

The pastor at a University student center, got a call from an upset parent, a VERY upset parent. **"I hold you personally responsible for this,"** he said.

"What is THIS and why me?" the pastor asked.

The father was upset because his graduate school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to put it off ("throw it all away" was the way the father described it) and go do mission in Haiti. **"Isn't that absurd!"** shouted the father. **"A BS degree in mechanical engineering and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti."**

**"Well,** the irritated clergyman answered, **I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months."**

**"Look,"** said the father, **"this is no laughing matter. You encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible,"** he said.

As the conversation went on, the pastor pointed out that the well-meaning but obviously unprepared parents were the ones who had started this ball rolling. THEY were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School, let her go to Youth Conferences. **"You're the ones who introduced her to Jesus, and made her a follower of the Lord, not me."**

A bit more subdued the father answered **"But all we ever wanted her to be was a Catholic, not a follower."** Hmm. Is that really what we aim for these days? To be an occasional follower, a little bit committed? Maybe a priority, but pretty low on the list?

Years ago a man named Millard Fuller was the poster boy of an American success story. He was a high-octane corporate executive working 18 hours a day and pulling down close to a million bucks a year. But then one day he said he heard God calling to him, telling him his priorities out of whack. So after much prayer he quit his job, moved to a more modest house, and wondered what to do next. What he ended up doing next was building affordable houses for low-income families who could purchase these homes interest-free. Today we are most of us well aware of the great good Habitat for Humanity has done.

But a preacher once re-counted Fuller's story and was later approached by someone who asked, "**How old were Fuller's children when he quit his job like that?**" It took this preacher a minute to appreciate what the man was really saying: how dare Fuller uproot his kids and subject them to a less lavish lifestyle just so that he could serve God?! That hardly seems fair of God to ask for so much; does he owe me something for being a believer?

The last few weeks news shows are all alarmed at the thought of "play for pay" at work in our government but it's an act. Is anyone really shocked by it? One of the facts of political life is patronage. When someone works and contributes and votes for a candidate, he expects to get something out of it - a contract for his company, a job for his son, help in getting a bill passed. We accept it as a matter of course in political life.

Maybe that give and take is part of the political process but it is most unfortunate when this attitude carries over into our relationship with God.

Some of us look on our church membership and occasional contributions as a vote for Jesus. Sometimes we look on our church attendance as a favor to God or the pastor, and on our prayers as a bargaining session with God. It becomes another give-and-take experience. I am voting for you, Jesus. Where is my patronage? I've been on your side all my life, God. How about a little pay-back? Faith is rewarding and often in unexpected ways but there is no pay-back, no guarantee, no negotiating.

Winston Churchill told the English people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, sweat, toil, and tears" in their fight against the enemies of England and his people responded to that and met the challenge and were most willing to do it. The demands that Jesus makes upon those who would follow him are likewise extreme. Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It is a hungering after God to the point of death if need be. It can shake our foundations, topple our priorities, pit us against friend and family, and make us strangers in this world. And in this world, so many things can sidetrack that commitment.

We can hear today's gospel and miss the real message because we get hung up on words- or really badly translated words. How can Jesus say to us, "If anyone comes after me and does not hate ..." How can he ask us to hate? **"Hate" is not primarily a feeling word in the Aramaic language**, the language Jesus spoke. It is primarily a priority word. It means to abandon or to leave aside; the way a sailor needs to abandon a sinking ship or the way a general needs to leave aside distracting things to win his battle.

We are not a people generally who are willing to make sacrifices. I know there are exceptions, but as a whole we have become a people in love with comfort. We drive comfortable automobiles and we live in comfortable houses and we even belong to comfortable churches. We don't like to think that following the lord might ask us to leave behind the life we have made, the goals I have dreamed, the relationships I have clung to. Yet, he does.

I was reading one time about Alexander the Great, who was carrying his triumphant military campaign into a certain city. It was a strongly fortified walled city. Alexander approached the city and demanded to see the king and set out his terms of surrender. The king laughed at him and said, "Why should I surrender to you? You can't do us any harm! We can endure any siege."

Alexander said to the king, "I want you to watch this." Nearby within sight of the city walls was a sheer cliff. He ordered his men to line up in single file and to March towards the cliff. The city's citizens watched with horrified fascination as one by one Alexander the Great's men marched over the edge of that cliff and plunged to their deaths.

After several men had obeyed his orders, he commanded them to halt. He then called his troops back to his side and stood silently facing the city. The effect on the citizens and the king was stunning. From spell bound silence they moved to absolute terror. They realized they had no walls thick enough and no defense strong enough to protect themselves against that kind of commitment and that kind of devotion. Spontaneously they rushed through the gates to surrender themselves to Alexander the great.

That is the kind of surrender and sacrifice and commitment that Jesus is asking for.

As a boy, Chiune Sugihara cherished the dream of becoming the Japanese ambassador to Russia. By the 1930s, he was the ambassador to Lithuania, just a step away from Russia. He was almost there. One morning, a huge throng of people gathered outside his home. They were Jews desperately seeking his help. They wanted Japanese visas, which would enable them to flee Eastern Europe and the Gestapo.

Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas; three times he was rejected. He had to choose between the fulfillment of his dream as an ambassador and people's lives. He chose the latter. He dared to disobey orders. For twenty-eight days he wrote visas by hand, barely sleeping or eating. Ultimately he saved six thousand lives.

Sugihara was not only courageous; he was also a committed Christian. He spent his remaining days in Japan, humbly selling lightbulbs. When his story was finally told, his son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" The young man replied, "**My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it.**"

If the lord needs you today will you be available or will other priorities get in the way?