

# Follow Me

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# Unfollow



"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. John 6:67-68

I assume that many of you have Facebook and you know what it means to friend and unfriend someone. Others of you also have Twitter. On your Twitter account you stay informed about and connected to people by 'following' them. You are able to receive information and thoughts from folks when they make tweets or posts.

If you ever get annoyed by what someone that you follow is tweeting or posting, you are free to click unfollow. This means you don't have to be subjected to their ideas, thoughts or statements. Most people do this when they become offended or have their beliefs challenged.

The same is true when it comes to Jesus. I fear that we are quick to unfollow Jesus when His ideas, thoughts and statements cause us discomfort. Many times entire churches and denominations choose to unfollow Jesus and seek to find truth in someone else's tweets or words.

You see, following Jesus can at times be inconvenient, costly, and even embarrassing. It can cause us to miss opportunities, lose business and stand out in a crowd. Jesus' disciples struggled with the temptation to unfollow, but one of his disciples asked a question in John 6:68 that put everything in perspective.

When you have doubt, you've got to ask, "if not Jesus, who? If not Christianity, what?" Why would we choose to be committed and not unfollow? Because... "We have come to believe and to know you are the Holy One of God" John 6:69

## Next Steps:

1. When has following Jesus been inconvenient, embarrassing, or costly for you?
2. How has Jesus given you a peace and assurance as you have been obedient in following Him?
3. What have you "come to believe and to know" about Jesus?

# Dont' Follow Rules



"In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And His commands are not burdensome."  
1 John 5:3

Our world has perfected the art of performance-based love. It is exhausting to feel like you're only as valuable as you are expendable.

The good news is that our performance does not determine Jesus' love for us. It can be difficult to wrap our minds around how Jesus loves. We easily fall into the habit of performance, viewing Jesus' commands as rules to follow instead of a means to intimacy with Him.

But, in 1 John 5:3, you see it is out of love for Jesus that we obey His rules — not the other way around.

God's commands have not been put in place to oppress us, but to free us. God's plan for our lives is the best plan for our lives. So when we give God ultimate control, it gives us ultimate joy.

If we measure our value on how well we're following the rules, we make our faith about us instead of Jesus' death on the cross. Obedience is not about how we perform, but how we respond. We say yes to God because we love Him, not out of obligation to Him or because we want something from Him.

Obedience is as simple as listening to Jesus and doing what He says. Don't follow the rules —follow Jesus and He will give us the strength and ability to live in obedience.

## Next Steps:

1. How can it harm our witness if we view God's commands as burdensome?
2. Take time to pray that God would help you know that your value is not in your performance, but your position as a child of God.

# Following A God Who Has A Love That Follows Us

“Surely your . . . unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life” Psalms 23:6

God’s goodness and unfailing love follows us in life. King David says it pursues us!

Picture a parent following a little child around picking up after them. When we’re struggling with hurts, habits, and hang-ups, God is coming right along side us, helping to pick up our messes and telling us that His unfailing love is always there.

This means, rather than entering into the future with a question mark, you can do it with an exclamation point! God will be with you no matter what happens. He will never leave you: “Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever” Psalms 23:6

- God's goodness will provide and protect.
- God's mercy (unfailing love) will pardon and forgive.

Goodness is the fact that God gives us good things in life that we don't deserve. Mercy means God holds back the condemnation we deserve. His unfailing love was demonstrated on the cross and is following you today.

## Next Steps:

1. Why is it important to know that God’s love is “unfailing”?
2. Take time to write down how you have experienced God’s goodness and love in your life.

# Follow Jesus' Calling



"Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."

2 Timothy 1:6-7

When Timothy joined Paul on his missionary journey, he was still a very young man. Paul sent him to a city called Ephesus to help start and lead a church. Even though Timothy had a problem with fear, God was still able to use him. There are three lessons we can learn from Timothy about how to follow God's calling on our lives.

1. Develop the gifts God gave you.

"Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example for the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith, and purity. Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you.... Practice these things and devote yourself to them, in order that your progress may be seen by all" 1 Timothy 4:12, 14-15

2. Refuse to be distracted.

"Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you" 1 Timothy 4:16

3. Give God your very best.

"Run your best in the race of faith, and win eternal life for yourself; for it was to this life that God called you" 1 Timothy 6:12

Paul says about Timothy, "I have no one else like Timothy". Can you imagine a greater epitaph? There was no one in the world like Timothy. He was focused. He was committed to the call of God on his life, nobody could distract or discourage him, and he gave God his best. Do you have a desire to follow God's calling?

## Next Steps:

1. How are you developing the gifts God has given you?

2. In what ways can you eliminate the distractions that are keeping you from focusing on your calling?

# Follow God's Will



“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”  
Luke 22:42

Have you ever stopped to think about God’s will? I don’t think we take time to consider that in our daily lives...but why? Maybe it is because we have worked hard to create a God that would never disagree with us or challenge us. I wonder if we do all we can to avoid feeling the tension between God’s will and our own?

Think about a time you saw someone else put aside his or her wants in order to follow God’s will. How did their actions influence or challenge your faith?

