

Our Holy Habits: Relentless Curiosity

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[0 : 00] Thank you so much, Daniel. I appreciate it. Hello, everybody. Hello. So, I, yeah, I've been on sabbatical since June, and I realize that some of you probably have no idea who I am, because I definitely don't know who the heck some of you are. So, my name is Anthony Parrott. I have been a pastor here for about three and a half years, been in ministry for about 15 years, I have a wife named Emily, two kids, Audrey, who's in second grade, and Wesley, who's in kindergarten.

And this church believes in the power and the importance of rest and rehabilitation and relaxation, and I got all of those in spades over the past summer. And so, I want to say thank you to this congregation for believing in that. Maybe you didn't know we believe in that, but we do. And thank you for all of the leaders, some of which you saw up here, who we prayed for, people like Daniel, who's an elder, like all the people who make it possible to be able to take a sabbatical and to rest. And I want to give, and I want you to give your heartfelt thanks especially to Tanetta and Mish, who had to carry the slack that I, you know, let go.

All right. So, let's do a little bit of a meet and greet sort of mixer question. If you are the introverted type, you don't like those meet or greet mixer sort of questions, reminder, this is also the opportunity to get a snack, a drink, or use the restroom.

Here's the question that we're going to open up with. Introduce yourself, name, pronouns, maybe how long you've been going to the table. And the question is this, you walk into a crowded room, maybe much like this one, you know, not a work conference, just like, you know, people you don't know and you don't know anything about them, they know anything about you. What do you know more about than anyone else here? Okay? What is the thing that you are the expert on that you doubt anybody else in the room is an expert on? So, take a couple minutes, answer that question, and then we'll be back.

Go. Go. Bring your attention back. What I absolutely, what I absolutely love about meeting people, particularly in this area, is that, like, you meet people who are experts on just, like, the most particular specific things, right? Like, I am the expert on the economics of timetables for trains. Like, that's what, like, I've heard that before. Like, I guess somebody has to. Now, my, my go-to answer for this is my, I know more about anything, more than anyone else about, like, fictional alternative universes.

[3 : 15] Okay? So, like, you know, something I've discovered about myself in the past year or so is, like, you give me a topic and I will nerd out on that topic. So, like, the Bible, I want to know everything about the Bible. Marvel, I want to know everything about Marvel. Star Wars, I want to know everything about Star Wars. I spent an embarrassing amount of hours using my sabbatical to gain even more encyclopedic knowledge about Star Wars. Okay? That is my, that is what I know more about anything else. Now, we're in the middle of a series. We're talking about holy habits for our church, for the table church, and we're calling these holy habits as kind of a way to avoid the word values because vision and mission and values, we're all kind of sick of organizations talking about those.

But that's kind of what we are talking about, but we wanted to use the word habits because these are embodied. They're, they're, they're actions. They come out in our lives and the life of our community. And so, so far we've talked about radical friendship and revolutionary justice, and that has done a great job introducing those to us. Radical friendship and revolutionary justice. And I get the topic of relentless curiosity. Relentless curiosity. Now, I'm a little offended that this was the one that Tanetta assigned to me because I feel like this is her way of calling out how much of a nerd I am, which as the former poster child of homeschooling may be fair. You can go ahead and put that picture up.

That's me and my brother, age like 15. Go ahead and zoom in. I mean, come on. You know you are swiping on that profile on Tinder. I don't know what direction you're swiping in, but you are swiping. So yes, I, I'm a bit of a nerd. I geek out. I have, uh, unbridled curiosity about lots of things. And it ended up as one of the value statements of our church, one of the holy habits that we felt was already true of us, and we wanted to continue to be true of us into the future. Now, why curiosity? Like, churches and curiosity aren't always like two words that you see pairing together. But I think curiosity is a necessary ingredient for growth and learning and healing and transformation. And without curiosity, I get stuck, and the world around us gets stuck. If we want a world that's transformed by revolutionary justice, if we want to be a church that's known for radical friendship and hospitality, you cannot do that without curiosity.

