

Crowded Churches, Empty Altars

Luke 14:27-28

27 And **whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.**

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Luke 14:33

33 So likewise, **whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.**

My Title this morning is Crowded Churches, Empty Altars

There has always been something that has intrigued me about crowds.

- I can remember growing up in school, those crowds at recess always got my attention.
- That usually meant a fight broke out.
- Everybody wanted to see a fight.

In 1992, when the Toronto Blue Jays won the first of back to back World Series they predicted a crowd of 500,000 people in the streets.

They were wrong, the celebration drew over a million people into the streets.

My brother and I and some guys from our church joined in because we wanted to see the crowd.

I had never been in a crowd of a million people before.

It was crazy and amazing all at the same time.

- I have always been drawn to crowds.
- I think most of us feel the same way.

If we see a crowd of people gathered on a street somewhere, we are probably going to check it out.

There is something in our nature that compels us to do so.

It was no different during the time of Christ.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, the Gospel writers declare how the multitudes **followed** after Jesus.

- In many instances it was recorded as 'great', multitudes.
- On one occasion the crowd was numbered as five thousand men.
- On another, four thousand men.

If you counted just one woman and one child for each man, that would conservatively put the number of the crowd at twelve to fifteen thousand people.

Literally, an entire stadium of people followed after Jesus wherever He went.

Some of it was curiosity, people wanted to see what all the commotion was about.

- But after a time, they came to enjoy His teaching.
- They loved how He stood up to the religious rulers.
- They saw the miracles He performed.
 - **They became followers of Jesus.**

Almost like Jesus groupies. Multitudes of people.

These crowds continued to grow.

When I travelled to Israel a few years ago, our tour guide showed us some of the hillsides of Galilee where Jesus taught.

- Seeing those places brought it to life for me.
- Those hillsides created natural stadium like seating for thousands of people so everybody could see Jesus as He taught.

It has always amazed me that He could draw such crowds so easily.

Most churches struggle to get a hundred people to show up.

- We spend money.
- We have special services.
- We advertise.
- We invite.
- We build Web sites.

But just hearing that Jesus was in town caused entire cities to drop what they were doing to go hear Him speak.

That is how it was for three years.

Then, something happened; as quickly as it all started, this great crowd of followers began to shrink.

The number kept shrinking from the tens of thousands, into the thousands, until only 500 of them remained after Calvary;

How does that happen; from the tens of thousands down to five hundred?

The answer is in our text;

Luke 14:27-28

27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Luke 14:33

33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

Jesus had begun to teach his followers to count the cost of discipleship.

- After witnessing His arrest and Crucifixion, they realized that they too had to bear a cross, and the crowds began to shrink.
- Following Jesus was going to cost more than they thought it would.
- When they sat down and counted up the cost of being a disciple, they began to disappear into the woodwork.

Till there were only 500 left who witnessed His resurrection.

Jesus appeared to these 500 followers and told them to; " wait, in the city of Jerusalem, until He endued them with power from on high."

I find it interesting that He told them to wait.

Why do we need to wait Lord? "You'll figure it out."

Most of us don't like to wait.

- For ten days, this group of 500 had a lot of time on their hands.
 - Time to think.
 - Time to count the cost.
 - Time to figure out what to do.

I can imagine what some of them were thinking:

- What do we do now?
- Jesus is gone.
- I can't just stay here in Jerusalem and wait.
- I have a job.
 - Ten days off work is a long time.
 - I can't afford this.
 - We're not even sure that Jesus will do what He said.

And the crowd continued to shrink as people gave up on Jesus and went back to their old life.

The crowd shrank, and shrank and shrank; From 500 all the way down to 120.

That ten day waiting period was an important time.

I believe Jesus was testing them.

- Jesus was testing to make sure that those who remained had counted the cost.
- He wanted to be sure that they were willing to lay aside their earthly ambitions and goals.
- Jesus wanted to know who the real disciples were.

There were only 120.

- But it was these 120 who were present in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost.
- It was these 120 who were filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues.
- And it was these 120 who were used mightily in signs, wonders and miracles.

There are crowds of people in churches across America today.

I am glad they are all in church today.

But I worry, because the Altars are empty.

When people count the cost of discipleship, it's too costly.

Do you know that Jesus wants to pull you out of the crowd into the committed today?

- It will cost you a lot.
- Jesus said, "It will cost you everything."
- But it will be worth it all in the end.

- The fact that you are here shows your desire for Christ.
- But are you part of the crowd, or are you in the committed?
- Jesus wants you to lay your life on the altar today.

He is looking for somebody to count the cost today.

- If you are willing to give all to Jesus, He will give all to you.
- If you will give all of your life to Him, He will fill you with the Holy Ghost today!

God will use your life in a miraculous way.

- It is a promise.
- You can take that to the bank.

Can I get a witness in the house?

From 120, committed disciples of Christ, the church grew by three thousand in one single day.

- Within a few weeks time, another five thousand was added.
- Within a year's time, the church was so large it could not be numbered.
- As rapidly as it had shrunk, it grew faster and larger than it had ever been before.

What happened? Pentecost happened.

Are you thankful for Pentecost?

As great as the day of Pentecost was there were some other equally great days:

- The birth of Christ.
- The Crucifixion of Christ.
- The Resurrection of Christ.

And as great as Pentecost was, do you know that it was on Pentecost that the church had its smallest crowd in history?

If we had our smallest crowd in history there would only be about three people here.

We would consider that a bad day.

