

Following Jesus Together: An Invitation to a Journey
1/12/2020

Welcome back, everyone! Happy New Year.

If you have a Bible turn to **John 10** and **1 Corinthians 9**.

One of the things I love about New Years is setting New Year's Resolutions.

Every year, millions of Americans set a New Year's Resolutions - whether that means eat healthier, be less stressed, manage your time better or whatever. Personally, my goal always seems to be the same year after year - I want to read more and I tend to get really into it the first month, and then I lag for 9 months, and then I speed up those last 3 months.

But whatever your resolution is, underneath it all is something about the human condition that is remarkable - it's that deep within us we all have this driving desire to grow. To be more. We recognize that we aren't where we should be and we want to grow. And the possibilities of how we can improve are endless and in large part Resolutions begin because it's caught up in a vision of what could be possible.

Now carry that over into our vision, as a church: to be a Jesus centered family on mission. We all acknowledge that personally we are not where we should be or want to be - whether we want to be more financially generous people, more patience around our kids, more missional with our neighbors, I want to experience more freedom from my sin and a deeper vitality in Jesus - and for most of us, what makes it challenging is a lack of vision on our part to see what is possible.

John 10, the words of Jesus -

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Two paths, two trajectories in life.

- One is a life where the world, the flesh, and the devil spiritually destroy your life.
- The other is a life where Jesus gives you what he calls the abundant life

That word abundantly is the word - "perisos" in Greek. It's the superlative word that means over and above, more than is necessary, superadded, superior, extraordinary.

Or to put in another way, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this verse:

John 10:10

I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

Jesus, when he talks about this type of life, isn't just referring to a *quantity* of life - this idea that when you die you will be with Jesus forever. Certainly a huge part of it. Jesus is also referring to a *quality* of

life - that there is a way to operate in this world right here and now in such a way that you experience life to the fullest - the way Jesus intended - the way you were always designed for.

A life that is with Jesus. Where you experience his power and presence on a daily basis.

A life that looks like Jesus. A life, according to one New Testament author that bears the fruit of the Spirit - radiating with love and peace and joy. A life that is less anxious, more content. A life that is less cynical, more thankful. A life that is relaxed and at rest in who you are and where you are in life and not always feeling so hurried and overwhelmed with kids and emails and responsibilities but calm and content. A life that can endure and lament in the hardships and be honest with God and with others - completely open and vulnerable having nothing to hide.

It's also important to note here, Jesus says he came so that "they" may have life Not "you." The process of being with Jesus and **becoming like Jesus is a team sport**. A group effort.

Now we're not talking about is "self-actualization" as though there is this secret-hidden you down to your very core that needs to be released and expressed if you ever want to find true fulfillment and happiness in life. In fact, the way to this type of life Jesus talks about is just the opposite - to become like Jesus according to Jesus means you die to your preferences, you die to yourself, you pick up your cross, because when you lose your life, according to Jesus, that's when you find it.

We're also not talking about is "your best life now." That if you just pray enough and send enough good Christian vibes into the world that your life will go the way you want it. If I just get religious enough and do the right things then my relationships will go well and bad things won't happen to me and all of my dreams will come true but nowhere in the Bible do you see that - in fact, more often than not, the closest followers of Jesus often suffered and experienced profound poverty throughout their lives.

What they did have though was this deep inner life - a quality of life that said "No matter what I'm going through, no matter what people do to me, no matter what externally happens in my life, I know who Jesus is and in fact, these circumstances are helping me become more and more like Jesus, and that's enough. That's the stuff that lasts forever." Followers of Jesus over millenia when they understood this and lived this out, they experienced the kind of lives we dream about - lives that even when the world was in absolute chaos, even when their lives were from an outside perspective in complete disarray, they maintained a deep inner peace and joy, full of love. They looked like the very person of Jesus. And *this* is the type of life Jesus wants for you.

And if we're honest with ourselves: The tendency in the West, in the American church is to truncate the Christian life down into simply intellectual belief and you're good to go. "Just say yes to these four things, and you're set for eternity."

"But as far as being with Jesus? Doing what Jesus did? Optional stuff but hey you're set if you do and you're set if you don't. No pressure."

And what Jesus is trying to show you is that there is so much more available to you than you can possibly realize.

So let me give you a key insight into how all of this works. Turn over to 1 Corinthians 9. The New Testament writer Paul says to attain this way of life goes like this:

1 Corinthians 9

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. **25** Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

Notice the contrast. “Only one” athlete receives the prize, “but we” - this is a community project here. Something we’re all called to do together.

