

The Parable of the Long Jump Pit

Tom Schmidt

The Old Meeting House, 28 July 2024

Virgil Bopp was his name. The Reverend Doctor Virgil Bopp, to be precise: a seminary professor from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Fifty-one years ago, he provided summer pulpit supply for my local church in Lansing. It was my first encounter with an educated, erudite biblical scholar. He spoke from his heart, but he didn't offer easy answers or standard phrases, he explored biblical passages with depth and integrity. I was a fairly new Christian in a working-class environment, and no one in my family, immediate or distant relatives, had ever attended college. Dr. Bopp's impact was like . . . well, a *bop* on the head. In the ensuing weeks, I decided that he was what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was only seventeen—unusual, I know, to get such a clear sense of vocation so young. But it worked for me.

Those were the early Seventies, when the counterculture was in full swing. Lots of people my age were dropping out, getting back to the land, and joining communes. A vivid memory of my freshman year of college was watching the Zeffirelli film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, about the life of Saint Francis, with a cool soundtrack sung by Donovan, and feeling the pull of walking away from my establishment trajectory to serve God in purity and poverty.

By the time I reached college, I had read through the New Testament several times, paying close attention to the Gospels, where I hoped to discover the real Jesus and learn how he wanted me to live. One morning, in my dorm room, I encountered a Bible verse that I must have read several times before, but this time it hit me harder than a *bop*—more like a *whack*. And I warn you, if my story has been mildly entertaining up to now, it's about to get bothersome. Then, I hope, a note of grace at the end.

What I read that morning was Luke 14:33: "None of you can become my disciple unless you give away all your possessions." What could that possibly mean? At face value, it was obvious, but there must be some explanation, I thought, that would excuse me from walking out of my dorm and heading for Assisi. So, like the aspiring scholar that I was, I headed for the library to consult commentaries. My research disturbed me even more, because the explanations I read seemed designed to justify doing anything *but* conforming to Jesus' demands. Some generalized the word for possessions to mean "your whole being," which not only defies the

sense of the Greek word but creates a category so broad that it doesn't ask anything of the hearer but a good attitude. Others took the verse literally, but only for Jesus' immediate followers, or only for a brief period, to kind of "jump start" the movement. But I couldn't imagine Jesus giving his other demands, like forgiveness or meekness or purity, such a short shelf life. No, the Gospels were clearly written for readers *after* Jesus' time who wanted to know how to be disciples in *their* time. Then to claim that a difficult aspect of his teaching, plainly stated, didn't apply? It was all too convenient.

Conservative Protestants, particularly Calvinists, included this with demands to forgive everyone, give the coats off our backs, and be pure in heart as unattainable ideals designed to drive us toward the cross. But it seemed convoluted to me for Jesus to offer all this instruction about discipleship while leaving us to guess, for theological reasons, that he didn't really mean all that, he just wanted us to feel bad for not doing it.

What to do with this, my least favorite verse in the Bible? It stayed with me through college and then graduate school, where I turned my anxiety into an intellectual pursuit, eventually writing my doctoral dissertation on attitudes toward wealth in the ancient world, both biblical and classical, with a focus on Jesus' radical demands. In the process, I was recognized as an expert on economic ethics in the biblical world, including the historical, cultural, and linguistic milieu of Luke 14:33 and passages like it. I'm sure Jesus was impressed. But I remained troubled by the distance between his demands and my discipleship.

I was certainly not alone. My historical work showed that this and similar verses had caused problems for Gospel readers from the start. The early church came up with a compromise that one scholar called "effective compensation," where rich Christians were accepted in the church only if they provided financial support for the poor and the clergy, who in turn would pray that God would forgive them for being rich. A two-tier system of obedience developed in the church, one for clergy, monks, and nuns, and another for rank-and-file believers, who won favor with God for financing the professional class—a sweet deal for everyone. Reformation Protestants rightly rejected this arrangement, but in order to provide a one-size-fits-all ethic, they spiritualized Jesus' teaching, instructing everyone to give everything to Jesus—but only in their hearts. Believers should remain "ready" to renounce wealth; but in practice, they need only give from their excess. John Wesley, champion of the Protestant work ethic, pushed a little harder by saying, "Make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can"—but most Protestants since

have concluded that two out of three ain't bad. In our day, it is hard to find anyone who takes Jesus' demands at face value: Evangelicals focus on personal salvation, with Jesus' ethics largely spiritualized; progressives translate them from personal demands to programs for social change.

