

8.24.2025 St. Bartholomew the Apostle

When a person talks about having “skin in the game,” they’re usually expressing the thought of being personally and actively invested in something. This expression is often used in the business, financial, or political world to describe someone who is directly involved in a particular cause. Examples might include a hedge fund manager who invests a substantial amount of their own money right along with that of their clients, a business executive who makes decisions knowing that it’s not only other employees that could lose their job, but that their own career is on the line, or a politician who will be directly impacted by the policies they create or support. Now, when we say that a person has skin in the game, we all know that this is an idiomatic expression. This is figurative language that isn’t meant to convey the thought that someone has literally given their skin for the cause - unless of course, we’re talking about St. Bartholomew.

On the holy days in which we commemorate the Apostles and Martyrs, we’re reminded of those saints who died excruciatingly painful deaths because of their unwavering faith in Christ, and when it comes to the painful deaths of the martyred Apostles, I would suggest St. Bartholomew is at the top of the list. Tradition speaks of Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Simon the Zealot being crucified, Paul and James, the son of Zebedee, being beheaded, Matthew and Thomas dying by the sword, and James, son of Alphaeus being stoned and beaten. These martyred Apostles suffered in ways we can’t imagine, but the most common tradition associated with the saint we commemorate today, Bartholomew, indicates that he died by being skinned alive, and then crucified upside down.

The saints serve as our examples. In life, and in death. Writing to Christians, St. Paul declared, “*Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ*” (1 Corinthians 11:1), and today as we consider how to imitate the Christ-like example of St. Bartholomew, a man who literally put his skin in the game, the thought I would ask you to consider is this: Do you have skin in the game? As a disciple of our Lord, are you personally and actively invested in the Christian faith, not at the bargain price of an hour on Sunday, but at the cost of your life?

Christianity is costly, and the cost of discipleship is a recurring theme in the New Testament. In the pages of Scripture we find those who are willing to pay the price, and those who are not. For example, when Jesus proclaimed His gracious invitation to “*Come, follow Me,*” there were those like Peter and Andrew who “*immediately left their nets and followed Him,*” or James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who “*immediately left the boat and their father and followed Him*” (Matthew 4:19-22), or Matthew who gave up his seat as a wealthy tax collector “*and followed Him*” (Matthew 9:9). These disciples forsook all, they left everything behind to follow our Lord, but there were others who saw the cost of such immediate obedience as a price too high to pay.

There was the rich young ruler who Jesus loved, but went away sorrowful because he refused our Lord’s invitation to put his skin in the game by selling all he had, giving it to the poor, and following Him (Matthew 19:16-22). There were the examples Jesus provided for us in a parable, people who wouldn’t come to Christ because they were so personally and actively invested in this world - in the “*cares and riches and pleasures of this life*” (Luke 8:14). Jesus said that these were people who all began to make excuses, “*I have bought a field... I have bought five yoke of oxen... I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come*” (Luke 14:18-20). It appears as if they’d all put their skin in an earthly game, and therefore had no currency left to invest in the things of heaven.

Eternal life is free, it is the “*gift of God*” (Romans 6:23), but Christianity is costly, discipleship is demanding. Listen to the way Jesus described the demands of discipleship. When large crowds were following Him, He turned to them and said, “*Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple. Which of you, wishing to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost to see if he has the resources to complete it? Otherwise, if he lays the foundation and is unable to finish the work, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, This man could not finish what he started to build. Or what king on his way to war with another king will not first sit down and consider whether he can engage with ten thousand men the one coming against him with twenty thousand? And if he is unable, he will send a delegation while the other king is still far off, to ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any one of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be*

My disciple” (Luke 14:27-33).

Jesus told these parables about building and war to illustrate the great personal cost of discipleship, and the images presented in these stories quickly come to mind. Let’s consider the first, that of the builder who sits down and carefully counts the cost to see if they have all the necessary resources. Anyone who has set out to complete even a small building project knows that a builder must count the cost, because materials are expensive, quickly depleted, and the required physical resources are only the beginning. Often, the greatest expenses in building projects are the emotional demands, the “sweat equity,” and all the time and effort that’s required to bring it all to completion.

A wise builder will sit down and count the cost. A wise builder will carefully consider the amount of skin they’ll have in the game, the level of personal commitment and active investment that the endeavor will require, and if this is true when you’re working with concrete and steel, if it’s true of earthly things, then how much more is it true for the things of heaven? Jesus wants us to count the cost, not for this physical building, but instead for the temple God is building in us - where our soul dwells secure in the abiding presence of His Holy Spirit. Have you counted that cost? Do you have skin in that game? Are you personally and actively invested in the good work God is completing in you?

After sharing these parables about building and preparing for war, Jesus presented His listeners with a conclusion, and this conclusion serves as one of the two bookends that frame these parables. Our Lord began with the statement, “*Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple,*” and after using these stories to encourage His listeners to count the cost, Jesus concluded by saying, “*...any one of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple.*” The cost of discipleship is a loss of all things. St. Paul said it this way, “*I count all things as loss compared to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ*” (Philippians 3:8), and this is exactly what we recognize in the martyrdom of St. Bartholomew.

I’ll leave you with this image. Covering the wall behind the altar in the

Sistine Chapel is a huge fresco painted by Michelangelo titled, *The Last Judgment*. Our Lord is the central figure in this painting that depicts His Second Coming, and St. Bartholomew has a prominent position in this work. He is slightly below and to the right of Christ, and in one hand Bartholomew holds the instrument of his martyrdom, a knife, and in the other, he's holding his skin.

Jesus said to count the cost, and after doing so, Bartholomew literally put his skin in the game, he gave his skin for the cause of Christ. On this day that we commemorate his life and death and strive to follow his example, may we remember that the cost of discipleship is no less now than it was then, and may we, by the grace of God, find that cost, the loss of all things to gain Christ, to be a price we're willing to pay.