

30. Nov, April 16, 1972 A.M.

ON THE FENCE WITH GOD

Matthew 12:30

He that is not with me is against me. And he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.

Whoever is not in partnership with me is against me. Whoever does not gather in partnership with me scatters. Anyone who is not with me is against me. Anyone who doesn't help me gather, scatters.

The Christian church needs men and women today who have dedicated their lives to God and will profess their faith.

INTRODUCTION:

How long has it been since you tried to walk the picket fence. Quite a few years for some of us. We all try it though at some time in our life. There is a certain irresistible thrill to balance ourselves over those sharp points - and when we are very young, we are always quite sure that if we fall we won't land on the pickets below.

Most likely you have tried to walk on a fence. It is quite a proposition.

The question today is, when did you stop walking on fences. Well, it would be hard for most of us to remember that some forgotten yesterday.

But we have concluded in our minds that it is (no longer) sensible for us to try to walk on a fence.

It is strange that maturity brings on these keen insights, about our physical well-being, but denies us often the wisdom to stop walking on spiritual fences, in regard to the things of God.

Jesus knew the danger spiritually and tried very hard to keep us from being on the fence with God.

Jesus is quite (blunt) in the way he says it. He that is not for me is against me.

A good many people have never faced that simple truth for their lives. To not be with Christ with all of the compassion of the soul and will is to be against him.

They fail to stand unmistakeably on the side of Christ is to line ourselves up with others whose influence and attitude are arrayed against the master.

This is a hard saying - hard to realize, and it is true, and it is hard to apply to ourselves.

Why is this hard to apply.

First, we are caught between (two worlds). Now living would be a (lot easier) for some of us if we were safe behind the pearl gates. There is just enough mischief in most people to make it difficult, for them to be saints.

God must have wanted it that way because he didn't make a lot of plaster saints - he didn't pour them into a mould and shape them. He lets the saint grow and develop and the tendencies which we have are sometimes stronger than others.

Living in two worlds makes it difficult, to have an awareness of God.

The second thing that makes it hard is that we think of indecision as being alright. But this really is a decision and it puts a little more confusion in the way. To decide not to decide - is to decide. Jesus said he that is on the fence is not on my side.

A third thing that makes it a little hard is we reach the place where we can't stall with the things of God. A Christian discipleship is something that cannot be put off. It takes the dedication of the will and if you fail to get on the right side - you are losing ground.

We don't amble into Heaven - we climb up these Heavenly steps. The man who expects to reach the high places at some time has to change his direction. He has to get off of the fence.

✓ I. SOME THINGS THAT KEEP US PERCHED ON OUR FENCE

I would like for us to think that these four things keep us on the fence with God.

First, there is the cost of following of God.

Second, there is the fear involved in it.

Third, there is the simplicity of the Gospel.

Fourth, there is the lack of involvement.

These four things cause a great many people to stay on the fence.

First, the cost.) It always costs something to decide for God. And that is the part about religion that is most difficult for most people.

We want all the benefits of our spiritual life - insurance - without paying the premiums. We don't want to face the disagreeable truth that our policy may lapse or be cancelled when we were unwilling to pay.

Jesus said, if any man will come after me - let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

How strange the cross sounds in our over-stuffed chairs - life existence. When we protect ourselves from anything that might harm us - we would like to somehow feel that we live in a twilight. And there are no pains to spiritual living.

To be a Christian costs something. It costs a great deal more than most of us are willing to pay.

The rich young ruler was a good man. A better man than most of us in this service - if his word about himself can be relied upon. He was the kind of church member that we would have admired. Wives in the congregation would have probably said to their husbands why aren't you like so and so. Men probably admired him as an example, to some high ideals.

Jesus looked at him and loved him - yet, he was on the fence - he lacked something. He knew it himself - otherwise, he wouldn't have come to the master as he did. Jesus said his money stood in the way. He told him to sell everything that he had and give it to the poor.

Maybe it was a test to see if he would, as Abraham had been tested in the sacrifice of his son. Maybe Jesus expected the young ruler to do just that. Perhaps he wanted to make him a disciple like the rest of the apostles. And they couldn't be hampered with a young wealthy man who had to be treated first class, to make this denial of himself.

Now instead the rich ruler remained in Judea - an honored and respected gentlemen, only lacking the touch (of a glorious surrender) to make him become a saint of God. He stayed on the fence because of the cost.

Now Jesus didn't mean we all had to be poor - because Jesus accepted the hospitality of homes of the wealthy. And he didn't mean that a man's riches - large or small - would keep him out of the kingdom. But he did mean that a man must dedicate what he has to God.

You see now, why we are on the fence - it is hard to let go completely. It is hard to sacrifice certain friendships, and social times, to get the soul ready for Heaven. It was hard for this young man. And it is hard today for a young man with a promising career to give it all up and go to college, and go to seminary, and prepare himself in order to preach. And to look forward to just a mediocre financial future. You see, it costs something. For a young man to say my time is God's - I'm going to give it back to him. I am going to give him every hour, every week. And this will be a sign that I love him.

