

The Essential Call

Study Leader's Guide

Chapter 2 - Sample

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Chapter Two: The Non-Negotiable Call

Section 2.1: The Call Is Not Optional

The Call Is Not Optional

"Now large crowds were going along with him, and he turned and said to them, '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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.'" (Luke 14:25-27, ESV)

Notice the setting: large crowds are following Jesus, likely drawn by His miracles, and He turns and thins the herd — the opposite of any modern church-growth strategy. This is a consistent pattern in Luke's Gospel: whenever the crowds swell, Jesus raises the bar rather than lowering it (see also Luke 9:57-62, and John 6:60-66, where "many of his disciples turned back" after a hard teaching, and Jesus lets them go). He is not interested in numbers for their own sake, but in genuine disciples, even if that means twelve men instead of twelve hundred.

The word translated "hate" (Greek: *miseō*) reflects a Semitic idiom for relative priority — the same construction in Genesis 29:31, where Leah is "hated" simply because Jacob loved Rachel more, and in Malachi 1:2-3, describing God's preference for Jacob over Esau. Matthew gives the inspired commentary: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37, ESV). Jesus is not commanding literal hatred of family; He is declaring that every relationship, even the most legitimate, must be subordinated to allegiance to Him — and He extends the same subordination to a person's claim on themselves: "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25, ESV).

Verse 27 lands the full weight: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." We have domesticated that phrase into a metaphor for minor inconvenience. A first-century crowd in Roman-occupied Palestine had watched condemned men carry the crossbeam to their own execution. To take up a cross was a picture of a person who had already died to his right to himself — the same reality Paul later states as settled fact: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20, ESV).

Twice in three verses Jesus repeats "cannot be my disciple." This is not a premium tier for the extra-devoted; it is the minimum entry requirement. Jesus makes a nearly identical claim about possessions in the next breath: "any one of you who

does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33, ESV). Discipleship touches family loyalty, self-preservation, and possessions all at once. There is no category in Jesus's vocabulary for a Christian who is not a disciple — the earliest believers called themselves disciples, followers of the Way, not "Christians," a label likely coined somewhat derisively by outsiders.

The Cost Must Be Counted

"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? ... 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?" (Luke 14:28, 31, ESV)

Jesus does not merely make a demand; He explains why it must be counted before it's accepted. A wise builder assesses cost before laying the first stone; a wise king assesses whether he can win before committing his army. Jesus is not discouraging discipleship — He is dignifying it, insisting it deserves sober consideration rather than impulsive enthusiasm.

Jesus applies this test to specific individuals elsewhere, with a consistent pattern. To the rich young ruler, Jesus named the specific cost: "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor... and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22, ESV) — and the man "became very sad, for he was extremely rich" (Luke 18:23, ESV). To a man wanting to bury his father first, Jesus refused to soften the urgency: "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60, ESV).

This has direct implications for evangelism. Much contemporary gospel presentation leads with benefits — peace, purpose, heaven — all true in their proper place. Jesus, before an eager crowd, led with the cost instead — a rebuke to "easy-believism," the pursuit of quick professions through emotional appeals without honest disclosure of Christ's total claim. This is not adding works to the gospel; salvation remains by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). But saving faith is never bare intellectual assent divorced from a transformed life. James states it bluntly: "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26, ESV). Counting the cost is not about earning entry; it is entering with eyes open to the fact that Christ's lordship is total, not partial.

Paul supplies the fullest first-person account of what this feels like from the inside: "whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ... I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:7-8, ESV). The verb is present and ongoing — he counts, continually, the credentials Judaism had taught him to treasure as rubbish by comparison. Counting

the cost is not a one-time transaction but a settled, continuing revaluation of everything else in light of Christ's surpassing worth.

Jesus tells two brief parables framing the same revaluation from the buyer's side: the man who finds treasure hidden in a field and "in his joy" sells all he has to buy it, and the merchant who, after a long search, finds one pearl of great value and does the same (Matthew 13:44-46, ESV). Some come to discipleship suddenly, overtaken by unlooked-for joy; others arrive after a long, deliberate search — but in both cases the buyer counts the total trade a bargain, not a sacrifice.

1. In Luke 14:26, what does the Greek word for “hate” (miseō) actually mean in context, and what is Jesus really demanding?

A: It reflects a Semitic idiom for relative priority (as in Genesis 29:31 and Malachi 1:2-3), not literal hatred. Jesus is declaring that every relationship — even the most legitimate — must be subordinated, not eliminated, to allegiance to Him.

2. What does it mean that Jesus twice calls “bearing one's cross” and “renouncing all he has” the requirement to “be my disciple” (Luke 14:27, 33) rather than an advanced or optional level of devotion?

A: It means these are not a premium tier of Christianity for the extra-devoted but the minimum entry requirement for following Jesus at all — discipleship touches family loyalty, self-preservation, and possessions all at once, with nothing left outside its claim.

3. How does the chapter distinguish “counting the cost” from adding works to the gospel of grace?

A: Salvation remains by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9); counting the cost isn't about earning entry but about entering with eyes open to the fact that Christ's lordship is total. Saving faith, biblically understood, is never bare intellectual assent divorced from a transformed life (James 2:26).