It looks like we've been trying to talk our way out of discipleship for two thousand years. I understand that. The demands seem beyond us. With his teaching about wealth, Jesus is clearly demanding a level of dependence on God that few are willing to attempt. We may want to join the Reformers and spiritualize Luke 14:33, but that gets harder when it is joined by dozens of similar verses that resist watering down. To give one often-quoted but seldom-understood example, Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is." He didn't say "Where your heart is, there is your treasure." In other words, it's not the attitude of my heart that defines my relation to riches, but what I do with my riches that reveals the state of my heart. Am I secure in God or in my portfolio? The point of these passages is not to redistribute wealth or alleviate poverty: walking away from one's possessions merely creates one more poor person. Nor is the point to support the church. The 6th century church, not Jesus, instituted the tithe—adopted from Jewish practice—to maintain itself with a moderate, measurable amount. But giving ten percent, or even ninety percent, still falls short of "all"—which is Jesus' standard for complete dependence on God.

Have I made you uncomfortable? Good—I could use some company. I don't like talking about this, partly because it exposes *me*. I understand Jesus' command to renounce wealth, but I'm not willing to do it. Does that mean I'm not a disciple? Perhaps not, at least in his terms. It's more accurate to say, "I'm a *selective* follower of Jesus." At the same time, I trust that God is merciful, not just in this regard but for other actions and attitudes of mine beside which my materialism seems a minor flaw. Maybe there *is* an element of hyperbole in radical demands like this one; maybe God demands all in the hope of getting more; or maybe God counts my refusal of radical obedience as humility or a tacit plea for mercy. Honestly, I'm not sure. But I am loath to re-align his expectations so to my behavior that he is clothed in my image, and I turn out to be following not the Son of Man but the Son of Manikin.

In a way, this entire sermon up to now has been a parable: a story that challenges and provokes but doesn't lay out a neat solution. I also want to stress that, while I've focused on Jesus' hard teachings about wealth, this could apply similarly to any number of radical demands he made about forgiveness, marriage, prayer, purity, or love for enemies—most of which we find

admirable but practically unattainable. It's strange that people would consider Jesus a great moral teacher, when we would regard as a lunatic extremist someone who followed his teachings. How can anyone be a disciple?

Reflecting on this sermon in the light of this past week's developments at the Old Meeting House, I see that my words about a challenge without a neat solution also apply to the church's current circumstances. It wasn't *voluntary* poverty, but we've lost our riches of Rona and Rameen in the space of a year, leaving us destitute, with the prospect of another long personnel search in a denomination decimated by defections. Talk about "dependence on God"—here we are. What do we do when the challenge appears beyond our resources; when, after the initial "we can do it" music fades, the outlook is daunting?

I believe there's a hopeful answer, but I also believe we're unable to hear it until we've been convinced that the old half measures, the old standard responses, won't do. I've deliberately provoked you this morning with one of Jesus' most radical demands, and the more uncomfortable you are, the readier you are to hear a note of God's grace, which I believe must be the final word of every story worth telling. That is the gospel, and the gospel, ultimately, is why we are here. In that spirit—and if it is not too presumptuous, in the style of Jesus—I will conclude with a parable, and let you work out your own meaning.

The Parable of the Long Jump Pit

Once upon a time, a group of about fifty people, in a dream or a vision, suddenly found themselves in a vast stadium filled with spectators. They were seated on the field, dressed in matching track suits: flimsy little shorts, lightweight running shoes, and tank tops with the name Jesus on the front. They were arranged in a kind of oval around a long jump pit and the runway leading to it. Naturally, they began to speculate about why they were there, dressed this way, facing a long jump pit. There was no coach in sight, although some vaguely recalled that they had once had a coach, and that he might come back. What should they do in the meantime?

