

On a very prominent bluff overlooking New Town in Edinburgh there's a spot called Calton's Hill. It's mostly bare now, kept as open space as a popular vista point for tourists. But there is one very peculiar structure on it. There are eight imposing gigantic Greek columns lined across a solid foundation—massive pillars with graceful capitols—as if there, overlooking Edinburgh, someone wanted to build a miniature Acropolis. Apparently someone did, and his name was Calton. But he ran out of money, and all that ever got built were those columns, and it looks ridiculous—and all the locals, to this day, call the place “Calton's Folly.”

This is exactly the kind of thing Jesus is warning us against this morning. Don't be like Calton! We're always building the rest of our life on some foundation or other: philosophies or relationships or goals or guiding principles. Almost all of us, I assume, and especially our six confirmands, are eager this morning to rededicate our lives to our Lord. They will soon be received into our church as full members; our Covenant Sunday is fast approaching, November 12—the time designated when each of us has our chance to register our heartfelt commitment to Christ and to one another, His Church, for the year to come.

We probably think of Jesus as the One who knows our strengths and our weaknesses and loves us anyway; who shows us on a human scale the infinite love of the eternal God. Jesus is the One who does not condemn even the woman guilty beyond doubt, He's the Good Shepherd who keeps watching over and running after His wayward sheep. His Spirit keeps guiding and encouraging us, all the way to the End. Just when we start getting comfortable with such a sweet and gentle Lord Jesus, He goes and spoils it all by saying something like this: “You may say you're My follower, but if you don't hate even your family—your mom, your dad, your kids—and your future, and even your own life—and if you're not ready to give up all your possessions: that means all your CD's, your ipod, every one of your favorite downloads, your cellphone, your cash, your allowance, and if you have your own car, that has to go, too—you aren't ready to be a follower of mine.”

He sure has a peculiar strategy for success. On the one hand we know He's doing everything He can, even going to the cross and freely giving up His own life, in order to get a lot of people to follow Him, to reconcile all people back into the love of God, inviting everyone to come into the new life He alone can offer and bestow. “Come unto Me!” “Follow Me!” And here it says “great crowds” were finally beginning to follow Him. It's working. He's starting to have good success. You'd think He'd be extra nice, wouldn't you, to be sure they kept following Him. But no: just when He starts to get what He wants (lots of followers) it's as if He goes out of His way to scare them off.

Why do you think Jesus would do this? Why does Jesus go out of His way to try to repel the crowds away from Him, when we know the whole point of His life, His entire hope and mission was to win the world back to God, out of our sin and separation. Why do you think He sounds so harsh? [“If you're not willing to give up everything to follow Me, forget it! If you love your mom or dad or brother or sister, even your own life, more than you love Me, forget it! The deal's off; go on back home and go on to college and try to make good money and have a nice family and nice vacations.” This sounds cold!]

[To start off: there are a few things you can trust about Jesus: you can be sure Jesus is wiser than anyone else, then or now, and He knows more about the Big Picture than anyone else who ever lived; you can be sure Jesus wants your highest good, your ultimate welfare, even more than you want it; you can be sure, if you are coming to conclusions about Jesus which cause you to question His wisdom or His love, that your premises are mistaken. You can trust Jesus and His Holy Spirit always to know more and to love you more even than your parents; more than your coaches, more than your friends, more than the people who make the movies, more than your college professors. More than you love yourself. Jesus is more reliable than any other person or any other thing in all the world.]

Knowing this, we know He loved each of those people in the crowd, just as He loves each one of us. But He also knew what those in the crowd were like. He knows who we are, too. He knows our motives. People want what Jesus offers—peace and security and freedom and love and justice and understanding and acceptance, of a sort—but at first most people have an imaginary view, a dream view, of Jesus. They may expect Him to be only sweet and nice; they may expect Him to say “yes” to their own hopes and dreams. They think that “going to church” is enough, or that “religion” or trying hard to be good and live right is the whole point. They may be very involved in the church Youth Group or in student government. There are many people in the crowd—especially when we start getting older and more tired and more disillusioned about the bright shining promise of youth—who hang onto a dream view of Jesus. They know life is hard, competition is tough, dreams tend to fade, relationships disappoint, somehow life has failed to deliver the goods. Those in the crowd will want to hang on to their own vision of some imaginary Jesus. Some in the crowd will try “going to church” and maybe even getting involved.

