

All In: Betting the Ranch

Luke 9:18-27

The table is set, dealer at the center. The seated players are dressed in tuxedos. On one side the evil genius with a patch over one eye. On the other side the suave secret agent with a gadget for every occasion. And the first battle between these two blockbuster movie titans will of course be... a game of poker. Have you ever noticed that all of the dramatic scenes concerning a poker game that you see in the movies and especially the old westerns are when somebody goes “all in” and they put all their chips on the table?

Many of you I am sure has probably played the popular game known as “Texas Hold ‘Em” so you are familiar with the term “all-in.” At any time in a game a player can decide to put all of his chips on the table. He bets his entire stack; everything that he has to offer he puts it on the table win or lose. When a player does that he is saying to all of the other partners, “I am betting everything I have. I am committing all that I’ve got.”

If you have ever heard the term “bet the ranch” that came from what would happen sometimes in the Wild West. Gamblers would come in and bet hand after hand and if they really felt like they had a shot at the big pot they would literally put the deed to the ranch on the table and bet the ranch that they had a winning hand. Back in the day you could literally take a piece of paper, sign your own handmade promissory note and bet everything that you had on that particular hand. Today it is known as “going all in.”

For those of you who like challenges, you are going to love this series. We are calling it, “**All In.**” We are going to be giving you the same challenge that Jesus gave to His disciples two-thousand years ago to go all in to following Him, to go all in in being committed to the church, to go all in in giving Him everything that you have, so that in return He can give you the biggest reward and the biggest return on the life that you are investing. I will tell you upfront it is not easy.

Think about the most nervous moment of your entire life. Maybe it was a time you had to speak in front of a group of people. Or perhaps it was right before a big test or a job interview. Maybe you get nervous before flying on a plane. For many adults, however, their most nervous moment is something that many of us have experienced. It’s that moment standing at the back of a church, decorated with flowers, with friends and family seated and waiting.

You may remember pacing back and forth, sweating bullets and hyperventilating. You were about to get married. You were making a covenant before God that would be until death do us part. And despite the fact that many marriages do end in divorce, I’d like to think that most couples on their wedding day are nervous because they’re thinking, “I have to live with this person, for better or worse, for the rest of my life.”

There was a man that was getting married who was standing before the pastor taking his vows and the pastor said, “Will you take this woman for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health?” He thought it was multiple choice and he said, “I’ll take better, richer and health.” As you know, that is not the way it works in marriage. In marriage it is “all in” when it is good, when it is bad, when you are happy, or when you are not. It is ‘til death do you part.

Jesus demands no less. What Jesus is looking for and what churches are looking for, too often are completely different. Too many churches are looking for decisions. Jesus is looking for disciples. One of the greatest problems we have in our church and I think “the” church is we’ve got too many people who have made decisions and too few people who have become true disciples.

One Bible scholar put it this way:

"It is possible [to claim] to be a follower of Jesus without being a disciple, to be a camp-follower without being a soldier of the king, to be a hanger-on in some great work without pulling one's weight. Someone was once talking to a great scholar about a younger man and he said, "So so-and-so tells me that he was one of your students." The teacher answered devastatingly, "He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students."

There is a world of difference between attending a lecture and being a student. It is one of the supreme handicaps of the church that in the church there are so many distance followers of Jesus and so few real disciples.

Let me put it to you another way. I am afraid we have people who are regularly exposed to small doses of watered-down religion who have become inoculated against genuine true Christianity. I think a lot of people mistake Christianity for this watered-down version and then say, "No thanks. I'm not interested."

What I want us to learn today from Jesus and in this series is very simple. Jesus Christ is not looking for "weekend warriors" who come once a month to a National Guard meeting. He is looking for full-time "spiritual marines". [Turn to Luke 9].

Jesus tells us in one of the strongest challenges He ever gave to anyone what it means to be "all-in". As we get in to this keep something in mind. When God sent Jesus Christ to this world, He went "all in." When Jesus went all the way to the cross to die for our sins, He went "all in." The whole-hearted Lord is not interested in half-hearted followers. He is looking for people who are "all-in." He is asking us every single day to "Bet the Ranch" on Him and to cash all of our chips in on Him. The only way to do that is to look in the mirror and do three things.

I. Deny Yourself

Every time I read the first two words that Jesus said it never fails to blow my mind. Listen to these first two words, ***"If anyone would come after me..." (Luke 9:23, ESV)***

I would have thought Jesus would have said, "Since everyone would come after me." I would think that if there is one person who has ever set foot on this planet that everybody would want to follow it would be Jesus.

