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WHO'S CRAZY?

Acts 26:19-29

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Acts Lesson 68

Who's Crazy? Acts 26:19-29

Newsweek [10/22/90] reported in 1990 that Princess Diana had spent more than \$1.9 million for her wardrobe since her engagement to Prince Charles in 1981. That averages out to over \$200,000 a year! It included 95 evening gowns, 176 dresses, 178 suits, 54 coats, 141 hats, 71 blouses, 29 skirts, 28 sweaters, 350 pairs of shoes, and 200 purses. She also had spent \$22,950 on underwear and \$11,475 on stockings. Millions of women worldwide would have swapped places with Princess Diana in an instant! But just a few short years later, it became public knowledge how deeply unhappy she was. Her tragic death should have revealed how vain it is to live for this world's fame and fortune.

"For what does it profit a man [or woman] to gain the whole world, and forfeit his [or her] soul?" (Mark 8:36) These profound words of Jesus sum up the scene in Acts 26. Luke describes how Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice entered the auditorium amid great pomp, accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city (25:23). If you've ever watched the Oscar Awards night on TV, you have some idea of the glitter and glamour of the rich and famous, who are all trying to impress one another and the world. Into this superficial scene the guards bring a little Jewish man in chains, the apostle Paul, to speak about eternal truths.

It was not a trial *per se*, but more like entertainment. Festus needed to know what charges he could write to the emperor. Agrippa, who was somewhat an expert in Jewish matters, wanted to hear this man who had stirred up such vehement opposition among the Jewish leaders. It would be fun to hear the man's quaint story and discuss it afterwards over drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

In the middle of the proceedings, after Paul had proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, Festus reached his limit. He blurted out loudly, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad." Paul calmly replied, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth" (26:24-25).

Paul proceeded to target King Agrippa, seeking to bring him to personal faith and repentance.

This exchange, which puts Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice on one side, with all of their worldly pomp and show, and Paul the prisoner for Jesus Christ on the other side, makes us ponder the question, “Who’s crazy?” Is Paul crazy to give up all that this world offers to follow Jesus Christ? Or, are those who live for all that this world offers—riches, fame, and pleasure—crazy, who die without repenting of their sins? The biblical answer is,

The crazy person lives for this present world, whereas the sane person obeys Jesus Christ and lives in light of eternity.

1. The crazy person lives for this present fleeting world.

Martin Luther said, “I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But the things I have placed in God’s hands, I still possess” (cited without reference by Ray Stedman, *Expository Studies in 1 John* [Word], p. 109). Or, as Jim Eliot, who was martyred at 28, wrote in his journal at age 22, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan], p. 15).

Those comments make perfect sense to the believer, and yet each of us would have to admit that this present world holds a strong attraction for most of us. Few of us who know Christ would abandon our faith in favor of the world, but many professing Christians try to live with one foot in each realm, hoping to get the best of both worlds. Even Demas, whom Paul at one point called his fellow worker (Philemon 24), later deserted Paul because he loved this present world (2 Tim. 4:10). Thus we all need to remember Jesus’ words, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13); and John’s warning, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Why would a person live for something as superficial and short-lived as this evil world? A brief glance at the lives of Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice will uncover at least six factors that should serve as a warning to us:

- 1) A wrong view of success can cause us to live for this present world.

Once when Marla and I lived in Dallas during my seminary years, President Ford came to town and was having lunch at the mansion of a businessman who lived just about a mile from our humble apartment. We rode our bikes over to the entrance. Secret Service agents had cordoned off the sidewalks and were shouting to the crowd as to where they could and could not stand. Soon we heard the roar of motorcycles, and about a dozen police in formation rode in front of the presidential limousine. A dozen more rode behind the vehicle. Secret Service agents stood on the running boards. As they turned into the driveway of the mansion, we got a brief glimpse of President Ford, waving out of the window. He went through the gate to have lunch with a rich, successful businessman. It would be very hard to be either the President or that wealthy businessman and not let it go to your head!

It must have felt great to Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice to be surrounded by armed guards, to step out of the royal chariots in their expensive robes and wave to the common people as they went up the steps into the auditorium. All of the invited guests bowed before them and greeted them respectfully. Servants stood by to wait on their every whim and need. In the eyes of the world, they had it made! Ah, the sweet smell of success!

But those whom the world considers successful are soon dead and forgotten. Festus would be dead within two years. If he, Agrippa, and Bernice had not had their names recorded in the Bible, no one today would know anything about them. Paul, whom most people in Caesarea wouldn't have walked across the street to see, was the truly successful man in the room that day, because he lived his life in the light of eternity.

- 2) Trying to impress others while forgetting God can cause us to live for this present world.

Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice were like all the rich and famous, trying to impress others with their own greatness. But their fatal mistake was that they did not give any thought about how to live so as to please God. And, while few of us here would ever be as superficial as these worldly people were, it's easy to fall into the trap of trying to impress others and forget that our focus should be on pleasing God, who examines our hearts. We should always keep in

mind the Lord's words (Isa. 66:3, NIV), "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

- 3) An over-emphasis on reason without factoring in God's power can cause us to live for this present world.

Festus was a rationalist. For him, the notion that Jesus or anyone else could rise from the dead was just plain crazy. He thought that in spite of Paul's great learning, saying such things proved that the man had lost his mind. He believed in philosophy and logic, not in religious superstition.

Festus' mistake was that he had not factored in God, who spoke the universe into existence by the word of His power. Reason is fine to a point; God gave us minds capable of thinking, and we should use them. His Word gives us many truths that require careful thinking to grasp. But if we exalt human reason to the point that we exclude God and His power or set aside His revelation in His Word, we fall into error. To leave God out only leaves this present world as all that there is. If this world is all there is, then we should eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die.

- 4) Embarrassment about what others might think without regard for what God thinks can cause us to live for this present world.

When Paul backed Agrippa into a corner with his pointed question (26:27), to save face Agrippa made light of it by saying, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28). He was embarrassed in front of all of these important people. What would they think if he took seriously what this controversial Jew was saying? So with no regard for what the living God might think, Agrippa joked away his opportunity for eternal life!

Peer pressure has always been a powerful force to draw people away from God and to keep them in this world. You don't want the other kids at school to think that you're weird! So don't take a stand for Christ. Just go to all of the parties and have a few drinks like everyone else. Just laugh along with the dirty jokes. At work just cut corners and fudge the truth like everyone else. Just go with the flow! But the flow is heading straight toward hell!

- 5) Living for and loving material things can cause us to live for this present world.

In their day, Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice had what everyone else wanted. They lived well. They had plenty of money, the finest clothes, the best food, and the most comfortable places to live. Paul owned no property, had no investment portfolio, and probably could pack all of his earthly belongings in one suitcase. But who was truly wealthy? As Jesus taught us, the one who piles up this world's goods and is not rich toward God is the fool (Luke 12:15-21). While we can legitimately enjoy the material blessings that God has given us, we need to be on "guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (1 Tim. 6:17-19; Luke 12:15). We need to remember that we are stewards of what God has entrusted to us. When we stand before Him, we will give an account of how we invested it in light of eternity.

- 6) Living for sensual pleasure in violation of God's Word can cause us to live for this present world.

It was rumored that Agrippa and Bernice were living together in incest, which was even scandalous in worldly Rome. Later she married a petty monarch, divorced him and then became the lover of the Roman general Titus. These worldly rulers were living for sensual gratification without regard for God's moral standards.

You can't stand in line at the supermarket without being bombarded by magazines with pictures of sensuous men and women and articles promising ten new ways to please your lovers. The power of the flesh, especially when you are in the beauty and strength of youth, is a strong temptation, even for Christians. But if we yield we are crazy, because we gain momentary pleasure, but long term misery and pain. The lives of Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice show us that the crazy person is the one who lives for this superficial, fleeting world.

2. The sane person obeys Jesus Christ and lives in light of eternity.

Contrary to the charge of Festus' outburst, Paul was the sanest man in that room! He calmly counters Festus' charge by saying, "I am not out of my mind, most noble Festus, but I utter words of truth and rationality" (26:25, lit.). As we saw last week, Paul's faith (along with the faith of all of the apostles) rested completely on the

resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was not an irrational leap in the dark, but was based on their eyewitness testimony. It was Paul's encounter with the risen Savior that converted him and changed him from insanity to sanity. Note three things about the sanity of obeying Jesus Christ in light of eternity:

1) Sanity begins with conversion.

Paul was insanely driven when he persecuted the church, but it was on the Damascus Road that Paul began to live in light of God's eternal kingdom, which is the only sane way to live.

If Paul had viewed Agrippa through worldly eyes, he would have thought, "The man has everything he needs. He's wealthy, he's powerful, he's successful—what do I have to offer him?" But Paul viewed his audience that day through God's eyes: They were lost, enslaved to sin, and under God's condemnation. While Agrippa had a superficial belief in the Old Testament prophets (26:27), he needed to repent of his sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. So Paul sought to bring him to saving faith, which necessarily includes repentance.

Often, there is an intense struggle involved in a person's coming to saving faith. The Lord describes that process for Paul as "kicking against the goads" (26:14). A goad was a sharp stick, sometimes with a metal tip, which was used for prodding oxen, especially as they were harnessed to a plow. To resist serving its master by kicking against the goads would only hurt the oxen. The only safe and sane path was to submit and obey. Paul apparently went through a time of resisting and kicking against the truth of the gospel, perhaps after he witnessed the death of Stephen.

