

TO MAKE US STRONGER

Luke 14: 25-33

Acts 2:37-45

You and I live in a world that is perishing and crying out for help. It all started in the Garden of Eden when the woman fell for the serpent's lie, the man fell from his leadership role in the home, and they both fell into sin and death. And ever since the human race has been falling, further and further away from God. And the further we get from God the further we get from hope. And we are not just talking third world countries, either. The despair abroad that you just saw on the video clip is also firmly entrenched in the land of the free and the home of the brave. And all around us people are hurting and dying and crying out, "If anyone cares and if anyone can, please help me!"

Beloved, if you've been to the cross of Jesus Christ and knelt there, and if you've had your sins forgiven by turning from them and placing your faith in Him alone as your Savior and Lord, you must never forget that you once were right in the midst of this lostness and despair. Paul writes in Eph. 2 that before you were saved you were dead in your trespasses and sins, that you walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the devil, that you were a child of wrath, and that you were without hope and without God. "But now", Paul says, "You who once were far off have been bought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13).

What a glorious truth! At some point somewhere, someone reached out to you and me with the saving message of Jesus Christ, we were washed in His blood, freed from condemnation, and now Heaven is our home.

But all around us the lost, hurting and dying are still crying out, “If anyone cares and if anyone can, please help me”!

Beloved, this is why you and I are still on planet earth. Our homecoming speaker, Sam Day, put it well when he said that we are not on a cruise ship, eating and drinking and making merry on a life-long journey to Paradise Island in the sky. We are on a battle ship, invading enemy waters, snatching lost souls out of his chambers of death. But that battle ship is also a hospital ship, ministering comfort to the hurting and dying, showing them that there is a God Who cares for them in their suffering. And these are not just clever analogies. For our Lord Jesus Christ said, “You are the light of the world”, and “You are the salt of the earth”. As He sent out the twelve disciples He said, “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). And because we have freely received God’s mercy and grace we are to certainly freely give it to others.

But to fulfill such a calling comes only in one way (Luke 14:25-33). Beloved, those words are hard to swallow. “Bear a cross”, Jesus said, and a cross was an instrument of death. “Forsake all you have”, Jesus said, which means being willing to give up anything we possess for the cause of Christ. Those words are so hard to swallow most of us just ignore them or we explain them away. We say that these words are for those that God calls to be missionaries or pastors, but not ordinary church members. And we explain them away to the point that our service for Jesus does not cost us anything. Our lifestyle doesn’t sacrifice anything that is really dear to us. We give our time in God’s service just up to the point that it doesn’t interfere with other things we want to do. We give our money just up to the point that we have to put off

buying something that we really want to have. The only problem with that is that it's not what Jesus said. Jesus said that if you truly follow Me, whoever you are, it will cost you.

So Jesus has commanded us to penetrate a lost and broken world with the only true hope they can have, the hope of the gospel. And He has also said that if we are to do this we must bear our cross and forsake all that we have; we must be willing to sacrifice to the point of even giving our lives for His sake. But Jesus did not stop there. He has ordained a plan as to how we are to go about doing this. And it is the **only** plan that He has promised to bless, the only plan to turn heartache and despair into peace and joy. And that plan is through His church, that through millions of churches all over this world His life and His love would saturate every human *ethnos*, every race and tongue and tribe. Speaking of all of these churches collectively, Jesus said in Matt. 16:18, "...I will build My church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it". But God's plan is that His collective, universal church be organized into local churches and then by the Holy Spirit to be energized and mobilized to do His work.

David Platt, the pastor of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, recently wrote a book entitled Radical Together. And in that book he said, "Throughout the history of humankind, God has chosen to call out not just individuals but a people for Himself. He told the Israelites, 'I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people'. Through Christ, God brought Jews and Gentiles together as 'one body'". And David Platt is simply confirming the words of the apostles. Peter told the church, 'You are a chosen people', not chosen individuals (2 Peter 2:9). And Paul told the Ephesians that it was through the church that the manifold wisdom of God was made known to all the spirit beings in the heavenly places

(Eph. 3:10). Now listen carefully to this last statement: “If you and I want our lives to count for God’s purpose in the world, we need to begin with a commitment to God’s people in the church. God has called us to lock arms with one another in single-minded, death-defying obedience to one objective: the declaration of His gospel.....to all nations”.