But Jesus knows a dream view of Him will do no good; trying to jump through religious hoops will do little good. Trying to use Him as a divine rabbit’s foot [thanks, Thursday night Study Group] will do no good in “real life”. You *will* get a teacher who is not fair, you will have a bad game or a bad season, you will get some bad grades; you will get rejection letters from the colleges you most want to go to. Boyfriends and girlfriends will dump you; parents and others will misunderstand and disappoint you; people you love will die on you. You will disappoint people you love; you are going to die.

Jesus knows the crowd does not really know Him at all. They mostly want some of the goodies they think He will give them. He wants to wake them up out of their dream picture of Him so He can actually do them some good in this real world. He wants to separate them from the crowds so they may come to Him as He really is, and build their lives on His sure foundation.

If His **first** reason is to wake them out of their dreams so He can enter and change their real lives, then His **second** has to do with their divided hearts, their wanting to have it both ways. There are always many in the crowd interested in Jesus whom He knows are living without peace, without purpose. This puzzles and frustrates them, because they think they are following Him. They also go to Worship Service; then enjoy the hymns and the anthems and maybe the sermon, they love to see so many children and young people “at church;” they may even support the church. But it’s as if their heart is divided in two right down the middle: they have a “Jesus” half, which wants very much to follow

Him, eager for eternal life, and another half, which wants to keep living a lot like everybody else does and not worry much about Jesus.

The non-Jesus half of their heart looks at others around them not as Jesus does—as dear ones much beloved by God, probably eager for a friend, for some human kindness and compassion—but as rivals. The non-Jesus half of their heart wants to succeed and get into a good college and have a great family and a satisfying career—but isn't willing to spend the time learning to pray so that they may pursue the career and the life God has created them for. They just “go for it,” and maybe study and work very hard—but what they “go for” may be the wrong thing for them, or leading them away from where God wants them—therefore away from their fulfillment. The non-Jesus half is interested in being part of the “popular crowd,” and wants to ignore the cost required to live with integrity as His follower.

You can already see that the way most people in the crowd want to follow Jesus will never work very well, at least not for very long. A heart half devoted to Jesus but half living as if He's really not all that important will never experience peace. Jesus sees the heart of the crowds; Jesus sees into your heart and mine. He knows that a divided heart, a “walking Civil War,” a half-Christian is in some ways worse off than those who want nothing to do with Him. [“Be ye hot or cold, but if ye are lukewarm I will spew you out of my mouth!”] If you know nothing of Jesus or His Way at least you can cheat on exams or cut corners or go a little wild at parties and do things to become popular without quite such a bad feeling, a tender conscience. You are not fighting against yourself: you can be focused if not ruthless in attaining your goals by whatever means.

But half-Christians cannot help thinking, “What would Jesus want me doing? Is the decision I'm making going to please God? Is it fair to others?” They can't even cheat on their homework or on exams with a good conscience. They want enough of God so that they can no longer live the way they might like to—but not enough to actually make the radical change of life and heart Jesus demands of them. The half-Christian who wants to keep being able to decide for herself how much of God she wants, how much she wants to obey, will always experience God as a big pain. As putting the brakes on life, as getting in the way, as ruining all the fun.

Jesus knows it's impossible for us to live happily as half-Christians: we're always fighting against ourselves, second-guessing ourselves, “dancing as if someone's always watching, singing as if everyone's always listening, loving as if we're always about to get hurt.” A half-Christian is always fighting our own selves, shooting ourselves in the foot, hurting the ones we love. The burden of life gets too hard this way, too tiresome, too heavy; eventually we have to decide to be whole-hearted, one way or another. I suspect a good deal of depression comes out of this conscious and sub-conscious civil war we are all fighting. (“Come to me, all ye who are heavy-laden, bent beneath your burden...I will give you peace; in Me you will find rest for your world-weary soul...” [Mt 11:28])

Jesus is challenging those in that crowd, every one of us, never to settle for a heart half turned toward God and half shut down. Never settle for the frustrating life of the half-Christian. Make the decision to exchange our plans, our agenda, our dream-Jesus for following the real Jesus, for living entirely His way, for His sake. Stick to it! This is the only way we ever know God as peace, as power, as love.

