

Because It Makes a Difference

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Date: 17 January 2021

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Table Church. This week is our last week in what can only be a starting of our conversation about why should we bother to follow Jesus.

I was asked to preach on the idea that following Jesus makes a difference. It makes our lives better in some way. The backdrop of even the first couple weeks of 2021, far too reminiscent of the 2020 we thought we had all left behind, makes this feel like a harder sermon.

Part of that is because if you, like me, come from a particular faith background, the idea that following Jesus makes our lives better has been so corroded by the definition of better, that have been propounded by our churches that it's honestly hard to think about what that could even mean for us today.

When reflecting on how to preach about this topic, what came to mind over and over again is a snippet from the Screwtape Letters. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this book, it is a novel written by C.S. Lewis from the perspective of a tempter and the tempter's mentor.

At one point, Screwtape, the affectionate uncle and mentor to a tempter in training, named Wormtail writes, when he, referring to God, talks of their losing themselves, he means only abandoning the clamor of self-will.

[1 : 27] Once they have done that, he really gives them back all their personality and boasts, I'm afraid sincerely, that when they are holy his, they will be more themselves than ever.

So why is this what comes to mind? Well, it helps to frame our conversation. Because Jesus came to this earth to share the gospel, which literally translates to the good news.

And throughout the New Testament, through the words of Jesus, we learn a lot about what the gospel is and what it is not. The gospel is a message for today and now, not for tomorrow.

The gospel is a message for everyone, not for some select group. The gospel is lived out and requires action. It is not static or purely theoretical.

And the saving grace central to the gospel, that we are free in Christ, is freely given, but not forced upon anyone. I think it's important sometimes to take a moment to really reflect on what we are following when we say we follow Jesus.

[2 : 43] Because the commitment to follow Jesus means something. I do believe that following Jesus makes our lives better. But we must dive into what that actually means.

We have created social meaning for the idea of a better life in Jesus, that mean our own creations of what we want God to be, rather than who God actually is.

As the late Reverend Peter Gomes once said, Just as God created man in his own image, people created a God from their own image. And the unfortunate consequence of the latter is that we end up with belief that is parochial and limited in view.

People imagine a God who plays favorites or medals in human affairs or partisan reasons. This God of the small minds is never prepared for the worst.

In reality, if we are following Jesus, really following Jesus, it does make a difference. It changes how we act and the actions we take.

[3 : 50] It changes how we interact with those around us. And it changes how we react to what is happening around us. Quoting Reverend Gomes once more, he writes in his book, The Scandalous Gospel, What's So Good About the Good News, that the question should not be, what would Jesus do?

But rather, more dangerously, what would Jesus have me do? The onus is not on Jesus, but on us. For Jesus did not come to ask semi-divine human beings to do impossible things.

He came to ask human beings to live up to their full humanity. He wants us to live in the full implication of our human gifts, and that is far more demanding.

Possibly the four most terrifying words to pray, if you mean them, is, Thy will be done. It is because when we pray, Thy will be done, we are praying that we are no longer in control.

That our preferences, our wants, our desires, our versions of success, be put aside, and that God's vision of heaven on earth be lived out through us.

[5 : 10] But giving up control can be, for many of us, scary. Yet, this prayer can lead us to different actions.

I remember my senior year of college, where I had everything planned out. I was heading to Honduras with the Peace Corps. And then Honduras had a coup.

And the Peace Corps decided that Honduras wasn't peaceful at this time, and canceled the trip. My plan, the one I had worked on so long, had just fallen apart.

So I prayed, God, what is it that you want me to do? See, I thought I was listening to God the whole time. I thought that this was God's plan for me.

But frankly, after coming out just a couple years prior, which resulted in a story for another time, but effectively terminated my involvement with faith ministries on campus, I think I had unconsciously taken back some control.

[6 : 14] The me that was so willing and so ready my first year of college to give everything to God. The me that almost went to the Salvation Army Seminary instead of Harvard, because it seemed like God might be calling me that way.

That me that was so ready to follow, by my senior year was hurting and less trusting. By the senior year, I needed a wake-up call.

Now, after my plan fell apart and several other things going on, I was back praying for God to show me where God is calling me. I asked sincerely, I will be done.

And I think God's response was somewhere along the lines of, are you sure? Now, at that moment, I was in a messy crying. I will say the best conversations I have with God are always the messy cries.

But I said, God, I'm at a loss. What would you have me do? What are you calling me to do? And then sometime later that week, a mentor approached me and said that there happened to be an organization that would potentially provide a grant to do something for about a year.

[7 : 27] He said he knew that I had hoped to go abroad and wondered if there was anywhere I could think of to move for a year. And without thinking, without processing, the words left my lips.

Mamaloti, South Africa. I can move to Mamaloti, South Africa. Now, again, a longer story is available over coffee. But for the purpose of this sermon, what's important to understand is that by suggesting that I move to Mamaloti, South Africa, I was suggesting that I create a partnership with the very faith organization that effectively forced me out just two years prior because I came out as gay.

