

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

I put a lot on your plates in last week's message, I know! But I appreciate the thoughtful and very encouraging responses that I heard from so many of you over the past week. This really is a healthy faith community; and I know we say it all the time, but it is a real privilege to serve Christ here with you!

I am tempted, as I typically would do in a two-part message, to recap last week as I begin here, but there was so much in it, that I really can't do that today... fully. But if you weren't here, please take a look on our Web site where you can pick up the message in audio or text form. And you can catch up if you're interested. I would, however, like to repeat just two points from that message, and then we'll continue from there today.

The first thing is that we looked at the Great Commission last week – Jesus' marching orders to the church. We noticed that the essence of that Commission is just one thing: we have been sent out *to make disciples of all nations*, all peoples. And Jesus defined that one thing in two ways – i.e., he specifically tells us that making disciples involves two components:

1. Baptism in the name of the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
2. Teaching the disciples, the new believers, to *obey everything that Jesus commanded us to do*.

I suggested that we (meaning the Western Church) might have gotten off track in that mission in recent years. Instead of our priority, our *first* purpose, being to teach people how to *live like Jesus*, we have substituted teaching things *about* Jesus. Teachings about Scripture. About social agendas. About theological systems: all very *good things*, to be sure. Important things, absolutely! Interesting things (to me) without a doubt. But in some ways, off task. As far as being our *first* priority. In substituting knowledge for action, the result has been a disaster for the church: A diminishing of our effectiveness in joining with Jesus in his mission to heal the world, through a loss of understanding how to *apply* those Scriptures, those teachings, to our everyday lives.

The only kind of influence that we've ever had in the world is our ability, our willingness, to represent Christ in it. Having the mind of Christ in us **is** – *should be, anyway* – our goal as

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

disciples. There shouldn't be anything that we want more than to live like Jesus in this dark, broken, needy world.

And yet, I shared the results last week of a survey of non-Christians between the ages of 16 – 29 with you, evidence that the world at the very least, is not seeing Christ in us. They are instead seeing anger, hatred, judgment, self-interest. So, we have a problem.

The second thing I want to repeat from last week is a question I shared with you that was posed recently by Brian McClaren:

*“What would happen if the Christian faith preserved all the rules of the art [of being a Christian] that could be written in books, and heard in sermons, but we lost the actual practice of the art?”  
What would we do? How would we recover that?*

I think that is a tremendously important question, because I don't think we give nearly enough attention to grinding out what it would look like to live in obedience to Jesus in our own particular portion of the world. We know the 'rules' ... kind of. But I think we hold them more as 'ideals' rather than practical teachings; we are at a loss as to what exactly to do with them, so for the most part we let the world be our role models.

Just a couple quick examples of what I'm talking about...

Jesus had quite a bit to say about conflicts – from 'turning the other cheek', to careful negotiation, to confrontation, to forgiveness, and lots more. These are wonderful and timeless teachings and they 'fit' just right in our lives as he promised they would. Yet, when we have conflicts we are still more often than not likely to lash out at someone, hold grudges, let our anger control us, avoid the person if possible, and even leave the community altogether.

None of these are what Jesus commanded us to do. And we are very unlikely – even among this healthy community of faith, of fellow disciples – to challenge the behavior of another person when it conflicts with Jesus' teaching. And we are just as unlikely to put *ourselves* in a position in which these things may actually be discussed, in grace, in a context of mutual love and respect, or in which we *ask*, even *encourage* someone's input into our lives.

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

So, I'm wondering, 'how do we learn this stuff?'

And that's just one example... in a world that teaches us that self worth and self-esteem comes from our possessions (and we're seeing the effects of the end result of that!) who can we talk to to discuss Jesus' view of possessions, stewardship, and things? In a world in which *everything* is sexualized, how are we interpreting Jesus' teachings on sexuality and purity, and how are we holding ourselves accountable? In a world where there are lots of people who think, believe, and act differently than we not only *do* ourselves, but who cross nearly every line of what we may believe is right – how do we interact with such a world in a way that demonstrates God's unconditional love without turning into judges or condoning sin? How can we love people into a better way?

How do we deal with failure, success, rejection, betrayal, disappointment, sin, (and on and on) in ourselves and in others? Do we even think that Jesus might have something to say about these things?