If we are to be called followers of Christ, we must consider the power of Luke 22:42. We need to examine our lives daily and ask if there is an area we need to say no to ourselves and instead follow Jesus.

## Next Steps:

1. Today I challenge you to pray: “Heavenly Father, I want to want what you want, more than what I want.”
2. Why are we afraid to pray that God’s will be done?

# Peace In Following



"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33

There are a lot of things we are promised if we follow Jesus. One is not a pain free, trouble free, conflict free or stress free life. However, as we follow Jesus and are reminded of His promises we can experience peace in spite of our daily circumstances.

We must be aware that this world is not our home. We are sojourners that are just passing through on our way to heaven. So this world that is broken will be filled with trouble. But...we need not let that steal our joy.

You see Jesus has overcome all that is in this world. That helps us to "take heart" to be bold, of good courage, cheerful and confident. As children of God we are also overcomers and that truth gives us a peace that the world cannot give and cannot take away.

We forget this truth all too often. But Jesus has "told us these things"... so lets take them to heart and know that our God is bigger than the momentary trials of this world.

## Next Steps:

1. What circumstances in this world do you allow to steal your peace?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. In what area of your life do you need to "take heart"?

# When Your Children Don't Follow

As a pastor I have seen the heartache that parents have expressed due to their children not being followers of Christ. While it is a cause for concern and should motivate them to do all they can to share the love of Jesus with their wayward children, I hope I can share a little encouragement.

## 1. Don't give up.

Your child belonged to God before belonging to you. His grace is extended to them as we speak.

If your child decided to follow Jesus but is running from the church, trusting God includes remembering we're not the Holy Spirit. It's not our job to convict someone of sin, but to consistently love him or her like God does, showing that Jesus offers us a better way to live. We won't change lives; Jesus will.

If your child isn't a Christian, trusting God means you don't take it upon yourself to convince him or her to act like a Christian or attend church. The first way your child experiences the life-changing kindness of God may not be at a church service, but through a relationship with you. God is not done with your child, so you shouldn't be, either.

## 2. Pray and position.

We can pray confidently for our friends and family members who haven't yet decided to follow Jesus, confident that God hears us. It's good to ask God to change lives and bring others to church; it's even better to pray while we position ourselves to welcome them back into our lives and into our churches.

## 3. Give grace.

We can try to do everything in our power to make someone say "yes" to Jesus, but grace is more attractive than guilt. Remember that the way we speak and act toward them can pull them closer or push them farther away from Jesus and His Church.

## Next Steps:

1. Who in your family do you need to witness to today?

2. Spend time in prayer asking God to use you as an instrument of His grace when sharing His love with unbelieving family members.

# Not A Cushy Job



“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”

John 15:18-19

This week we are going to focus on the idea of following Jesus in the world. This is an important topic because it is not easy to live the Christian life in some of the environments we find ourselves in daily. Not everyone will appreciate your faith in Christ. Your boss may fear you talking about your faith and offending someone. Teachers at school may tell you to put your Bible away during your free time because someone may get upset. These are the realities we are seeing in our own country and in our community. Sometimes the harshest critics we have for living according to God's Word are others who claim the title of Christianity but have no real concern for what the Bible says.

There are two things to remember as we begin looking this week at the idea of following Christ in the world. First, don't be surprised that the world is not always accepting of our faith. Jesus was clear about what they should expect in John 15:18-19. Don't miss what is happening when our faith is hated. We should not worry about our personal feelings being hurt because someone said something mean. Rather, we should be heartbroken by the fact that they have rejected Christ or don't know him accurately. I use the word 'accurately' because many people don't reject Jesus as the Bible describes, but rather some wrong idea about Jesus they have learned. Instead of just being angry at the world for how we are treated we should focus on the bigger issue of how they have rejected Jesus.

The second thing to remember is that we belong to Jesus, not the world. Sometimes we get upset about how we are treated because we want to be accepted and loved in the world. Don't forget that sometimes when we are feeling like the world does not appreciate our life decisions it is evidence that we have chosen Christ's plans for our life. The world's approval lasts for a moment; pleasing Jesus lasts for eternity.

## Next Steps:

1. In what environments do you find it most difficult to live out your faith?
2. Why should we not be surprised if we find ourselves hated by the world? How should we respond?

# Bible-colored Glasses



“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”  
Romans 12:2

Christians should think differently about life. We should view things through the lens of Scripture. That means we don't determine what we believe about issues based on what is popular or politically correct at the moment. We must understand truth according to what the Bible says. We cannot change the world for Christ if we begin to think like the world. Having a Biblical worldview is essential to following Jesus in the world because it will help us see things according to Scripture. We must filter our views on culture through the test of Scripture. We examine ideas and values and compare them to what God's Word says. If something agrees with Scripture we can accept it, but if something does not agree we must reject it and speak up for the truth - that is the way it should work! Christians should hold a Biblical worldview and boldly live according to God's Word.