One enterprising member of the group measured the pit, noted that it was thirty-five feet from the edge of the jumping board to the end of the sand, and said, "Wow, no one could ever jump that far; I recall that the World Record is 29' 4 ¾." What are we supposed to do? What's the point?" Discussion became animated, and factions developed.

The majority maintained that sitting in a circle like this was the point: they enjoyed a strong sense of community, they loved singing track songs, and they cared deeply for one another. Besides, they maintained, such a long pit could only be meant for professional jumpers, or Olympic champions from the past; as amateurs, they'd only make fools of themselves or risk injury, and get sand in their nice shoes.

Another group felt uneasy about this, thinking that the outfits, plus having the pit right in front of them, must imply some obligation to act. So, a member of that group drew two lines across the sand of the pit, one about four feet out and another about eight feet out, and said, "Let's give participation certificates to anyone who clears the first line, and gold medals to anyone who clears the second."

A third group thought the second group seemed more intent on rewards than the spirit of the thing. Therefore, they decided that they should do some stretching and stay *ready* to jump, in case the coach showed up and told them expressly to do so, and how, and when. Meanwhile, they committed themselves to jumping in their hearts, and they felt rather accomplished, in a spiritual kind of way.

One young man, a thoughtful type, decided that the whole situation would make an interesting book, so he headed for the Olympic library to do further research, carefully stepping around the sand pit. It was a pretty good book, if I do say so myself.

There were a few, however, who agreed, quietly and tentatively, that maybe they could try simply jumping as far as they could. They wouldn't get far, but maybe, they thought, with practice they might get better, and at least they'd be acting in a way that sort of matched their outfits. So, they jumped. And sure enough, they didn't get far, and they didn't get much better with practice.

But when the coach showed up, guess what happened? Wonder of wonders, he walked from the far end of the pit, into the sand, and caught in his arms those bad jumpers from that last group, one by one, just before they landed at whatever paltry distance they achieved, turned around and carried them the rest of the way, stooping and staggering under their weight, until he deposited each of them on the grass, which turned into a garden with a river flowing through it, beside which trees grew that were laden with fruit for the healing of the nations . . . and you know the rest of *that* story.

Follow-up Notes and Discussion Questions, “The Parable of the Long Jump Pit”

As I understand it, the meeting point of biblical ethics and theology, law and gospel, is simply this:

Only in our attempt to conform to God’s seemingly impossible expectations do we encounter God’s seemingly impossible grace. Obedience and growth on the one hand, and humility and gratitude on the other, require seeing the two in tension.

This statement may be amplified by explaining deviations from it [parable equivalents in brackets]:

To discount God’s expectations by limiting them to spiritual devotion is the contemporary Evangelical deviation, where God has become, for many, a cosmic dispenser of good feeling who expects nothing but affirmation of basic tenets of belief. [lounging in track suits, waiting for further instructions]

To discount grace in favor of obedience is generally the legalist deviation: the legalist must limit or redefine obedience to render it possible; while defining faith as behavior, the legalist functionally denies God’s grace. [different lines across the pit]

Both conservative and progressive Protestants may qualify as legalists to the extent that the former define faith in terms of particular moral and personal piety standards, while the latter define faith in terms of social action; both groups base their definitions on selective readings of the Bible while accusing the other of doing the same. [rival jumper groups]

To discount grace in favor of humanity’s goodness is Rousseau’s deviation, that people are good, improving, and don’t need God’s forgiveness or help. Jesus is merely a behavioral model who may inspire us to create our own expectations and find our own rewards. Generally, history has not been kind to Rousseau’s views. [not in the parable, but maybe these would wander off to create other sports—then cut off the heads of those “royalist” long jumpers]

Further questions to ponder:

How might OMH members process Rameen’s departure in terms of “somebody better out there *to be*”? Are we under any obligation to make ourselves more teachable or lead-able?

When Tom was explaining the various ways to explain Luke 14:33, did you find yourself hoping he’d offer a persuasive alternative to the literal approach? How do you interpret your own response?

In terms of the parable, rather than characterize the different groups as different faith traditions, how might they convey different responses for a single individual, perhaps at different times?

In terms of the parable, what would constitute an uncomfortable but appropriate form of “jumping” for you individually in response to any of Jesus’ radical demands?