

"Setting Spiritual Priorities"
Luke 14:25-33

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It's been said of Jesus that when He met a person, it was as if that person were an island around which Jesus sailed until He found where the real need was, and there He landed.

In Luke's traveling narrative, which is our Scripture lesson today, Jesus turns to the large crowd that followed Him and poses a question: *If you set out to build a tower, should you not sit down first and count the cost?* Highly effective people begin with the end in mind.

Of course, Jesus is thinking more about discipleship than drainage ditches, more about spiritual equity than savings accounts but here at the height of His popularity, Jesus refuses to dilute discipleship into some wishy-washy, take-it-or-leave-it, cross-less Christianity. *If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him kiss family goodbye, shoulder a cross like a criminal, abandon his possessions and follow Me.* These are hard words, even heavy words--words that would radically alter our lives if we were to follow them.

So what does it mean to set spiritual priorities? When it comes to spiritual development, where does your real need lie? I want to pose those questions to you today.

The first reaction of the crowd that day had to be one of caution. When somebody says something as radical as Jesus has just said, you take a little time to think about it. Indeed, the crowd needed to think.

Upon approaching a little country store, a stranger noticed a

big sign that read, "Danger - Beware of Dog." Inside, the only dog the stranger could find was an old hound asleep on the floor. "Is this the dog that I'm supposed to beware of?" asked the stranger of the owner. "Yep--that's him," said the owner. "He certainly doesn't look very dangerous to me," continued the stranger, "why did you post a sign?" "Well," said the owner of the place, "before I posted a sign, people were continually tripping over him when they walked through the door!"

Culturally speaking, we have so tamed Christianity that it no longer has a bark, much a less a bite. Instead of being costly, we have made it convenient. Let's be honest. Christianity for many of us, is nothing more than a religious preference to be checked on an information form. "I like my coffee black, my wine white, my sex straight, my religion mild; anything else you want to know?" But Jesus will have nothing to do with this kind of discount discipleship. Rather than luring an unsuspecting crowd into an ill-considered commitment, He goes for full disclosure and the claims are radical, profound, overwhelming, and sobering. You cannot read this passage of scripture without shivering with the kind of demands He makes upon a human life. It's costly; indeed it is.

In the small town where I was first a pastor, I used to visit a friend of mine who ran a liquor store down on the corner. I'd go in to see him a couple of days a week as I walked downtown for a cup of coffee. I had a purpose in mind--I wanted to convince him of my Christ and invite him to church. One day, we were chatting as I sat at the counter. He said to me, "Howard, I don't want to offend you, but you're hurting my business. When people drive by and see you sitting at my counter, they won't stop." I said, "Lanny, I've got a deal for you. You meet me in church on Sunday morning and I'll quit meeting you at your liquor store during the week." I had a convert that very day! He ended up joining the church a few weeks later.

If you are here today, cautious about the Faith, concerned about commitment, hesitant about decision--Jesus says you ought to be. This is no casual, wishy-washy kind of invitation to life that we're posing today and if you need to think about it--take your time and ponder it.

For many in the crowd, it was caution at first sight. Others in the crowd were curious. Curiosity always draws a crowd, does it not? People love a show and the bigger the show, the better they like it. Tonight about 70,000 people will assemble at Adelphia Coliseum for the Titans' first home football game of the season. I love good football. I like to watch the plays, analyze the tackles, assess the calls, predict the strategy and pretend I'm a coach. But I've discovered something about professional football however, in this past year. The hype has very little to do with football and everything to do with the show. For some, it's excitement, a release of energy. For others, it's entertainment--a chance to be a part of a social environment and have fun. For others, it is a way to make money, big money. You can now buy a two-tiered Titans birdhouse for \$29.95 according to the paper yesterday. A box of Titans band-aids costs \$5.99. You can even own your own Titans lingerie for \$25.99. Everything's got Titans' something on it.

So Jesus says to this large crowd: I don't want to spoil your show but I need to tell you something. There's a real game going on down on the field and I invite you out of the stands and onto the field, but I need to tell you something. People get knocked around on the field. Players have to work hard and sacrifice alot to be a part of the team and I can't guarantee that you won't get hurt, but if you still want to play, come on to the field.

That's where it happens. Christianity is not a spectator sport. So if you're hanging around on the edges, attending, but not

involved; called, but not connected; present, but not a part of the play, then I suspect Jesus the Christ, is sailing around your life until He discovers where the real issue is, and there He lands saying, "Isn't it about time you came out of the stands and entered the game?"

There were other people there. Luke says the crowd was big. I suspect there was a group of people there who were directly connected with Jesus the Christ. The Connected have met the Master. They've dined at His table, tasted His grace, received His benefits, and seen His miracles. Their children have been blessed, their bodies have been healed, their hopes have been heightened and when Jesus scans the crowd and catches their eye, they nod at one another because they have been acquainted with each other before. The "connected" were there. They knew Him--indeed they did.

