

Follow Jesus: Start Where You Are

Last week I spoke about following Jesus. You might recall that I asked, what would you do if you heard Jesus say to you, "Follow me"? Maybe you'd say, "Well Jesus, I'm already following you." What if he replied, "Come with me over here..."

And suppose Jesus said to you, "Sure I know you want to follow me. Can you join me in seeking and saving the lost?" Knowing Christ and Him crucified is key – that is the center of what we have to share with the lost. Remember? The gospel in ten words: Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead.

"Sure, sure" we say, and yet ...*Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father,"* Luke 9:59. The man was actually saying, wait until my father has lived out his life and left me an inheritance, then I'll follow you. Maybe you're saying to yourself, "When the kids finish school, when they're out of the house, or maybe when I'm retired, I can follow Jesus. But right now, I'm overwhelmed by life." Yes, we want to follow Jesus, join His mission, but there's always something pressing that gets in the way. Very often it's our own discontentment with life.

Life Becomes Unhappy

Some people always appear to be happy throughout life. Maybe even more so if they're on social media. Some people have discovered they can be happy in all circumstances. Still others are unhappy no matter what their circumstances. Was it Abraham Lincoln who said: Most people are about as happy as they choose to be? Ever since the beginning of creation there has always been someone, somewhere, unhappy with his/her position in the universe. It started with an angel named Lucifer. His seething discontentment caused him to lead a rebellion against the Most High. We know him as Satan, the devil, the prince of this world, and the implacable foe of God and all His works.

In the Garden of Eden Satan sowed seeds of discontent in Eve's unsuspecting heart. By misquoting the Lord, he made Eve think that God was somehow trying to cheat her and to keep her down. So, Eve took the fruit which Satan offered and ate it. She gave it to Adam and he swallowed it whole, and with it, sin was planted deeply in the human soul. The seeds of discontentment brought forth the bitter harvest of disobedience, which led to the loss of paradise.

Unhappy Ever After

After Eden humans have never been a happy race. We always want something more and better than what we have.

- If we're young, we want to be older. If we're old, we wish we were younger. If it's old, we want something new. If it's new, we want something newer.
- If it's small, we want something bigger. If it's big, we want something really big.
- If we have a thousand dollars, we want two thousand. If we have two thousand, we want five thousand.
- If we have an apartment, we want a condo. If we have a condo, we want a house. If we have a house, we want a bigger house. Or a new house. Or a nicer house. Or maybe we want to scale down and live in an apartment again.
- If we have a job, we dream of a better job, a bigger job, a closer job, a bigger office, a better boss, better benefits, more challenge, bigger opportunity, nicer people to work for or with, and more vacation time.

- If we're single, we dream of being married. If we're married ... you can finish that sentence yourself.

None of this is unusual in any way. We were born discontented and some of us stay that way **forever**. Now there are two kinds of discontent:

1. A healthy discontent begins in **gratitude** and dreams of what the future might hold. This is the kind of discontent that brought many people to the shores of this country – looking for a better life. It is the kind of discontent that works for justice, freedom, and equality for all people. This is a kind of discontent that has brought untold benefits to humanity in technology, medicine, and human relations. The hope for something better drives us forward and keeps us working, inventing, striving, creating and innovating.

2. An unhealthy discontent, on the other hand, begins in **outrage**. It sees that life and the world are not perfect and demands all be made better. It rails against whatever is not perfect (according to their vision). It agitates, bullies, and imposes a human version of utopia on society, while bringing untold misery to humanity.

Here are four signs of unhealthy discontentment:

- a) **Envy** - The inability to rejoice at the success of others; resentful of what others have.
- b) **Uncontrolled Ambition** - The desire to win at all costs, no matter what it takes or who gets trampled in the process.
- c) **Critical Spirit** - The tendency to make negative remarks about others and to tear down every idea that is not yours.
- d) **Complaining Spirit** - The disposition to make excuses and to blame others or bad circumstances for our problems; a refusal to take personal responsibility; inability to be thankful for what we already have.

The unhealthy discontent is a cancer of the soul that eats away our joy, corrodes our happiness, has no gratitude, and produces a terminal jaundice of attitude, smothering all in a cloud of negativity. No wonder Benjamin Franklin declared, "Contentment makes a poor man rich. Discontent makes a rich man poor." It even afflicts those who follow Jesus, and if not expunged makes for miserable disciples of our Savior and miserable congregations. Is there any hope for those mired in unhealthy discontent?

Yes! It's just this type of discontent that the Bible addresses and Jesus actually overcomes.

Discontent Overcome

Sometimes it's hard to tell, even in ourselves, where our discontent comes from. That shouldn't be surprising – we are, after all, imperfect humans. First Corinthians chapter 7 contains some amazingly helpful insights about discontent, even though the word itself is never used. Let's take a look:

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him, 1 Cor. 7:17. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him, 1 Cor. 7:20. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to, 1 Cor. 7:24. This first insight is repeated three times here so, it must be important:

1. You Are Where You Are By The **Grace** Of God. What does it mean? It means this: lead the life

God has **given** you. Yes, I know your life is not perfect, it hasn't turned out as you desired or hoped, or maybe it's terrible. We often find ourselves in terrible circumstances; sometimes because of our own choices, sometimes because of choices of others, and sometimes it's because nature and life are just broken and beyond our control. But God is not the author of imperfection, or brokenness, or evil. Despite all the mess He can still use your life for His ultimate purpose.

