

“The Memo”
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Luke 14:25-33

“Now large crowds were traveling with him; and Jesus turned . . . to them,” and squandered a great opportunity. Either he didn’t get the Memo to Religious Leaders Aspiring to Success, or Jesus got the Memo and didn’t read it. Or maybe he read it and didn’t understand it, but what flew out of his mouth next contradicted all the precious rules that apply to Religious Leaders Aspiring to Success.

Jesus told people four things. You must hate your family, including your parents, your wife and children, and your siblings, and yes, even life itself. You must carry a cross and follow him, and you must “give up all your possessions.” Those are his standards, and to a certain type of rare person who loves a gruesome challenge, they might be attractive, but to most people who hear these criteria for discipleship, they are confusing, discouraging, or downright offensive. And all of that goes straight against the Memo.

To be a successful, popular religious leader and draw large crowds and keep them coming back, you aren’t supposed to confuse people. You’re supposed to keep it simple and clear, give certainty, preferably in an unthreatening way with funny stories. You’re supposed to encourage people with possibilities and the promise of easy rewards if they just believe, but you shouldn’t ask anybody to do something terribly difficult, unless it might result in a quick and tangible gain. And above all, the Memo strongly urges Religious Leaders to be as inoffensive as possible to the group that’s following you. Everybody else might be going to hell, but not the people following you. That’s the Memo in a nutshell, and wow, did Jesus get off the tracks.

Take, for instance, hating your family. That's strong language, the word hate. Back in the day, when Jesus was around, family units were really tight in a way that we would probably find suffocating, so we can be confident that this demand to hate family seemed outrageous to most of his listeners. In fact, Jesus partnered hating family with hating your life, because in his era, the two were practically the same thing. Even now two millennia later, when families aren't always so close and hatred might well exist among some members, the hatred brings pleasure to very few, and the idea that Jesus would demand it as a requirement is a bit off-putting. To be honest, it's a deal-breaker for me.

And I'd like some clarification for my confusion, because elsewhere Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." [Luke 6:27-28] Apparently, the trick is make enemies out of your family members, and then you're allowed to love them. Or does the requirement to hate your family take precedence, even if your family is your enemy? Not trying to be nitpicky here, but love the ones you hate actually makes more sense than hate the ones you love, and that's really saying something.

Then there's the provision to hate life itself. Isn't following Jesus supposed to make life better, not worse? Plenty of people already hate their lives, so this might be the easiest criteria Jesus listed. However, religious leaders, if they want to be successful and popular, need to give people hope and joy and peace, or at least a map that shows us how to get there. How discouraging to learn from the lips of Jesus that to follow him, we have to start hating life or to keep on hating it, which could only make us miserable.

Requirement #3, carry the cross, is less of a problem for us, because we take it metaphorically, which means that it can mean almost anything, but when Jesus was alive and

teaching, the cross was an instrument of execution: long-lasting, cruel, and humiliating. He was basically saying to people, “Follow me, and get ready for a scandalous, torturous death.” Again, this is not in agreement with the recommendations of the Memo.

And finally, give up all your possessions. This brings to mind the true story of a young British man, who in 2004 sold everything he owned, including his home. In all, he raised about \$140,000. Then he flew to Las Vegas and went to a roulette wheel, where he placed the entire sum on red. For those unacquainted with roulette, this gave him a slightly less than 50% chance to double his money. His fate lay in a spinning disc and a bouncing ball. It was all over in less than a minute, and the ball landed on number 7, which is . . . red.

This story intrigued me, because it seemed like such a monumental testament to human stupidity. I felt revolted at the idea of risking everything, but also a sense of how strangely liberating it might be to stake all that you own on the winds of fortune. Of course, Jesus wasn't suggesting that we play roulette with the hope of doubling our money. Instead, Jesus wants us to give up our possessions, period, which feels much less liberating and much more revolting, scary, and stupid. Once more, this violates the core principles of the Memo for religious leaders who want to be successful and popular. Don't scare people too much.

Jesus compounded his serious deviation from the Memo by telling two short parables: one about a builder who started construction and ran out of resources by the time the foundation was laid; and another about a general outnumbered two-to-one. The gist of the parables was that to follow Jesus, you needed to count the cost first, lest you make it only part of the way and look foolish to other people. The implication being that if you want to follow Jesus, you need to be ready to comply with all four requirements or fail. Religious leaders who want to be popular and successful don't talk about the prospect of failure with their followers. It's too negative and

emphasizes the perilous nature of the endeavor. Faith is supposed to be easy and fulfilling, right?

Elsewhere, Jesus seems so welcoming and assuring, but in front of this large crowd, he took a detour. I wonder why. Maybe Jesus was less concerned about being popular and successful, and more concerned about being honest and bringing a more vital faith to fruition. Maybe Jesus understood a mystery not easily grasped, about how radical being a follower of the truth really is. Maybe Jesus perceived that only sacrifice could make a person holy, since the word sacrifice literally means “to make holy.” Maybe Jesus possessed wisdom more valuable than any material possession, wisdom only acceptable to those ready to exchange all they have for it. Maybe Jesus offered a relationship more loving than any other. Maybe Jesus knew that only after giving up everything could a person receive the one thing necessary, which would restore and redeem everything, giving back in greater measure. Maybe Jesus felt that there is a strange liberation in the prospect of losing it all for the sake of faith.

Of course, none of that is in the Memo. Perhaps being successful and popular, two things cherished not only by religious leaders, but by all people, aren't that important after all, or perhaps we've simply come to define successful and popular by the wrong measurements. Perhaps following Jesus is more about what we give and less about what we get. Perhaps it isn't meant to be easy or always comforting or convenient, but hard and sometimes scary and full of rigorous discipline. Perhaps following Jesus is a risky thing, not a sure one. But you won't find any of those ideas in the Memo. Amen.