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Matthew 16:21-28  
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#### GUIDELINES

"....for thou savourest not the things that be of God,  
but those that be of men."

-Matthew 16:23

If one were to present a philosophical discussion on the nature of human life, his discourse could never be complete unless he finally got to the matter of decisions. For life is made up of a vast multitude of decisions; and if it were necessary for man to pause and think through every situation in his life which demanded a decision, he would get nowhere. It is only because as a human animal he has a potential for developing habits that he can exist at all. Contemplate the problems involved if one had to pause and reflect on just how to tie one's shoes, make the morning toast, and find one's way to the office. I know some people who go through the whole morning without apparently ever stopping to think at all. Everything they do is a result of habit and they don't really wake up until about noon. I strongly suspect that there are a few who manage to get through the whole day that way.

Now habit can be a blessing or a curse depending on how, and how much, we use it. Proper use requires that it be guided and directed by a sensitive heart and a competent brain. The key is to be found in a story concerning President Lowell of Harvard who was once asked how he managed to make so many important decisions during a single day of his busy life. "Oh", he replied, "It is not too difficult. There are only a few, perhaps half a dozen, principal standards of value by which I make my judgments. Almost every decision fits one of these broad categories."

Any man who wants to lead a satisfactory and meaningful existence must establish these "principal standards of value" for his life. They become his philosophy. They determine his goals and the means he will use to reach those goals. They become the guidelines which determine his direction and his destiny.

Now every man makes a decision in this area whether or not he wishes to. He makes a positive choice concerning the principles and values which are going to govern his life or he chooses to believe that there are no such principles. If he makes the latter choice, he has nevertheless chosen. His lack of guidelines will determine his destiny just as certainly as will the choice of any positive principles.

As Christians we are asked to commit ourselves to those same principles and guidelines which directed the life of Christ. When Peter thoughtlessly urged Jesus to make a wrong and cowardly decision, Jesus replied, "Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." In other words, Peter would have had Christ abandon the guidelines he had previously adhered to and adopt a different and less worthy philosophy. As the Phillips' translation puts it, "You stand right in my path, Peter, when you look at things from man's point of view and not from God's."

Jesus then proceeds to give his disciples two of the principles or guidelines which rule his life. They are self-denial, and a willingness to sacrifice for the things in which one believes. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." They are two principles which, to say the least, are not likely to be winners in any twentieth century popularity contest -- self-denial and a willingness to sacrifice for that in which one must surely believe. Yet without such principles and guidelines, constructive decisions which lead step by step toward some meaningful end are impossible.

## II

Now a lot of people complain these days that life has no particular sense or meaning to it. There may be several reasons for this. In the first place, they may be confusing the meaning and purpose of society with the meaning and purpose of the individual. It is true that as one looks at civilization today one may have grave doubts concerning its worth and its future. We are daily offered a new choice for mass destruction -- nuclear war, over-population, pollution of the water supply, contamination of the atmosphere, or what have you. But if Jesus offered man one thing then surely he offered him this -- a constructive, meaningful personal existence quite apart from the outward environmental circumstances. You don't have to be a victim of mass action. You don't have to be a pawn in the hands of fate. You don't have to let society carry you in its current willy-nilly. If you have the proper guidelines, you can make your life have its own high and noble meaning, you can direct it toward some worthwhile and majestic goal.

Or you can do what many young people are doing today. You can revel in life's emptiness. The Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport, calls this state of vacancy, or existential vacuum, "an affliction of the sophisticated and miseducated man". Modern man is miseducated in large part because we Christians have done such a woefully inadequate job of convincing men that life does have meaning and what that meaning is. Allport goes on to cite the case of a young woman who confessed beamingly, "I cannot tell you how much I enjoy my existential despair."

Well, what is overlooked or tolerated in teen-agers will not do for adults -- for those who want to develop a mature and meaningful life. One, if not the most centrally important, aspect of maturity is the refusal to act on the basis of expediency, but rather to make one's decisions as did President Lowell, on certain definite standards of value which do not change according to whim.

Think of Jesus and those temptations which afflicted him at the outset of his ministry: to change stones into bread, to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple, and to bow down to the devil (the forces of evil and expediency). How did he meet these temptations? Upon what did he base his decisions? Upon only one thing, his understanding of ultimate values which he derived from his awareness of God.

Unless we do have these basic principles and guidelines to direct us, we never discover what are the really valuable things in life. We are like the little lad who went to Sunday School with fifty cents his parents had given him to put into the offering. When he returned home he still had the fifty cents. His parents questioned him as to why he did not leave it at the church and he replied, "Well, there wasn't anything I especially wanted, so I just brought the money home again."

Cute for a child! But unfortunately there are a lot of child-like adults in our society who have a great emptiness in their lives because they do not know what they want. They have no definite goals and no definite principles. They live in the midst of an existential despair.

## III

In my own ministry I have found this problem to be particularly acute among men in their forties who have attained a certain degree of success in life but who now see not much meaning ahead. They are personified in Jesus' parable of the rich young ruler

who had obtained position, wealth and prestige but found there was still something lacking. He had no real underlying pleasure in life, no sense of real meaning for his existence. He typified so many people, and particularly men, who come to the middle of life and conclude, "I'm stuck."

Now Sigmund Freud concluded that a man in this position was sick. A modern Viennese psychiatrist, however, Viktor Frankl, has a different opinion. He says such a man only proves that he is truly a human being.

A man is not sick because he asks such questions. As a matter of fact, he is just beginning to come alive. For this reason he is here, to discover why life is meaningful and significant and what he must do to make it more meaningful and significant. Too many people in their earlier years have their values and their guidelines completely confused. They love things and use people. The order must be reversed. You must come to love people and use things. If you do not learn this lesson, tragedy awaits you.

What we are saying, therefore, can be summed up in something that St. Augustine said many centuries ago, "The heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." To find meaning is the prerogative of a human being. An insect or an animal does not look for it!

Now many people will argue that you cannot have positive knowledge that God exists, nor absolute proof that the principles and ideals of Christianity are eternally valid. And to be sure, you cannot. But is it not also a mark of maturity to be able to endure life and to use life constructively without absolute certainty. Let me quote Viktor Frankl, as he puts the whole matter in words very reminiscent of Jesus' own words:

"Self-commitment and fulfillment of life's concrete challenge is the road, at the end of which we are awaited by wisdom so that ultimate meaning becomes intelligible. This intellectual achievement is preceded by existential commitment. Trust in the wisdom of your heart, a wisdom which is deeper than the insight of your brain."

In the Old Testament book of Joel, which I am certain is seldom read, there is a phrase which sums up man's situation. The prophet laments the sufferings of his people and proclaims God's justice. Then he cries, "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." But the day of the Lord is always near, and man stands daily in the valley of decision. Only right principles, standards of value, moral guidelines, will save him from those expediences which lead into despair and emptiness. God has made them known. It is ours to use them.