These are *basic* discipleship questions... and yet for the most part, we try to figure them out on our own, or we let the world teach us. But how can we do *that*, if our very lives are centered, focused, on the call of Jesus Christ to 'follow *me*?' What does it mean to follow Christ?

My message last week was also influenced by book I've read recently (twice), which I highly recommend to you. It's called The Prodigal God, by Timothy Keller. (I know some of you are already reading it.) This book is a revisiting of Jesus' parable of the 'two lost sons' found in Luke 15. Without getting into the meat of this book (which we will do, eventually, I'm pretty sure!) let me give you a quick summary:

Keller has a unique insight into this wonderful parable in claiming that it is the story not of a lost son, but the story of *two* lost sons. And not only are they both lost, but they are lost for *the same reason!* Both the older brother and the younger brother in the parable want stuff *from* the father but neither wants the Father himself.

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

So, the younger son takes his *stuff*, his inheritance, his ‘blessing,’ and he goes off and wastes it all. He makes up his own rules; he lives however he wants to, no limits, and no restraints. And, we all understand this part of the story; he eventually comes crawling back home, having come to the conclusion that living for himself, being his own ‘law’ is an entirely unsatisfying and dismal way to live. We’re not made for that. It’s not anything like he expected it to be.

So he returns to his old home, expecting to try and convince his father to take him on as a hired hand. He has the whole speech ready, but before he could get it out, instead he is welcomed into the father’s house by his father’s sheer grace.

The older brother in the parable, however, tries a different way of getting something from the father. And it is very subtle. He tries *goodness*. He says to his father, “My whole life I’ve never disobeyed you – not even once! And what do I have to show for it? You haven’t given me anything!” Remarkably, the Father accepts that, he doesn’t contradict him.

This son says, “I’ve done everything *perfectly*”, “I did *everything you ever asked me to do!*” But, Keller points out: the father doesn’t contradict him, but look where that got him! He is standing outside the father’s feast, and his father is out there with him pleading for him to come in. In fact, he was just as lost as his younger brother. And ominously, the parable ends right there. We’re never told: does he go in or not? We don’t know.

But here’s the thing, where Keller’s insight is remarkable: the ‘badness’ of the younger son kept him away from the Father’s house. We get that. But it was the ‘goodness’ of the older son that accomplished exactly the same thing. He’s on the outside looking in. And in spite of that, this older brother sits in judgment of his younger sibling, he’s seething, angry with his brother, because deep inside he feels that his ‘goodness’, his obedience, has earned him a higher place in the father’s house. His ‘goodness’ has earned him some ‘rights’ in that place. But, in truth, he doesn’t understand what the Father is about at all.

The Pharisees who heard this story knew without a doubt that it was directed at them, and they went away offended and angry. They got it! The older son felt like he had earned the right to demand something from the Father by his goodness. His obedience wasn’t something that grew

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

out of love or respect, it was a way of trying to *earn* something; or worse, a way of trying to put the Father himself in a position where he could demand something from him as his *due*. You OWE me! It is my *right*. (I hope a lot of you read this book! It is a powerful, eye-opening work.)

Friends, here is my heart: for a long time I have been growing weary of watching the Church (again, I'm speaking of the church universal – across denominations, and theological systems, and so forth) watching the Body of Christ which we are all part of, divide itself into smaller and smaller segments based on lists: proper beliefs, lists of certain social ethics, convictions about this or that. Again, let me say it as clearly as I can: all important things, to be sure. Things we need to wrestle with – things that are part of any true discipleship. Things we need to talk about.

But there is something lacking in the way we've been going about this. By cutting off those who disagree with us, or cutting off ourselves from those who are different from us, we lose our opportunity to influence one another in our discipleship. How can the Holy Spirit use us in discipling someone if we have cut off contact with them because of a belief or lifestyle or issue, or because their theology is deficient (in our opinion?)

We read a Scripture at the Taize service last Wednesday from Romans 10, that says, “All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” It's not our doctrine that saves us; it is the Lord who responds to anyone who calls on his name. I had a conversation with a sister in Christ this past week, and I was asked about my ‘theory of the Atonement’. I appreciate the question and I love to talk about stuff like that.