However, that is not the reality we are living. According to George Barna only around 19% of Christians who identify as “born again” have a Biblical worldview. That is alarming! What that tells us is that many people who should be following Jesus in the world are instead ignoring Jesus and conforming to the world that they have been called to reach for Christ. We have been called to change the world, but often times it seems that we are allowing the world to change us. We must be aware of this reality in our own life.

Do you have a Biblical worldview? Do you allow God's Word to shape your view on ALL aspects of life? We need to get into the Word before we go into the world. We can very easily miss God's will for our lives and not take the opportunities that he is giving us to serve, when we allow our minds to get distracted by the things of the world. Base your life on God's unchanging and perfect Word. The idea, principles, and values of the world are constantly shifting, but God's Word will stand forever.

## Next Steps:

1. In what areas of your life are you tempted to conform to the world rather than God's teaching?
2. Pray that God will help you look through the lens of scripture in all areas of life.

# Opportunity is Knocking

“Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'”

Matthew 28:18-20

Matthew 28:18-20 is a section of Scripture known as the Great Commission. In these verses Jesus tells his disciples what he plans for them to do as they live their lives in light of his death and resurrection. He is telling them to live their lives each day in a way that seeks to help others become followers of Jesus as well.

What is impactful about this verse is that He did not tell them to retreat from the world. Instead, we see a need for them to continue living their lives in the world, but with a new focus. As they go about their day they are looking for opportunities to point people to Jesus; they are looking for ways to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ through everyday interactions. They didn't stop after telling about Jesus though, they helped others develop in their faith. They helped them understand what it meant to be a follower of Christ and live a life that honors the Savior.

The reality is that as they went through their day, God was opening up doors for them to reach out to others, and the opportunities have not ceased! Everyday we have opportunities to go and make disciples at school, at work, in our communities, and in our homes. We interact with people that God loves and He wants them to know it. The Great Commission was not given to be a specific event at a certain time, it was not given just to those with special training or certain spiritual gifts. Rather the Great Commission is to be a focus for our every day lives. As you go about your business, reach out and make disciples, point people to Christ by how you live each and every day, and speak about what Christ has done for you as you're given opportunities.

## Next Steps:

1. The opportunities to share the love of Christ with others are always there, the question is... do you see them and are you faithful to take those opportunities to point people to Christ?
2. What fears keep you from sharing your witness with others? Spend time praying this week that God will give you boldness and the opportunity to share the unfailing love of Jesus.

# Consistently Bold



“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

Romans 1:16

Paul was a man of great integrity. He says he is not ashamed of the gospel and we know that he is absolutely truthful in that statement. How can we know? Look at what he went through for the sake of the gospel: he was imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned to the point where they assumed he was dead, and ultimately executed. Paul is a man who demonstrates how to boldly follow Jesus in the world.

It would have been easy for him to tone it down when he left town after being imprisoned. He could have laid low for a while until things seemed to calm down and Christianity was accepted, but he refused. He had an integrity that said no matter what happens, no matter who is watching, no matter what the consequences, I will speak the truth. I will live my life without shame and without fear as I live out my faith. Paul was not ashamed of his faith and it is clearly seen in how he lived. He never backed down or hid his faith even though it would ultimately cost him his life.

What can we learn from Paul now? We know that Paul did not change his character, values, or faith based on his audience. It is not uncommon for people to live and act differently around their church friends than around others. They are bold in their faith around Christians but won't say a word about Christ outside of those circles. We justify this type of thinking by saying we don't want to offend anyone. Is it possible that what we are really afraid of is being embarrassed by how they may react? Don't forget that the gospel message can bring others to a salvation that will change their eternity. The gospel can transform people's lives. We spend most of our time talking about the gospel with people who have already been transformed by it. We must boldly get beyond embarrassment, shame, and fear to share with those who desperately need it.

## Next Steps:

1. How consistent is your Christian life? Does your lifestyle and speech morph depending on your audience?
2. Are you willing to risk possible temporary embarrassment for the potential to change someone's eternity?

# Time to Reap



“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.'”

Matthew 9:36-38

Jesus sets an example of how we should view people in this passage. Everyday, we encounter people who have needs, some of those needs may be obvious. Sometimes, because of fear or shame, they will not reveal what is going on, but we know something isn't right. It is easy for us to get so wrapped in our own lives, own problems, and our own ambitions that we can very easily ignore the problems of those around us. We need to start trying to live our lives with more compassion.

We need to realize that sometimes Jesus will put us into someone's life to help them. Jesus looked at this crowd and had compassion on them because He knew how great their needs were. He looks at the people as a field ripe for harvest. They are ready to respond to God's work in their lives they just need someone to come and share the truth. Following Jesus in the world requires us to begin paying attention and responding to those around us.

The harvest is still plentiful. I would dare to believe that most Christians have the assumption that the majority of people would never put their faith in Christ. At least this is reflected by our hesitancy to point people to Christ. Instead of assuming the worst, perhaps we should start thinking differently: why not assume that people would at least be open to Christ? At one point in time people believed that the Apostle Paul would never become a Christian, yet we see how Jesus worked that out. We do not know how close someone is to faith. We do not know what Christ has been doing in their heart in preparation for your interaction with them. Jesus may use you in the harvest. He may use you in planting seeds. You never know how Christ may use you in the journey of someone's faith. Don't just pray for workers to reach people for Christ, get to work!

