

FEAR – FAMILY – FAITH 3

“Fear of Commitment”

“So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.” Philipians 3:15

In the book of 1 Kings, chapter 19 there is a fascinating story of Elijah the great prophet being instructed by God to choose an assistant who would become his successor. That would be a scary post to inherit huh? So Elijah goes to the field where Elisha is plowing with a team of oxen, he lays his cloak on Elisha's shoulder and asks him to come. Elisha asks for a moment to say goodbye to his parents, and we expect him to do as the excuse maker does in Jesus' story that sounds familiar to this one. But Elisha doesn't abandon his new calling instead he takes the yoke off his ox, breaks it apart, starts it on fire, kills his team of oxen, barbecue's them right then and there as a going away gift for his family and friends...then run's off after Elijah. That my friends is commitment. He totally severs himself from his family, his friends, and his former life to answer God's call to come.

Today I want to visit about our fear of such Commitment. Fear of Commitment is most often reserved for and defined by some gun shy bridegroom having last minute doubts. But our fear of Committing to God runs deeper still than our fear of marriage. Though, what I'm about to share will have many parallels to the marriage commitment; I want to visit with you about some of the reasons I see people avoiding or putting off or ignoring...or yes...even fearing the commitment to follow Jesus. I believe there are many reasons people fear following Jesus, but will limit myself to these four.

People put off committing their lives to Jesus because they are:

1. LEANING ON THEIR OWN SELF - RELIANCE

Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored. Romans 8:5

The single most common reason people give for not yielding their lives to Jesus, is, that they don't need to! Multitudes of folks are convinced that they don't need God, that religion is nothing but organized superstition, and church is irrelevant to our lives and culture. The predominant and rampantly growing message of this great 'do-it-yourself' nation is that we are independent, self-made men and women, who need nothing from no-one. But as the scripture remind us, *'obsession with self, in these matters, is a dead end.'*

People who lean and trust only in themselves may appear confident, self-assured, and strong; but I wonder what goes on in their minds when the lights are off, when their conscience has a chance to be heard, when totally alone after being shattered by one of life's many cruelties, they are forced to listen to that still small inner voice? I know that there are people who are born, and live, and die everyday who have never given any conscience thought to or about God...and I wonder why? Maybe it's a fear of appearing weak that keeps people from choosing God. Maybe it's the fear of an unknown faith that scares some to reject God. Maybe it's the inability to trust someone who fails to answer all the questions to the skeptic's satisfaction. There are probably as many individual reasons for ignoring God, as there are individuals ignoring God. But one of the main one's is we are just too self-absorbed and self-reliant.

People put off committing their lives to Jesus because they are:

2. HOLDING ON TO THEIR PAST HURTS

Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who has hurt me? Seven times? "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:21-22

I could and maybe should speak about some of the hundreds of ways people get hurt by other people. Abuse, neglect, rape, spoiling and overindulgence, physical injury or sexual harassments, or malicious gossip...are just a few of the ways people hurt each other these days. But instead today I want to address people being hurt by people in the church and sometimes in the name of God.

Many people have been hurt by misguided Christian people who ignorantly say insensitive or even intentionally harmful things. Many people have been hurt by misguided Christian Churches that get full of self-righteousness, and judge and condemn anyone who doesn't fit into their 'club' or safe little controllable group. Misguided Pharisaical Christian Churches have often been branded as the only institution in the world that kills it's wounded. I've seen it.

A down the nose glance at the pregnant teenager, a sideways sneer at the divorced woman, a raised eyebrow at the dirty visitor, an under the breath comment designed for all in the vicinity to hear, about some recently overheard gossip about that young unmarried couple, or that overdressed woman or man, or just any target within eyeshot or earshot of the offender will do. Lots of people have been hurt and beat up by lots of different offenders, but the worst have to be those who have been hurt by others... who claim to be followers of Jesus.

Granted, some measure of grace must be extended to ignorant people, but there is little room in my grace field for willful judgment of unsuspecting victims by overzealous condemnors. Who do we think we are to be judging? Don't we remember Jesus' words about judging others?

If you are here today and you have been hurt by a church or a "Christian"; I offer you an apology...and on behalf of God...I extend to you grace and love and sincere sorrow that you have been hurt by someone in His name.

And on behalf of God...I invite you, today, to leave your pain and hurt and disappointment, and anger, even your hatred right here today. As much as I'm concerned and hopeful that you might find and yield your life to God, I know that for some of you, you have to leave some of your past...in the past, first. It can happen today.