I still find it incredible that not everyone then or everyone now wants to become a follower of Christ. It is hard for me to get over the reality that most people will refuse to follow Jesus.

You've got to give Jesus credit for one thing. He is "pro-choice." No, not in the area of abortion, but He only wants people to follow Him who want to follow Him. He will not force you to follow Him. He will not coerce you to follow Him. He will bless you if you will follow Him, but He won't make you follow Him. You've got to decide on your own that you want to follow Him.

That also tells me that I have the right to stand up anytime, anywhere, and say to anybody, "If you want to follow Christ you can follow Christ." He will accept anybody, anytime, anyplace under any circumstances that wants to become a follower of His. Not everybody will become a follower of Jesus, but Jesus will accept anybody if they want to become a follower.

I have never met a person who wants to be a follower of Jesus, but can't be. But, I have met plenty of people who could become followers, but won't be. Yet, I think Jesus also gives us the answer as to why many people

don't want to become a follower, because in order to do so, He goes on to say, ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself."*** (Luke 9:23, ESV)

This is where discipleship really gets demanding, because Jesus being upfront and being honest says, "There is a cost to following Me. You've got to deny the hardest thing to deny which is yourself." It is easy to deny things. It is easy to deny pleasures. It is easy to deny other people, but it goes against our very grain to deny ourselves.

Let me clarify something. Denying self is not the same as self-denial. Everybody practices self-denial when you give up something or give up an activity or you even give up food for a certain reason, but we deny self when we cash everything in and when we surrender all that we have and all that we are and all that we could get and all that we can ever become to follow Jesus.

Especially here in the wealthiest, most materialistic society on earth it goes against the grain of everything we are taught, everything we see and everything we hear from advertisements on the radio, television and even the internet to the culture itself. Rather than deny ourselves we are taught to deify ourselves. We want ourselves to be glorified, edified, promoted, advertised, exalted, eulogized, admired and esteemed.

I am going to make a very candid confession to you today. I am going to name publically for the first time the church member at this church that gives me the most problem. This church member is my biggest headache. Now, I really hate to call his name out loud, because I really like this guy.

He is one of the best people I know and I love being around him and if you ever got around him and got to know him you would love him too. In fact, I can never get away from this guy, because the church member that gives me the most trouble is me. I have to constantly tell myself to get out of the way so Jesus can have His way.

How many of us are honest enough to say that we will serve Jesus, obey Jesus, and honor Jesus as long as we don't have to pay too much, go too far, or leave our comfort zone. Jesus said, "If you are going to follow Me, step one is deny yourself." That means you have to put Jesus before you, above you, ahead of you and instead of you. You've got to get your life to the point where it is all of Jesus and none of you. That is hard enough, but then Jesus ratchets it up another level, because the second step to following Jesus is...

II. Die to Yourself

Listen again, ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily..."*** (Luke 9: 23, ESV)

That doesn't translate very well to us today. You have to remember that the cross was a symbol of death. Today, Jesus would have said, "Take up the electric-chair" or "Take up the gas chamber." If you ever saw anybody carrying a cross they were going to die.

When you take up the cross in your life it means you are having a funeral. You put yourself, your ego, your desires, your wants, your ambitions and you put it in a casket. You close the top and you bury it. If you are going to follow Jesus, you've got to have your own personal Gethsemane, you've got to go to your own personal cross, and you've got to die to yourself.

Before you think that is too high of a price to pay let me remind you that all Jesus is asking of us is to do for Him what He has done for us. Just before He uttered these words He said this in ***verses 21-22.***

“And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’” (Luke 9:21-22, ESV)

Simply put Jesus died for us and now He asks us to die with Him. We cannot die for Him like He died for us, but we can die to ourselves so that we can live for Him.

That is exactly what Jesus meant in **verse 24**.

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:24, ESV)

It all comes down to two choices. You can either keep your life for yourself and eventually lose it or you can lose your life to Jesus and eternally keep it.

A few years ago there was a newspaper article that is probably among the saddest true stories ever written. There were some Siamese twins who were joined together at the neck all the way down. The doctor came to the parents of these twins and said, “If I do not perform surgery very quickly, both of these twins are going to die.”

The parents said, “Well, you obviously have our permission. Begin immediately.” He said, “You don’t understand. It is not that simple. I can save one, but I can’t save the other. I can save either, but I can’t save both. What I am telling you is the two of you must make a decision on which one is going to live and which one is going to die.”