I was 11 years old when I first made my public Profession of Faith in Christ in a little country church. I was a part of the only Confirmation class that little church has ever had in its history. My mama said I was too young to know what I was doing. But no person could have been more sincere than I that day when I stood before a little, crippled preacher and said, "I confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and pledge my allegiance to His Kingdom." There was not much about God that I understood. I even understood less about myself. But of one thing I was certain that day, and that was I gave as much of myself as I understood, to as much of God as I could comprehend. I say to you today, forty-five years later, that is why I am here. Don't make light of those connecting moments in one's spiritual life.

For you who are trying to do the best that you can with the faith you have, Jesus is sailing around your life with a

question--you've come with Me this far, you've made these decisions, we've been acquainted--now I want to ask you something else--will you go with Me all the way? Would you dare take one more step on the road of discipleship?

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Sally is crawling across the floor when Lucy laments, "When will she ever learn to walk?" Linus replies, "Let her crawl. Once she starts walking, she's committed to it for the rest of her life." Jesus says to you and me, "Are you going to crawl or are you going to walk in your faith?" The "connected" were there.

But Jesus was pitching for something else that day. It is so clear in the text that you cannot get away from it. He was pleading and longing for those who would clearly and open-mindedly count the cost, step up to the plate and say, "I'm committed to it, whatever the price." The committed were there that day. Martin Luther once said, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

Did you hear about the Kamikaze pilot who flew 50 missions? He was involved, but not very committed. A wife watched her husband sucking in his stomach as he stood on the scales each morning. Finally, she said to him, "That's not going to help very much." He said to her, "It's going to help alot. It's the only way I can see the numbers on the scale." He was devoted, but not very committed.

Some years ago, the safety council ran an advertising campaign. It said, "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." But Jesus had another slogan. He said, "You seek to save your life, you'll lose it but if you'll lose your life for My sake, you will find it." So discipleship might be simply defined as understanding what Jesus wants and then daring to do it.

One of life's finest moments comes when we reach into an

unpredictable future and make a dependable promise of our present. The committed create an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty. Casual Christians say, "Help me, please." Committed Christians say, "Please let me help." Casual Christians say, "Bless me now," but committed Christians say, "Make me a blessing." Casual Christians say, "I did it my way," but committed Christians say, "I did it God's way." Casual Christians say, "Jesus goes with me, I'll take Him along in my bag," but committed Christians say, "I'll go with Jesus, let Him lead the way." That's the difference--do you understand?

Lyle Shaller, probably the greatest interpreter of Church life, looked down the road to the year 2050, and made this prediction for the mainline Church: "In the next fifty years, the proportionate rate of people who are deeply committed to their faith will at least double, but those who are lukewarm about their faith will dwindle in great numbers." Those who have made a choice somewhere to go with Him all the way, to walk into the depths of discipleship, are going to be the wave of the next generation; and those of us who want to play church, are just going to find something else to play for church won't be worth it. The committed were there that day.

I must suggest that there is one other group. They were what I call 'The Contagious.' 'The Cautious' were there. 'The Curious' were there. 'The Connected' were there. 'The Committed' were there, but there was another group. They were 'The Contagious' group. They were the little group of feeble disciples who were about to transform the world in their lifetime. It's incredible--absolutely incredible! The story of the early Church is absolutely incredible!

C. S. Lewis defined conversion as the good infection. If a tiny germ can spread illness, why can't a little good spread health? My dear friend, Ron Crandall, in his book, *Contagious Witness*, says it's time parents, especially fathers, realize their

tremendous importance in the faith development of their children. From thousands of interviews that his seminary students did, he comes to this conclusion: "A father's attendance at church is a key predictor of the future church participation of his children." It's the facts of life. How's the Church at your house?

This reminds me of the story of a Sunday school teacher who asked her elementary school students, "Where does God live?" After the usual answers of God lives in heaven or God lives in my heart, one little boy spoke up and said, "God lives in the bathroom at our house." The teacher says, "He lives in the bathroom?" "Yep, God lives in the bathroom. Every morning about 7:30, my daddy gets up, walks down the hallway, beats on the bathroom door where my sister is, and says, 'My God, are you still in there?'" Where does God live at your house?

Carol was a nurse at a large hospital. At a lunch break, she noticed a woman sitting alone at a table for 10, her head bent low over her tray. Carol walked over with her tray and said, "May I join you?" and Barb said, "Yes." In a matter of a few moments, Carol understood Barb's story. Her 55-year old husband was dying and they had no children, no close friends, and no family. All week, the two met at Carol's break and when Saturday came, Carol suddenly realized that they might never meet again. Carol said, "I won't be here tomorrow. I'm going to church with my family. Why don't you meet me there?" Barb did and years later in a small group Barb said to Carol, "Do you remember that day you sat down at my table? I saw God's Spirit resting on you and I knew God sent you to answer my prayer to die by bringing me a reason to live." Do you understand the power of a winsome invitation at the right time, at the right place, to the right person, for the right purpose?

Who are the people God has placed in your path who are

waiting for your word of invitation? We gave you a little card last week and I hope you are working on a list of two or three persons. Think about who the persons in your world are who are waiting for you to be a contagious Christian. It's been said of Jesus that when He met a person, it was as if that person was an island around which Jesus sailed until He discovered where the real problem was, and there He landed. What steps do you need to take to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ today? The living Christ is sailing around your life, seeking to land where the real need lies, and to empower you to take a step.

Amen.