People put off committing their lives to Jesus because they are worried about:

3. GIVING UP OF THEIR PERCEIVED FREEDOM

Jesus said to the people who believed him, "you are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free." John 8:34-36

I've had conversations with people young and old who told me they prefer their sinful life over the boring life of a Christian. This is another common excuse people give for neglecting Jesus' offer of forgiveness and new life. They don't want to give up their freedom. But note again the verse; it's not Jesus who 'enslaves' us, it is sin that enslaves us!

Maybe they look at our self-righteousness and decide they want no part of it. Or maybe they look at some of our stupid man-made rules we selectively try to enforce on others, while ignoring ourselves; and determine they don't want to be hypocrites. Maybe they just honestly don't know how much a blast and adventure following Jesus can be; because all they see are sterile and sensible people sitting passionless on the pews, performing meaningless rituals, or they are watching us stand silent while praises to God are being sung around us! My friends, we have been set free...let's let our faces in on the secret, just once in awhile!

You hear groomsmen and bridesmaids tease about "your last day of freedom", or "it's not too late to 'escape'".

What they may not know is that the fun and freedom they mistakenly believe they'll lose after marriage; pales in comparison to the freedom and fun two people totally committed to each other will discover! In the same way, some people fear to commit their lives to Jesus because they think it's not fun to be a follower of Jesus...now where did they get that idea?

I'm not saying that following Jesus is all fun and games, or that the life of a Christian is not subject to life's difficulties...I'm just saying that with Jesus at the center of our life...we should be able to face whatever comes with an attitude of humility and joy! I've learned to appreciate that far more than any assumed "fun" I thought I was having before I met Jesus. I remember all too well, too many of those inebriated nights of "fun"! Yippee!

People put off committing their lives to Jesus because they are:

4. WAITING FOR THEIR PERFECT CONDITIONS

Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest. Ecclesiastes 11:4-6

As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says, "At just the right time I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation." 2 Cor. 6:2

Whether waiting to get out of school, or to get married, or to get a job, or to get settled, or waiting till the kids come along, or for the kids to go away, or waiting for retirement...or waiting till you get promoted, or waiting for the Dr's. pronouncement on your death bed...far too many people fear committing their lives to Jesus; because they have not yet met some self-determined, pre-determined condition. Oh, I'll accept Jesus after...or I'll get right with God before...or I'll go to church when...or as soon as... happens...then I'll get my house in order.

Here is another example. So many people are fearful of committing to God because they think God owes them an explanation or an answer or even just a response. I worked for 8 years with a few professors who had difficulty understanding how God could allow injustices such as the Holocaust, or any number of (wrong in their mind), wars, or hundreds of other evil atrocities they perceived that God either caused or didn't prevent. I've met people who are holding God hostage till they get some answers for something they think God has done to them, or not done for them; without ever considering what they make of themselves when they make of God their personal errand or whipping boy. Thin ice.

My friends; excuses are like armpits, everyone's got a couple and most of them stink! There are no perfect conditions except one...NOW...today is the day of salvation.

If you have been living in fear or just simply resistant to commit your life to God... maybe today is your day. I have no way of knowing, but I trust God to speak to your hearts...and if you have heard His voice, and you'll dare to commit, then take the step. You don't have to come to this or any other altar, just settle this issue in your heart. It is a personal matter, though keeping it completely private will be impossible if you are really sincere. It is between you and God, but I encourage you to settle it today. It's time to commit, totally commit your life to God.

On April 21st, in the year 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez sailed into the harbor of Vera Cruz, Mexico. He brought with him only about 600 men, and yet over the next two years his vastly outnumbered forces were able to defeat Montezuma and all the warriors of the Aztec empire, making Cortez the conqueror of all Mexico. How was this incredible feat accomplished, when two prior expeditions had failed even to establish a colony on Mexican soil? Here's the secret. Cortez knew from the very beginning that he and his men faced incredible odds. He knew that the road before them would be dangerous and difficult.

He knew that his men would be tempted to abandon their quest and return to Spain. And so, as soon as Cortez and his men had come ashore and unloaded their provisions, he ordered their entire fleet of eleven ships destroyed. His men stood on the shore and watched as their only possibility of retreat burned and sank. And from that point on, they knew beyond any doubt there was no return, no turning back. Nothing lay behind them but empty ocean. Their only option was to go forward, to conquer or die.

Maybe it's time to burn your ships; time to set fire to your ship called Self-Reliance, how about igniting your ship called Painful Past, or making a bonfire of your ship named Pseudo Freedom, or barbecuing up your favorite ship named: When every thing is Perfect. When everything else has been destroyed you are left with a loving God, patiently waiting. Like Elisha, I hope you'll burn up your excuses and commit yourself to God. Come.

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