

To Hell with Our Excuses

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Bible Text: Luke 14:15-24

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The subject of my remarks this morning may sound flippant to you, "To Hell with Our Excuses." The last thing in the world I would ever do is be frivolous about the preaching of the Gospel. The sermon subject is a paraphrase of what Jesus is saying in the 14th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning at verse 15 and concluding with verse 24. Let me read it to you.

15 And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. 16 Then said Jesus unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: 17 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. 18 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first saying, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. 19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. 20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. 21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. 22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. 23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. 24 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

I have concluded the reading with the 24th verse of the 14th chapter of Luke.

It has been said the streets of hell are paved with good intentions and I might add, they are also paved with poor excuses. There is an old story about two men who had gone fishing one Sunday morning. At 11 o'clock, one of the men said to the other, "I feel rather guilty being out here when it's time for church. I ought to be in church." The other man said, "Perhaps I ought to be in church too but I don't really feel guilty because if I were home, I couldn't go." And his friends said, "How is that?" He answered, "If I were home, my wife's sick."

Jesus tells the story in my Scripture this morning which reminds me of that homely little illustration. Jesus said there was a man who made a great supper and he invited some of his friends to come to that supper. When the invitation was received by the first, he sent his regrets and he said, "I have bought a piece of property, a piece of ground, and I must go and see it so please have me excused." Obviously, he was not much of a businessman. Who would buy a piece of ground that he had never seen? When my wife and I planned to buy the five acre plot on which we built our retirement home in Elizabethtown, we walked over that property again and again; we looked at every nook and cranny. We wanted to be sure it was what we wanted and we were getting what we were paying for. Every good businessman would do that with a piece of property so this was really not a reason, it was only a very lame excuse. It is true, is it not, that many of us are immersed in business so much so that we do not have time to pray? We do not have time for the more important matters of life such as the discipline and training and nourishing of our souls.

When the invitation came to the second man, he said, "I must send my regrets. I cannot come because I have bought some oxen and I must go and prove them." What kind of a cattleman would buy a yoke of oxen before he knew whether they would work? Not a very good stock man, I must say. Even if you're going to buy so simple a thing as a dog, you want to see it to be sure it's the kind of dog you want before you make the investment. But it is true, is it not, that novelty can crowd out God. We buy a new boat and we no longer go to church. That's not a reason, that's an excuse.

When the third man received his invitation, he likewise said, "I am sorry but I cannot come because I have married a wife," which obviously means that already he was under the dominance of someone else. Paul says in one of his letters, "The only trouble with marriage for the Christian is that when a man marries, from henceforth, he tries to please his wife rather than God." Well, that wasn't a reason either, was it? It was an excuse. It's so easy for us to put the blame in the wrong place: to blame men, to blame circumstances, to blame environment. Adam blamed Eve for his sin and Eve in turn, blamed the serpent for her sin and the serpent, though it is not as visible on the surface, in turn blamed God which really is ultimately precisely what we all do with our excuses: we blame God for making us the way we are; for creating circumstances the way they are; for giving us the environment in which we must live which makes it impossible for us to do certain things we know we ought to do and yet, it is true that man and woman do exactly what they want to do.

If the President of the United States should invite me to a prayer breakfast, I am sure that I would pay the price and buy a ticket and I'd be there. I wouldn't send my excuses. If I didn't go, I would at least be honest and I would say, "I can't be there because I don't want to come," for that's the only thing I can think of which would honestly convey my feelings if I didn't attend the invitation to the prayer breakfast. Well, God has sent out an invitation to us and we keep sending back our regrets. "The service of God is too severe for me." To be sure, Jesus never made discipleship an easy matter. The terms of becoming a Christian are not easy and the terms of being and living as a Christian are not

easy, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself," that isn't easy. "Let him pick up his cross and follow me," that isn't easy.