In effect Jesus says you’ve got to make a similar choice. If Jesus is going to live in you, you must die to you. Your heart is like a throne and either you are on that throne or Jesus is on that throne.

One great preacher put it this way, “In every man’s life there is a throne. When self is on the throne Christ is on the cross, but when Christ is on the throne, self is on the cross.”

There is a great lesson here for everyone who is married or is thinking about getting married. If you are not yet married, but one day you hope to be, before you do you and the person you are marrying had better have two funerals. You had better die to yourself and that other person had better die to themselves because if you don’t and you live for yourself, you will have conflict.

I know what you are thinking, “But if I die to myself I am willing to lose everything for Christ.” That is exactly right. In the movie, “Act of Valor” which stars real Navy Seals, there is a scene in when one of the Seals is about to leave his wife and new-born baby to go to war. The commanding officer is asking this soldier if he really is ready to make this sacrifice to which the soldier replies, “If you haven’t given up everything you have already lost.”

Jesus said it is only when you have given up everything for Him that you are really ready to gain everything from Him. It is only when you deny yourself and die to yourself that you are ready to take the last step of following Jesus which is

III. Devote Yourself

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23, ESV)

That word “follow” is a very interesting word. It comes from a prefix which means “like” or “same.” It is attached to a word that means “way.” It literally means to “walk in the same way” or “to take the same road.”

The idea is not just following behind someone as they walk further ahead, but to walk beside someone as you go in the same direction. To follow someone meant then that you submit totally to the authority of that other person. You give up all of your rights. You give up all of your freedom. You give up all of your desires, all of your wants, all of your ambitions and surrender to the person that you are following.

The only way you are ever all in with Jesus is when you completely surrender. Surrender is an unpopular word. It implies losing and nobody wants to be a loser. When you think about surrender you think about being defeated in a battle. You think about having to give up to someone that is stronger than you are or having to forfeit a game. The words are almost always used in a negative context.

Our culture teaches just the opposite. You never give up, you never give in, winning is everything and surrendering is absolutely unthinkable. Yet, Jesus amazingly says this, “The only way to victory in the Christian life is surrender”. Douglas MacArthur the great military commander once said, “In war there is no substitute for victory.” If I can paraphrase that Jesus is saying, “In life there is no substitute for surrender.”

Jesus was always about the bottom line. For an accountant that the only thing that really matters is the bottom line. The bottom line of your life is very simple. You are either going to waste your life by trying to hold on to it or you are going to invest your life by surrendering your life to Christ. If you try to hold on to it you are going to lose it, but if you will lose it to Jesus you will gain it. Jim Elliott, the great missionary, who died trying to take the Gospel to the Auca Indians in South America famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Here is what is at stake.

“For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:25, ESV)

Everybody is going to go all-in always in one or two things: either the world or Jesus Christ. Jesus says, “You are foolish to try to hold on to what you are never going to keep.”

Dolly Parton once said, “If I see something sagging, dragging, or bagging, I get it sucked, tucked, or plucked. It takes a lot of money to look as cheap as I do.” Do you know what? You can get it sucked, tucked, and plucked, but eventually it is going to sag, drag and bag. What you try to keep you will eventually lose, but what you lose to Jesus you will eternally keep.

Ask yourself the hard question today, “Are you all in? Have you bet the ranch on Jesus Christ?” Let’s get specific. When it comes to your church are you all in? Are you active in the church where you attend? Are you serving in the church where you attend? Are you faithful to the church where you attend? Do you support the church where you attend?

How about your marriage? Are you all in? Have you bet the ranch? Do you need to say to your spouse all over again, “I am all in to our marriage” or “I am all in to this relationship and no matter what else happens it is going to be ‘til death do us part.”

Are you all in with your money? Do you ever put any chips on the table when it comes to financially supporting this church when it comes to financially giving to God’s work?

You may remember when you were in school and you studied your history about the explorer, Hernando Cortes. He was from Spain and in 1519 he came to Mexico and landed at Vera Cruz. He had been given orders

to conquer the land and to build a colony. When all of his men were off the boats he did something in which he has been remembered for almost 500 years. He burned all of his boats. He looked at his men and said, "We will either win this victory or we will die, but we are not going back."

Do you know what he did? He bet the ranch. He was all in. There is only one way to follow Jesus Christ – burn the boats, bet the ranch, and go all-in.