## Next Steps:

1. Why are we tempted to expect the worst possible reaction when we share the gospel with non-believers?
2. Pray this week that God will help you see what's at stake for those who do not know Christ. May the eternal difference that your testimony could make inspire you to be a faithful laborer for the Lord.

# Grabbing The Gavel Too Fast

“What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

Paul is writing this in 1 Corinthians 5 in response to a church discipline issue. He is talking about holding people to a high standard in church because we should know better. However, sometimes we take an approach that is different than this. I believe sometimes instead of worrying first about how we live our lives we focus on the sins of those outside the church. We desire to judge the sinful world and hold them accountable for their sins without much concern for first holding one another accountable to live according to God's standard. We must be careful that we do not spend all our time looking at the behavior of those outside the church while ignoring our issues inside the church.

The reality is that people who have not been transformed by Christ are not going to be concerned about living according to what the Bible says. Following Jesus in the world requires knowing how to approach people with a proper way of helping them deal with sin. Instead of merely condemning people for their sin we must help them understand what sin is and how Jesus Christ provides forgiveness and can change their lives. Merely holding signs that say “God hates \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with your chosen sin)” is not going to work. It is a one sided story. The gospel is much more than telling people to change their behavior. The gospel says God hates sin, but He loves you so much that He sent Jesus to die on the cross to take the punishment for your sin so you can be forgiven and free. What if we spent less time huddled up with our Christian friends bemoaning and condemning the behavior of this sinful world and more time out with the people pointing them to Christ. That is a much more productive use of our time. Don't expect that people will change their behavior merely because you told them it was bad. Absolutely expect that behavior will change when God changes someone's heart.

## Next Steps:

As Christians we need to do two things.

- 1.) Get our own house in order and make sure we are holding each other up to God's standards.
- 2.) Stop merely complaining about the way the world is going and start doing something about it.

# HE Wants Them Found



“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:8-10

Take time and read all of Luke 15. It is a picture of God's desire that people come to know Christ. We have a God who loves those who are lost and wants them to be found. As Christians we should be concerned about the things that matter to God. This means we all should do all we can as we live in this world to help bring rejoicing in Heaven as people come to know Christ. We need to reach out to our neighbors. We need to understand that our workplace, our school, our home is a mission field. We also must understand that we cannot ignore the needs of our world. God cares about your neighborhood, He cares about our state, He cares about our country, and He cares about the world. Not only does He care, but we have been called to action.

We have talked about evangelism and reaching out to our community, but now we want to look at world missions. We can all be involved in God's mission to reach the world. Missions is not just about missionaries who move to foreign land. There are several ways to be involved in missions for each of us.

## Next Steps:

Pray- Do you believe that prayer makes a difference? I do and I believe that prayer is vital in reaching the world for Christ. We can pick a missionary family or two and pray for them. We can also pick a nation or people group and pray. Prayer does make a difference in missions.

Give- There are numerous opportunities to support missions work. Find something and start giving.

Go- God may want you to leave your community to share the gospel. This may be short-term on summer trip or short-term project. Maybe God is calling you to go and serve long term. Be open to God's plans for your life.

# Another Day Older and Deeper in Debt

And to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Gen 3:17-19

This is where it all started. It probably won't surprise anyone but work is a curse at its root. God judged Adam's sin by declaring that the perfect world that was created for him would no longer yield food to him without effort. In fact, the ground itself would wage war against him as he tried to make a way for his family. At some time we all have faced the impacts of this curse.

It would be wrong however to view work itself as a curse. The act of working is blessed by God and encouraged, even mandated, through the Scriptures. Oftentimes we look at our jobs as a curse, a means to an end, working to live. Tennessee Ernie Ford had a hit song about the curse of work. One of the lines from the song goes like this:

*Some people say a man is made outta mud, A poor man's made outta muscle and blood  
Muscle and blood and skin and bones, A mind that's a-weak and a back that's strong  
You load sixteen tons, what do you get, Another day older and deeper in debt  
Saint Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go, I owe my soul to the company store (in modern terms, the credit card company)*

It is easy to fall into this way of thinking. Monday morning comes fast. This week I want to change the way we look at working. It's not a curse; in fact it is a blessing. We can take our occupation, no matter what we do, and use it as a platform to serve God and bless others. It is a battle, a struggle and at times it can take all of the resources we have to get through the work week intact. But, if we as followers of Jesus understand why we are doing what we do during our work, it can fundamentally change how we view life on the job.

There is a story about a man walking by a construction project, he asked one of the laborers "What are you doing?" The man answered "Laying bricks". The next guy in the crew said "I'm building a wall". A third guy spoke up loudly and said "We're building a cathedral, to the glory of God". That anecdote illustrates the different ways we think about work. We all look at our work somewhere on the spectrum between laying bricks, the pure drudgery of work, and building a cathedral, work that is part of a divine purpose.