- But Pentecost was a great day because some people decided to count the cost of being a disciple of Christ.
- It turned into the greatest day of the Church because a few people said, "From this day forward, I am giving all of my life to Jesus Christ."

If there is only one person who can make that decision today, it would be the greatest day of this church.

Can I get a witness? C'mon church, this is what it's all about!!

There is something else that happened on the day of Pentecost that caused it to be the greatest day of the Church.

Acts 2:43

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

Fear came upon every soul.

There have been a lot of different things preached from acts chapter two, but fear is not usually one of them.

- We have preached about unity and prayer.
- We have preached about fellowship and meeting house to house.
- We have taught the Apostles doctrine.

But the Bible says it was when fear came upon every soul that many signs and wonders were done by the Apostles.

The fear that Luke refers to here is not fear of heights, or spiders or some earthly force, but it is the fear of the Lord.

When the fear of the Lord came upon all of the church, miracles took place, people were filled with the Holy Ghost and phenomenal growth occurred.

We see proof of this again in;

Acts 5:11-14

11 And **great fear came upon all the church**, and upon as many as heard these things.

12 And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.

13 And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.

14 And **believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)**

- Somebody say signs and wonders!
- Somebody say multitudes!
- Somebody say revival!

The extent of revival in this church is directly linked to how much we fear the Lord!

Let me say it this way; If we don't fear the Lord, we will never have revival. We will never become disciples.

What really caused the crowds to stop following Jesus was that they didn't fear Him.

Mark 7:5-7

5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?

6 He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, **This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.**

7 Howbeit in vain do they worship me, **teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.**

Mark 7:13

13 Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.

Jesus said, "Isaiah prophesied of you."

And this is what Isaiah said;

Isaiah 29:13

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

The people didn't have a true fear of God.

- There was a lack of reverence and respect for God.
- They didn't take God at His Word.
- Instead, they believed what their culture taught them about God.

They pretended to worship God, but it wasn't true worship.

They pretended to follow the Word, but they were following the precept of man.

When they did so, they nullified the Word of God.

From Isaiah's day all the way to the time of Christ the fear of God was being diluted by the traditions of man.

- Year after year.
- Diluted by false gods.
- Diluted by sin.
- Diluted by the precepts of man.
- Decade after decade, people feared the Lord less and less.

Until their fear of the Lord disappeared.

When that happened the people actually killed their Lord and Savior.

Today we are fighting that same spirit.

We have to guard against it with all that we have.

Our culture says, as long as we all believe in a higher power we'll be Ok.

- It doesn't really matter who He is.
- It doesn't really matter what you call Him.

- You can call him Dagon.
- You can call him Buddah.
- You can call him Mohammad.

It doesn't really matter, as long as you believe in Him.

That is what the precepts of man say to us today.

As long as you reach out to Him in your own way, everything will be alright.

You don't have to do everything the Bible says.

As long as you are a good person, you'll be OK.

Be very careful. That is a very slippery slope.

That's what happened to the followers of Christ.

- Their traditional thinking took over.
- Their cultural mindset misguided them.
- And they crucified their Lord.

But on the day of Pentecost, something miraculous happened.

- They witnessed an outpouring of the Holy Ghost.
- People were speaking in tongues out in the streets of the city.
- They didn't understand what was happening.

So they asked Peter, "What meaneth this?"

Do you know what Peter did? He began to preach to them.

He began to remind them who Jesus was and what they had done to Him.

- He reminded them that they had once followed Jesus.
- He reminded them that they had once witnessed His miracles.
- Then Peter reminded them that they had killed Jesus.
- Peter began to preach to them that Jesus was alive and that one day He was coming back to judge every person who ever lived.

His words began to convict them and shake them.

Their hearts were burning within them.

They were awakened to the truth of who Jesus was.
They were shaken out of their cultural mindset.

They suddenly realized that they had messed up.
And if they didn't change, God would judge them on that great and notable day of the Lord.

The Fear of the Lord came back and the greatest revival in history took place.

Here is what this means to us:

You and I are living in a generation that does not fear the Lord.

- They mock Jesus on the Television and Radio.

- They take His Name in vain.
- They mock those that pray to the Lord.
- They ridicule His Word.

Don't get caught up in what this world says about Jesus.

I am preaching to you the same message that Peter preached at Pentecost.

- It is time to get in the Book and do what the Book says.
- God is coming back to judge every one of us.

**Are you a follower or are you a disciple?
Are you counting the cost?**

Do you really fear the Lord and His Word, or do you listen to what our culture is saying about Him?

- I pray as I am preaching, that the fear of the Lord would begin to grow in you like it did in those at Pentecost.
- Don't allow the thinking of this world to affect how you feel about Jesus.

Yes, the Lord loves you more than anything.
Yes, He is full of mercy and Grace that will cover any sin.
But we must also fear Him, and honor and respect His Word.

Can I get a witness?

By the time Peter finished preaching that keynote message they were lining up saying, "What do we need to do?"

Acts 2:38-39

38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Over three thousand people received the gift of Holy Ghost that day.

- The reason they received the Holy Ghost is because they counted the cost and said, "Lord, I will give my all to you."
- They realized what they had done to the Lord, and they repented of their sin and made a decision to follow Jesus no matter the cost.
- The fear of the Lord returned into their hearts.

Closing

The same can happen in this place today!

If you will lay your life on the altar and give all to Christ, He will fill you with the Holy Ghost today!

If you need to be baptized, we can do that this morning.