I shall never forget that Tuesday morning when the phone rang. A man's voice which I did not recognize on the other end of the line said, "I want to see you. I'm interested in joining your church." I was very pleased. He came. We had our conversation. I discovered very soon that the man did not know the first thing about discipleship, not the first thing about membership in the church. I found out that he was joining the church because his wife insisted and because he was getting old and he was afraid he might die without being a member of the church. So I pressed upon him the claims of Christ and I tried to make clear the terms of discipleship and he finally arose and said to me, "Preacher, I came to join your church but you've made it too hard for me."

Jesus said, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." Are you willing to live that kind of disciplined, sacrificial life? "It's too hard," we say. "It's too severe. It's too demanding to serve God." But the question I ask you to consider is: which is the harder service, the service of God or the service of Satan? Who is the cruel taskmaster of those two possibilities? If you ask the most loyal servant of the devil if it is easy to be a servant of the devil, he will tell you on the surface it seems to be but at a much deeper level, it is not. Ask the drunkard whose wife and children are going without food and shelter and clothing. As the drunkard who is always in trouble with the law. Ask the criminal who is on death row facing death for some crime he has committed. Is it easy to serve the devil? Obviously you know the answer to that question. Did it ever occur to you that the less resistance we put forth, the easier life seems but the harder it actually becomes? So as we serve the devil, it seems very easy because there is no resistance but the farther along the way we go, the more difficult it becomes. It is the way of the transgressor which is hard, says the Bible. To be a follower of God demands stamina; it demands resistance; it demands temper; but the rewards are so great. So if you are saying, "I cannot come because the terms of discipleship are too severe," that is not a reason. That is a poorly thought out excuse.

"I cannot come because God's message is ambiguous. I can't understand his message. I can't understand the Bible." How often do we express an opinion upon a book we have never read? If I am given a book and I do not read the book, I have no right to tell you whether it's a good book or a bad book, a poorly written book or a well written book. I must first of all peruse its pages and study it carefully so that I can give some reasonable judgment upon it. Have you ever heard anybody say, "I am not a Christian because I don't know where Cain got his wife"? How foolish. "I am not a Christian because I cannot understand the Old Testament." How foolish. "I am not a Christian because I do not understand the imagery and the symbolism of the book of Revelation." How foolish. The Bible is an open book to us. Certainly you do not understand it fully when you read it the first or second time but as you continue to pursue knowledge in the open page of the book, the Bible grows clearer and clearer to you. It becomes a lifetime study and that's what is needed if you're to understand God's message.

Back when my children started school at the age of six, every time one of my children started school, the first day when he would come home I would say to him, "Now Andy, David, Charlotte, what did you learn today about calculus? Explain to me physics." No, I never did such a thing for I knew that after the first day of the first grade in school, they hadn't even heard of calculus and physics but I also discovered that after years and years of study and progression, they would learn about calculus and physics but they would do it after a day-by-day grind, a week-by-week grind, year after year after year and eventually immersing themselves in that kind of study, they would learn. The Bible is a lamp to our pathway but it becomes a bright lamp only when we devote hours and weeks and a lifetime to its study. How much time do you devote to the message of God? Do you devote as much time to God's message as you do to reading the paper? Do you devote as much time to the study of God's word as you do to watching television? If you do not, then how can you say to God, "This is a valid reason I do not understand your message." If we were honest, we would simply say to God, "I am a biblical dropout. I quit trying a long time ago."

"No, I cannot come because God's people are often unseemly." I suppose this is the one excuse which preachers hear more than any other. "God's people are unseemly." People who call themselves Christians too often do not act like Christians. They are bogus Christians. If you're going to give as your excuse hypocrites in the church, then you must be consistent and you must admit that in every walk of life there are people like this and for every one hypocrite in the church, there are 100 in every other walk of life. How often do I pick up the paper and read about, well, for example, a man who has been practicing medicine in a town for five, six, eight years and suddenly it's discovered that the man has never been to medical school and he doesn't even have a license to practice. Does that mean that you're never going to go to a doctor again because you found one who is a bogus charlatan? Of course not. But it's so easy to try to pull the wool over God's eyes and say because we find such people within the household of faith, we cannot come. I know a man who drives carelessly so I won't ever drive anymore. I know a man who eats without manners so I won't ever eat anymore. I know a man who doesn't know how to handle his education so I won't try to get one.