The only way we gain a clear path forward, a focused self, our full God-given energy and potential and future, eternal life undiminished is when we decide we've had

enough of the divided heart, living as a half-Christian. (Jesus is saying, “you can’t have it both ways; you need to be decisive. You need to make a choice.” Unlike the old Irish man on his deathbed, a lifelong churchgoer, barely hanging on. He summoned the parish priest to come give him the last rites. “Do you promise allegiance to Jesus Christ in this life and the next?” I do. “Do you accept the teachings of Christ and His Church?” I do. “Do you renounce the devil?” Silence. “Do you renounce the devil?” Silence. The priest asks, “didn’t you hear me? What’s the problem here?” “Father, you don’t understand my situation. Until I know where I’m going, I’m in no position to antagonize anyone.” It’s funny when it’s some guy in a joke, but Lord knows it’s not funny when it becomes the story of our life, the lives of those in the crowds: trying to hang onto God on the one hand while refusing to renounce the evil one, the easier way, the allurements of riches, the agenda of following our own self as Lord on the other. No wonder it feels we’re spinning our wheels, getting so tired of the whole thing...)

“Count the cost up front,” Jesus is saying. Don’t become part of His Church with our eyes and brain and heart and spirits wide shut, then be disappointed that He’s not the Jesus of our dreams. You can be sure that many other foundations to build your lives on will attract your attention, and appear worthy of your allegiance. Some are better than others. What a range of options await you who are being confirmed today.

There are the foundations you are already aware of, inviting you to build the rest of your life upon them. Some false foundations appear very wholesome, very healthy. They may be fine approaches to life—just not adequate foundations for resting your life on. For example, the approach of obeying your parents, your teachers, your coaches. A sound approach, generally—except that before long you will need to be deciding things on your own, accepting responsibility yourselves. They will counsel you, try to help you make wise decisions—but then, as adults, it will be up to you.

In high school you already know plenty about the foundations of competition and accomplishment. And you know all about the pressures they also bring. It’s handy to know how to finish up on top of the heap, how to get A’s, to go to Carnegie Hall with the orchestra rather than playing only the radio. The world is a lot friendlier when they think you’re a winner—as they define it. Many adults keep their hearts set on competing and accomplishing: the goodies going to the victors are some nice ones, no doubt. Good salaries, nice houses in nice neighborhoods, nice homes, nice cars, nice toys...

You know about relationship foundations, as if the friends you choose, or the boyfriend or girlfriend you end up with will make all the difference. They may make a big difference, and obviously choosing the wrong friends or husband or wife will surely take you down. Great friends, a great husband or wife are surely great blessings from God—but even here, in the end, the best friends and most blessed spouses are those who keep encouraging us back to Jesus, who want us to be living whole and true and focused rather than divided and half-hearted. (It takes a very unusual husband or wife to be able to do that for you, and it means you must be very mature to be able to trust that these are such important qualities in a mate, and in you if you want to be a good mate.)

I’m sure you know all about the false foundations of appearance and personality and popularity. How nicely you can behave, how funny you can be, how outgoing you can be, how sexy you can look or dress, the heights or depths to which you are willing to go in order to be accepted by your peers. The problem with winning friends thru any of

these means is that you are attracting people attracted to something other than who you really are. Jesus is the One who loves you as you are, on the inside, whether you are always funny or looking sexy or getting A's or accepted by the kids you would like to be your friends. Jesus is the Friend who will not give up on us no matter what. (Besides, our appearance doesn't hold up forever, anyway.)