4. The rich young ruler “became very sad” when Jesus named the specific cost of following Him. What is the one thing Christ would need to name specifically in your own life for you to feel that same weight — and how would you answer Him?

A: Answers will vary; a good answer names something concrete and personal (a relationship, ambition, habit, or possession) rather than a generic “everything,” and reflects honest self-examination rather than a rehearsed spiritual answer.

Section 2.2: A Command as Wide as Your Life

The Command Is Comprehensive

"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20, ESV)

A grammatical detail changes how this familiar text should be read: in the Greek there is only one main imperative in the entire Great Commission — **mathēteusate**, "make disciples." "Go," "baptizing," and "teaching" are participles describing how that single command is carried out. The Great Commission was never primarily about accumulating decisions or counting baptisms as ends in themselves; baptizing and teaching are the method, disciple-making is the mission. And the teaching is not merely informational — believers are taught "to observe," to actually practice, everything Christ commanded. Knowledge divorced from obedience is not discipleship; it is religious education.

The other Gospel writers record parallel commissioning statements reinforcing the same scope. Mark's risen Christ commands, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15, ESV). Luke ties the mission to Scripture: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47-48, ESV). John records Jesus grounding the church's sending in His own: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21, ESV). And in Acts, Jesus' final words before His ascension supply the mission's geographic, Spirit-empowered shape: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8, ESV).

Notice the bookends of the Matthew 28 passage: verse 18 declares Christ's total authority, and verse 20 promises His abiding presence. The command to make disciples is sandwiched between those two realities — not a burden Jesus hands off and walks away from, but one that comes with both the authorization and the resource to accomplish it.

The Fruit Evidences Discipleship

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away ... I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-2, 5, ESV)

This passage reframes everything said so far. Jesus does not say, "bear fruit, and thereby become my disciples." He says the reverse: abiding is the means, and fruit is the evidence. "Apart from me you can do nothing" is not human effort straining toward spiritual output but a branch drawing life from a vine it did not create and cannot survive without. This is where discipleship and grace meet without contradiction in Reformed theology: sanctification, no less than justification, flows from union with Christ rather than unaided striving.

The Father is glorified, John 15:8 continues, when believers "bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." The fruit does not create the status of disciple; it demonstrates what abiding has already made true. Jesus makes the same evidentiary point elsewhere: "You will recognize them by their fruits... every healthy tree bears good fruit" (Matthew 7:16-17, ESV). John adds two further marks of authentic discipleship: love for one another (John 13:35) and abiding in His word (John 8:31-32). Fruitfulness, love, and abiding obedience together constitute the New Testament's own test of genuine discipleship.

This should press on every reader: sustained fruitlessness is not a neutral fact about a professing Christian's life — it is, in Jesus's own words, a diagnostic (John 15:2). Paul supplies the positive content of that fruit in character: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23, ESV). John adds a relational test: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14, ESV). Assurance, for John, is not found by staring inward at one's feelings toward God but in the observable, checkable fact of love actually extended toward other believers — the fruit that faith alone, being real, inevitably produces.

The Multiplication Mandate

"...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:2, ESV)

Count the generations in this single sentence: Paul taught Timothy — generation one. Timothy is to entrust it to faithful men — generation two. Those faithful men are to teach others also — generation three. This was the deliberate strategy of the apostle who planted more churches than perhaps anyone in church history, never built around mass crowds but by investing deeply in a few who could invest in a few

more. Paul describes the same multiplying pattern already at work among the Thessalonians, who "became imitators of us and of the Lord... an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7, ESV) — disciples who themselves became patterns for others to imitate.

Put together, the conviction of this chapter — and of this book — is this: discipleship is not a program the church offers its more zealous members. It is the essential substance of what it means to follow Jesus Christ at all: costly, Christ-commanded, grace-fueled, and inherently reproducing.

1. Grammatically, what is the one command in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), and what are “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching”?

A: The single main imperative is *make disciples*. “Go,” “baptizing,” and “teaching” are participles describing how that command is to be carried out — baptizing and teaching are the method; disciple-making is the mission.

2. According to John 15, what is the correct relationship between abiding and bearing fruit — and why does this matter for how a disciple should feel about spiritual growth?

A: Jesus doesn't say “bear fruit, and thereby become my disciples” — He says the reverse: abiding is the means, and fruit is the evidence. Sanctification flows from union with Christ rather than unaided striving — a disciple isn't manufacturing growth but staying connected to the Vine, which produces the fruit.

3. What does 2 Timothy 2:2 describe, and how many “generations” of disciple-making does Paul outline in that single verse?

A: Paul describes a self-replicating chain: he taught Timothy (generation one); Timothy is to entrust it to faithful men (generation two); those faithful men are to teach still others (generation three) — the multiplication mandate at the heart of biblical discipleship.

4. Who is currently your “Timothy” — someone you are investing in — and who is your “Paul” — someone investing in you? If either answer is “no one,” what is one step you could take this month to change that?

A: Answers will vary; a good answer names a real person or a concrete next step (asking someone specific) rather than a vague intention.