

LABOR OF LOVE

Luke 13:31-35

What is the Number One problem I hear people talking about today? It is direction in life. There seems to be an epidemic of indecision and lack of direction. It's a concern of teenagers who feel pressured by parents and teachers to get good grades, aim for a quality college and decide what they are going to do with their lives.

It is a generational characteristic of many young adults in their 20s. There are so many possibilities that many young men and women don't want to choose for fear of making a mistake. One of the nicknames of those born between 1965 and 1979 is "the postponed generation". They are waiting years longer than their parents to choose careers, get married, buy houses and make other major life commitments. One of the common explanations is that there are so many options that there is paralysis from "over choice".

For those in mid-life it is the chronic restlessness that comes from getting older and feeling that something is being missed. Even the most successful don't feel satisfied or fulfilled. Arrival at success has turned out to be less satisfying than the race to get there.

Two physicians in Wisconsin, a husband and a wife, simultaneously resigned their practices and bought a bagel shop. A graduate school professor out west is thinking about becoming a business consultant even though he's never been in business.

Retirees often wonder if their lives have really counted for anything. Recently I had lunch with a retired professor who is one of the best teachers I had in 30 years of schooling. He told me that he often wonders if he ever did any good in his teaching career.

We all have one shot at life and we don't want to blow it. We want our lives to matter, to make a difference, to count for something and to leave a mark. We want to know why we are here and that somehow we have succeeded.

There's a story in the biography of Jesus that I think can help us. It not only gives us some great insights into who Jesus was and how he lived, but it helps us learn for ourselves what are some of the marks of a God-directed life. The story is located in Luke 13:31-35:

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!”

“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”

In Jesus’ life we see that the first mark of a God-directed life is to **know the goal**. **If you don’t know where you’re going in life, it’s pretty tough to figure out how to get there.** Jesus knew where he was going to the point that he could say in verse 32 that he planned to reach his goal in three days: “I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” His clear sense of goal helped him make very difficult decisions.

Jesus clearly distinguished between long and short-term goals. He knew that he had been sent from heaven to earth to die for human sin and reconnect us to God. However, he broke down his ultimate goal into one, two and three day goals. He knew that to get where God wanted him to go he needed to chase out demons and heal people first.

It is very much the same with us. If we want God-directed lives than we need to have “God goals”. We struggle day in and day out trying to get the big goal at the end of life that we’re supposed to accomplish, but we neglect the one, two and three day goals because we think that the ultimate goal will determine what is immediate. Deal with the short-term goals for God—for the next 24 to 72 hours—and you’ll make significant progress toward long-term goals.

The second mark of a God-directed life is to do what God asks. That’s what Jesus did. He was sensitive to God’s present expectations. In this case what God was asking him to do was to chase out demons and to heal sick people.

One of my hobbies is collecting wisdom from other people’s experiences. Lately I’ve been interviewing people who are now in their 70’s, 80’s and 90’s whom I think have lived good and meaningful lives for God. I ask them to compare where they thought their lives were headed when they were younger to where life ended up when they grew older. Almost all of them have told me that there wasn’t a lot of correlation. They never fully dreamed or anticipated what God

would do in their lives. Most seem quite surprised that their lives turned out better than they expected. No one has ever told me that they planned their lives and lived out the plan.

They talk about surprising opportunities that they never anticipated. And they tell about devastating disappointments. They detail marvelous ways God worked in their lives that didn't make sense at the time, but now from the vantage point later in life they can see the sense of it.

What I see the most in them is a willingness to do whatever God asked them to do at the time, whether they liked it or understood it or not. They obeyed God through lost jobs and new jobs, through births of children and deaths of spouses, through unexpected successes and indescribable failures.

What I've learned from these senior Christians is to do whatever God asks me to do at the time and not worry too much about whether or not it makes sense to me. Take one, two or three days at a time and leave the rest to God. It is a mark of the God-directed life.

The third mark of a God-directed life is a willingness to die for what is right. **Unless a person knows what he is willing to die for, he may never figure out what he's living for.**

Jesus was headed to Jerusalem to die. In a sense, that was the goal of his whole life. That's why he said, "I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" Jesus was driven by a labor of love. He came to die on the cross for human sin. That directed and controlled everything else in his life.

Jesus' followers have picked up this same characteristic. In AD 55 there was a mounting persecution in the Roman province of Asia. The proconsul ordered the arrest of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. He was brought into the city arena where a large crowd screamed for his death. The proconsul felt sorry for the nearly 100-year-old Christian leader and offered him a deal. Silencing the crowd, the proconsul called out, "Polycarp, curse the Christ and live."

Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him and he has done my no wrong. How then I can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

The proconsul threatened to bring out the wild beasts and Polycarp told him to "bring the lions." The proconsul threatened to burn him to death and Polycarp told him to "bring on the fire." Eventually he was burned at the stake. Before they lit the fire they brought out hammer and nails to nail him to the post so that he wouldn't run away, but Polycarp said, "You don't need the nails; I will stand here to die." So without the nails they lit the fire and Polycarp died.

Polycarp was committed to Jesus Christ and willing to die for what was right.

Most of us will never face a martyr's death. But that doesn't mean that the principle doesn't apply to us. In fact, we could argue that the principle is even more applicable in more routine situations. What would we be willing to lose our jobs for, break off an engagement for, lose a friendship over or break a business deal over? The real question is, "Are we absolutely committed to do what is right for God regardless of the consequences?"