But something occurred to me as I responded to that question, (because I guess in the back of my mind I was thinking about this message) ... I had a 13-week graduate level class (in Greek) on theories of the Atonement. (I even got an “A” by the way! Ha!). So, this is interesting and exciting stuff to me, now; but the truth is that I had been a follower of Christ for a good number of years before I even knew that *were* ‘theories of the Atonement’.

I knew that Christ died for my sins, and following him changed my life and is changing my life. My theology came much later as I tried (haltingly) to describe what Christ had *already done in me*.

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

I ended last week's message reminding you of the nature of this church – there are a lot of different kinds of people, thoughts, maturity levels, etc. going on here. Our unity is found in our common desire to respond to the call of Jesus Christ and to live that out in our very real worlds.

In hearing that call we turn toward Christ ... and we are doing that. We are coming to him from many different backgrounds, different mindsets... our life's influences have been very varied (some very positive and some very negative). We are at varying places on that road moving toward Christ... some have traveled very far, and we have a lot to learn from you. Some are new, you've just started – and you, with your fresh eyes and newfound excitement, have something to offer us as well, who have been on the road a long time. We are fellow journeyers, all under construction by the Holy Spirit working in us.

But we need to better grasp two things, in my opinion...we need to understand that Christianity is more than theoretical, it is a way of life. And we need to grasp how to build into the structure of our lives some working system to keep ourselves on the 'way' to Christ. Maybe we can put it like this: Christian Faith is not a spectator sport! We can't merely observe, clinically sit back and watch and be much of a disciple.

Our Baptism is our initiation into the Body of Christ and the local community of faith. But as the beginning, there is much more ahead. We learn best the art of discipleship through what we talked about last week from Michael Polanyi – 'elbow knowledge'. We learn what it is to be a follower of Christ by connecting with other disciples and asking the hard questions to each other. By holding one another accountable to live up to the faith we profess.

Our Community in Christ is a precious, and often underused gift to us. Please allow me to share a quote from The Prodigal God, as we come to a close here today:

We live in a culture in which the interests and desires of the individual take precedence over those of the family, group, or community. As a result, a high percentage of people want to achieve spiritual growth without losing their independence to a church or to any organized institution. This is often the meaning behind the common protestations "I am spiritual, but not

## Christianity As A Way of Life, II

religious” and “I like Jesus, but not Christianity.” Many people who are spiritually searching have had bad experience with churches. So they want nothing further to do with them. They are interested in a relationship with God, but not if they have to be part of an organization.

I have explained in this book why churches – and all religious institutions- are often so unpleasant. They are filled with elder brothers. Yet staying away from them simply because they have elder brothers is just another form of self-righteousness. Besides that, there is no way you will be able to grow spiritually apart from a deep involvement in a community of other believers. You can't live the Christian life without a band of Christian friends, without a family of believers in which you find a place.

C. S. Lewis was part of a famous circle of friends called the Inklings, which included J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and also the author Charles Williams, who died unexpectedly after World War II. In his book *the Four Loves*, Lewis wrote a striking meditation on his death in an essay entitled “Friendship.”

*“In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles [Williams] is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's [Tolkien's] reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him “to myself” now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald... In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious “nearness by resemblance” to heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each of us has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying “Holy, Holy, Holy” to one another (Isaiah 6:3). The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have.*

[Keller:] Lewis is saying that it took a community to know an individual. How much more would this be true of Jesus Christ? Christians commonly say they want a relationship with Jesus, that they want to “get to know Jesus better.” You will never be able to do that by yourself. You must be deeply involved in the church, in Christian community, with strong relationships of love and accountability. Only if you are part of a community of believers seeking to resemble, serve, and love Jesus will you ever get to know him and grow into his likeness.<sup>1</sup>

It was a profound thing that Val and David came and asked if they could be married at the 11:00 service here today. Valerie expressed to me more than once how this community has deeply impacted her life, that she considers you ‘her family’. And this is what I've been trying to explain with my poor words... that is truly what we *are*.

There's a saying that you've all heard: “Blood is thicker than water”. I don't know exactly what the ‘water’ part means(!), but I get that the phrase is saying that blood ties run very, very deep.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Timothy Keller, Dutton USA, 2008, p. 124 - 127

## **Christianity As A Way of Life, II**

Family finds its connection in common heritage. In following Christ we have that same tie... common heritage, the same Father, and the most profound of Blood ties.