"I do not understand God's ways," some people say. It was 9 o'clock in the morning on August 25, 1965 when there was a series of 24 explosions at the DuPont neoprene plant here in Louisville. A number of men who worked at that plant gave their lives that morning. Some of them were burnt to a crisp; some of them were left maimed for life. One of the men in that explosion was Elwood Crispin who was a member of the church at Beech Mont. Just the night before, he had chaired the commission on education, a fine Christian gentleman. The next morning, he was standing with his hand on the compressor of the cooling system when it exploded and that was the trigger which ignited a chain reaction of 24 explosions throughout that plant. When I got to the hospital to see Elwood, his face was three times as big as it should've been. He was conscious but he could not speak. He lay upon that bed of suffering with third-degree burns over his entire body for three days until finally he expired and all of us knew that he was fortunate not to have to continue to live like that. I received a letter shortly after from his wife. In the letter she said, "As Tommy, Sybil and I walked from the hospital that day to the street where the

car was parked, I felt like the end of the world had come and then I saw your car turn the corner and pull to the curb. You talked to us saying the things I needed to hear and the feeling was gone and the aloneness with it." She had accepted the inevitable but she still did not understand; I do not understand why a man like Elwood Crispin had to be snuffed out in that horrible manner that morning. I do know that the Bible teaches that Satan is still in control here in this world which has sold itself to the devil and refused to be obedient to God, its true Master. But why a good God with all the power of love which he has would allow this to happen, I do not know.

A few years ago, a Jewish rabbi wrote a book entitled "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." Well, I wish he had the answer; I wish I had the answer. I do know that the important thing is not what happens to us in this life, the important thing is how we react to what happens to us and there are multitudes of people across the world who say to God, "I want nothing to do with you because I don't like the way you run things down here." Maybe you don't like the way God runs things, maybe I don't understand how he runs things but God is precisely at the point in history right now that he was when Jesus, his own Son, was so cruelly put to death upon the cross and there is nothing that you ever have to face and nothing you ever have to comprehend which can begin to compare with the pain in the heart of God when his own Son died for sin.

Well, if you ever hear anybody say, "I cannot be a Christian because the terms of commitment are too permanent," the fear of failure is perhaps the worst kind of negative thinking I can imagine. Many years ago now, Babe Ruth was in a World Series game in Chicago and he stepped up to the plate and pointed to the fence and swore he would knock the ball over the fence and sure enough he did and the people literally tore down the bleachers when the ball responded to Babe Ruth's wish. Afterwards, some reporters asked Babe Ruth, "What would you have done if you had missed the third strike?" Babe Ruth said, "Why, I never once thought of it." Now, there's positive thinking at its very, very best. Never once thought about striking out and yet there are people in the world, people in the church, who never have any thoughts except negative thoughts about striking out. "I'm afraid because I'm afraid I cannot manage." You only live one day at a time, moment-by-moment with Jesus Christ. That's all. One day at a time and I am persuaded with Paul that he is able to keep that which I have presented and committed unto him on against that day.

Well, there are other excuses. There are so many I can't begin to look at all of them. What about the alarming factor of uncertainty? "I'm afraid that I'm not of the elect." Now, if you think these excuses are not used again and again in our enlightened day, let me remind you that they are. My own grandfather was a member of a group which said, "What is to be will be, you cannot change it. If you're of the elect, then that's the way it'll be. If you're not, there's nothing you can do about it. If God has elected me, then I will be God's and if he hasn't, there's nothing I can do to change it. I am a pawn on the chessboard of life." That would be like a farmer saying, "I'm not going to plow my fields this season because if God wants me to have a crop, I'll have it and if he doesn't, no matter what I do, I won't have it." Or that would be like a man saying, "I'm sick but I'm not going to take any medicine, I'm not going to the doctor, I'm not going to care for

myself. If God wants me to get well, I will and if he does I won't." There is a Gospel of whosoever and that includes you and me. God has elected all of us to salvation and the choice is ours. We can have the assurance. We do not need to wonder with uncertainty whether we belong to God. "Discipleship negates an affirmation of life," some people say. You have to be sanctimonious. You have to be gloomy to be God's like the Pharisees who disfigured their faces when they fasted so that others would know what they were going through for their faith. This annuls your faith.

