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**Sunday 4 September 2022 to Sunday 11 September 2022**

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Sunday 4 September 2022

# Consider the cost

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:33).**

Read Luke 14:25–33

He can’t really mean that, can he? Give up everything? Hate your family? Maybe he’s exaggerating to make a point. We do that, don’t we? Read the words of Jesus and whittle them down so that they are words with which we can be more comfortable. It’s clear that Jesus is saying that disciples of his need to know what they are in for. Like a builder before building or a king going into battle, understand what you’re in for before you start. Consider the cost.

One thing we know about Jesus is that he asks us many times to consider what’s really important to us. If it’s something other than being a disciple and gets in the way and takes precedence over following him, then put it aside. It’s like having a bruise. Jesus gently touches the bruise, the sore spot. He knows what it is and challenges us to identify it too. What is it that we hold so tightly that we are not prepared to let go of? It could even be life itself! Nothing should be first above following him. Nothing, which is emphasised by asking us to give up everything.

So that gives cause for reflection, doesn’t it? We shouldn’t shy away from what Jesus says. But one thing we should know is that Jesus doesn’t ask something of us and then say, ‘Okay then, all the best. Leave you to it!’ There is joy in following him. There is a peace unlike anything else that flows into us when we follow. He walks in front to show the way, alongside us to be a fellow traveller with us, and behind us to see when we fall so that he can pick us up again. There have been those who say, ‘trust me’, and it’s dangerous to take them at their word. But when Jesus says it, you can count on it absolutely.

**Jesus, you’ve found my sore spot, and it hurts. Help me sort out the first-things-first issue and discover the joy of discipleship that costs. Amen.**

Jim Strelan is a retired pastor who lives in Brisbane, Queensland. He has worked in Papua New Guinea, two Lutheran colleges and two suburban congregations, both with schools. He has three children and seven grandchildren and loves them all unconditionally. His passion is to share the gospel in ways that are as clear and simple as possible.

Monday 5 September 2022

# Worth everything

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**In his joy [he] went and sold all he had and bought the field (Matthew 13:44b).**

Read Matthew 13:44–46

What does it mean to you to know you have a God who loves you unconditionally, promises to be with you always, willingly forgives you and lets you start again, and only has open arms for you? What value do you put on that compared to many other things you might have that are of worth?

If your heart is set on something, then nothing will get in the way of you achieving it. You will make sacrifices, forego things, and persevere because you have put value on that thing, and it’s worth everything.

The man in Jesus’ parable who finds a treasure is so overwhelmed and so excited at his discovery that he willingly, with great joy, sells everything to gain it. The treasure for this man and the exquisite pearl for the second man in Jesus’ parable is worth everything.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like this. Where Christ is king, there is a shift in mindset. All the things in life we enjoy, all the things that are precious to us, all the things we consider to be of great value, all those things we don’t hold onto so tightly that we’re not prepared to let them go. They have great value, but when we are in the kingdom – where Christ rules – that connection means more than anything. Many things bring us joy, but there is no greater joy than being in the kingdom.

The great thing is that the treasure is already in the field, and the pearl is already there. Neither man created the treasure. Neither man actually earned it nor deserved it. But on finding it, both men recognised the value. It was worth everything.

Spend a moment reflecting on the value of the gift you have been given. Acknowledge how much poorer you would be without it. And thank God. What he gives is worth everything.

**Thank you, God, for giving me the greatest gift of all and for the joy it brings. Amen.**

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Tuesday 6 September 2022

# Letting go

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Matthew 16:22).**

Read Matthew 19:16–30

There’s something about being a disciple of Jesus that is really hard for us to get hold of. We can be faithful, attend worship regularly, pray earnestly and be generous toward others, but the really hard thing is to let go.

To let go means that we are willing to trust God to be true to his word to the point that we can enjoy what we have, but it isn’t everything. If we were to lose it, it wouldn’t be the end of the world for us. God is good. God promises to be there for us, whatever happens. God will provide.

Martin Luther’s explanation of the first article of the Apostles’ Creed – the part that says, ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth’, confesses this clearly. He says that God ‘richly and daily provides [him] with all that [he] need[s]’.

The young man who comes to Jesus is a good man. He is a seeker. He wants to do what pleases God. But when Jesus asks him to let go of the things he holds onto most tightly, that is too hard. It saddens him because he wants what Jesus offers so much, but it is too hard.

Here’s the thing: if you are financially well off, then you have been blessed so that you can be generous. But have you ever wondered how those who have lost everything through famine or war and those who are just downright poor can still acknowledge God’s goodness toward them? Do you remember the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)? Lazarus means ‘God has helped’. The rich man helped no-one; the poor man acknowledged God as his help.

It's hard to imagine how we would survive if we let go of everything. Hard for us but not hard for God (Matthew 16:26). God is true. We can trust him.