## Next Steps:

As we start the week, take time to evaluate how you look at work. Write down the tasks that you think are pure drudgery and see if you can find a larger purpose for that task. How can the most mundane tasks be used to glorify God? Look past the task at hand and search for the big picture behind why God has you on the job today.

# One Simple Test



"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." 1 Cor 10:31

"Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." Colossians 3:22-24

As followers of Jesus we are called to a higher purpose for anything that we do. My daughter in college is active in a campus ministry which dialogues routinely with unbelievers, atheists, skeptics and others who don't share our world view. One of the most heart breaking things that she tells me is that these college kids come to the meetings and relay story after story of how "Christians" have hurt them. "My dad was a Christian and left me and my mom when I was little". "I went to church and the people were so mean I had nightmares about it". "I got into trouble and the pastor condemned me and told me I was going to hell for what I did". These poor kids have deep and lasting scars from encounters with "Christians". I have become cautious even using the term to describe myself anymore lest I be lumped in with the past failings of other folks who may be wearing the T-shirt but aren't on Jesus' team.

In our workplace we have a great opportunity not to show how Christians act, but how followers of Jesus act. Paul tells the Corinthians that everything in our life should be dealt with using one simple model. What should I do that brings the most glory to God in this situation? That simple test will solve a world of ethical problems in our life. Many times the answer will come at a personal cost to us. We may not want to get involved in another person's life, but would it bring more glory to God?

He also tells the Colossians that one way we bring glory to God is in how we conduct ourselves at work. We should not be the office gossip, the crank, the suck-up, the person who is always against everything, the guy coming in late and leaving early, the one nobody wants on the project team. Whether we know it or not, when we talk about going to church on Sunday, people's ears prick up and they immediately start watching us. They compare our actions with what they expect a "Christian" to act like. Many times we fail and fall into the stereotype they have of hypocrisy. Our challenge is to conduct ourselves at work just like Jesus was in the next cubicle over. Our work should be solely to glorify Him while we do the best we can for our employer.

## Next Steps:

Think about what label your co-workers would apply to your office door if they could pick your title. Are you the gossip, the complainer or the slacker? Or are you the person someone comes to when they need an honest and trustworthy worker to get a hard job done on time. Even better are you the person people seek out to get advice or share with when co-workers have problems. Are you just another "Christian" or are you a true follower of Jesus? Use this question this week at work, "What can I do in each instance where I have the chance to bring more glory to God?" Pray and ask God to give you the chance and you have the faith to take the actions and see what happens.

# It's 5' O'clock Somewhere



"Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil--this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart." Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

I mention sometimes that I like to draw parallels and illustrations of Scripture from country music. For sure, it is not inspired but many times it is darned insightful. Merle Haggard isn't on the list of philosophers that you might study in school, but he pretty well captured the essence of what Solomon says in our verse today.

Well, I keep my nose on the grindstone, work hard every day  
Get tired on the weekend, after I draw my pay  
But I go back workin', come Monday mornin', I'm right back with the crew  
I drink a little beer that evening, sing a little bit of these working man blues

Work is our lot in life. Sometimes I think followers of Christ forget that we can enjoy ourselves. We get so wound up on what we shouldn't do and guilty about what we don't do that we forget all we can do.

Solomon says in essence, "You have to work anyway, so don't be afraid to enjoy what you earn and what you do". Solomon figured out in his life that work and the fruits of work, when done in service to God, are things to be enjoyed and relished. Our job, our income, our family, our church friends all deserve to be enjoyed.

God expects us to show Him praise by being content with the job we have, the money we make and the things He has given for us to do. I fall victim to this all the time not being happy with what I have and focusing on the tiny fragment of what I don't have. Peaceful contentment at the end of the day is something that is irreplaceable. Solomon is telling us to enjoy our life. Our lot in life is not punishment; it's not random chance or bad luck. It's exactly what God wants us to have. John Piper's famous quote applies to work as well, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him".

## Next Steps:

This week, make a determined effort to write down all that you have to be thankful for regarding your work and income. Make a list and put it on the fridge, mirror or wherever you like to look at things to remind you. List all of the things you enjoy that come from your work. Intentionally look for contentment in the small things of life and make a list of these things.

Some of you have experienced loss and know that many times you don't miss something until it's gone. Today, make a list of all of the good things and enjoy them while they are still here.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain" 1 Timothy 6:6

# Don't Be Sorry



"The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.:

Proverbs 26:13-16

"How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man." Proverbs 4:9-11

In our country today there are a myriad of ways to avoid work. We have worked hard to make our lives easier, from microwave ovens to washing machines to Google maps that tell us where to go and how to get there. The question is raised, what do we do with all of the extra time we should have accumulated since the 1900's? Most of it is wasted goofing with the gadgets that are supposed to save us all that time, but that's another lesson.

Some people take the easy way to avoid work and do all they can to live off someone else. Proverbs gives us a good picture of these folks, they are called Sluggards. In my family the term is "Sorry", as in that person is too sorry to breathe. That may be a southern term, but it's synonymous with lazy. The sluggard in Proverbs is sorry, as in lazy. He's too sorry to work and too sorry to eat. As we talked about earlier, God told Adam to work as a consequence of his sins. Avoiding work for the sheer purpose of being lazy is disobedience to God in that we are avoiding our just responsibility. 2 Thessalonians 3 tells us that if a man won't work, he shouldn't eat. That's the divine order of things.

