

JESUS' THIRD LESSON ON THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

By Paul Penno Jr.

June 13, 2012

JESUS FELT THE TREMENDOUS TEMPTATION OF HIS GREAT POPULARITY. Should He ride the crest of the wave that was mounting upward, bearing Him prominently to the pinnacle of national prestige and influence?

Or should He arrest the movement of popularity by solemnly announcing the real truth of His Messianic message—His coming sacrifice on the cross?

This was no mystic secret reserved for the inner circle of a few close disciples. At the height of His ministry when “great multitudes went with Him,” He boldly proclaimed to them all the same testing truth. Luke reveals how He chose to present it with ultra simple realism to the startled ears of the “great multitude”:

“And He turned, and said to them, ‘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 disciples. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciples.’”

Luke 14:25-27.

It was as if He said, I am glad to see you following Me; but are you really sure this is your heart's choice? I must be plainly honest with you. I am indeed the Messiah, but not the one of popular hopes and expectations. I am indeed going to the

kingdom of heaven, but mark you, My route lies via the cross. If you follow Me, you must of necessity accept My route. Many will at some future time mistake the god of this world for the Christ; I must ensure now that you do not mistake the Christ for the god of this world.

IT REQUIRES RARE PREACHING, SELDOM HEARD TODAY, TO LEAVE THE HEARERS THUS FREE TO DECIDE.

But Jesus had no fear of the multitudes. He had faithfully preached the truth—so faithfully, in fact, that His path was leading Him directly to His own death. Why then need He fear to present the cross to the multitudes and to call for their decision? Only the man who himself bears the cross dare summon others to do so. What need had Christ to resort to any psychological subterfuge? The way of the cross had delivered Him from any such helpless vanity.

Since it is clear that a decision to accept the gospel is a decision to accept the cross, and since that decision can be made only by the inner heart of hearts, it follows that there must be no confusing pressure in true soul-winning work. Simple truth needs no alluring embellishments to make it attractive to the honest heart.

In fact, such embellishments serve only to repulse the sincere seeker for truth who fails to discern the voice of the True Shepherd in the confusing appeals to “self” voiced by the would-be soul winner. Psychological tricks and egocentric inducements to “decision” can be the tool only of one who knows not the strength of the cross.

The reason the cross is the “power of God unto salvation” is that love alone has true drawing power. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.” Jeremiah 31:3. George Mattheson, author of the beautiful hymn “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” has made the following apt comment:

“I understand the word ‘drawn’ to be used here as of the opposite of ‘driven.’ I take the meaning to be: ‘It is because I love you that I do not force you; I desire to win by love.’ Love is incompatible with the exercise of omnipotence. Inexorable law can rule the stars; but the stars are not an object of love. Man is an object of love, and therefore he can only be ruled by love, as the prophet puts it, ‘drawn.’ Nothing is a conquest for love but the power of love, of drawing. Omnipotence can subdue by driving, but that is not a conquest for love; it is rather a sign that love is baffled.

“Therefore it is that our Father does not compel us to come in. He would have us drawn by the beauty of holiness; therefore He veils all that would force the will. He hides the glories of heaven. He conceals the gates of pearl and the streets of gold. He reveals not the river of His pleasures. He curtains from the ear the music of the upper choir. He obscures in the sky the

sign of the Son of man. He forbids the striking of the hours on the clock of eternity. He treads on a path of velvet lest the sound of His coming footsteps should conquer by fear the heart that ought to be won by love.”—*Thoughts for Life’s Journey*, pages 70, 71.

CHRIST WOULD RATHER *DRAW* BY THE CROSS THAN *DRIVE* BY THE CROWN.

The converts who come by way of the cross are those whom the Father draws. In His mysterious process of drawing, He doesn’t want mere lip servers, but disciples who will *follow* the Lamb wherever He goes. The power of the drawing is in the truth, for Christ is the Truth. If truth is made unmistakable, the power will prove to be invincible. Another way of saying the same thing is that the truth-seeker and truth are made for each other and when they meet, like Crazy Glue they unite.