26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. **27** But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul equates living the Christian life - one of abundance, quantity and quality - is in a lot of ways like a prized athlete trains. An athlete - for those of you that don’t sports - has *one* sole focus in mind - to win. Great athletes orient their entire life around that goal. Their sleep, their diet, their time, what they think about when they wake up and when they go to sleep, the type of people they’re around - all orients around this. They become experts at this. And in the process, they discipline themselves slowly into someone who can win. They’re shaped into becoming that kind of person.

And that’s what Paul says following Jesus is all about. Notice how v.25 talks about it, if an athlete wants to reach their goal they must “exercise self control in all things” Fixing your eyes on this one main goal, narrowing your focus, planning with the end in mind - if I want the abundant life found in Jesus then I must at all costs orient my life around this pursuit.

It happens through, according to v.27, discipline. It’s an unsexy word in modern day American because for most of us we’re left with this impression of “Ok so I need to do more here and there.” But once again think about the athlete, it’s not a question of “ugh I need to do more.” It’s a matter of narrowing the focus, prioritizing around the main goal and cutting things out that don’t fit within that. Everything else becomes a distraction from the main goal.

To give you an illustration for those that sports, in 2004 Dwight Howard was the number 1 NBA draft pick. Eight-time All-Star and three-time Defensive Player of the Year. 6’ 11”. 250 pounds. One of his crowning achievements was during the 2008 Slam Dunk contest. A guy that so many people had their eyes on for so long, expecting him to be one of the greats with so many possibilities ahead of him.

And yet, what the world didn’t know about at that time was that there was another side to Dwight Howard. In what was supposed to be him hitting his prime, he began to get slower on the court. His stats began to plummet. He stopped winning awards. And it was reported years later that all the while Dwight consumed for nearly ten years straight upwards to 24 candy bars every. Single. Day. Which for those first

few years in the NBA no one seemed to notice, things seemed to be just fine. But over time his body began to shut down. The distractions he allowed in his life kept him from the main goal and both he and his team suffered for it.

And the reality is we're all like Dwight Howard. We have so much potential and possibility of what could be but instead of candy bars getting in the way - maybe it's the next TV show to binge, or the next push notification on your phone, or the next experience to have with your friends, or the next relationship to run to, or the next promotion, or the next extracurricular to sign your kids up for. None of those things are necessarily wrong - but without the proper self control and discipline they can too easily become distractions. And whether you realize it or not those distractions, all of your choices and actions day in and day out are shaping you to be someone who is experiencing the abundant life or not.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself...Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

Moment by moment. Choice after choice. Decision after decision - we are becoming something.

And here's the thing, according to Jesus, Paul, Lewis, and countless other thinkers, philosophers, and psychologists, Christian or not, all agree: there is no such thing as being undisciplined, everyone is disciplined about something. You have an aim in life whether you know it or not.

- And you can generally see what you're disciplined about based in many ways on how you spend your time, how you spend your money, what your conversations are about
- For most of us, our main aim is being entertained as much as possible so we discipline ourselves around that - so when you hang out in LifeGroup and people begin talking about their lives and what's going on, you may get really quiet and awkward, but man, as soon as someone mentions Clemson football - you can talk for hours on end.
- For some of us, spending time reading the Bible sounds like this impossible task that you never seem to have time for but the moment you get an email from work or you find out the latest episode of your show come on or someone reached out to you to go hang out - its like you magically have the time for it now - that reveals where you are truly disciplined.

We all have one main thing in life that we discipline ourselves around but is the main thing one of abundance that Jesus maps out for you or is your main aim whatever your culture, your upbringing, your feelings, your circumstances, or your TV watchlist has laid out for you?

Moment by moment we are choosing what kind of life we are really after. And those moments are forming us whether we know it or not.

Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*

Spiritual formation is not an option! The inescapable conclusion is that life itself is a process of spiritual development. The only choice we have is whether that growth moves us toward wholeness in Christ or toward an increasingly dehumanized and destructive mode of being.

To choose to live a life of wholeness found in Christ begins with assessing where you are:

- It's a recognition that your time and attention and adoration go towards a million other things every single day. And disciplining your life to look more and more like Jesus means cutting out the million little things that suck away at your soul each day in so you can prioritize around just one thing - the presence of God.
- It's a recognition that your money goes towards the things that you care about most - most of which have no direct correlation to warming your affections in Jesus and becoming more like Him. And disciplining your life to be more like Jesus means cutting out the things that you spend your money on so you can prioritize around just one thing - the mission of God. Caring and providing for others the way God has cared for and provided for you.
- It's acknowledging that watching the next episode or staying at your phone for hours on end, or checking your phone the first thing when you wake up and the last thing before you go to bed is all shaping you and turning you into something - and is that someone looking more and more like Jesus or less?