**Loving God, if my fists are clenched tight, gently prise them open as I adopt an attitude of trust. I put my trust in you. Amen.**

Wednesday 7 September 2022

# Shining like stars

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**… children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life (Philippians 2:15,16).**

Read Philippians 2:12–16

When I was growing up, the only people I really knew or associated with were church people. Being a PK (pastor’s kid) meant the church community was like our extended family. If you’re an older Christian, you might be able to identify with that. The circle of influence was narrow. Things have changed so much, and most Christians now mix with a wide group of people. The secular world has crept into our ‘church world’, and we’ve learnt to assimilate. We blend in. Apart from Sundays, there doesn’t seem to be much to distinguish us from anyone else.

I like that phrase, ‘in which you shine like stars in the universe’**.** Go outside at night, especially if you are away from the city, look up, and see myriad stars dotting the night sky. Only clouds can prevent you from seeing them. They stand out.

The Apostle Paul contrasts followers of Jesus with what is around them – ‘a crooked and depraved generation’. Followers of Jesus have adopted the mindset of Jesus himself. Philippians 2:5 says, ‘Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus’. They stand out.

Sometimes we don’t really want to shine like stars. We don’t want people to roll their eyes at us as though we are some kind of weird freaks. We like to blend, to not be noticed too much because no-one wants to stand alone. It’s scary. So somewhere along the line, we have to distinguish between what is dark and what is light. To be honest, the dark is frightening too. A follower of Jesus – by the very nature of what that means – prefers the light, seeks it and wants to shine brightly in all the darkness around them. How are you going with that?

Read verse 13, ‘For it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose’. If you are going to shine like the stars, it’s the light of God reflecting in you. If it is God who works in you, then that’s a work he continually does. He is still doing it. He infuses you with his love so that, as you stand out, what really stands out is that God-love. People can roll their eyes at our supposed superiority, at our judgementalism, at our better-than-you attitudes, and they will. But if our shining comes from God, if the light we display is his light, then we are being true, and we can actually make a difference for good.

**Loving God, work in me through your Spirit so that I can reflect your light and shine like stars in the darkness around me. Amen.**

Thursday 8 September 2022

# Setting an example

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and purity (1 Timothy 6:12).**

Read 1 Timothy 4:6–16

One of the main criticisms levelled at the Christian church and its followers by non-believers is that we are all hypocrites. We preach love, but we don’t demonstrate love. Worse still, the church has for too long been an agent of abuse in so many ways, including spiritual abuse. We have to accept that and be ashamed of it. However, we believe in God and his goodness, believe God loves unconditionally and believe he is a forgiving God, so how do we match what we think with how we act?

In the Scripture today, the Apostle Paul gives advice and encouragement to a young pastor, Timothy. He reminds him that ‘we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all, and especially of those who believe’ (verse 10). So, Paul urges Timothy, who is grounded in that hope, to not let anything get in the way of the message – not his youth (a great encouragement for the young) nor his behaviour. Be exemplary in every aspect of your life so that there is nothing that will cause anyone to stumble.

If we didn’t know it before, this following Jesus thing is demanding. Yes, Paul’s encouragement is especially for those in leadership, but all of us bear the name of Christ, and so, all of us are a testimony to the Christ we believe in. Firstly, matching our behaviour with our beliefs is about setting an example for other believers. But it is also a witness to those who look for ammunition to discredit us. I know of people who are quite out there with their faith so that no-one can doubt where they are coming from, and yet they are respected by everyone because they are seen to be genuine. Others may not share their faith, but they respect them because what they say they believe matches the way they are. Think about the impact the opposite of that might have.

Paul’s words are not meant to make Timothy feel bad or unworthy. So, when we read them, we need to know the same thing. They are words of encouragement. The God in whom our hope rests is a living God, and, as such, he works in us and through us. When our trust is firmly focused, he works in us and through us so that our lives can reflect the one we believe in. And he keeps working in us, day by day. So be encouraged.

**Lord Jesus, continue to work in me so that my speech and actions reflect everything you are. Amen.**

Friday 9 September 2022

# The way we speak

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly (2 Timothy 2:16).**

Read 2 Timothy 2:15–26

Timothy is a young pastor, maybe even a beginning pastor. And Paul gives him advice that will help him in his ministry. Timothy will be most effective when his character is wholesome in every regard. Particularly in these verses, Paul encourages him to guard his tongue. He warns against ‘godless chatter’ and ‘foolish and stupid arguments’. Paul doesn’t want Timothy to get involved in debates that won’t do anything to build people up but will just confuse them. The way he speaks will have a significant impact on those to whom he wants to minister.

