

Sermon for Sunday, September 12, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"FORGET ABOUT THE GRASS"

Acts 16:25-34

Text: "...and be rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God."  
Acts 16:34

The Football Cardinals were playing the Kansas City Chiefs in Kansas City for the Missouri Governor's Cup. I suppose most of you were watching television as I was as the game unfolded. At one point in the game, the announcers began to talk about the grass on the football field and incidently on the infield of the baseball diamond since they use the same area for both games. They begin to say that the groundskeeper in Kansas City has the reputation of being the best groundskeeper in America and that the infield grass that he produces is the best anywhere. And as they were commenting about this, it reminded me that in about 1967 if my memory serves me correctly, during the last week in September evangelist Billy Graham took his crusade into Kansas City for what he called the Heart of America Crusade. The crusade was scheduled to be held in the Kansas City Municipal Stadium which was at that time the home of the Kansas City Athletics baseball team. Just before the crusade was to open those of us who are sport fans and avidly devour the sports page each day saw an article in the newspaper. The Kansas City groundskeeper expressed concern over what the crusade would do to the grass on the infield of the baseball diamond. Baseball was important to him. He was concerned about what damage might be done to his carefully tended turf by the feet of those religious inquirers who might come forward during the invitation at the end of each service. The article seemed to infer a certain hostility on his part to these peculiar religious people who would interfere with things that are really important--such as baseball and infield grass.

However, what happened on that baseball diamond that week did not make the sports page again and not many know what happened afterwards. It was only later that I myself discovered in a religious publication what transpired that week. The crusade team members did their best to cooperate and they established procedures whereby they would try to keep people off the playing field. Apparently, the groundskeeper himself came to see to it that his beloved grass was protected. But that was a mistake on his part! As the Spirit of God moved on that vast throng of people, the groundskeeper himself must have felt his heart strangely moved within him. When those answering the invitation at the first service began to stream forward in response, the man in charge of the grass ran up to the officials of the meeting and cried, "Forget about the grass!" By the next meeting he had provided straw mats for seating those who could not find a seat in the stadium. And on the final meeting when a record-breaking 53,000 jammed the stadium, the grass had been completely forgotten and the people almost completely covered the whole field.

What happened to make the groundskeeper change his mind? What happened that baseball ceased to be first in his life and thoughts? What happened that an event to which he had exhibited hostility and about which he was obviously displeased suddenly changed and became terribly important to him? At least we can say that his standard of values changed. The grass of the infield had been terribly important to him, but now suddenly in the light of some new value judgment he cries out, "Forget about the grass!"

Our scripture for this morning provides another instance in which value judgments are suddenly reversed. In this case the man is a jailer. Being a good jailer was the most important thing in his life. The security of his prisoners was uppermost for him. Thus, when an earthquake caused a shifting of the foundations of his

jail and the consequent springing of the prison doors, and when he was convinced that his prisoners had escaped, life simply was not worth living any more for this man. When that which he judged to be most important in life was suddenly jerked out from under him his world came crashing in upon him and he was on the verge of suicide.

Perhaps, we can find a clue as to why the groundskeeper forgot about the grass in the experience of this ancient jailer who forgot about his jail. The first thing we might note is that the jailer discovered that his values failed him. In his own mind at least being jailer at the city of Philippi was important. Having authority over prisoners, controlling them, having them subjected to his will must have given him a sense of prestige and a God-like importance. When Paul and Silas were brought to him and he was charged with keeping them safe, it must have been with a sense of pride and power that he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. So our jailer friend felt his own importance, he felt an inner security in the walls and bars of his prison. But an earthquake, not uncommon to that region, suddenly changed all of that. The walls of his prison cracked, the doors were sprung, and he was sure that his prisoners were gone. Surely fate had dealt cruelly with him! He had done his best but the things on which he had built his life and his sense of worth, the things on which he had counted, had suddenly failed him. With his prisoners gone so was his reputation, so was his security, so was his importance, so was his reason for living. Standing as it were in the midst of the ruins of his jail and his dreams, surrounded by the collapse of prison walls and the collapse of what he had built his life upon, there was nothing left to live for. The Bible tells us that then he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

Does this suggest to us that we need to be careful about what we build our lives on? Back in 1923 an important meeting was held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago and among those attending were nine of the world's most important and successful financiers. They built their lives and reputations and prestige on making money and did very well at it. Twenty-five years later, after the crash of the stock market, what had happened to these men? The president of the largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, died in bankruptcy and lived on borrowed money for five years before his death. The president of the greatest utility company, Samuel Insull, died a fugitive from justice and penniless in a foreign land. The president of the largest gas company, Howard Hopson, went insane; the great wheat speculator, Arthur Cotton, died abroad insolvent. The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, went to Sing Sing Penitentiary. The member of the president's cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home. The greatest "bear" on Wall Street, Jesse Livermore, died a suicide. The head of the greatest monopoly, Ivar Krueger, died a suicide. The president of the Bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, died a suicide. The values on which they had built their lives had failed them.