And once you begin to discipline and practice self control - you allow the Spirit of God to slowly reshape you into a person who looks like Jesus.

This is our goal for you as a church. This is our discipleship plan for you as outlined by Jesus. This is how we become a Jesus-centered family on mission. If we had to put all our chips on the table, it would be that you would get this - that you would develop the discipline and focus to be a person who's sole aim in life is to be with Jesus. And listen, we can stand up here and inspire and motivate you and give you all the Greek words and insights in the Bible to where your journal is just stocked with bible knowledge but it all comes down to what will you do with it? We can provide you training and resources, but you need to step into them. We are here to give you the tools you need to put in the sweat.

So we've got something for you: **FollowingJesusTogether.com**

We've collected from over the years loads of resources on how you can grow in your love for Jesus. When it comes to developing the keystone habits of Bible and prayer - we've got a whole slew of training to get equipped and grow in the practices of Jesus.

And, it's together! It's a team project. We help one another grow. Just like creating any new habit, the more people are on board with a vision, the more likely they're going to accomplish what they set out to do. P90X anyone? Same with becoming more like Jesus. On the site, we've got resources designed for you to go through on your own, with someone else or with your entire LifeGroup.

Now I'm a little bias here - but honestly, being in a LifeGroup is one of the best things we do here. Getting you into relationships with other people, committing to each other. That becomes the training ground for how you grow into a disciple of Jesus. Discipleship, maturation in Jesus doesn't happen apart from community. For some of you here, that might be the first step. Get in a LifeGroup. For some of us, it means sticking with your LifeGroup.

Practically, this could mean you or someone in your LifeGroup wants to grow in reading their Bible regularly but they don't know where to start. And it could very well look like going to the website - followingjesustogether.com and subscribing to the Bible reading plan and meeting up for coffee once a week with someone in your LifeGroup to go over what you've been reading or texting your LifeGroup each day about what you read.

This could mean, going to the website, looking at the practices and asking yourself of all of the teachings and practices of Jesus - where do I need to grow in? So for me, that looks like growing in confession and repentance. Based off the resources there, I've picked a couple of questions that the guys in my LifeGroup will be asking me every week in specific difficult areas of my life.

So in LifeGroups, here's what we're going to do together this week - we're going to the website and you'll team up with people in your LifeGroup to work through one spiritual practice. That's it.

Three resources that I'm really excited about - we put together daily devotionals for fighting against feeling overwhelmed, feeling discontent, and feeling apathetic. These devos are 3 weeks long, there's a passage for you to read and an activity to do.

- And if you're listening to this and that feels overwhelming then go through the 3-week track on fighting against feeling overwhelmed that you and others can work through together.
- And if you're feeling discontent about which resource to work through, we've got a 3-week track on fighting anxiety that you can go through with others.
- Or if you're like "whatever I don't really care." Then, sorry dude. We got nothing for you. Kidding. It's called "Fighting Apathy."

Each of these 3 tracks takes about 5 minutes a day and could make some radical changes to your life if you stick with them.

Now you don't have to do any of this. You have a choice in all of this. But I would say if you don't take advantage of the abundant life Jesus offers you, can you just be honest with yourself that maybe you're not actually a Christian yet? And maybe that's the first step you need to take. Just be honest and admit where you are and place your trust in Jesus. To turn from your vision of life and commit yourself to Jesus' vision of life in the kingdom in the here and now.

So start slow. Take your time. Create a small, attainable goal for yourself in that area. And then once you get that small win, make another attainable goal in that practice. And after a while, once you stick with it, it starts to become a habit. When that happens, move onto another spiritual practice that you need help

with and keep going. Create a small goal. Then another. Then another. And over time, those habits and disciplines that you're cultivating for yourself will begin to carry you and you'll start to see more momentum and transformation in your life.

You begin pushing the flywheel of your life in the trajectory of Christlikeness. If you're anything like me, whenever you get psyched about something you just wanna go hard. "I want to do all the things!" Reality check - that's not good for you, it's impossible to keep up with, but what's one thing you can do to be with Jesus and become like Him?