The fourth mark of a God-directed life is that it is undeterred by human threats. Jesus was determined to do what God wanted him to do, even when threatened by Herod, the King of Galilee. It was Pharisees who warned Jesus, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

Now that was a threat to take seriously because Herod was a powerful and wicked ruler. He had already killed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, by having his head chopped off and brought to a banquet. Jesus had to know that Herod wasn't afraid to kill him as well.

Some of us live our lives by responding to threats. If someone tells us what to do, writes an intimidating letter, makes a threatening phone call or otherwise pressures us to compromise, we all have to decide if we are going to be directed by God on the inside or threats on the outside. Those of us who are God-directed on the inside do what is right on the outside no matter how others behave.

There's an interesting story about a young man who applied to become a missionary. As part of the application process he had to go through an interview. He was told to arrive at the examiner's home at 5 a.m. It was a snowy morning but he arrived at exactly 5 a.m. and was escorted to the examiner's home office. After three hours the examiner walked in.

The first question the examiner, a retired missionary, asked the young man was, "Can you spell?"

"Yes sir," he replied.

All right, spell "baker".

The young man said, "B-A-K-E-R."

"Fine. Now do you know anything about numbers?" the examiner asked.

"Yes, sir; something."

"Please add two and two."

"Four," replied the candidate.

"That's fine. You may go."

I'll give my report to the board.”

If I were that candidate I would consider that threatening and inappropriate behavior—not quite the risk of execution, but at least intimidating. But let me tell you what happened. The next day the examiner gave this report to the board:

He has all the qualifications to be a missionary. First, I tested him on self-denial, making him arrive at my house at 5 a.m. He left a warm bed and came out in the snow without any complaint. Second, I tested him on promptness. He arrived on time. Third, I examined him on patience. I made him wait three hours to see me. Fourth, I tested him on temper. He failed to show any sign of aggravation or anger at the delay. Fifth, I tested him on humility by asking him questions that a seven-year-old child could answer, and he showed no indignation. So, you see, I believe the candidate meets the requirements. He will make the missionary that we need.

This young Christian was God-directed on the inside rather than shaped by human threats on the outside. He was a whole lot like Jesus!

The fifth mark of a God-directed life is that it is unchanged by group pressure. This is different from threats that come from somebody who is in authority. This is the power of the crowd of people around us who want to shape and direct us, the people we hang out with.

In Jesus' case it was friendly Pharisees. Usually Pharisees weren't very friendly to Jesus and he often had harsh things to say about them. But these Pharisees seemed to be good guys. They warned Jesus about the threats of Herod and advised him to get out of town. Their strategy was to run away when trouble comes.

Jesus was set on his God-given goals. He wasn't calling for a vote or a public opinion poll. Even if his friends didn't like his decision or abandoned him Jesus wasn't going to get his directions from group pressure. God was his inner-compass.

People tend to go in one of two extremes. The one extreme is to flip-flop with everyone else's opinion and advice. These people consider God last and other people first. The other extreme is to stubbornly hold on to our own opinions regardless of what others say—often with little or no sensitivity to God and arrogantly not considering input from any other source.

Jesus was guilty of neither sinful extreme. He listened to others but he took his directions from God. He kept on course. He was unchanged by human pressure.

That's the way I want to be. I want to be so God-guided in my soul that I don't easily cave in to group pressure. I don't want to be the kind of person who first reads the crowd and then decides which way to go. When God calls me to stand and fight, I want to stand and fight whether I feel like it or not. When God wants me to be quiet and take it, I want to be quiet and listen and go with what he says not with the group pressure around me.

Do we change? Of course we change, constantly. But it has to be the changes that God brings in our lives. We must not be changed by group pressure.

Last on the list of the marks of a God-directed life is a passion for people. Certainly that's what Jesus had. Let's look again at Jesus' words and try to hear his words and feel his emotions when he talked about the people of Jerusalem:

“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”

Jesus loved the people of Jerusalem. Even when they stoned the prophets of God, he still cared for them. When they rejected him and crucified him he still loved them with deep passion.

Jesus wasn't selfish. He was focused on the needs of others. He wanted the very best for people even when they repeatedly did not want God's best for themselves. He was heart broken by their spiritual rejection of God. He wept for the people of Jerusalem. He never gave up.

One of the clearest marks of the God-directed person is passion for people. You can't be directed by God and not have passion for people. By contrast, the person who is self-concerned, worried about her needs and what he wants is usually is not God-directed.

There is a strange irony here. The man or woman who agonizes over what to do with his or her life seldom finds meaning. However, the man or woman who seeks God's direction is more concerned about serving the needs of others and is usually the person most likely to find direction and meaning in his or her personal life. At least that's the way Jesus did it.

Our work is really important in our American culture. It's one of the primary ways we identify who we are. One of the first questions we ask is, “What do you do for a living?”

I wonder how Jesus would answer that question. He might say, “I make furniture. I'm a carpenter.” Or he could say, “I am a teacher.” But these probably wouldn't be his top answers.

Most of all Jesus lived for God. He went where God wanted him to go. He did what God wanted him to do. He took it a few days at a time. He had a clear sense of direction and purpose and meaning. And that's what he wants for us.

So, go for it. Be like Jesus. Be the kind of person who . . .

- ~ Knows the goal
- ~ Does what God wants
- ~ Is willing to die for what is right
- ~ Is undeterred by human threats
- ~ Is unchanged by group pressure
- ~ Has a passion for other people.