

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "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. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ 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? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ 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? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

At the beginning of 2019, a question was proposed to me by a colleague; "what makes a company stand out in today's marketplace?" As an employee of a historically successful mom-and-pop music store for nearly 20 years, I was intrigued. So, in typical fashion, I began researching how the answer to this question could be applied to my business. My research, which consisted of many trade-magazine articles, speaking to industry insiders, and watching markets, revealed something interesting. Regional companies that deal in the retail service industry that are employee-owned are considered by their customers to be far superior to similar businesses that are not.

Here is an example. Of these southern grocery chains, which one do you think most people say is the best in appearance, products, and customer service? Food Lion, Publix, Piggly Wiggly, Winn-Dixie, BI-LO, or Save A Lot? Overwhelmingly, customer feedback polls show Publix outperforms the others consistently. Publix is employee-owned.

In my industry, the music industry, I applied the same question. What I found was the same answer. Here are two examples. Taylor Guitars, an employee-owned manufacturer of acoustic guitars, consistently outperforms the two biggest name brands, Gibson and Fender. Another company that was heads and shoulders above the competition was W.L. Gore and Associates, a string manufacturer [Elixir Strings] that outsells all the other brands and is considered by many to be the "Top Shelf" string.

These two companies also only make one thing for the industry. Taylor makes acoustic guitars, and Gore only makes strings. They are employee-owned and focus on one manufacturing goal. Other companies in

that industry do the same thing, but the variable that sets them apart is the same one that Publix has; they are employee-owned.

By taking active ownership of the company, the employees want the company to succeed. They train better, work harder, stay longer on the job, and actively seek what is best for the company's future.

What does this have to do with our lesson for today?

What if [Listen to Me Closely] Christians took this principle of ownership and applied it to our FAITH, CHURCH, and EACH OTHER? And then we go one more step; we only focus on one goal, Following the example of Jesus. Jesus says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." [v.27] Keep this in mind as we follow my logic rabbit hole.

[Lens of Faith] 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." If we live like we are the body of Christ in the world, what would that look like? How would we react to the stimuli of the world, the distractions that keep us from doing what Christ calls us to do? Jesus points to "father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself." [v.26] He tells those following him that they can't just say they are his disciples. Not possessions, station in life, not even family can be a distraction from this noblest endeavor. To follow Jesus is to have FAITH in something beyond our capacity to understand, and to grow that faith, we must follow Jesus unconditionally. Looking at this from a lens of FAITH, what a small sacrifice Jesus is asking of us. Follow him unconditionally. After all, he unconditionally died to save us from our sins. At least we have the book that tells us how the story ends. We have the promise of a resurrection.

[Church] It goes to reason that in FAITH, we should have an ownership stake in the Church. If we did, we might train better {study the bible}, work harder {participate in church activities, cleanup, join the choir, or begin a spiritual practice in Tithing}, stay longer on the job {and have a vested interest in growing the reach of the church in the community, instead of just asking what the church can do for us}, and actively seek what is best for the future of the Church {participate in committee work, church government, or higher council government}. According to Jesus, it's not enough to show up; we must follow him because he leads by example. Paul writes, [2 Cor. 5:10] *"... all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,*

so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.” [James 2:26] “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”

Therefore, taking ownership of our Church will cause us to want it to succeed. Succeed in reaching out to the community. Check on those who live next door or down the street. Collect food for the homeless and contribute more of the yearly budget to local charities. In the church, good customer service is being there, praying for one another, and checking in just because the spirit moved you to. It’s exciting to think about.

[Each Other] The first two points organically tie into this point. As the church, we are the body of Christ. Romans 12:5 says, *“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”* As Christians, in faith and action, we claim the teachings of Jesus. One part of the body cannot carry the cross alone. The body must work in concert, each part doing its job to bear the burden of the cross. This means working together in the work of the church, in the mission field, and supporting each other in whatever crisis may come along. So that, in spite of the distractions the world may throw at us, we can continue to follow Jesus.

Most of the companies I have spoken about adopt a policy like Jesus gives to his followers. They make one goal, and they stick to it. It may be “have the best customer service in the industry” [have you noticed that if you say thank you at a drive-through now it is customary for the cashier to say, “my pleasure”, thank you, Chick-fil-la] It may be, “have the best quality control for the highest quality product” like Taylor guitars, or Elixir guitar strings. Sometimes it's that everyone working for the company knows that if the store is stocked, the floors are clean, and customers are engaged in a polite manner that you will be known as the best grocery store in the region. We are given one task, Follow Jesus!

I know what some of you are thinking, “Rob, you are being idealistic.” I can hear one of my mentors/critics say it in my head as I write this. But there is one more thing that my research from 2019 uncovered. Article after article asked the same question, “what is the cost of doing nothing? What will happen to a business that does not adapt and change with the market forces? How do we stay on brand as we do?”

Churches are susceptible to the same type of forces. Every week in this country, another church closes. Several presbyterian churches in our presbytery are down to less than a dozen members. It is just a matter of time before their doors close forever.

The forces that push and pull churches; forces that change the surrounding neighborhoods. Forces that take influence away from churches or cause us to lose our focus on Jesus. Forces that tell us we must maintain a status quo instead of boldly loving our new neighbors, who may be different.

We mustn't lose focus on the cross. Follow Jesus, who leads by example. Love thy neighbor as you would love yourself.

So here is my challenge. Next week is Homecoming. Take ownership of your church! Make it a priority to call someone and invite them to worship. Not because it's homecoming but because this is where the spirit is moving in this community. Don't take no for an answer. Call someone who hasn't been since the pandemic. Ask someone new to the neighborhood. Ask someone who has lived near here their entire life but has never stepped foot in a church. And when they get here, Church, show them the love of Christ, tell them you are glad they came. Shake a hand, give a fist bump, smile, and show them the Holy Spirit is moving in this space and in your life. How awesome would it be? Could it be? No, how awesome will it be when we take ownership of our Faith, our Church, and each other through the Holy Spirit as we take up the cross and follow Christ? Let us Pray!

Lord, I know I sound like a lunatic, but I wonder how those people felt that day when Jesus gave this lesson. Lord, I pray that today you send the Holy Spirit into this sanctuary, into our lives. Make it a revival to come, not just a homecoming, as you send us out into the world. Remind us to take ownership of what we do here. Remind us to talk about You to the stranger, neighbor, friend, and loved one we meet today, tomorrow, and in the coming week. Stir in us a fire that burns only for you so that we may glorify your name, your spirit, your church, and carry this cross together as one body, your church in the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, our savior, our teacher, and our hope. AMEN!