

Counting the Cost

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, November 20th, 2011

“Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it – lest, after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish it, all who see it begin to mock him...” (Luke 14:28).

In the first place, this is reminiscent of something recorded earlier in Luke when the Lord had determined to go up to Jerusalem and confront His critics there. And someone said, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house,” to which He replied, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:61-62). The point is, when we start something we need to think it through, and be prepared to follow through.

We can see easily how this relates to our natural lives, and in particular to the life of the church, especially as we prepare to enter into a major building project *despite the fact that we are rather desperately short of funds to run our existing program*. And of course we *are* thinking this through, and we *do* intend to have a prudent plan in place before we start.

But the Lord’s words here were not meant to teach us principles of natural life. The fact is He was using well known, well understood principles of natural life to teach us something about *spiritual* life, and that is to consider carefully what we may have to sacrifice for a commitment to the Lord. After all, the passage actually begins this way: –

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

And this is something that we may not emphasize enough in this (or any congregation of this) church. Frankly, most of us are pretty comfortable. We live in a culture that is pretty comfortable. And we have certain expectations about how comfortable we should be. Even those of us who don’t have much money still have almost everything we really need: – running water, heat, electricity, reasonable housing, clothing, cars or trucks (or both), and yes, even basic medical care despite our own struggles to afford it. *Most* of us have big TV’s (which we *don’t* really need), cell phones, computers, magazine or newspaper subscriptions (some of which are free!), and a lot more things that are way beyond basic necessities.

It’s not that the Lord *literally* requires us to hate our families; this is clearly a statement He made to stress the relative value of what He offers compared to the value offered by anyone else, even those closest to us in this world. But more than that, our families of origin represent our hereditary inclinations, which all have to be set aside in favor of the enlightened principles the Lord reveals to us in His Word. This is consistent with what He also said in Matthew, quoting, incidentally, from the prophet, Micah (ch. 7, v. 6): –

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother *more than Me* is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter *more than Me* is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:34-38).

Another teaching that comes to mind in this vein is Matthew 6:24, where we read,

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon” (also in Luke 16:13).

Here again we see a well known and well understood natural principle applied by the Lord to spiritual life: “You cannot serve God and Mammon.” Mammon literally was the ancient Syrian God of riches, and so metaphorically this refers to wealth or riches themselves.

But it’s not just extravagant riches that the Lord warns us about. In the Sermon on the Mount, as we all know perfectly well, He refers to the basic necessities of food, drink and clothing, unequivocally teaching that we must “seek first the kingdom of God and His justice,” and then “all these things” will be added to us (Matthew 6:33). But what *are* all these things?

Just as our families of origin represent spiritual states, so the food, drink and clothing the Lord referred to represent the spiritual benefits that come to us when we look first to the Lord. Food is the goodness of His love, drink is the truth of His Word, and clothing is the truth as we adapt it for use. These are the real essentials of life, as anyone who doesn’t feel genuine love or know the truth can testify. But what we often forget is that these things come only from the Lord, and so if we don’t follow Him we can easily miss out. More about this a little later...

Now the challenge is to see what the Lord really means by “counting the cost” to follow Him. For there IS a cost, both naturally and spiritually, and we need to understand it.

First and most obviously, we need to be prudent. No one hanging by a rope from a great height would be wise to let go unless he could be reasonably sure that some one or some thing would prevent him from coming crashing down. The Lord Himself told His disciples to be as wise (or prudent) as serpents, and even in one case to “make friends of the mammon of injustice!” (Luke 16:9). But here of course mammon represents spiritual riches, so we read,

“...in the spiritual sense by the mammon of injustice are meant *the rational conceptions of truth and good* possessed by the wicked, which they employ solely to acquire for themselves dignities and wealth. It is *these knowledges* of which the good or the children of light are to make themselves friends, and which shall receive them into everlasting habitations” (DP 250:5).

And we are clearly taught in the heavenly doctrines that we do need to look out for ourselves –

“For unless anyone provides himself with the necessities of life, he cannot be in a position to exercise charity, being himself in want of everything” (NJHD 97).

But it’s a case of what’s most important. We look to our own health and welfare *so that we can serve others*, and ultimately so that we can serve the Lord. If we serve Him for our own sake, giving only in order to get, then our whole world is upside down.

So what is it, really, that we have to *give up* for the Lord? What is the personal cost of following Him? Can we be clear about this?