You know about the way of conformity, the foundation of the 51% vote. The Japanese proverb says "the nail standing tallest gets smashed with the hammer." How many people today decide the best way to fit in, to avoid pain, is to live by is what everyone else is doing. There's no right or wrong other than whatever the majority happen to decide. You are smart enough to know the current morality, "what's right for you is right," or "just do it"—is just plain stupid. You don't have to know anything about Jesus to know that.

When you get on to college you'll run into another whole range of pressures and foundations you might use to build your conduct, your identity around. You will run into professors who are very knowledgeable about their subjects, who will want to convert you. You'll run into more of the pressures of political correctness or conformity. More questions of politics and ideology. And of course once you move away from home you'll need to decide what you do on Sunday mornings, and how you choose your schedule and your priorities so that you truly follow Jesus rather than simply blend back into the crowd because there are so many other exciting choices all around you (and besides, it's probably extremely uncool to be a Christian when you're away at most colleges.) It's going to cost you a bit more to be faithful, once you're out and away from your families. And after college, it only gets more complicated since you may have your own families. The decision about which foundation to build upon never gets easier than it is right now.

I expect and hope you are questioning what I'm telling you. Don't take my word for it; don't even take His word for it. But come out of the crowd and get to know Him; act as if you trust Him totally, as if He is wise and trustworthy and as if He knows best. Invest your lives in discovering and living out His purpose for you, away from the great multitudes. No matter the cost, allow Him to live His life thru you.

You have every right to question what I'm telling you. (One of the mixed benefits of being older is that you've had the chance to try out some different foundations for building a life upon. For better, for worse.) I'm guessing that for you confirmands and high school students, there's a particular foundation, a particular path forward these next several years which may seem to be a lot less risky, and a lot more exciting, than Jesus. Your counselors might think it's a nearly perfect plan.

Let's pretend you got straight A's (OK, let's say two "B's") in four years of high school.) Let's say you scored well on your SATs, and have outstanding references from teachers. Let's say you excelled in your sport or your music—let's say, maybe, top ten in the country, maybe national champion. Let's say you have tons of schools and coaches writing you letters, making nice promises, coming to visit to recruit you to please come, on scholarship, to their university. You would be such a great addition to their program, and it would be a great experience for you. Let's pretend you get accepted to all your first choices: Cal, USC, UCLA, UCI, Pepperdine, Princeton, Stanford—there are plenty of good schools out there. You end up at Stanford, where you get very good grades and your team wins a national championship or two.

You probably know, for me this is not pretend. This was my life during those college years. For many people it might have been a dream come true, but in my case, since it had nothing to do with Jesus or with God's purpose for my life, it ended up more like a nightmare. I was firmly fixed in the crowd for most of those years—interested in the Jesus of my dreams, but not interested enough to give up everything I thought I wanted (like the ability to travel and the feeling I was “special” or superior which my proficiency at my sport provided me) in order to actually take seriously the future He had for me. I wanted Him to watch over and bless the life I was building for myself, but at no time did I ever stop to say, “Jesus, you know who I am, You know my temperament and my strengths and weaknesses, You know my parents and my upbringing and my life experience, You know about my relationship with my Dad, my coach, and You see the Big Picture including my future. You know the plans you have for me...and I want nothing other than to live as Your Holy Spirit directs me.”

I did not do that, so I deep-down knew, and know, what it is to be a walking civil war, to be my own enemy, to live unfocused, to sabotage my own best efforts, to live half-hearted as a half-Christian in a life of frustration and isolation. For as exciting a lifestyle I lived, it wasn't very pretty at all most of the time on the inside. It took years for the Holy Spirit to pick up the broken pieces, to lift me out of the darkness I had pitched into, to smooth the rough edges off my addictive behaviors, to change my sense of shame and failure—and it's still happening in my life, as a matter of fact, as it is for each one of us who has chosen as if we knew better than Jesus, chosen to build a tower on the wrong foundation.

Jesus knows what He's talking about.

Good grades are fine, a good college is fine, career success is fine.

But if they take the place of Jesus as you plan your future, don't be fooled.

Follow Him with your whole heart; follow where He wants to lead you.

For Him, let go everything else.

In Him you will become all you long to be, all you were created to be.