On the other hand, the use of psychological and emotional techniques designed to force “decision” may attract an entirely wrong class of adherents who are neither disciples nor followers of the Lamb. If “decision” is secured on the basis of naked self-interest, it cannot be of faith. And “whatever is not of faith is sin.” Romans 14:23. In the resultant confusion, the True Shepherd’s “sheep” may be turned away completely because “they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” John 10:5. This may be one reason why sometimes so few people respond to gospel invitations.

Putting a stumbling block before Christ's "little ones" is surely sin. But Jesus said that His own sheep hear His voice. "The sheep follow Him, for they know His voice." "My own know Me, as the Father knows Me and I know the Father." John 10:3, 4, 14, 15, RSV. Those "other sheep" of Christ's fold therefore need not be *persuaded* to accept gospel truth; once the truth (made known by the voice of Christ) is clearly presented to them, no power in earth or hell can possibly *dissuade* them from following that Voice!

The winsomeness is in the truth itself because love and truth are inseparable. He who thinks he is speaking right doctrine but does not speak in love cannot be speaking truth.

CAN THE LOVE OF SELF ALSO INCLUDE LOVE OF FAMILY?

If Jesus' words to the multitudes sound a bit hard, we must know that He was not teaching an attitude of harsh, unfeeling hatred toward one's loved ones in the family circle. The biblical meaning of the word "hate" is to love less in comparison.

An illustration of what He meant can be found in His attitude toward His own mother and relatives. He tenderly loved His mother, even in His desperate hour on the cross was thoughtful of her needs. His was a perfect example of filial devotion. However, He would permit no family tie, however intimate, to lessen His devotion to all suffering, needy members of the human family.

On one occasion while He was helping the multitudes, His relatives arrived: "Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach

Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, 'Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You.' But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it." Luke 8:19-21.

Here was no spurning of the tender affections of kin, but rather a recognition that these affections must not become perverted through a failure to love *all* needy members of the human family. It is a deep lesson that many of us need to grasp, who instinctively feel that our charity can be confined within the narrow walls enclosing precious kinfolk or close friends.

Love of family and pride of blood can be a very difficult form the "old man" assumes. When God calls us to do something or to go somewhere for Him, and we say No because of the ties of kinship that bind us, here is the "old man" alive and well. Love for those who *potentially* will "hear the word of God, and do it" will prevail even as Jesus heeded the call to come to save us. But when a call comes to leave father, mother, brother, sister, and other cherished ties of the homeland, to go to a distant land in service for Christ, "self" often protests. Seldom is it seen that rejection of duty is a rejection of the cross.

JESUS' ENTIRE LIFE WAS DEVOTED TO SERVICE, EVEN FROM CHILDHOOD.

It was His to "taste" all the suffering and privation that we humans can know. Although many rejected Him, there were those who listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and were drawn to Him. And there

were worshipers of “self” who belonged to Satan’s kingdom who did not respond to the drawing. Eventually all would show on which side they stood. And thus throughout time everyone passes judgment on himself.

There will be a day of final judgment when every lost person will understand why he is “outside.” In the final encounter, as on a screen, the cross will be presented, and its real bearing will be seen by every mind that has been blinded by sin. When the lost see Calvary with its mysterious Victim, sinners will condemn themselves. People will see what their final choice has been.

If we refuse a call to difficult service for our Master because of love of family or for other selfish reasons, there can be no lighter sentence awaiting us eventually than if we reject Bible truth for similar excuses. In either case it is the cross which is being rejected rather than either doctrine or service.

THERE IS A “PRICE” TO PAY IN BUILDING CHARACTER.

In explaining the cross to the multitudes Jesus used three simple illustrations.

(1) The first shows the need for counting the cost before one professes the building of Christian character. The price to be paid is the bearing of the cross:

“If one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and figures out what it will cost, to see if he has enough money to finish the job. If he doesn’t, he will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see

what happened will make fun of him. ‘This man began to build but can’t finish the job!’ they will say.” Luke 14:28-30, TEV.