Curiosity is a necessary ingredient for what it means to grow, to seek out justice, to question the status quo, and to, you know, have some sort of care or concern about the people next to you, or the people on the street, and the people in the neighborhood. You need curiosity. So tonight, I want to compare and contrast two Bible passages from the Christian scriptures, the New Testament, and see where this value of curiosity comes from, and some examples of that in scripture. So the first one comes from Luke chapter 18. You can open it up in your Bibles or on your phones if you want. The words are also on the screen. We're in Luke chapter 18. And Jesus says this, people were bringing even babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. And when the disciples saw this, they scolded those people.

And then Jesus, and we're told, the story is told throughout a variety of gospels, and we're told that Jesus gets angry at the disciples, calls the disciples to them and says, allow the children to come to me.

[7 : 09] Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it. So as a refresher on sort of first century culture, Greco-Roman culture in particular, so we're during the era of the Roman empire, which men apparently think about a lot, we're during the era of the Roman empire. And children were seen as often just property, as a way to propagate a bloodline. Children in and of themselves had no power. They had no ability to negotiate on behalf of themselves in society.

Any honor that they had came from their father. Children are utterly dependent, and they aren't able to really do anything for themselves. They're kids. In the Jewish world, children were seen with a little bit more dignity. They're seen as a blessing, as a way of God showing blessing to a family. But similarly, they're seen also as merely a way to propagate a people or a bloodline, and again, not a whole lot of rights to themselves, especially if you are not the firstborn, especially if you're not a boy. Now, Jesus, in Matthew 18, he says you need to humble yourselves, to remove honor from yourself and become like this child. So to be a child is to already start sort of this basis of shame. You're not a grown-up. You have no power. You have no dignity. But in this passage, Jesus actually calls them people. God's kingdom belongs to people such as these kids. Contrast that to the response of the disciples. The disciples see people bringing kids, even babies, to be blessed by rabbi Jesus. And the disciples are like, don't waste the rabbi's time. Don't waste Jesus's time with just these children. He's got much more important things to deal with. And Jesus gets upset. Sort of this how-dare-you attitude from Jesus. No, the kingdom of God belongs to people like these kids. Now, what are kids known for? Kids are known for lots of things. They can be annoying and rambunctious and loud and messy. And they're also known for routinely asking the question, why? Why, why, why? Over and over and over again. They're known for their curiosity. Most kids that I've ever met have an innate desire to learn. Now, sometimes that why question is so that they can get their way because the way that the grown-up is doing it doesn't make sense to them and they want it their way. Why can't I have a milkshake for dinner? Why can't I stay up until midnight? Why, why, why?

But often it's also just a wanting to understand. There's a very funny thing that happens that when you have a kid, you have a kid, you put them in a car seat. That car seat faces backwards until they reach a certain weight or height. And then you turn the car seat around and they can see forward.

[10 : 26] And this funny thing happens where all of a sudden the kid becomes an instant, automatic, expert driver. Dad, why aren't you going? The light's green. Dad, why aren't you turning? You can turn.

Dad, why, why are you? And they ask that why question because they think they understand how to drive. You ask them what the pedals on the floor do, they have no idea. You ask them what a gear

shifter is, no clue. But the light's green, that means go in America, please go, Dad.

They have an innate curiosity about them and they have a willingness to question. Most kids, at least in a healthy environment, most kids feel like they have the safety to be like, why does it have to be that way? It doesn't have to do, you don't have to do it that way, Dad. You can do it this way. Let me show you. They have curiosity. Curiosity is willing to say that I don't have all the answers. It may not have to be this way. And there must be more than this.

Curiosity has this intellectual humility. I don't know it all. I want to learn more. If you start with the assumption that you know everything, well, then you have nothing to learn. But if you're willing to say I don't have all the answers, then you have the opportunity to learn.

Curiosity has the ability to question the status quo. Why are things this way? It doesn't have to be this way. Why are there people who live in intense cities? Why are there people that were passing on the street that you're not giving money to, Dad? Like, children will point out your hypocrisy like none other. And curiosity is willing to say there must be more than this. Certainly life is not just like going to work and coming home and putting dinner and putting us to bed, right, Dad? Certainly there's more to your life than that. I hope so, Wesley. I hope so. A lack of curiosity, or the demonization of curiosity, is what keeps the status quo the status quo. It's what keeps things the same. Well, of course we exclude these people. Well, of course the economy works this way. Well, of course that's what everyone's always believed. I was shocked. Like, I'll admit, you know, I'm a pastor. I've gotten my degree in Bible and theology and all that stuff. But oftentimes the sermon still starts with google.com and searching for stuff, okay? And so I'm searching for curiosity and what other writers and thinkers and theologians and sermons have said about curiosity.