The point is, to fight God on the matter of conversion is insane. It is only to wound yourself. The path to blessing both now and for eternity is to quit fighting God, to repent of your sins, and to trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

2) Conversion manifests itself in radical, lifelong obedience to Jesus Christ.

As I said, repentance is an essential part of conversion. Paul preached that people "should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (26:20). Repentance means doing a 180, turning from sin toward God. Before conversion, we all

were living for self and for the things of this world. After conversion, we live to please and glorify Jesus Christ and to seek first His kingdom. Paul describes his own repentance in Philippians 3:7-8,

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.

Here Paul describes his life after conversion: "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision" (26:19). That vision included his commission to preach not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles (26:17, 20), which was the reason the Jews hated him. It took radical obedience for a zealous Jew like Paul, who thought that any contact with Gentiles was defiling, to devote his life to reaching Gentiles for Christ and to teach that they had equal standing in the church. But Paul obeyed the Great Commission.

Such radical obedience is not just the calling of the super-committed. Jesus said, "if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). He told us that, instead of seeking after all of the worldly comforts that worldly people seek, we should seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:31-33). Each of the Gospels and Acts record His Great Commission, that we should go and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all that He commanded us (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

I fear that many American Christians have dismissed the Great Commission as pertaining only to those who are called as missionaries to foreign lands. Since they have never sensed that call, they pretty much ignore Christ's command and get on with their careers, their families, and their private pursuits and interests. Once in a while they drop a few bucks in the offering plate to do their bit for the cause. Church is a nice slice of the good life that they enjoy as Christians. But they don't live with radical obedience to the Great Commission. It plays little if any part in how they live their lives. In fact, they hardly ever give it much thought at all.

But the Bible clearly teaches that *every* Christian should put Jesus Christ and His kingdom at the center of their lives. Knowing

Him and making Him known, both locally and globally, should be our passion in life. I like the way John Piper's church, Bethlehem Baptist, puts it:

We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. One of the Biblical truths that drives us is great news that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

And this vision of reality radically frees us from passing and dying trinkets of the world and compels us (as joy always does) to spread what we love the most through radical acts of love. We long to see those who do not treasure God now, whether in the American urban centers or suburban sprawls or among the unreached peoples of the world, to come to know true and forever Joy -- which is only found in God. (From their web site, <http://bbcmpls.org>).

You don't accidentally fall into that kind of radical obedience to the Great Commission. It must be your deliberate focus. You've got to keep shrugging off the enticements of this world in order to be obedient to the heavenly vision. One final observation:

3) Radical obedience to Jesus Christ only makes sense in light of eternity.

As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." The world lives as if this life is all that really matters. The obedient Christian says, "No, if this life is all there is, I am crazy!" We put all of our eggs in the eternity basket. We say, "If Christ is not risen, and if there is no hope beyond the grave, please pity me, because I'm nuts!" Would the way that you obey Jesus as Lord, the way you spend your time, and the way you manage your finances cause a worldly person to say, "You're a bit off"? If not, perhaps you need to rearrange your priorities in the light of eternity. Because Jesus is risen, it's the only sane way to live.

Conclusion

Peter Cameron Scott, a gifted young vocalist, was on the steps of an opera house ready to pursue a career as a singer, when God challenged him, "Will you seek a life of self-glory and applause in the entertainment world, or will you dedicate your life to My serv-

ice?" He obeyed God's call, received some missionary training, and at age 23 he sailed for Africa. Within a few months, his brother joined him, but the harsh African climate and environment that became known as "the white man's graveyard" took its toll. His brother died. Peter built a crude coffin, dug the grave himself, and buried his brother. Alone at the grave, he recommitted himself to preach the gospel in Africa.

His own health broke, and he went first to England and then back to the U.S. to recruit others for the cause. In 1895, at age 28, he established the Africa Inland Mission. But just 14 months after he and his party had landed on African soil, Scott fell ill and died.

After Scott's death, the mission nearly failed as one after another of the workers died. By the summer of 1899, only one missionary remained on the field. But they persisted, and ten years after the mission's founding, there were 31 missionaries on the field. In the early years, more missionaries died from the harsh conditions than people came to Christ. But still more missionaries came, arriving with their goods packed in coffins. The Africans were amazed at such determination. They said, "Surely only a message of great importance would inspire such actions." By 1971, there were a million and a half members in the Africa Inland Church. (Story culled from "The Global Prayer Digest" [10/84] and from Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* [Zondervan], pp. 300-304.)

Who are the crazy ones? Those who live for this present world and all it offers. Who are the sane people? Those who obey Jesus Christ and live in light of eternity!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know when we are "worldly"? What does this mean biblically?
2. Is it permissible to enjoy the luxuries of American life? How can we know when we "love the things of the world"?
3. Are all Christians responsible to obey the Great Commission, or are just some called to do so? Give biblical support.
4. Practically, what does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God? How can a person do this and hold down a full-time job?

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