I hope that no one reading this would find similarity with the sluggard. If you do see any similarity, be warned that these folks don't fare well in the long run. God is not pleased with laziness. That doesn't mean that hard work gives us a free pass, but it is the part of a life built in service to Him.

There are so many things in life that can only come from hard work. Physical fitness, learning, knowledge, deep and caring relationships all take dedication and hard work. Our society is all about "quick and easy". Look at any cooking or fitness magazine and you'll see quick, fast, easy or no-work ways to do everything.

## Next Steps:

Our Christian character and testimony takes work. We can't be like a sluggard. Our relationship with God takes constant effort and attention. Our marriage, our relationships with children and parents, co-workers and friends all take time and determination. Take a look at some aspect of your life where you may fall in the sluggard circle and see what's going on. Take an honest appraisal of your efforts and see what God would have you to do better in that area. That's how we move from the ranks of the sluggard to the prudent men. Proverbs 14: 8 "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception."

# Are You Wasting Your Efforts

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Ephesians 2:8-10

Why did God save you? Have you ever thought of that? Because He loves me and doesn't want me to go to Hell would probably come up as one of the top answers. While that is true to a point, Paul tells us in Ephesians that we were saved for a purpose.

There has long been confusion over the role of faith and good works in the life of a Christian. People who follow Jesus are saved by faith but they are saved for good works. James tells us that without good works, our faith is dead. Healthy apple trees produce apples and healthy followers of Jesus produce good works.

It gets even deeper. Our text today says that not only was I saved by grace, apart from my own efforts, but I was saved for a purpose that God had planned even before I knew Him. That makes our salvation much more valuable than we sometimes understand. I have a purpose that God mapped out, designed and continues to develop me to accomplish.

Since we spend anywhere between 40 and 70 hours a week at work, it only stands to reason that some of our purpose is to be found on the job. One of my guiding verses is Ephesians 6:12 - "For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens."

It is essential to understand this as it relates to our purpose at work. The things we battle against on a daily basis aren't what we think if we are followers of Jesus. Being his workmanship, or His creation, or His hand-made craft gives us a different perspective on our lives. Struggles against people on the job, against circumstances on a daily basis, are more than the immediate. We are called into a higher battle that is fought on the front lines at our jobs. We are warring against spiritual forces that seek to tear us down and cripple us from the God-given good works we were made to do.

## Next Steps:

As you go to work this week and next, spend time thinking about the battles you fight every day. Look at them not just as project deadlines, production quotas, sales goals, meetings or cranky co-workers. Look at it as a challenge to do good work for the sake of Jesus in the face of spiritual opposition. A vast army of evil forces want to ruin our witness and stop the kingdom of God as we would advance it even at work. We don't have to preach sermons in the break room to evangelize at work, our conduct and demeanor can be powerful weapons.

Take a look at what good works at your job that Jesus may have made you for. What skills, talents and abilities do you have at work that you can use to advance the kingdom and wage war against evil forces in dark places?

# Dropping the "S-bomb" at Work

"Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly." 2 Timothy 2:14-16

Paul wrote the letters we call 1st and 2nd Timothy to a young preacher named Timothy. This is Paul's "how-to" manual for a preacher. The text today is encouraging Timothy about how to teach and act as a follower of Jesus. He tells Timothy to be an approved worker who is not ashamed of his faith and can handle the Word of God properly.

There is a children's ministry called AWANAs that uses this as their foundation verse. It stands for Approved Workers Are Not Ashamed and it centers around Bible verse memorization so that as children grow up they can handle the truth of God in the proper way. We teach our children how to handle a number of things properly. But are we learning to handle God's word?

At Church we learn about the word of God, but to put it into use, we have to be out in the world. Paul warns about Godless chatter right after telling us to learn the Word. I would be hard pressed to create any better description of our world today than Godless chatter with an absence of the Word. Godless chatter. (There's an App for that!) I don't need to list what I'm talking about, you know what this phrase means. Paul would tell us to stop trying to be an iPhone ninja and start learning how to handle the word of God.

A prime proving ground for handling the word of God is on the job. Nothing will change the tone of a conversation like dropping a Scripture into the discussion. Call it the "S-bomb", the Scripture warhead. To do that, we have to know enough of the Bible and understand the context enough to make it apply. That doesn't take a seminary degree, it only take a little effort. I talk to people all the time who can drop movie quotes or song lyrics into any conversation. How about dropping Bible verses into the mix every once in a while?

We were talking at work a while back about a particularly spectacular sunrise that everyone saw that morning. The sky was just a carpet of red, pink and rose colors. Several folks were commenting on how beautiful it was. I dropped an S-bomb and quoted Psalm 19:1, the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky proclaims His handiwork. I didn't cite chapter and verse, and I think I actually mis-quoted it slightly, but I tried. A revival didn't break out in the office, and nobody declared jihad, but God got the praise for what He had done in the sky that morning.