*Be A Missionary -*

You will agree - it is easier to try to walk a picket fence, than to make this kind of a choice.

Second, fear. I think this keeps people perched upon the fence. We have fear about this new experience - or a new life in Jesus. It is very much like the mother bird teaching her little ones to fly. She shows them just how it is to be done by flipping back and forth, and standing perched on the edge of the nest. Finally, when she comes back to the nest she pushes them out - she knows that they are ready to fly. And fear has held them back all of this time. They have stayed on the fence.

It is like this in reference to learning how to swim. And to over come the fear of water - we wonder if the water will support us. Now we may know that other people swim. And somehow, I may know that I can swim. But I am a little bit uncertain about it - I will not venture out - fear holds me back.

In reference to the Christian life, we are a little bit uncertain about the future. Will I be completely happy about it. If I follow God, will it rob me of my freedom to do as I please. If I follow God, will it tie me down to the church. Will it keep me from all of the fun times that I have enjoyed.

Well, we can't be sure about this of Christian living. There are times, I suppose, when the most earnest Christian wonders who gets the most fun out of living. But there is one point where we can all begin. Most of us at our best moments are willing to confess that we aren't making a howling success out of living. If you talked to the average person - there are shadows of regret. There are dark places of doubt. There are fears, frustration, and worry.

Now most people put on a big brave front. There is that restlessness and dissatisfaction underneath with things as they are. We feel that we are not all we ought to be quite. Through our life we have acquired most of the things we have wanted. We have not had the happiness that we had expected from them.

The older we get, the more we begin to realize that getting somewhere is not getting to the top of the social, the financial, or success ladder. But it is a quality of living. It is a peace of mind.

There is an unsatisfied urge that pushes us Heavenward. It may be buried for the moment - but sickness, sorrow, or hardship - always shuffles it back up to the top, of our thinking.

In our sermon text last Sunday night, Judges 5:23 - curse ye Meroz said the angel of the Lord because they came not to the help of the Lord against the mighty. This was the (sin of the undone) People sitting on the fence. Instead of getting on God's side. And perhaps it was fear that Meroz did not come out and get on the Lord's side.

✓ Third, simplicity of the Gospel. This is another thing that keeps people on the fence with God. Not only does it cost or is there fear involved - but the simplicity of the Gospel. It is very simple and very plain - and we go on day by day in our indecision. The choice is being made whether we are conscious of it or not. God had to have some plan of salvation. He had to have some simple workable scheme in order to make it simple for man to understand.

What will you do with Jesus is still the question. Pilate asked the crowd - something has to be done with the Master. He cannot be ignored. He that is not with me is against me. This choice must either be made with conscious decision or by your indecision of staying on the fence.

Jesus said, he that hath seen me has seen the Father. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

Whosoever therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father in Heaven.

The plan is so simple. The plan is so direct - that no man can ever say, as he stands before the judge of life - I didn't know. I didn't understand!

You can know him in Jesus Christ. You don't have to run all over this world and wonder what kind of a God or an experience you ought to have. You don't have to go on in endless speculation. You don't have to be involved in theological debate. The Christian faith believes that God became man in Christ.

The beginning of Christian living rests upon our own acceptance of that belief. So this simplicity of the Gospel keeps people on the fence.

That little reminder we used to have on a (train ticket) - not good if detached. The same applies to the Christian. Not good if detached from the Christian body of believers. God does not have any Christians "anonymous". You can just sit on the fence - but Christ says you are not being counted on my side. What an inspiring, reassuring fact it is to see a person accept this simple Gospel. Which is high and holy. And to see a person live with clean hands and a pure heart toward him.

In a small American community the Pastor of a little church after years of preaching had a throat ailment that made his voice husky and sometimes it was almost impossible to hear him speak. Some visitor, one Sunday, asked a loyal

member of the church, why don't you get a new minister. This man can't speak clearly at all. Knowing the background of the preacher - he had been among them for two decades, the member answered the question by saying -- this man's life is his best is his best sermon and we just love to see him go in the Pulpit. What a compliment - his life was his best sermon. The Gospel is so simple that often people stay on the fence. And it is not just offering an 11th hour religion - that is a type of quick sand. Now, you may say that I will stay on the fence until my death bed. Until my last dying gasp. And then I will get off the fence and onto God's side. There is only one account of this in the whole Bible. One account. So that man may not despair - it is possible - but it is highly improbable. And you may put off the most important thing until the last moment. You may postpone it - and you probably will do so permanently.

Matthew 27:5 - it is said that Judas stayed on the fence with God for a long time but in that verse, it tells a dark story. And he departed - and went and hanged himself. The simplicity of the Gospel - quite often people will stay on the fence.

In the Old Testament - Joshua 24:14-15 - Put it in very simple terms. Put away the Gods which your Father served on the other side of the flood and serve ye the Lord. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Joshua knew that it was simple - getting on God's side and getting off the fence. And God forbid that we should forsake the Lord to serve other idols.