I was also suggesting that I engage in the three things that just the year prior I had told God I would never do. Ministry, short-term service trips, and move to a country where I didn't have context.

Now, I knew it was my fault because I genuinely meant my prayer. I wanted God to show me where I needed to be, but I forgot how different than my own vision that could be.

But sometimes this is what action when following Jesus looks like. We are called to act in ways that do not meet our definitions of actions we want to take or think benefit us or move us forward in the directions we've laid out for ourselves.

[8 : 55] In Mark 10, we read a story of a man who wants to follow Jesus. Specifically in Mark 10, 17 through 22, we find the story of a wealthy man who sought out Jesus's words on what he must do to inherit eternal life.

We read, And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, You lack one thing.

Go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me. Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Now, while admittedly I didn't have very many possessions, that choice that I made at the end of my senior year in college felt a little bit like this one. I had a plan, a path.

I knew what my next 10 years were supposed to be. And this moment, the choice to move to Mamaloti, South Africa, didn't fit into this plan.

[10 : 30] It required me to give up the control that I had built for myself, that I had idolized and prioritized. And yet it is probably the clearest call from God I've ever heard.

So I acted on it. I moved to South Africa, not knowing why or what I was meant to do. And I've never regretted it.

As I've become older, I've begun to realize more and more how painful and difficult that decision might have seemed for the man speaking with Jesus. Because the more established we become, the more rhythms we create, the more possessions we acquire, the harder it is to truly pray, thy will be done and mean it.

Because acting in line with a calling to follow Jesus requires us to be willing to prioritize God's call over our own comfort and idols.

So the reflection question I would offer you for this week is this. What thing are you holding onto that creates a barrier for you to fully follow Jesus through your actions?

[11 : 44] Following Jesus makes a difference in our lives because it calls us to actions that are countercultural. This does not mean that Christians are better than others. It means that when we truly are following Jesus, we act better to other people.

When we follow Jesus, we are called to radical action that turns upside down what we have been taught to expect or do. Jesus frequently acted inconsistent to the rules and expectations that reinforced political power for the religious elite.

But he also always acted consistent with the spirit of God and with the intention to serve and better those who were most marginalized. Acting with earnest deference and love to those who are hurting makes a difference.

It's just whether we are willing to live into that calling or if we, like the man in the parable we read earlier, are just not ready or willing to give up that which we value more.

Now before I get a bunch of emails, no, I am not saying that everyone needs to sell all their possessions in order to follow Jesus.

[12 : 55] To say this would merely be providing a checklist so you can fit following Jesus into your plan. And while I love a good checklist, the audacity of the gospel is that it requires nothing of us except for our choice to love God above all else.

And that that action transforms how we act, interact, and react. See, there's no checklist, no minimum requirements, just a choice to actively live your life in a way that reflects God's love for humanity.

Which brings me to my second point. Our call to follow Jesus makes a difference in our interactions with others. How we see and value others.

Now the Table Church is of course based in Washington, D.C. The nation's capital. And D.C. is called the center of power and influence in the United States. Here is where every lobbyist has an office, everyone knows that money speaks, and we are told that it's as much about who you know as what you can do.

We are conditioned to value certain interactions over others. However, if we return to Mark chapter 10, just a few verses earlier, we see an interesting interaction between Jesus and little children.

[14 : 20] People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. But the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.

For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them. The Messiah, God incarnate, made space for little children in his limited time on earth.

Now, context is important. If you read commentaries on this section of scripture, several commentators will note that particularly in the Jewish tradition at this time, it would have been an unworthy use of time for so great a prophet, who should be focused on instructing those of full age, to spend his time with little children.

I am sure that those watching this happen had a similar reaction to Jesus' time with women, and his time with Gentiles as well. If we look at a different passage, we see Jesus again interacting in a way that contradicts societal norms of the time.

[15 : 38] Now, you can find this story in Mark 5, starting around verse 25, but as a quick summary, some of you may be familiar with the story of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak to be healed.

She was pushing her way through a crowd and knew that if she could just touch the cloak of Jesus, she would be healed from 12 years of bleeding and pain. And she did that.

And here's how Jesus reacted. When she touched him and was healed, at once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him, he turned around in the crowd and asked, who touched my clothes? You see the people crowded against you, his disciples answered, and yet you can ask, who touched me? But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet, and trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.

And he said to her, daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. Jesus interrupted his journey to address a woman, a poor woman, marginalized by others, cast out because of her illness, no less.

[16:56] I am sure those around him felt like this was a waste of his time and needless interaction. It was bad enough that she would bother him, but that he would interrupt his day to interact with her must have been shocking.

But Jesus did. Jesus stopped. Now Jesus knew what happened. He knew her faith had healed her. He knew her love for him. It would have been enough for that woman just to be healed by Jesus. No recognition necessary. But Jesus stopped and interacted with her. He called her daughter and recognized her humanity.

And I'm sure Jesus had important places to be. He was clearly trying to make his way through a crowded group of people, undistinguished by the description given by his disciples. No one important was probably there.

Jesus just needed to get to his next place. But he put all of that on hold. Because following Jesus calls us to see people in a way that reflects God's love for them.