There was something decidedly attractive in the teaching of Christ. Its appeal was phenomenal. But Jesus saw that this very appeal, in the warmth of its rushing tide, might sweep the emotions into impulsive beginnings of character-building which would bring shame if left unfinished. The irresistible rush of enthusiastic devotion will be needed later when the cost has been counted and accepted. *For the cross is the cross.*

Accept the “price” first; *then* let the tide of emotional appeal reinforce the consecration. Understand at the outset, Jesus said in effect, that the cross on which self is crucified is the price for the building of any useful and enduring Christian character. Failure to count the cost of surrender to the cross brings a disgraceful failure to reach the proper heights of Christian character. An unfinished “tower” can result only in the grief of heaven, the scornful derision of the world, and a painful shame of disillusionment for the builder.

How often has the world laughed at the inconsistencies of professed followers of the Lamb. Perhaps the early enthusiasm gave promise of a wonderful edifice to be erected. After the early difficulties with gross evils such as drunkenness, tobacco, sensuality, and the like, it is assumed that the work will be carried on to completion.

But there comes a time when subtle evils impede further progress. Gradually the “workmen” on the

“tower” are withdrawn, and the heart is left an unfinished temple marred with deficiencies, unsightly in its deformity. Pride, evil temper, catty impatience, pious selfishness, uncharitable judgment, peevishness, envy—these constitute the ruins of an unfinished character. “All who see what happened will make fun of him. “This man began to build but can’t finish the job!” Christ is dishonored in His professed follower.

The “builder” himself can miss out on both worlds through a failure to reckon the true cost of Christian experience. A painful sense of futility comes to anyone who has used all his resources in a half-finished building program. Few have the courage to tear down the unfinished “tower” that the embarrassment of failure might be hidden through ceasing to profess Christ. Most are content, like survivors in bombed houses, to dwell in the dismal rubble, hoping that sometime resources for the completion of the “tower” will be miraculously forthcoming. Such hopes are doomed to ultimate disappointment unless we here and now assess the cost and surrender to its payment.

When the “tower” of Christlike character is properly finished, the world will see it and marvel. There can be no power more effective for the finishing of the gospel commission in the earth than the finishing of that work in our own hearts.

MEASURING THE STRENGTH OF THE ENEMY, AS IN WAR.

(2) The second illustration Jesus gave was that of the unequal battle:

“If a king goes out with ten thousand men to fight another king who comes against him with twenty thousand men, he will sit down first and decide if he is strong enough to face that other king. If he isn’t, he will have to send messengers to meet the other king to ask for terms of peace while he is still a long way off. In the same way,’ concluded Jesus, ‘none of you can be My disciple unless he gives up everything he has.’” Luke 14:31-33, TEV.

Solemn words!

Human nature sees the futility of a king seeking battle with an army twice as strong as his own. Any king with sense would send messengers to seek out the best terms possible, salvage as much of the original kingdom as he could, and then abandon the rest. The invader dictates the terms he will impose and sets the new boundaries. On one side he sets up his new kingdom; on the other, the overmastered king will dwell with his trembling subjects, trying vainly to keep up a pretense of the old glory and power, while his independence is gone.

Jesus was here illustrating the solemn truths of the cross.

In effect, He was saying: Do not underestimate the strength of the enemy with whom you strive, namely, the “old man,” or “self.” If your will to crucify self is only half as strong as the will of the “old man” to live, you must be reduced to the

pitiable recourse of seeking a truce. Better have the courage to forsake all. Only thus can you defeat the enemy. Be My disciple in truth, and rejoice in your freedom and victory.

BUT HOW MANY MAKE A TRUCE WITH THE ENEMY!

The heart is divided with a boundary. Feebly, a show of loyalty is kept up by attendance at divine worship, tithing, and participation in some Christian endeavor of good works. The boundary divides the kingdom of the “old man” from that of his puppet. The “old man” dwells on one side, the halfhearted Christian on the other. There are occasional border incidents, for it is a kind of armed frontier. The soul cannot rest. But if one is unwilling to risk an all-out engagement, he must dwell side by side with the enemy.