[12:50] And I was shocked and dismayed by the number of hits that were like, let me tell you about the sin of curiosity. The curiosity is the first step in a path away from Jesus. The curiosity is the first step in the path that will lead you away from the church. And so the boundary makers will set this big, big, thick line around what you are allowed to think and what you're not allowed to question.

So curiosity gets demonized, which makes sense. If you want to tell people to turn off their brains, to not think too hard, then that's how folks get trapped in spiritual abuse or abuse of any sort. Cults are cult-like religions, echo chambers of any sort, be that political, ideological, theological, anything. When you make curiosity sort of the forbidden fruit and you convince people that curiosity is that first step of rebellion, well then people will often shrink into themselves and just accept the way things are.

But I think that curiosity is the first step towards hope. What if things could change? What if it didn't have to be this way?

Curiosity can inspire wonder, and by wonder I mean both awe, the sort of thing that when you walk into a cathedral or you walk out into the open air on a crystal clear night and you see the stars, you look up and you experience awe and wonder, and I also mean it in the terms of like, I wonder. I wonder if, I wonder when, I wonder how.

[14:34] Curiosity can inspire doubt, and doubt can be a powerful weapon against injustice. Doubt that drives you towards, I wonder, I wonder if.

Hope is all ingredients towards hope. Hope not merely a sentiment, hope not as magic, but hope is action. Hope is organizing a plan. Hope is execution of that plan.

And this action, in Jesus' mind, is what we call the kingdom of God. Remember, he says that if God's kingdom belongs to people like these children, that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it.

And for those of us who grew up with scripture, oftentimes we hear a phrase like kingdom of God and it gets replaced with just like heaven, afterlife, something after death.

But kingdom of God is not the afterlife. It's not the world to come. It's the world that Jesus is bringing here and now. The kingdom of God is where God's will happens as we pray, by will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[15:48] And so you cannot enter that future world or that current world or that world to come, that world to be, that world that is blossoming up today. You cannot enter a world where injustice is confronted, where rulers are cast from their thrones, where the hungry are fed and the rich are sent away empty.

You cannot enter a world where the excluded are now the leaders if you don't have the curiosity and the openness to say what if. So of course Jesus says you have to accept the kingdom of God

like a child because a child doesn't have preconceived notions and has not been formed into cynicism.

A child has the ability to say it doesn't have to be this way. There could be better. So that's one passage. I want to compare and contrast this with another statement in the New Testament. It comes a few books later, the letter to the Corinthians chapter 13, where Paul writes this. He says, When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, and think like a child. But now that I've become a man or grown up, I've put an end to childish things. Now at first blush, first reading, this sounds an awful lot like contradicting Jesus.

[17:06] Poor Paul left out of the kingdom because he hasn't become like a child. Although I bet some of you in this room are like, that's good. I don't want Paul in the kingdom anyway. I don't like that guy. But I'm going to encourage us to be curious that maybe something else in this passage is going on.

So this is 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians 13 is the love chapter. It's the chapter that gets read a lot at weddings, all about what love is like. And so as a quick refresher, love is patient and kind. Love is happy or rejoices with the truth. Love is not and does not. It's not jealous. It doesn't brag. It's not arrogant. It's not rude. It's not irritable.

Love does not seek its own advantage. Love does not keep a record of complaints or wrongs. Love is not happy with injustice. For all things, love puts up with all things and trusts all things and hopes all things and endures all things.

Which means that in Paul's logic, if you want to grow up, if you want to be a man, if you want to be an adult, this sounds a lot like you're going to have to be downright naive.

[18:20] Hope all things. Endure all things. Trust all things. What kind of person would be that trusting and hopeful and enduring?

Oh yeah, it might be a child. Friends, I think Paul is purposefully using the language of irony. He's pushing back on the culture that he's surrounded by, which isn't that tremendously different by the culture that we're surrounded by.