We did not choose our race or sex or culture or skin color or our national origin, our physical stature, our IQ, or our talents. Don't waste your life fighting those things, bewailing the unfairness of life, the cruelty of the world, or being angry at God. God has given each of us a job to do, starting right where we are. He has gifted each person in various ways and has plans for each of us to fulfill His ultimate purpose of redeeming all from sin, brokenness, and discontent. Be a true Christian right where you are.

Don't let your circumstances be an excuse to avoid God's call. Evidently some of the Corinthians, to whom Paul wrote, having been converted out of idolatry were jettisoning every part of their old life in favor of something radically different. The same thing often happens today. "I'm saved so I can quit my job." Well, wait a second. Maybe God wants you there to be his witness. "I'm a Christian, I don't have to finish college." Maybe God can use you even more if you finish college. "I'm a Christian. I don't have to obey the law anymore." No, true. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Nothing proves the reality of your conversion more than staying where you are and showing the change by the way you live. Don't cut and run. Stay where you are and live for Christ.

In one sense Jesus chooses us, no matter where we are. *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit ... fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name, John 15:16.* God has given each of us a job to do, starting right where we are.

[Paul offers two examples to help us understand this principle. The first is circumcision (v. 18-19). He basically says that circumcision doesn't matter one way or the other. If you are a Jew (and therefore circumcised), don't try to be uncircumcised once you come to Christ. If you are a Gentile (and therefore uncircumcised), don't think you need to be circumcised once you are saved. It doesn't matter one way or the other. That fact would not have bothered the Gentiles (who didn't care about circumcision anyway) but it would have hugely troubled the Jews who viewed circumcision as the visible mark of their covenant relationship with God. Paul says following Jesus is greater than our religious traditions. Stay the way you are—circumcised or uncircumcised – just follow Jesus.

The second example is more difficult because it involves slavery (v. 21-23). It's difficult because our national history carries the stain of slavery; which fortunately ended 158 years ago. It is unfortunate, however, that slavery is still practiced in parts of the world today – you may hear of it as "human trafficking."

Slavery was a major part of life in the Roman Empire when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians. They would all be aware of it or part of it. In many cities there were far more slaves than free people. Simple math suggests that eventually some slaves would respond to the gospel and come into the church. What did the gospel have to say to their sad situation? Paul's advice sounds strange to us, and might today be called politically incorrect. In essence, he tells the slaves, don't worry about your slavery. Serve God where you are. In verse 21 he indicates that freedom is preferable: ... if you can gain your freedom, do so.

But the sad fact was if you were a slave, you were likely to stay a slave all your life. That left only one question: Would you serve God in that disagreeable situation or would you focus so much on your slavery that you couldn't serve God? For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave, (v. 22). Even if you're a slave on the outside, in Christ you are free inside – for God has made you to be free. By the same token Paul is saying it's better to be a slave on the outside and a freeman in your heart because you know Jesus, than to be free on the outside but still a slave to sin because your soul is in darkness. Would that apply to anyone you know? You were bought at a price, he says in verse 23, referring to the blood of Jesus. If Jesus purchased you, then you are both free from sin and are now a servant of Christ.]

At times we will find ourselves in places we would rather not be. Sometimes we are in those places for weeks or months or years or even for a lifetime. And we can't just push a button or say a prayer and make it all go away. In those cases, we must decide whether or not we will follow Jesus anyway. The second insight:

2. The Issue is Not Circumstances. Most people think: "Change my circumstances and then I'll be

happy.” Paul says, “Get close to God and He will take care of your circumstances.” What does it matter what we are called to do? All Christ’s servants are honored in His sight. Serve God where you are until God clearly calls you elsewhere.

It’s not wrong to better yourself, but more money or a new position doesn’t necessarily mean a better situation. ... *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well, Matthew 6:33.* If I’m going to live for God, I can do that anywhere: at Chevron, or at Memorial Hospital, or at In and Out, or at Kern High School District. I can do that while driving a Toyota or a Ford or while living in a mansion or in a pup tent. I can do it in Bakersfield, or Houston, or Delano. I can serve God single or married.

And if I’m not going to live for God, I can be disobedient anywhere: at all those same places. It doesn’t matter. The issue is God—not my circumstances.

None of this is an argument against change per se. Like most people, I’ve moved from one job to another, from one church to another, even from one country to another, and I’ve owned different brands of cars. Change is a fact of in life but it’s not a guaranteed solution to our problems. And that’s why it’s important to remember the basics. Each day Jesus says to us “Follow me ... right where you are.” So:

3. Remember the Basics. Though we may have long ago accepted Christ as our Savior and even been following Him for some time, our flawed human nature still seeps through. Discontentment tempts us daily. Some cling to their discontent and the burden of sin, forgetting the very thing that He provides, which makes all the difference in the world to who we are. He provides salvation - contentment - through forgiveness of sins. The gospel message is simple: Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. So simple in fact, that we forget its power in our lives. We are here today because we need to remember it.

The Scriptures tell us: *He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities ... and by his wounds we are healed, Isaiah 53:5.* Think about that. If the Savior came simply to take away our pain, right every wrong, and impose His peace, we would remain sinners, continuing to inflict pain, doing wrong, and discontented because we’d want more and better. The true power of the gospel is that Jesus Christ transforms the human soul.

Once we understand this, our true position will become evident, and we’ll be able to sing that Christmas carol with enthusiasm: “O come, let us adore Him.” We belong on our knees in gratitude for His great grace that takes away our sin. Jesus Christ bought you with his own blood. He gave everything to set you free from sin. Will you now follow Him? Or will you complain your way through life?

To follow Him means to yield your self to Him completely. As long as you demand your freedom to do whatever you want, you will always be in chains. He is the only way to be truly free.

So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed, John 8:36.