✓ Fourth, lack of involvement. Not only does the cost keep people on the fence - so does fear and the simplicity of the Gospel. But a lack of involvement and committment.

Jesus in our text was admonishing that we seal the decision - you must confess that faith - you must give expression to that faith before men. For whosoever shall confess me before men - him will I confess before my Father in Heaven.

Jesus expected men to unite with the church and to give an initial witness, on the stand for him. This is a personal invitation to any who have not taken this step - age is no barrier and it has nothing to do with it. Get off of the fence entirely and be willing to be counted as a member of Christ's church. And you say by this act of joining - I am a Christian - I want the world to know this. I am on God's side.

Elijah, in I Kings 18:21 came to all the people and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. Elijah was trying to get the people off the fence, to follow God. They had been on the fence in indecision. He was urging them to make a decision now to follow God.

Moses, Exodus 32:25-26 - Moses saw that the people were naked, (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies.) And Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. Moses was seeking total involvement and total commitment. And this holds many people back.

Anyone who comes with me Jesus said, must leave self behind.

Whosoever wants to be great must be a servant. And whosoever would be first -

must be willing to be a slave of all like the son of man. Jesus didn't use gimmicks to gain followers. He honestly layed before them the tough command and demands of discipleship. And it was total involvement. Total commitment. It was getting off of the fence.

I remember the story of Jim Vaus - he accepted Christ in a crusade in Los Angeles in 1949. Jim was a wire tapper in the under world. And when he came forward, he was a rich man. But in a few days he owned only the suit of clothes in which he stood. After he had received Christ, he wanted to make things right, with those he had wronged. And it took virtually everything he had to make restitution.

He said of his conversion - it resembled an allied attack on Germany. It was total invasion and they demanded unconditional surrender. He said that Jesus came at him and said this is total invasion, and his terms were unconditional surrender. I yielded myself totally to him and I discovered that I had never had it so good. Jim became a social evangelists in New York City. He was completely involved for Jesus Christ. You just can't stay on the fence. Now there are only a few who are willing to pay the price. Christ's way is a way of discipline - of hardship. The verbs in the New Testament describe the Christian life as fight, wrestle, run, work, suffer, endure, agonize, mortify. A Christian is one who puts the teaching in action.

To make this total involvement - a man must (deny) himself. Self, means the flesh, the world, the old man - the natural man. It takes self-denial to turn off the television and spend time in prayer. It takes self-denial and discipline to read the Scriptures. It takes self-denial as Paul said - but what things were gained to me - I counted lost to Christ. The whole object of his life was to honor Christ.

Total involvement means taking up the cross. This is a voluntary action. It is a free matter. It is not a gold cross. It is not the burdens we bear. But it is the cross the disciples were requested to carry. It is despised - the hateful things - it is of torture and shame. This means to associate yourself with Christ. And share his rejection. It means to take a stand for Christ.

Jesus said, I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hateth you. John 15:19. The moment you receive Christ - you may live a lonely life - you may be ridiculed.

Now if you are going to be totally involved - you must follow him. Jesus said, follow me. When he passed by Matthew that day, he said, follow me. Matthew had to get off of the fence with God and get on the side of Christ.

In World War I the American Soldiers were in France one year before they were allowed to fire a shot. They went over there to fight. Their hands ached to pull the trigger. General (Perishing) took those young recruits and for one solid year trained, developed, and organized as well as disciplined them. And one morning he announced that the 1st American Expedition Army was ready. General Perishing shouted, forward, march! And one million men stepped forth as one man and every Prussian throne trembled. And that day we discover that those men had taken sides.

One of the disciples said, Lord, allow me to go and bury my father. Jesus said, follow me - let the dead bury the dead. Even the sacred duty of burying one's own father was not to interfere with the high obligation of following Christ. He that loveth Father and Mother more than me is not worthy of me. He that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Matthew 10:37.

Are you ready to go this far with Jesus Christ. Are you ready to follow him in a disciplined life of prayer and Bible reading. Jesus was not a drop out - he worked hard. Now the being a Christian doesn't have anything to do with the way the styles are, that change from generation. Or culture. But it has to do with surrender.

Joan Winmill Brown, the President, who is the wife of Bill Brown - President of World Wide Pictures while in New York City -- Joan bought groceries from a super market. There were piles of hard core phonography. Having once been a London actress, she knew both sides of the street. She decided that in Christ's name those piles of obscene literature must go. She got other young customers together and saw the manager. The manager felt a bit embarrassed about what he had on his stand. His conscience had been hurting him. He responded to Joan's crusade and the phonography was moved out. Now this sort of thing could happen across the country, if we would get off the fence, and get on God's side.

Every Christian ought to go faithfully to church, and he ought to make a contribution as well to worship. Yet the churches are getting more empty by the day. Let us recall our text again. The all important work of Jesus' remark here - that Christ is on an errand in the world, gathering a harvest. And Christ expects and requires from those who are with him that they gather with him. He says if you are not gathering with me - you are scattered. And he that is not for me in this holy war - is really against me.