

"IF"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 27, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

A Sunday school teacher was telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus. There sat Lazarus outside the rich man's gate covered with sores and begging for food.

Passing by without even seeing Lazarus was the rich man. But then they both died and Lazarus went to heaven, while the rich man found himself in less desirable circumstances, which the teacher described most graphically.

When she had finished, she asked the children, "Which would you rather be -- the rich man or Lazarus?" One little fellow answered, "I would like to be the rich man until I die and then Lazarus afterwards".

He was expressing the desire of most of us. We want it both ways. We want our cake and eat it, too!

DEVELOPMENT

I want to draw your attention to a very small word with some very big implications. It is found in the 23rd verse of the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel. It is the diminutive but decisive word, "IF".

"If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."

I want to ask you to consider making a choice this morning. Choices are nice to make. Pity the poor person who has no choice.

A young man was trying to convince his sweetheart to marry him. She continued to resist him. Finally he said, "Honey, is there anyone else?" She replied in a tone of desperation, "There must be." Surely she could do better, she was thinking to herself. It is important for us to believe that we do have a choice.

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No matter who the person was, this was the rule. Soon people were using the expression, "Hobson's choice" which really means, no choice at all.

Sometimes life does throw us, "Hobson's choice". Circumstances can sometimes limit our choices, though this is not always so.

Two men bumped into each other one day in a railway station in Austria. One was an alcoholic, begging for enough money to buy one more bottle of wine. The other man asked him how he got in that condition - existing from one drink to another. The beggar responded that from the beginning, the cards of life had been stacked against him. His mother had died when he was very young; his father had beaten him and his brothers and sisters mercilessly. Then World War I came along and the family was separated. "You see", explained the beggar, "I never had a chance. If you had grown up as I did, you would be this way, too."

The other man replied,

"This is very strange. The truth of the matter is that my background is similar to yours. I, too, lost my mother when I was young. My father was also a brutal man, often beating me and my brothers and sisters. The war also separated me from my family. However, I felt I had no choice but to try to overcome these circumstances rather than being overcome by them."

And as the two men continued their conversation they made a remarkable discovery. They were, in fact, blood brothers, long separated by the trauma of war! Two human beings came out of the identical set of circumstances, yet one ended with a life of despair. I suspect that our most powerful ally in difficult circumstances is simply the realization that we can choose how we react.

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Certainly the most important choice in life is no Hobson's choice. God has granted us the freedom to choose Christ or to reject Him. "If...anyone...would come after Me..." There it is. No force is involved, simply a decision.

And some of us don't like decisions! Right? A mother took her three kids into the Ice Cream Parlor for an ice cream cone. The man behind the counter asked, "Chocolate or vanilla?" The mother asked, "Why don't you have more flavors?" He responded, "Lady...if you only knew...HOW MUCH TIME it takes some people to make up their minds between chocolate and vanilla, you'd never have another flavor!"

Perhaps you can sympathize with the owner of a small motel in a sparsely populated area in the southwest. A recent graduate of a business school...eager to show off a bit of his new learning...was staying in the motel. "How's business?" he asked the owner. "Not very good" the tired-looking man answered. "Well...what's your next step?" asked the business major. "What's your plan to rectify the situation?" "Well" said the owner drily,

"I've never made enough in this business to stick with it, but I've never lost enough to get out of it...and I'm sort of hoping to do one or the other this year."

Some of us have been there and it's tough to decide. I think it was Yogi Berra who once said, "When you come to the fork in the road...take it!"

It may be that someone here today is standing at a fork in the road...wondering. You may never have really made up your mind, too, about Jesus. Oh...you've admired His great teaching. You want your children to learn about Him in Sunday School. You have no question about His moral superiority over every man or woman who has ever lived. But you have never been able to say with Simon Peter,

"You are the Christ - the Son of the living God!"

You have never made Him the Lord of your life. Our Scripture lesson for this day offers you a choice - a decision for you to make. "If anyone would be My disciple..." Not an admirer, but disciple. Not a fan, but a faithful follower. Not a Church member, but a bearer of the cross.

BEARING THE CROSS

Now this is not a decision to be made lightly. Let me put it this way. Bearing the cross is not the same thing as wearing a cross. Pardon an illustration that you may feel is a bit crude, but I want to drive home the seriousness of this distinction.

There's a story going around about a woman who, on a trip to China, bought an old medallion which she liked so well she began to wear it almost constantly about her neck. Its bizarre and striking design always gave rise to some good conversation and the woman became so fond of it she adopted it as her "good-luck" charm.