One of the saddest Christians I ever knew was a Methodist preacher who was a member of this annual conference. He was once asked why he always had such a sad countenance and he gloomily said, "Because there's so much suffering and sorrow in the world, I don't see anything to smile about." Now, I do not negate his commitment to Jesus Christ. I know nothing about that, that's a personal matter between him and God but I do say that this kind of attitude annuls the Christian faith. The person who knows Jesus Christ should be a happy person. Happiness comes from knowing Jesus Christ. There is no real permanent joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness except in Jesus Christ. It is fun to be a Christian. Why has it taken us so long to learn that? Why did the Puritan fathers think that to be a Christian meant you had to wear a long face? And if anything was fun, it couldn't be Christian? "I write these things," said John, "that your joy may be full," and Peter spoke about "joy unspeakable and full of glory."

Let me conclude, I can't go on. "I cannot come," say some, "because I must wait until I am a better person." We want to change our lives ourselves. We want to reform ourselves and become acceptable to God because we don't like to feel that we're helpless and that we cannot handle this situation without God's intervention and yet that is true. Without God we cannot change. The church is not a museum filled with saints to look at, the church is a hospital filled with sinners who are trying to get well by God's mercy and love.

There's an old story told about an artist who one day saw in the Bowery a drunken tramp. He was a perfect embodiment of what he had been looking for to include in one of his paintings and so he asked the man if he would meet him at his studio the next day for he wanted to paint his picture. The man agreed and the time came and he arrived but when the artist opened the studio door, he did not recognize the man because he had on a new suit, he had shaved his whiskers and washed his dirty face, his hair was neatly combed and he had shiny shoes and when he explained his identity to the artist, the artist said, "I am sorry, Sir. I am sorry but I cannot use you this way. I wanted you just the way you were."

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
O Lamb of God, I come."

God wants us just like we are because all our own righteousness, all our own doing is as filthy rags and if we continue to send up our excuses to God, God is going to say to us, "None of those who were bidden shall taste of my supper. These excuse makers are not

welcome. They shall suddenly be cut off and that without remedy." To hell with our excuses.

I tried to get Jack to accept Christ for a long time and finally one day as I talked to him, he said to me, looking me straight in the eye, "I just don't think I'm ready to change my life," and from that day on, I respected Jack so much more than I ever had before because he was at least honest with me. He gave me no more excuses, he simply said, "I'm not ready to do it."

One of the most interesting commercials that I saw on television this year was a commercial about an express delivery service. A man on that commercial picks up the phone and somebody is asking for an impossible delivery and he says, "Yes, I can do that!" He picks up the other phone, "Yes, I can do that! Yes, I can do that!" And then as he puts the phone down, in puzzlement he says, "How can I do that?" Now, some of us get ourselves in an awful lot of trouble because we promise too much but most of us get ourselves in trouble because we do not expect enough of ourselves. We keep saying, "I can't do that," and if you keep thinking that way, you can't. Can and cannot are separated only by your resolve, by nothing else. So again, I reiterate in words which Jesus probably had in mind when he told the story, "To hell with our excuses. That's where they belong. You can do anything you want to do if you want to do it badly enough."

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we are here today because we want to change our lives. We don't want to be like we are. We want to be different. We don't want to go home like we came. We want our lives, our objectives, our intents, changed and we know that the only way they can ever be transformed and we can become new creatures is through the power of thy divine grace. So speak to us today, speak to us words of conviction and then speak to us words of confirmation and assurance and forgiveness and let us no longer make excuses for what we are. Let us determine that by God's grace we shall be what you want us to be. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.