Well, for one thing, there is our intellectual pride and all the cultural influence that goes with it. Stepping away from that and making a commitment to something we do not *fully* understand is extremely difficult for most of us. And it becomes all the *more* difficult if what we’re committing to is overlaid with traditions and interpretations that don’t seem very helpful or don’t square with our experience. But the Lord doesn’t ask us to take a blind leap into some dark abyss. As we’ve already noted He is constantly using metaphors and symbols drawn from ordinary life to illustrate the challenges and the benefits of following Him.

And in that vein it’s worth noting that almost anything we learn for the first time requires some discipline or commitment before we can fully appreciate it. Math, physics, engineering, law, biology, or even musicianship come to mind. We have to *study and practice* these things before we can really realize their benefits. And so it is with the gospels or the heavenly doctrines. A passing acquaintance or a superficial reading won’t bear much fruit.

We have to do some work. We have to leave the comfort of our pre-conceptions, give up the fantasies of self-love, let go a little of our worldly ambitions, and think about eternal life. Indeed, the Lord says, we have to leave our whole original life behind, that is, the life of our inherent inclinations, and get a *new, better* life from Him.

What does this mean? Well, in addition to the intellectual and emotional sacrifices we will also have to make some material sacrifices. We’ll have to spend TIME, and inevitably MONEY that we might have spent elsewhere, to secure the opportunities we need to learn and practice the laws of spiritual life. This may include participating in church functions, and more particularly supporting the church financially since it is the primary means of promoting the love and wisdom of the Lord. It may include mixing with people we may not naturally like and doing things that we find tedious at first because they aren’t what we’d be inclined to do when left to ourselves. But this is all part of the practice, part of the exercise of *living* our faith in charity among others.

We may have to endure the cynicism of friends and the criticism of colleagues, the inconvenience of co-operation with others and the confusion or doubt that inevitably attends any new commitment. In short, we may experience real poverty and deprivation as we move from a naturally focused life to a spiritually focused life. (I know I do; and why should any of us expect otherwise?) But in the end, when it comes to material stuff, we can’t take it with us when we die, or even when we grow old, so we might as well learn how to enjoy a spiritual life.

And here’s the thing. Ultimately the financial cost of our commitment to the Lord is NOT what really matters – not to Him and not to us. Of course it matters to the church, but that’s another

story. (He doesn't need the money and up to a point neither do we, but giving freely to the church is one way of following His example, contributing to His work.) The point is, all that *He* gives He gives *freely*, without reservation, without the expectation of any benefit to Him. After all, He is perfect, that is, complete in Himself; He needs nothing from us, any more than gravity or space or sunlight needs anything from us. In fact we really don't *have anything* we can give Him that would begin to pay for what He provides. Rather what is needed is for us to *receive* what He gives, and the more consciously we do so the more blessed we will be (AC 5957).

All this connects directly with something in Isaiah – which seems at first like a contradiction of our theme but actually (as you would expect) reinforces it. We read,

“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have *no money*, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk *without money* and *without price*. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you – the sure mercies of David” (Isaiah 55:1-3).

The money in these verses literally is silver, which is a symbol for the very truth of the Word that can enrich our spiritual lives, *but which we do not have until we come to Him and get it*. And the *wages* referred to are not really wages at all but the labor that earns them, so a better translation would be something like “Why do you *labor* for that which will not satisfy?” If we don't feed the soul no amount of natural nourishment will bring happiness, but if we **DO** then the Lord will show us what we need on all levels, as well as what we *don't* need so that we can do without it.

Next Thursday is Thanksgiving, and on that day we will be considering the benefits of giving thanks to the Lord for everything – even for the painful things that challenge us to go to higher level of life, leaving various worldly things behind. But in conclusion *today* we may well ask, what about the person who does NOT acknowledge the Lord and who does not turn to Him for spiritual life? Is he condemned? Does the Lord write him off? Of course not! As already mentioned He gives everything freely, without qualification. And He is subtle! So a person can receive *and share* His blessings even without knowing where they come from. It's just that the more we know the more we can receive, and the more we receive the more we can know the incredible wonder of His infinite love.

Now in conclusion, recall the children's lesson. The cost of following the Lord, the *price we pay is the effort we make* both to get and to honor the knowledge that comes from Him in our lives. And we should pay this price willingly, just as David did, saying “Nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

Amen

Lessons: 2 Samuel 24:18-25
 Children's talk on making our offering to the Lord
 Luke 14:25-33 and Arcana Caelestia #4599:5