If you look carefully through much of the New Testament, you will see that the way we speak continually crops up as an indicator of how followers of Jesus will live out their faith. Ephesians 4:29 says, ‘Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up’. Colossians 3:8,9 tells us that now Christ is in our lives, we ‘must rid [ourselves] of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from [our] lips. Do not lie to each other’. James 3:1–8 reminds us that the tongue can be ‘a restless evil, full of deadly poison’. Instead, we are encouraged to speak the truth, speak words that build up and encourage and give a clear, uncompromised witness to Christ.

How do you go with that? Does the way you speak match what you are as a redeemed child of God? Do you like to get involved in arguments, even arguments about God-things that really are just to demonstrate how intellectually clever you are but distract from the basic message of the gospel? Paul wants Timothy to be a man of integrity. That’s what a follower of Jesus is: the way we act and speak is consistent with who we are as God’s people.

Self-examination is a good thing, and we shouldn’t shy away from it. It helps us see how things are and can turn us in a new direction. When Paul wants to encourage Timothy in the way he lives, his starting point is always to remind him of the foundation of his faith. This chapter begins with the words, ‘Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus’ (verse 1). You and I keep focusing on the One who calls us to follow. In all the challenges he presents in his call to discipleship, there is always comfort in knowing that he walks with us, gently teaches us along the way, and equips us bit by bit, day by day.

**Lord God, help us by your Spirit so that the way we speak builds up and encourages only and so gives witness to you. Amen.**

Saturday 10 September 2022

# A new heart

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (Psalm 51:10).**

Read Psalm 51:1–10

Have you marvelled at the miracle of a heart transplant? The old heart is no longer operating effectively. It’s worn out; without a transplant, it means death. If you were the recipient of such a transplant, you would have so much gratitude because you have been given a new chance at life.

When Jesus calls people to follow him, he spells out exactly what that means. It’s challenging and can even be off-putting. How can I possibly be everything he calls me to be? Psalm 51 calls on God’s unfailing love and great compassion (verse 1). The songwriter acknowledges that he falls short and lifts his eyes to a gracious God. Cleanse me, wash me clean, and ‘let me hear joy and gladness’ (verse 8). How would we manage if this following business was just left totally to us and our efforts? We would need to constantly ask our God to have mercy on us.

The reality is that the way we are and how we act and live out our Christian calling all depend on the state of our hearts. Actually, it all depends on the goodness of God. He’s the surgeon who alone has the skill to do a heart transplant – not physically but in terms of the renewal of spirit that he can bring (verse 10). The prayer of these verses is a prayer we can pray every day of our lives. It’s a matter of asking God to keep on renewing, purifying and transplanting. That’s the way he works.

In the Lutheran liturgy, this verse (verse 10) is something sung just before communion. It is there that we are fed, there Jesus is shared, there we know we have forgiveness, and there where renewal is promised and given. Like a father, God cares for his children, and so, he provides for them. A disciple of Jesus knows that and depends on it. When God does his thing, then we can have joy and gladness (verse 8).

**Lord Jesus, you call us to follow you. We look to you to constantly renew us, refresh us and create in us something new every day. Thank you for your unfailing love. Amen.**

Sunday 11 September 2022

# The lost LEGO piece

by Eden Bishop

**What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? (Luke 15:8).**

Read Luke 15:1–10

There’s nothing worse when you’re building a set of LEGO than realising that you’re missing a piece, especially if this piece is important for structural integrity. You must stop working and look until you find it. Otherwise, the set is not complete and cannot function properly.

The parable in this text highlights how we are utterly helpless until Jesus finds us. We are like lost sheep at the complete mercy of the elements. We are like inanimate objects such as a coin or even a lost piece of LEGO that can’t do anything to help itself. We are dead in our sin and hopelessly lost.

The good news is that we have a God who chases us down until he finds us. This parable tells us that we are not left in our helpless state because we are precious to God. We are valuable like the lost coin, part of God’s flock like the lost sheep, part of the set like the missing piece of LEGO. We can take comfort in knowing that God’s heart and concern are for those who have wandered from the flock. Sometimes it can be a little disheartening when we have friends or family members who have wandered off or haven’t yet come into God’s presence. However, we can take encouragement from this text, which tells us that God is a part of the search and provides his Holy Spirit to strengthen us and do the work.

We can also take comfort in knowing God pursues us and brings us into life, just like the woman who searches desperately for her lost coin. God searches for us because we cannot help ourselves, and he brings us into a relationship with him and into a community with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now like a properly functioning and completed LEGO set, we are whole again in God’s presence and community.

***Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you that you ceaselessly pursue us when we wander off. We also thank you for your promise to search for those we hold dear who haven’t yet come to you or have gotten lost. Amen.***

*Eden Bishop lives in Adelaide and is a member at St Paul Blair Athol. She attends the University of Adelaide and is in the final year of her Advanced Economics degree. Eden enjoys reading (particularly The Lord of the Rings), playing the piano in church, knitting and learning fun facts about dinosaurs.*