## Next Steps:

Write down a few things that come up often at your work and go to the Bible to find what wisdom it has about these topics. Memorize the verses that apply and use them at work the next time the topics arise. See what God can do if you rightly handle His word.

# I Like a Fine Whine with Lunch

"Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." Philippians 2:14-16

If you've sat in meetings, you will understand what I'm about to say. I've been in countless meetings where the conversation eventually deteriorates into blatant whining. I've had bosses who started saying "would you like some cheese with your whine?" just to shut people up. I used to get tired of it and just out of the blue ask "do you guys hear that high pitched whine? Where is it coming from?" Then every time someone would start whining again, I would say "it's back, what is causing that sound?" After a while they got tired of me saying it and the meeting would break up or at least change course. Crude strategy but effective.

Any parent can attest that the ability to whine is fully developed at birth and we only get better at it as we get older, it peaks at some time in the teen-age years and some folks never outgrow it. Paul tells the people in Philippi that they need to be careful of having too much whine. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to do our job without grumbling or complaining. If you want to stand out at work today, simply doing your job without grumbling and complaining will put you in the small minority.

At work, what Paul is telling us is exactly on the mark. If you want to shine as someone different than the world, don't whine about your job. Keep the words of Christ in mind, He has created me for good works and given me this job so why should I be whining? Imagine if you were standing in front of Jesus whining like you do to your buddies in the break room. What would He say?

As we approach our jobs, we are to glorify God, do the good works He has prepared for us, be content with what He has given us and rest in the faith that He has us where we can do the most good. There's no place for whining.

## Next Steps:

Challenge yourself at work over the next few weeks to consciously stop whining. Devise some strategy, even if you have to enlist a cohort, to become the shining light in the discussion when they break out the whine. You can even quote some Scripture at the appropriate time to cork the whine bottle again. Don't be a jerk about it, Paul didn't say he would be proud of ticking off everyone around him. He said to run the course so that when you look back you are proud of how you ran.

# Do Not Follow Your Heart



The other night I heard yelling coming from the living room. No! Noooo! Don't do it!

I was prepared to fuss at Cooper for starting a fight with his sister. I stomped into the room and yelled, "what is wrong"! Both kids looked at me and said, "the girl in the Disney movie told her friend to follow her heart" and we were telling her not to do it. Well...my kids have learned at least one important life lesson.

In our homes we need to beg our kids to avoid the Disney mantra of "follow your heart". This phrase is as dangerous as its ugly sister "you can be whatever you want to be". We need to teach our kids to follow Jesus, not their heart.

"The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" Jeremiah 17:9

Your child's heart will tell them to be selfish, disobedient and hateful. Their heart will make them follow their boyfriends or girlfriends into fornication. Their heart will encourage them to tolerate everything and stand for nothing.

Let's teach them to follow Jesus in spite of what their heart says. Let's not leave our kids at the mercy of a deceitful and wicked teacher. Let's point them toward Jesus.

## Next Steps:

1. How has following your heart caused you pain and regret?
  
2. Where do you see your kids following their heart instead of Jesus? How are they being deceived?

# Just Do It



Have you ever felt like God was directing you to take a step of faith, but you were hesitant? Have you ever known exactly what God wanted you to do but you continued to pray about it?

When I was a little kid we sang a lot of songs in Sunday School. One song that I remember to this day talked about how we should respond to God's direction. "Do it now, don't delay, don't put it off till another day" said the song. So... why is it so important that we follow the directions of Christ with urgency?

Why? Because delayed obedience is immediate disobedience. Let that sink in. If you know what you should do today, but you wait or "pray about it", you are being disobedient. Any delayed obedience is immediate disobedience. It is the delay that gives Satan room to work and put stumbling blocks in our way. During the delay we can often take our eyes off Jesus and begin to focus on the circumstances around us. Also, remember that you don't have to pray about what God has already said to do.

As a parent and spiritual leader in your home, let your kids see you exhibit obedience without delay. Show them that you have enough faith in your God to serve Him with boldness and a sense of urgency.

## Next Steps:

1. Why is delayed obedience common in our lives? Why is it so dangerous?
  
2. Have you ever used prayer as an excuse to not act on what you knew God had called you to do? How can prayer be a dangerous delay and stall tactic?

# C's Get Degrees



Of all the things I have said from the pulpit, this may be what has caused parents to cringe the most. I have told people that “C’s gets degrees” as a way to help them not stress too much about exams and end of grade tests.

On a related note...so many people over the years have told me they cannot follow Jesus the way they would like, because they don’t “know enough”. They feel like they are C students when it comes to matters of the faith. They don’t witness because they don’t know enough. They don’t pray because they don’t know enough. I think Satan throws a party when he hears that excuse.

Hear me... You don’t have to know everything to follow Jesus. One step at a time is all Jesus asks us to take. If you wait till you are Martin Luther or Billy Graham to share your faith or speak out for Jesus, you will never follow Jesus faithfully.

You follow Christ by taking steps of obedience, learning more and more about His Word and communicating daily through prayer. We all learn on different levels.

