads to one of two conclusions: *Either [Zell is] crazy, or everyone else is selfish.*" Family members and friends challenged Zell to consider his moral obligation to provide for his wife and children. Others reasoned that he should only give away a third of his money and invest the rest so that he could give away even more in the future. An article in Philadelphia magazine claimed that "*When Zell told his wife about his kidney [donor] plan, she said she'd divorce him.*"

In a full-length feature story in the New Yorker at about the same, the author portrays Zell Kravinsky as just a little bit off, if not seriously deranged. The author concludes that Zell was driven by personal pathologies arising from unresolved issues with his parents, who never gave him any affirmation and for whom, consequently, he could never do enough. If this author's theory is true, I figure that a heck of a lot more of us should be giving away a lot more kidneys, or a lot more money, or taking other great risks that will lead others to call us strange or misguided.

Perhaps I've said enough to help us better see and examine our own conflicted responses to Jesus, as he paces in front of us with his clipboard and checklist. On the one hand we may feel inspired and compelled by the great ideal and the sense of call to be more genuine and more complete in our own faith. On the other hand, we're held back by all sorts of fears and rationalizations and our comparisons with others.

In regard to these very real conflicts felt by many of us, let me end by focusing on just one word from today's passage in Luke. It's at the end of the text where Jesus says '*you cannot be my disciple if you do not give up all of your possessions.*' The Greek word translated here as 'giving up' is *apotáссо*. It means saying farewell, taking leave, distancing ourselves, making a separation from someone or something. So the command of Jesus here is not merely to give away something that we imagine to be ours; but to detach our very identity and meaning and story from it. And it's at that very deep and basic level, I imagine, that our conflicts arise in response to the clipboard requirements of Jesus.

Our possessions and our achievements and our titles and our privileges and our expectations possess us. Who would we be without them? If you're thinking, "*We're nothing without them,*" you're right – unless we genuinely believe what we say we believe, unless we genuinely begin to comprehend and practice *apotáссо*.

Maybe today none of us is going to go out and give away 99% of our net worth or our kidney. But maybe each of us can easily enough identify whatever it is that's most possessing us right now, and maybe if we can get that in focus, we can try to practice *apotáссо*, just for a moment, just for today. And maybe if we can give it up just for today, the vision and credibility of Jesus will be kept alive in the world through us. Maybe our *giving up* will grow into something bigger, a living instance of what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. *Amen.*