It is indeed a great disaster when the values on which you have built your life fail you. I am greatly distressed, for example, about the values that people in our city who are in our general socio-economic group are building their lives on. Because these values are proving empty and unsatisfying and I am seeing lives, homes and marriages shattered and cracked. One of my good friends calls his section of town "Peyton Place" and apparently with some justification. If our youth today are rebelling against the values that we adults place on life, who can blame them? It is just unfortunate and sad that the form of their rebellion is negative and not constructive and it is a greater pity that this yearning for better values cannot be more usefully and meaningfully channeled. We do not so much need to criticize today's youth as we do to offer them a better alternative.

So, the first thing we notice is that the jailer discovered that his values failed him. When it got down to the nitty-gritty of life, everything he had built his life on had failed him. The second thing we might notice is that he met someone with different values from him and their values did not fail them when the chips were down. Here were two prisoners, Paul and Silas, who we are told were charged with disturbing the city. They got caught in a violent mob experience in which we are told that the crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. Then, as the Bible reports, "when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely." But the reaction of these two men to pain and suffering and abuse and imprisonment must have astonished the jailer. He had put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks and their backs were bleeding and raw from the beating they had undertaken. Yet in spite of this apparent disaster, at midnight he heard them praying and singing hymns to God!

But that was not all! When the jailer was on the point of committing suicide these two men stopped him. It would have been easy enough to let the jailer do himself in and then walk out of the prison free men. But St. Paul cried out to him, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." His concern for the jailer was more important than his freedom. How astonished the jailer must have been! Here one of his own prisoners had more concern and compassion for him than for his own welfare. Here was a man who had some amazing values and he could forget about the grass.

Do you have that sort of security in your life? Have you built your life on the sort of values that no matter what life brings you, you are secure, your anchor holds, and the place where you have planted your feet is firm?

William Bright, Executive Secretary of Campus Crusade for Christ, says that no matter how brilliant you might be or how successful as an athlete, as a student, as a business man, a professional person, or whatever, unless you know Jesus Christ as your highest value, you will never know real purpose in life. Whoever you are this morning, you are made for God. As St. Augustine said centuries ago, "Our hearts, O God, are restless until they rest in thee." We are made for God. But listen to what happens to people who do not find God. H. G. Wells, the famous historian and philosopher, said at the age of 61, "I have no peace. All life is at the end of its tether." The poet Byron said, "My days are in the yellow leaf, the flowers and the fruit of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine alone." Thoreau, the literary genius, said, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists of the nation, left this note pinned to his pillow when he took his life, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great success; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day."

That is what life is like when Jesus Christ is not its highest value. Pascal, the French physicist and philosopher put it this way, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only God can fill..." Dare I say this morning that there is a vacuum in your life? I do not know all of you, but I do not need to know you. Ask yourself in the quiet of your own heart and if you do not truly have Jesus as your highest value, you are saying this morning, "Yes, there is a vacuum; I am not satisfied with my life." That is what happened to the jailer and it is what I would like to think happened to the groundskeeper who said, "Forget about the grass." The jailer saw in Paul and Silas a security that stood steadfast in the midst of shame and imprisonment and whippings so that Paul and Silas could pray and sing in prison. He saw a freedom in their lives that permitted them to be more concerned for his welfare than they were for their own.



And when he saw that, he wanted it for himself. He cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer was simple. The answer was to center his life on Jesus, to put Jesus as his highest value, his deepest loyalty. Indeed, it was to surrender his heart, mind and will to Jesus.

Do you want to forget about the grass this morning? Do you want to forget about those human values that seem so important but really are not? Ten years ago my mother and father came to live with us. They were in ill health and they were poor and had no place to go and they came to our home. Mother died three years ago and yesterday on my birthday my father died. Last night at the hospital as Elizabeth and the children and I were there at the hospital bed, I couldn't help but think when you come to this point, what's really worthwhile. What values are going to count at a time like that? I want to say to you this morning, if you are not building your life on Jesus Christ, if Jesus Christ is not the highest value for you when you come to that moment, the things on which you are building your life will fail you. Do you want to have such a security in Jesus that no matter what life brings you, you can sing and pray at the darkest midnight even in the inmost prison? The only way to do that is to surrender your total personality, your mind, your heart and your will to Jesus. Some of you may say that I believe that Jesus is God's Son. I believe he died for my sins and all my life I believed in God, am I not a Christian? No, not if you have refused to yield your will to him. Some of you might say "I heard a great sermon once at a youth retreat or at special services and I gave my heart to Jesus. I had a great emotional experience when I came forward at the invitation. Am I not a Christian?" No, not if you did also surrender your will to Christ. Some of you may say, "I have been a church member a long time. I come regularly to services. I pray often and read my Bible. I give generously to the church, work on its committees, and live a good life. Am I not a Christian?" No, not unless you have surrendered your will to Christ. Not, unless he is the Lord of your life. Not, unless he is the King of the throne of your heart.

The Phillipian jailer discovered his values had failed him and he cried out, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" Then he made Jesus his highest value, then he put Jesus at the center of his life, then he surrendered his mind to Jesus, he surrendered his heart to Jesus, he surrendered his emotions to Jesus, he surrendered his will to Jesus. When he had done that he could forget about the grass and the Bible says, "he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God."

Do you believe intellectually in God? Do your emotions respond to Jesus? I invite you to take that all important third step, in order to put Jesus at the center of your life, I invite you to surrender your will to Jesus. I invite you to let him live his life through you because your life is an expression of the will of God. Then you, too, can forget about the grass.