These toxic forms of, quite often, being a man's life. And an honor-based society that he and his peers grew up in. Being braggadocious and arrogant and rude and irritable and seeking your own advantage and being satisfied with the status quo in Jesus' kingdom, that's downright childish. But being hopeful and trusting and patient and kind and, dare I say, curious, that's when you're growing up. Now, I want to talk directly to those who identify as men in this room for a moment.

There are so many forces in our society that desire and want us and need to mold us into an ideal of masculinity that is harmful and toxic, not only to those around us, but also to ourselves.

[19:39] Our culture's ideas of manhood are absolutely opposed to what it is to be Christ-like. I want to read an extended quote to you. This comes from Jared Sexton.

He says this. It says, From an early age, men are convinced that they deserve to be privileged and entitled. The women and men who don't conform to the traditional standards are second-class persons, are weak and thus detestable.

This creates a tyrannical, patriarchal system that tilts the world further in favor of men. And as a side effect, accounts for a great deal of crimes, including harassment, physical and emotional abuse, rape, and even murder.

Next slide. These men, and the boys following in their footsteps, were socialized in childhood to exhibit the ideal masculine traits, including stoicism, aggressiveness, extreme self-confidence, and an unending competitiveness.

Those who do not conform are punished by their fathers in the form of physical and emotional abuse, and then further socialized by the boys in their school and community who have been enduring their own abuse at home.

[20:46] If that isn't enough, our culture then reflects those expectations in its television shows, movies, music, and especially in advertising where products like construction sites, quality trucks, power tools, beer, gender deodorant, and yogurt promise to bestow masculinity for the right price.

The masculinity that's being sold, that's being installed via systemic abuse is fragile because, again, it's unattainable. Humans are not intended to suppress their emotions indefinitely, to always be confident and unflinching.

Traditional masculinity, as we know it, is an unnatural state, and as a consequence, men are constantly at war with themselves and the world around them.

To which Paul's response to that sort of masculinity is stop being childish. Instead, if you want to grow up, if you want to be a man, rediscover what it is to be naive and hopeful and trusting again. In other words, stop being childish and, in the words of Jesus, become like a child. One more thing from 1 Corinthians 13 while we're here.

[22 : 02] Paul writes, if I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I could move mountains, but I don't have love, I'm nothing.

Having all the right theology, all the right answers, direct access to the mind of God does not exempt you or me or anyone from the need to be a loving, kind, hopeful, trusting person. which, by the way, you may have met once or twice a pastor, a theologian, a professor who had all the right degrees, knew all the glossary terms from a theological dictionary, but they were also callous or cruel or mean.

They were ready to throw everyone but a certain few elect into the fires of hell. But listen, an erudite, astute, educated, well-spoken, articulate theology that wears a belt and suspenders and a little cap with a propeller on it that hates immigrants or the poor or women or hates gay people or trans people or black people or brown people.

No matter how educated the theology is, if it's mingled with hate, it is, to quote Paul in Philippians 3, verse 8, shit.

[23 : 27] It is garbage. It doesn't matter how much knowledge it has. It doesn't matter how astute it sounds.

If it includes hate, it is garbage. To put it more succinctly, knowledge does not exempt us from love. Maturity and knowledge and information should never lead us towards arrogance because if it does, it means we've made a wrong turn somewhere. which, to get back to our main point, if you find knowledge somehow building up walls inside of you and somehow closing off your ability to be a loving person, then the antidote might be, you guessed it, curiosity.

Curiosity is that intellectual humility to say, I don't know. And while I don't know, my only option is love. And if I think I know, but it's leading me away from love, then I actually don't know.

Now, let me bring in one more piece of scripture, try to bring this bird of a sermon in for a landing. Philippians 2, Paul quotes one of the earliest Christian hymns, which says this, adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.

[24 : 53] Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself. He took the form of a slave by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Now, if it were up to me, we'd quote this every single week. It tells us so much about God and what the Christian community ought to look like. But I want to bring your attention specifically to the word humbled. In this passage, Philippians 2, we're talking about Jesus emptying himself of divinity, becoming human.