Jesus’ apt illustration shows the Laodicean condition of lukewarmness. It is a state neither radiantly alive, nor dead, but in between—pitifully weak; neither hot nor cold, lukewarm.

WE CANNOT FOREVER REMAIN IN SUCH TEPID DEVOTION.

Eventually reality must be faced. We come to the point of decision, the dividing of the ways. We must choose one of two roads—one leading back to Egypt and apostasy, the other leading by way of the cross to the sunlit plains of the heavenly Canaan and eternal victory. Which will we choose?

Patience and so-called balance can be overdone in our time of crisis. The former can degenerate into cowardice, and the latter, when thermostatic, can be most disappointing to our Saviour. He knew no

lukewarm “balance” in His love which drove Him to His cross. “My devotion to Your house, O God, burns in Me like a fire,” He says. John 2:17, TEV. Peter Marshall prayed, “While time is running out, save us from patience which is akin to cowardice. Give us the courage to be either hot or cold, to stand for something, lest we fall for anything.”

THERE IS A HIDDEN ELEMENT OF VALUE.

(3) The third illustration Jesus gave about the cross is striking in its simplicity:

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It is no good for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown away.”

Luke 14:34, 35, TEV.

Christianity is good. But if that Christianity has lost the principle of the cross, what is it good for? It is fit only for what is happening to it in many parts of the world. It is not execrated, cast on the “manure pile” through persecution and violent opposition; nor yet is it valued as the world’s only vital preservative as it should be. It is merely ignored, trodden underfoot, “thrown away.”

Those good people who comprise the church of Jesus are indeed the salt of the earth. But the saltiness which alone can cause them to preserve the world from spoiling prematurely must be seen for what it is. Moral rot will corrupt the whole world unless that saltiness is in God’s people. What is needed is the preaching, and the living of the principle of the cross!

Solemnly Jesus warned the chosen people of His day of the danger of their not discerning a hidden

lack in their work for their world. To the outward eye and touch, whole mountains of salt may appear beautiful, glistening white, and genuine. Enraptured souls may exclaim regarding the marvelous potential of such an abundance of “salt” for salting the needy earth. But an increase in volume and weight of such salt is no increase to its saltiness. Numerical and statistical increases to the church do not necessarily make her any more the “salt of the earth.” Tons upon tons of salt that has lost its savor is worth less than a cup of truly salty salt.

There were neither refrigerators nor ice storage facilities in the world of Jesus two millennia ago. Salt was used as the preservative for meat and fish. A shipment packed in saltless salt spoiled. The spoilage process in the moral and spiritual health of our world today is plain for anyone to see and feel for himself. Brutal ethnic cleansing and genocides are terrifying. Crime, the inroads of loveless infidelity, the corruption of human morality, the steady degeneration of physical and mental vitality—all are alarming evidence that our sinful world is spoiling like rotten fish on the way to market.

It was never God’s plan that the world spoil for want of salty salt to preserve it. He never intended that the work of His followers should be made so difficult in these last days. The final conflict between Christ and Satan could take place without the need for moral and spiritual values to degenerate to the place that multitudes become unable to comprehend the gospel sufficiently to accept or reject it intelligently.

In His love and mercy, God intends that His last message to the world shall be considered thoughtfully and freely by a world population capable of *intelligent* acceptance or rejection. In His providence His people are scattered all over the world among many nations, tongues, and peoples. Their living the principles of the cross, with their proclamation of its message, is to be a preservative salt to a society that will otherwise spoil to a desperate degradation without it.

But let us take heart. The world will surely listen to the message of the cross when presented in its “high-fidelity” truth. Even the obvious fact that much preaching is ignored can be a cause for encouragement, for it is not genuine Christianity that the world so ignores, but merely the crossless imitation of it. No *salty* salt is ever “trodden underfoot.” It will be accepted vigorously, or rejected vigorously.

So it was in the days of Christ and His apostles; and so will it be until history ends.

Jesus concluded His sermon to the multitudes: “Listen, then, if you have ears!”