As a recent diplomatic dinner in Washington she met the Chinese Ambassador who, she noticed, was observing the medallion with a faint smile on his lips. "Have you seen one of these before, Mr. Ambassador" the lady inquired. He admitted that he had and promptly changed the subject. "Would you be so kind as to translate the inscription on it?" the lady asked. The Ambassador said that he would rather not. But the lady insisted. "Very well, madam" he said at last with great reluctance. "It says, 'Licensed Prostitute, City of Shanghai'". Boy, was she ever embarrassed. Here she had been wearing this medallion with no hint, no idea of an understanding of what it signified.

I have no right to judge what is in the heart of any other person. I know that. But there are some people who should not wear a cross on their necklace. They have no more idea what that cross signifies than did that lady with her beautiful medallion.

And in case you think that I am overstating this matter, note this from one of our church journals. It seems that a Denver woman told her pastor of a recent experience that she felt was typical of the time in which we live. She was in a jewelry store looking for a necklace and said to the clerk, "I'd like a gold cross". And the man behind the counter looked over the stock on the display case and said, "Do you want a plain one, or one with a little man on it?" Now if that doesn't make you laugh, it will make you cry. Bearing a cross is not the same as wearing a cross.

BEARING A CROSS HAS TO DO WITH CENTERING ALL ON HIM

Bearing a cross has to do with centering all of our thoughts, our dreams, our aspirations on Him who loved us so much that He gave Himself in our behalf.

Wearing a cross might be an important witness for some people...or even an important reminder. There is nothing wrong with wearing a cross. But bearing a cross has to do with a total commitment of all we are and all we hope to be in the service of One who created us and died for us.

William Kelly was an outstanding scholar, a student of the Bible, and a devoted follower of the Lord. He was once offered a position at Trinity College in Dublin - a position that would have brought him prestige and privilege. He was not interested. Those who made the offer asked him, "Mr. Kelly, aren't you interested in making a name for yourself in the world?" To which William Kelly answered, "Yes, gentlemen...but which world." William Kelly understood what it is to bear the cross.

A novice painter had just completed a truly lovely landscape. Her family lavishly praised her work, but a wise uncle shook his head from side to side as he looked at the painting. "You don't like it?" asked the young artist?

"Oh, I like it, all right...but it's not going to last... your picture has two centers of interest - see, a large tree there, and a snow-capped mountain there. In time, people will be confused about the focus of your picture's subject, and even you will begin to dislike it. No work of art endures when there is more than one center of interest."

And no life endures with more than one center of interest. "No man can serve two masters..." Some of you in business or education are probably familiar with the name of Vilfredo Pareto. Pareto, a mathematician, sociologist, and economist of the 1800s, gave us the 80 / 20 rule. Pareto theorized that in any given group there are relatively few "significant" items, and that attention must be placed on these if maximum results are to be expected. His conclusion was that 80 per cent of the results will come from 20 per cent of the event. For instance, an insurance company discovered that 80 per cent of its income came from 20 per cent of its clients. A manufacturing firm realized that 80 per cent of its sales was coming from 20 per cent of its product line.

And my guess would be that in any given organization, including the Church, 20 per cent of the people end up doing 80 per cent of the work. So I put the question on your heart this morning: where are you - in the 80 percent or the 20 per cent. Pareto's work helped many people set priorities for their lives. The Gospel tells us there is only one priority:

"If anyone would come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me..."

There it is. If you're resting there in that 80 per cent, you may be facing something of a decision. Do we really want to follow the Master? Do we really want to live the Christ life? Or do we want to go on as we always have..living primarily for ourselves, with little thought to God's over-arching purpose for our lives? Think about it...

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

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'So why wait? Now is the day for a decision. Now is the
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PRAYER Help us to follow closely in the steps of the Master, more ready to
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PASTORAL PRAYER: June 25, 1989

ETERNAL SPIRIT....Thou who hast taught us that in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength, make us to know that Thou art with us...and that with Thee all things are possible.

TOUCH THOU our lives, we pray that:

Our spirits may grow calm.
Our minds may be disciplined.
Our homes may be holy.
Our pleasures may be pure.

HELP US, LORD, to carry into the everydayness of our lives all that to which we aspire in this time of worship.

When we are discouraged, help us to carry on.
When we are fearful, increase our trust.
When we are wronged, help us to forgive.
When we are sorrowful, bring comfort to our hearts.
When we are successful, keep us humble.

RENEW OUR STRENGTH and our perspective in this time of prayer. Help us to see life from higher ground. Send us forth as loyal servants of Christ to do what we can to help others who may be imprisoned by life's experiences.

WE PRAY for the sick,
the tempted,
the lonely,
the anxious,
the bereaved.

Strengthen us in our concern and determination to do what we can to improve conditions in the world, to bring peace into those places where tension and friction and violence now exist. And finally,

"Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee more faithfully,
To give - and not to count the cost;
To fight - and not to heed the wounds;
To toil - and not to seek for rest;
To labor - and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do thy will."

All this we ask in the strong name and the loving spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.