

# “Prayer for the Journey: On Getting What You Expect”

Luke 14:25-33 <sup>1</sup>

As we continue our Lenten study of *Prayer for the Journey*, the topic for the coming week has the title, “On Getting What You Expect.” In this longest of the seven studies, Dr. George Bullard—whose writings underlie much of what we’re considering together—comments that **congregations with few or no expectations** of their members are often just going through the motions of being church. They expect their pastor and any other available staff to produce whatever measurable results are needed in the congregation.

According to Dr. Bullard, such no-expectation congregations are bound by the culture of the congregation rather than bound to the radical nature of the Gospel. Church rituals are important to these congregations, but growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ is, well, not so much.

In comparison with no-expectation congregations, **low-expectation congregations** expect more from their members and attendees, but not much more. Such congregations have a small core of highly-committed, faithful leaders, and a much larger group of passive participants who are consumers of what the church has to offer rather than significant contributors to its life. In low-expectation congregations, it’s easy to remain a casual Christian with half-hearted faithfulness to Christ and to His Church.

With such observations, Dr. Bullard is obviously trying to move churches toward being **high-expectation congregations** in which spiritual growth is highly-valued. In such high-expectation congregations, members are expected to be on an intentional journey toward spiritual maturity in Christ, and they are expected to serve in the congregation and in the world with both faithfulness and love.

High-expectation congregations consider participation in Christ-centered community to be of extremely high value. Worshipers are expected to move from casual participation toward committed leadership. As Dr. Bullard puts it, in such congregations, “Making a commitment of time to the life and ministry of the congregation is assumed. Living a life during the week that is consistent with the substance of worship on Sundays is expected. Tithing a household’s income is a high value. Being an obvious model of Christ’s love is not simply a goal, but is a foundational expectation.”<sup>2</sup>

Now while Dr. Bullard’s comments are certainly challenging, they’re also quite congruent with Jesus’ words in our text, and I was interested to discover in my research for this message that these words were also the text for my sermon thirty years ago this week:

*<sup>25</sup> Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: <sup>26</sup> “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

*<sup>28</sup> “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? <sup>29</sup> For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, <sup>30</sup> saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 17, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> George Bullard, “Will Your Congregation Still Exist Ten Years from Now? 25 factors That May Impact Your Survivability, Vitality, and Vibrancy,” [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org); used by permission.

<sup>31</sup> “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup> If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. <sup>33</sup> In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples (Luke 14:25-33).

These, too, are challenging words, and we must be careful lest we let ourselves “off their hook” too quickly; yet at the same time, we will certainly miss Jesus’ point if we fail to understand these words in the larger context of Scripture. Whatever Jesus meant by this teaching must surely be consistent with what He said when He told us that <sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. <sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it (Matthew 13:44-46).

Whatever Jesus means by these expectations must surely be consistent with my favorite Bible verse, which says that “*The LORD your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will comfort you with His love. He will rejoice over you with singing!*” (Zephaniah 3:17). The first statement of The Westminster Shorter Catechism is reminiscent of this verse when it reminds us that “**The chief end of man is to love God and to enjoy Him forever!**”<sup>3</sup>

The larger message of the Bible is that what God wants to do in our lives has to do with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). The larger message of the Bible is that what God wants to do in our lives is worth whatever it costs. With these ideas as our framework, let’s return to a consideration of today’s text . . . .

At the very least, our text in Luke 14 tells us that while Jesus does indeed call us to follow Him, the only acceptable terms of such following will be those He stipulates. Once a person chooses to become a member of Christ’s Company, he or she must be willing to give up some measure of personal freedom, much as any soldier does. Having once sworn our allegiance to Jesus, we are no longer free to do as we please with our own time and energy. We are no longer free to use our money simply on our own purposes. Our allegiance to Jesus requires us to consider the needs of the Kingdom of God before our own needs.

Does such exclusive commitment mean that following Jesus is a hardscrabble, long-faced, joyless endeavor? Oh, no! Most emphatically not! The commitment must be there, but that commitment does not exclude joy. In fact, **it is our whole-hearted commitment to Jesus that makes real and lasting joy possible.**

For example, Jesus was not talking here about “hate” in the sense in which we normally use that word. He’s referring to the relative value that we place on things, which was the point of the parables about treasure and pearls. Paul later wrote that since he had met Jesus, he now saw all of the things that had been so important to him in the past as just so much garbage that stood in the way of what God was doing in and through his life (Philippians 3:7-9).

Fifty years ago this Easter, my parents gave me my first leather Bible, in which I wrote these words from the great Baptist preacher George W. Truett: “To find God’s will is life’s greatest discovery. To know God’s will is life’s greatest knowledge. To do God’s will is life’s greatest achievement.”

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Westminster\\_Shorter\\_Catechism](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Westminster_Shorter_Catechism)

A missionary pondered this question of life significance and concluded that **“Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn’t really matter.”**<sup>4</sup> I suspect you’ve discovered that it’s really quite easy to get caught up *“in the thick of thin things,”* living with the uncomfortable sense that what we’re doing with our lives is only getting us to the wrong place faster.<sup>5</sup>

Some years ago I had the opportunity to visit an optical engineering company whose secret pioneering work was expected to lead to both fame and wealth. I asked one of the engineers what the point of it all was: “Once you get past making things smaller, faster, and more powerful, and once you’ve become wealthy by doing so, what’s it all really about?” The engineer thought for a moment and then answered, “It’s better not to ask such questions.”