What Christians have historically called the incarnation, the taking on of flesh and skin and bones. At Advent and Christmas, we celebrate Jesus becoming a baby, which makes sense considering that Jesus said, those who humble themselves, Matthew 18, same word, those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Oh yeah, Jesus literally became like a child. He knows what he's talking about. And because Jesus literally became like a child, we get passages like Luke chapter 2, Jesus increased in wisdom and years.

[26 : 12] And Hebrews 5, Jesus learned obedience, which for me basically means if Jesus needs to learn stuff, maybe you do too. If Jesus needs to learn some stuff, if he's learning obedience and growing in wisdom, then who am I to ever get to a point to say, I have nothing else to learn?

I should never get to that point. Certainty can be intoxicating. Certainty can feel really good, especially if I had to get to throw it in someone's face and let them sit in their wrongness.

But certainty is the murderer of curiosity. Without curiosity, how are we supposed to grow and to learn and to change and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and grow up?

Now, some of us may have curiosited ourselves right into doubt and deconstruction, leaving behind old forms of faith, maybe even into a place where we're not really sure if we have any faith left at all. But, I believe that if curiosity got us into this mess, curiosity can get us out of it too. Curiosity can lead us into, or excuse me, curiosity can lead us out of old forms, old ways of doing things, ways

that trapped us into the ways that we saw God and our fellow human beings.

[27 : 48] And curiosity can lead us out of those toxic, harmful forms of being a person, of being a person in relation to God. And we can drop those toxic forms of faith, of being a man or a woman, of relating to God as a punisher or a judge and instead as a healer, a doctor, a friend.

But we will still need curiosity to keep moving us forward. Curiosity that can lead to hope. What if God is better than what I've been told?

What if the gospel is more robust than I ever knew? What if those people who are already told all my life were God's enemies and therefore my enemies, what if even those people are actually God's beloved?

So I want to leave you with an invitation and a challenge. As this church pursues justice and friendship and curiosity, the invitation is this.

Your doubts are okay and welcome. Your doubts are probably fed by a curiosity that says it's got to be better than this. They are welcome here. They are welcome in this community.

[28 : 59] Not knowing is okay. Mystery is okay. To be at a place where, you know, every once in a while we say the apostle's screen and put it on the screen for like some sort of leader thing and if you get to a point you're like, I don't know.

I don't know about any one of those words. That's okay. Questioning, mystery, uncertainty is welcome. Here's the challenge.

The challenge is to keep questioning. Doubt, yes, and then begin to doubt the doubts. Why are those doubts there? What lies have I believed that are leaving me in this place of not knowing and not even wanting to know anymore?

Keep questioning, even in places like this, which, you know, hopefully seem healthy, seem vibrant, but also can get lulled into status quo and comfortable.

Be willing to challenge and to question wherever you're at, work or home or church. In the words of Paul, to stop being childish.

[30 : 10] Wherever we find ourselves not lining up with that description of love, wherever we find ourselves in a society or a culture or an environment, a workplace or a family system that actually awards us for being arrogant or rude or brash, that actually rewards us for keeping a record of wrongs.

Stop being childish. Begin to hope all things and endure all things and trust all things. In the words of Jesus, become like a child because it's in the becoming like a child, in the humbling ourselves, that we welcome in the kingdom of God, a place where God and God's justice can make its home. Would you pray with me? Good and triune God, you are a God who you are ahead of us.

I believe that you are in the future, a glorious future of light and wonder and celebration and joy, and yet you're also a God who comes into this moment.

You are a God who comes into this place, and you let us know about a future that could be. So God, I pray that our eyes would be opened, like Elisha prayed for his servant, that our eyes would be open to all that you are up to, all the ways that your goodness is at work in our lives, in our town, and that we would have the ability to question, to be curious, to keep learning, to keep growing, to never be satisfied with stagnation, but rather that we would have the power to say, why?

[32 : 04] Does it have to be this way? Is there something more? Jesus, Son of the living God, you are in this place, and your spirit is up to good work in these people.

And so God, would you spark up the flame of your love, of your power, your presence in this place, that we may be relentless in our pursuit of knowing you, not to have all the answers known, but so that we may be a people shaped and known by love.

We pray these things in the unity of the spirit, in the name of Jesus. Amen.