

DID YOU ASK HOW MUCH IT WAS GOING TO COST

It is said that Jay Leno of the TONIGHT show is a genuinely nice guy. When Leno returned from entertaining troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, he brought with him a list of two hundred telephone numbers of parents of troops in that war. Leno called all two hundred parents personally to say that he'd seen their sons and that they were fine. Leno will even stop on the freeway to help a stranded motorist. Recently, in fact, he pulled over for a group of men standing around an old Cadillac. He offered the use of his car phone so they could call for help. The men took advantage of his offer. They called home to El Salvador. Leno didn't find out until he got his bill.

Of course, Jay Leno can easily afford a call to El Salvador. Most of us probably should think twice before offering the use of our phone to a stranger. Our generosity might cost us dearly. How many of us have been burned sometime in our lives because we didn't ask the cost before we made a commitment?

Jesus knew that people make that kind of mistake sometimes. They get caught up in a movement without thinking where their involvement is leading. He knew people sometimes leap before they look. Such people are unlikely to stay with the program very long. Their commitment will always remain superficial. He decided it was time to begin the process of separating the wheat from the chaff.

There was a large crowd following him as usual. After all, he was the hottest ticket in town. But many were following him out of mere curiosity or because they had nothing better to do. He was not interested in that. Jesus didn't want spectators. He wanted disciples. He didn't want gawkers. He wanted people who were willing to put their life on the line. He decided to put them to the test. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself," Jesus said to the multitude, "cannot be my disciple." Wow! Strong words! What does he mean, "hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself?" Then Jesus went on. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." What does he mean, carry a cross? The crowd was surely baffled. Only criminals carried crosses. Then while the crowd was digesting what he had said thus far, Jesus added: "For which of you intending to build a tower does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'this fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Of course, Jesus was not talking about building towers at all. He was talking about building lives. He knew that some of the people who were following him had no idea what they were getting into. They were caught up in his works of healing. They were fascinated by the interesting stories that he told. They liked

hearing him tweak the Pharisees from time to time. They didn't know what following him would one day entail. The words "hate your father and your mother" were probably hyperbole, but Jesus knew that there would come a time when people would be disowned by their families because they followed him. People would lose their property because they followed him. Many would even lose their lives because they followed him. To follow Jesus was not small decision. It was no Sunday afternoon diversion, no harmless but satisfying hobby. It cost people everything they had. Jesus wanted the multitude to think through the possible consequences before they made a commitment.

For you see, following Christ is a call to commitment. When you were baptized you were not simply joining a social club. You were not merely joining another organization. Not if you took your vows seriously. To be a baptized member of Christ's body is to be crucified with him. It is to stake your life and everything you have on his call to service. It is to make a decision about your priorities in life. Christ first, everything else second. It is a call to commitment. It is a call to make a decision about who Christ is in your life. Let's use a contemporary analogy.

When Chris Evert started high school, she deeply wanted to be a cheerleader. No surprise there. Lots of girls want to be cheerleaders. But Evert also wanted to be an outstanding tennis player. She had to make a choice. It was not easy. Like most girls that age she wanted the acceptance of her friends at school. Cheerleading was a good way to gain it. She went to two tryouts and thought she was pretty good.

Her dad gave her good advice, though. He said, "You can either be a great player or you can be a cheerleader and go to all the parties and turn out to be an average player." Chris Evert could have been a cheerleader but she couldn't have done that and won five U.S. Opens and two Wimbledons. As Fred Hartley say in his book *GROWING PAINS*, that choice that Chris Evert made while yet a teenager was probably the single greatest choice ever made for the advancement of women's sports.

Life is filled with choices like that. There are choices that are not to be made impulsively, but after much prayer and searching of the soul. For every time you choose one alternative you cut yourself off from others. Chris Evert cut herself off from cheerleading to excel in tennis. Most important decisions are like that. When we marry we decide for one person and cut ourselves off from others. When we accept a job, we cut ourselves off from other opportunities we might have had. Jesus wanted those who were following him to realize that if they accepted his call to discipleship they might very well be cutting themselves off from family and friends, form material comfort, perhaps even from life itself. It was not a time for an impulsive reply.

However, Jesus knew that impulsiveness was not the biggest barrier most people face. The biggest barrier is inaction. For every one who leaps without looking there are a dozen more that never leap at all. They stay on the sidelines. They become God's frozen people.

Most people do not have as much difficulty with impulsiveness as they do with inaction. It's that first step that is the hardest. It is that initial decision that is most daunting. Paralysis by analysis is the sin that haunts many of us. Our hearts are warm but our feet are cold. Jesus knew that impulsiveness was a problem only for a few. But many are hindered by their unwillingness to make a commitment.

This brings us to the important conclusion that SOMETIME OR ANOTHER, WE MUST MAKE A DECISION ABOUT FOLLOWING CHRIST. We must decide whether we will be spectators or gladiators in the arena of his service. We must decide whether we will be mere observers of the passing scene or movers and shakers for the kingdom. We must decide whether we will stay among the curious or take up a cross and follow in his steps. There is no standing on the sideline, Jesus tells us. Either you are in the game or you are not.

Lucy O'Brien, one of the pioneer newspaperwomen in Florida, put it this way: "The most important question a person ever asks themselves is, 'If I die today, what will my life have stood for?'" Let me put that question to you, even as I put it to myself. "If we were to die today, what will our lives have stood for? I don't want your answer to be an impulsive one. You need to count the cost before you answer. To say yes to one thing is to say no to many others. But the greatest danger is not impulsiveness, but inaction. Only twelve men and a small but unknown number of women out of the thousands who ever heard Jesus teach said yes to his call of discipleship. The rest decided the cost was too high. They were too comfortable the way they were. How about you? There is a door to eternal happiness made for you and you alone. It is a door made by the blood of Jesus. Will you enter it today?