Jesus wants our availability and He will give us the abilities we need.

So... Follow Jesus even if you think you are a C student at best. Jesus will tutor you along the way and fill you with the knowledge of the Holy Spirit.

## Next Steps:

1. When have you used the “I don’t know enough” excuse?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What steps can you take to grow in your faith as you are following Jesus commands?

# Protecting, Nurturing and Guarding

Jesus protected the disciples' spirits. What does that mean for your children? You protect their spirit. You realize the power of your words, that your words can heal or hurt.

We say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me." That's absolutely wrong! Names hurt more than sticks and stones. A child can break a leg or an arm and it'll heal, but some of you are still under a curse today because when you were growing up your dad or mom said, "You're never going to amount to anything." And you're still trying to prove them wrong.

As parents we must understand the power of our words to hurt or to heal. A father can crush his daughter with one sentence. Or he can build up his daughter. The same is true with sons. John Eldridge, in his book, *Wild At Heart*, says most men go through life reacting to what I often called 'the father wound.' Every boy, as he grows up, wants to have his manhood affirmed and the most important person to affirm it is his dad.

If he doesn't get it there, he tries to get his manhood affirmed in a dozens of other ways. He lives his entire life trying to compensate for something his dad never said. "I'm glad you are my son. You're a man. I am proud of you. You're valuable."

The Apostle Peter gives advice that applies to all leaders including moms and dads: "Nurture, guard, and guide the flock of God. [That includes your kids.] That is your responsibility. Not domineering as arrogant or dictatorial or overbearing persons. But being examples and patterns and models of Christian living." 1 Peter 5:2-3

## Next Steps:

1. As a follower of Christ, how can you protect, nurture and guard your flock?
2. How have you wounded your children? Commit to seek forgiveness and restoration today.

# "Fish On"



""Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." Matthew 4:19

I love to go fishing. One of the highlights of my year is when my dad, son and several friends go to the coast for a fishing trip. I enjoy the fellowship, the relaxation and the scenery. But what I enjoy the most is when a rod bends over and you can hear the sound of brakes squealing. That means a big fish is on and we are in for a treat. I can hear Coop yelling now... "Fish On"... "Fish On Baby".

With all the excitement that brings, our text tells us that there is a catch that is even better. One that does more than cause some fishy smelling guys on the beach to jump up and down, it causes the angels in heaven to throw a party. You see as followers of Christ we are given a lifetime fishing license and have no size or amount limits.

As followers of Christ we learn that evangelism is not an option. We are expected to attract men and women to the gospel by sharing the unfailing love of Jesus. This means we have to have a love for those who need to be caught for Jesus. The disciples were able to haul in a great catch when they were obedient and followed the instructions of Jesus. The same is true for you and I. There is a great harvest awaiting faithful followers of Christ who are committed to fish for people.

## Next Steps:

1. When was the last time you shared the gospel with a non-believer?
2. Pray that Jesus would give you a passion to fish for people.
3. Write the name of a non-believer you will share your testimony with this week.

# It Costs How Much?



"But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?" Luke 14:28

There is a cost to following Jesus, but I would also add there is a greater cost in not following Him. Whatever you give up to follow Christ, will be more than made up to you in this life and certainly in the life to come.

Jesus wanted all who were willing to follow Him, but not to begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? In other words, Don't do this on the impulse of a moment. Count the cost.

Even still some people who set out to follow Christ haven't counted the cost, like couples who rush into marriage. Once you have made a marriage commitment, it is a lifelong commitment. And if you are not willing to make it, then do everyone a favor and stay single. Count the cost.

The Bible records the story of someone who saw Jesus walk by and blurted out, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus had not called this person to follow Him; he just volunteered. So Jesus said, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head" Luke 9:58. He was saying, "Listen dude, I am not headed to the Jerusalem Embassy Suites. It is a rough life. I am headed to the cross. Are you sure about that?"

Sometimes in the impulse of the moment, someone will say, "I will follow Jesus," but they don't follow through on that commitment. They didn't count the cost.

## Next Steps:

1. What difficulties have you faced because of your faith in Christ?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How have the blessings you have received outweighed the hardships?

# Follow The Leader



"Keep your eyes on Jesus, our leader and instructor. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy He knew would be His afterwards; and now He sits in the place of honor by the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2

When I was in elementary school every child would come to class and anxiously wait to see who was named line-leader for the day. This person was able to walk out front wherever we went and all the other kids were expected to follow. They had to watch to see where the leader went and keep up the pace the leader set.

My prayer is that as we grow and understand our weaknesses and out of desperate need for a perfect and loving leader that we would not look to man but to Jesus. You see if we hope to go where we need to go and live the right pace of life, we had better keep our eyes on Him. Let us watch Him closely and learn from His love, mercy, truth and grace. He is the perfect teacher and instructor. In addition His love for us was proved by His willingness to die on a cross, not with regret but joy.

## Next Steps:

Let's commit as a body of Christ to keep our eyes on the one who now sits in the place of honor.

1. What in your life takes your eyes off of Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Pray that Jesus would give you the boldness and faith to follow His leading today.