Well, that’s the introduction to my sermon today. Let me sum it up: **God’s true children have been called to be His radical followers, forsaking all for the proclaiming of the gospel to the ends of the earth. And God’s plan for obedience to His call is through His church.** Now, with this in mind, in the last few months our deacons have expressed a concern that we need to do a much better job of communicating these truths to our new members. Because so many times people join our church and never get fully involved and then fall away. And this has been their concern and mine, and so we’ve developed a plan by which we may address this problem. It is not the final word on the matter, but it is a start. And we felt that this is of such importance to the health of our church that we needed to share it with you. And so for the remainder of the message that is what I hope to do.

I’m going to ask our ushers to pass out a letter to you that I want us to read together. This letter is part of a folder of information that we’ve prepared to give every person who may be praying about becoming a member of Grant’s Creek.

1. It is of the utmost importance that before anyone becomes a member of Grant’s Creek that we do all that is humanly possible to make sure that the candidate for membership is truly saved. That’s the way it was with the first church in the book of Acts 2: 37-41. This occasion, of course, is Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. The

Holy Spirit had just fallen on the 120 believers, they began to speak with new tongues, and then they were accused of being drunk. But Peter said, “No, these men are not drunk, but this is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, who prophesied the coming of the Holy Spirit”. And then Peter proceeded to preach Christ to the great multitude that had gathered. And the Holy Spirit convicted their hearts of their sin of crucifying Jesus, and we read how they cried out to Peter, “What shall we do?” And we read Peter’s reply. “Repent and be baptized”. And they did repent. Look at verse 41. They received Peter’s word. They believed on Jesus as their Savior and Lord, and then they were baptized into the church. But here’s the point – they did not become a part of the church until they were saved and baptized.

Now, we know that that salvation is a free gift of God and does not have anything to do with baptism. So just because someone tells us that they have been baptized does not mean that we take it for granted that they have been saved. I was baptized fourteen years before I was truly saved. Many of you have had the same experience. And so when someone desires membership at Grant’s Creek we do all that we possibly can to insure that that person has truly been saved.

Should someone join the church and not be truly converted, there are two terrible results.

1. A person will probably have a false assurance of salvation.
2. A person will be attempting to function as a member of the spiritual body of Christ without the Spirit of Christ dwelling within them, and this will lead to all kinds of problems in the fellowship and ministry of the church.

2. That each new member be actively involved in a Sunday School class. Why do we place so much emphasis on Sunday School at Grant's Creek? Because when Sunday School is done right it will keep the back door of the church closed as much as anything we do in the church. A Sunday School class that functions as it should grounds its members in God's Word as it is faithfully taught each week. And the Sunday School class is also that small group where fellowship occurs, members sharing life together, caring for one another, laughing and crying together. Beloved, that's what keeps folks coming back to church! When they are growing in their walk with Jesus, and when they know that they are among people who really care! That's how it was in the first church. Look at Acts 2:42a. These are exactly the two things I'm talking about. The apostle's doctrine was simply the teachings about how the OT was fulfilled in Christ and also the teaching of Christ Himself and fellowship has never changed from that first church until now. And it all happens in a Sunday School class better than any place else.

But the Sunday School class is also the best outreach arm that the church has, and even new members need to be involved in outreach. So for all these reasons, we strongly urge every new member to be involved in Sunday School.

3. That each new member be involved in a ministry. Jesus said, "Whosoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27). Jesus also said that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). And being a servant to others is just part of the DNA of a true disciple of Jesus. This was the practice of the first church. Look at Acts 2: 43. Those

apostles were all over the place doing ministry. You see, many, many times without ministry we have no message. Our words about Jesus fall on deaf ears. Because most people don't care what you know unless they know that you care. When they listen to your invitation to church or to your witness about Jesus they are thinking, "Is this for me or is this for them?" And we want our new members to be effective in letting their light shine for Jesus, and so we will be asking them to commit to get involved in a ministry of their choosing through their church.

4. That each new member be a regular giver. The entire Bible, beginning with Cain and Able, teaches that God's people are to give back to God a portion of what God has given them. And we believe that from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the starting point for our giving should be the tithe, or 10%. We don't require the tithe, as you know. But we do believe that the tithe is the Lord's, and we will ask that every new member give something. The first church had no problem with this. Look at v. 44-45. Whoever had possessions sold them and shared with them who had nothing. And lest we think that the poor were exempt from giving, Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 8 that the churches in Macedonia, whose members were so poor they were beggars, still willingly gave beyond their ability (2 Cor. 8: 1-4).

5. That each new member attend a new member's class. Acts 18: 24-26. Apollos was a "new member" of the Christian faith. He believed a Messiah was coming that John had preached about, but he didn't know that His name was Jesus. So Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and taught him further about the truth that he needed to know.