[18:04] We can look also at Jesus' choice of dinner guests. In Mark 2, for example, we read that while Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples.

For there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law, who were Pharisees, saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. See, when we say we are following Jesus, we are also choosing to follow the way he interacted with others.

Jesus tells us that the last will be first and the first will be last and lives out that truth in his ministry. We are told from the beginning that each of us is made in the image of God.

And Jesus reminds us of that truth, of our inherent value, not because of what any of us have done, but instead because of who we have been created to be.

[19:14] Jesus sees everyone. He chooses to spend his time with those society writes off and discards. His interactions model how we are supposed to interact with each other.

They challenge us to be better. We see this principle embodied in the early church, a church that welcomed in anyone and met the needs of the community, that loved unconditionally, one that lived out the calling to love thy neighbor in the most expansive definition.

As an example, this is reflected in the writings of Acts. In Acts 6, we see a moment where one set of widows are feeling overlooked.

So they appoint a group of people to specifically look after them and make sure they are cared for. Because if we are following Jesus, it makes a difference for the better in how we interact and care for others.

Because we are centering others and seeing others in a way Jesus would have seen them, endowed with that innate value as image bearers of God.

[20:23] So this is an opportunity for a second reflection. This week, I would invite you to reflect on your choices in interaction. Who gets your time?

Who doesn't get your time? What drives your decisions about who is worthy of interaction? How might you change how you think about or prioritize interactions to better reflect Jesus' model to us? Finally, following Jesus makes a difference in our lives for the better because our confidence in the gospel and our commitment to follow Jesus makes a difference in how we react to the challenges we face.

No matter what we are enduring, when we are following Jesus, we can find peace in abiding with God. Now this does not mean that followers of Jesus are always happy, but it does mean that when

we truly are following Jesus, we're able to find peace even while we are hurting or lamenting or in pain.

An organization I've worked with spoke of it as a joy dance, defined it as a recognition of hope in the midst of struggle and suffering, an expectation that new life, joy, and resilience grows from life's most difficult challenges.

[21 : 46] When I think of peace in the midst of struggle, I immediately reflect on Jesus' last moments on earth before he was crucified. In Matthew 26, as Jesus was about to be taken away to be judged and sentenced to death, Peter lifted his sword to defend Jesus.

But Jesus demands that he stops. We read that Jesus said to him, put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Now this is the part I really love. Jesus says, Do you think that I cannot appeal to my father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the scripture of the prophets might be fulfilled. Now I can imagine that Jesus' peace with what was happening, his measured reaction while still speaking truth to the people who think that they had power, was irritating to those arresting him.

[23 : 00] But Jesus had no need to worry or fear, because he was confident that this moment was temporary. This same peace was lived out by many followers in the early church.

Paul, as an example, reflected this type of reaction to adversity in his epistle to Philippians. See, Paul talks and says, In all my prayers for all of you, I pray always with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart, and whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. Now, in case you didn't catch it, as Paul is writing this letter to the Philippians, Paul is in jail.

And yet he's still saying, I always pray with joy. And he's not praying with joy because he's in prison or wants to be in prison. He is praying with joy because prison doesn't matter.

[24 : 16] Just like Jesus is not calm and peaceful because he thinks what Judas and others are doing is right, Jesus is at peace because he knows God is bigger. Again, before I get a number of emails, I'm not saying that followers of Jesus don't feel emotions.

Jesus himself lamented boldly, felt anger, sadness, and grief. And I'm also not saying that followers of Jesus shouldn't stand up to injustices. In fact, I believe we are called to do just that and see Jesus do that over and over again, whether in the temple or even in his last moments as he remains true to himself and calls out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, even as they threaten him with death. Perhaps for some of us, the learning that we have to deconstruct is a version of performative happiness, that we are supposed to always be happy as Christians, that since Jesus died for our sins, we should be happy all the time.

No, emotions are as much part of the image of God as we are. Our humanity demands them. What I am saying is that following Jesus makes a difference in how we react because we have security in a bigger picture.

We know that no matter what the challenge or harm that God is present and that we can move through it with God with us, that won't change how much it might hurt in the moment.

[25 : 43] That won't change whether the action itself is morally repugnant, but it changes how we are able to engage in the moment, allowing us to act differently and interact differently because we're able to react differently.

So our final reflection question, how does my choice to follow Jesus impact how I react to challenging moments? What role does God play in moments of hurt or pain?

Now, as I conclude, I want to note that when I say that I believe that following Jesus makes a difference for the better, I mean that when you decide to follow Jesus, it makes a difference for the better in the world around you.

This does not mean that we are called to enforce our interpretation of the Bible and other people. What it means is that when we are truly following Jesus, when we live like Jesus, we are collaborators in bringing heaven to earth.

And that means that we are collaborators in justice and mercy. We act in a way that demonstrates God's love to others. We interact in a way that acknowledges the image of God in all people and prioritizes the marginalized and oppressed.

[26 : 59] And we react in a way that is founded in the surety that comes with following Jesus.
Amen. Amen.