My friend Steve Hadden once noted that the world is forever asking “What do you do?” but that this is the wrong question. The right question is “What are you doing with your life?” and like that engineer, most of us can’t answer that question. We don’t really know what we’re doing with our lives.<sup>6</sup>

Stephen Covey once interviewed a Type-A fellow who lamented, “My life is hectic! I’m running all day long—meetings, phone calls, paperwork, appointments. I push myself to the limit, fall into bed exhausted, and get up early the next morning to do it all again. My output is tremendous; I’m getting a lot done. But I get this feeling inside sometimes, ‘*So what? What are you doing that really counts?*’ And I have to admit that I don’t know.”<sup>7</sup>

**So how would you answer the question, “What are you doing with your life?”** Our church motto is **“A Life that Matters; Relationships that Last”**; and everything we do in this place is intended to help you achieve those two divine purposes in your life. The question of expectations is related to those purposes, too.

I suspect that most of us are proud that the Baltimore Ravens are this year’s Super Bowl champions. And I suspect that you realize that the Ravens didn’t achieve this distinction by simply wanting to be on the winning team. No, victorious teams are composed of players who show up for every practice, on time, dressed out, warmed up, and willing to endure the pain of practice and scrimmage and battle. **No excuses. No whining. No schedule conflicts. No weather woes. No outcome but victory.**

That’s what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, too, and that’s what Jesus was talking about in our text. Jesus does not intend that we abandon all previous commitments when we commit our lives to His service . . . but He does intend that we begin to see those previous commitments in a new light as we give ourselves to new priorities and to eternal goals.

Rick Warren has famously said that **“A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a Great Church.”**<sup>8</sup> We’ve taken the Great Commandment and the Great Commission and distilled them into what we call “The Five Things Disciples Do Every Week,” which just happen to be the same principles that Dr. Bullard has identified as “Four Involvement Factors” related to congregational expectations.

You have the list of **The Five Things** as an insert in your order of worship, and you may want to look at them as I conclude this message. You’ve seen these five things many times

<sup>4</sup> Unknown New Tribes Missionary, *Eternal Perspectives* (Fall 2003), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 20, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen L. Hadden, “A Vocation Clarification Seminar for College Students at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky” (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Covey, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 102.

before, and they simply make tangible and specific what we're talking about when we make our way "around the baseball diamond" of **WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO!**

Dr. Bullard has written that "Your congregation is more likely to exist ten years from now if at least 50 percent of the adults present on a typical weekend for worship [are practicing The Five Things] in their lives. If only 25 to 50 percent [are practicing The Five Things], then your congregation's future existence is marginal to uncertain. When less than 25 percent [are practicing The Five Things], your congregation's long-term existence is very much in doubt.

"Congregations," he wrote, "where at least 50 percent of the adults present on a typical weekend for worship [are practicing The Five Things] continually create the leadership base necessary for the congregation to grow qualitatively and quantitatively. If people attend corporate worship frequently, are engaged in a disciplinemaking process, have a close support group of friends, and have a place of service, then they will also grow deeper as followers of Christ.

"Congregations where only 25 to 50 percent of people [are practicing The Five Things] are probably struggling to have enough leadership and financial resources to be vital and vibrant. Often they burn out their faithful leadership and strangle their ability to fund essential work and balanced ministry.

"Congregations where less than 25 percent [are practicing The Five Things] are deteriorating in their ability to provide quality leadership and adequate resources for the work and ministry of the congregation. People leave these congregations to go to other congregations where the programs, ministries, and activities they need are provided."

One of my Dad's maxims about which I often think goes like this: "**What kind of church would this church be if all of its members were just like me?**" While its grammar could be improved, that statement is an excellent summary of what I'm trying to convey this morning.

I invite you—no, I challenge you—to read this handout carefully and prayerfully. Look up every one of the Scripture references in your Bible. **If you want your life to count for eternal things, then it's going to have to look a lot like WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO.**

Rick Warren reminded us that you can't say, "yes" to everything. You have to say "no" to some things. You often have to say "no" to good things in order to have time for the best things. If you're serious about fulfilling God's purposes in your life, then you have to make space for God in your life. And if you're going to make space for God in your life, you're going to have to cut some stuff out. Some good stuff—not sinful stuff—good stuff.<sup>9</sup> If we're going to be all that God intends for us to be, we have to stay focused, to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing.

Remember Jesus' words about new wine that we considered several weeks ago (Luke 5:36-39). The reason old skins can't contain new wine is that the process of fermentation is a living, bubbling, pressurizing process. I think Jesus' challenge to us is that we allow such a creative process of spiritual fermentation to well up within us, giving us new life, transforming our minds, hearts, wills, and character, and giving us access to both new **joy** and new **power**.

So as you sit here this morning, my friend, where are you personally in your practice of The Five Things? What would our Lord say about the level of your commitment? And what changes does our Lord want you to make this week?

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<sup>9</sup> Rick Warren, online sermon, "Don't Waste Your Life."