

The Goal: Becoming More Like Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Sweet. Thank you, Freddie. Good morning, everyone. How are you today? And Happy New Year. All right. Sweet. It is a good day. And those of you who are new, glad you're with us. If you're listening online, glad you can do that. We're going to start out this year as a church launching into a four-part series. We're going to start that today. And the title of this series is called The Way, Becoming More Like Jesus. Now, whether you're here and you're just exploring Christianity, learning, wanting to learn more about the Christian faith, or if you're a Christian already, this series, what it does, it gets at the fundamental question of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And, you know, we've probably since the new year, many of us, especially the overachievers, we sat down, we've made some goals for the coming new year, like how do we make our lives better? And I'm all for that. I'm all about that as well. But I want to ask a rather important personal question. One that is more important than what are the targets and goals that we want to hit this year? And it's this. What is the aim of your life? I'm not asking what are you living for? I'm asking what are you living toward? What is the aim of your life? You know, sadly, we don't think that deeply these days.

And so what happens to us is we don't end up living toward anything really. Our lives really aren't about something transcendent or purposeful. We wander through most of life without an aim at anything of substance. And we don't think much beyond the immediate pleasures or pains that we presently face. And so what happens invariably is that our lives, they become shallow. Or to quote Henry David Thoreau, I don't know if I said his name right. Is it Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau? Thank you, Thoreau. Henry David Thoreau. I need one of those things on Google that like, you know, it says the name for you to pronounce it right. So he said this, the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things. So Thoreau, Thoreau, he grew up in the church, but he was not a man of faith. But he's this secular prophet from hundreds of years ago who picked up on the vanity of our various pursuits in life.

And when we live for our work, in the end, it falls short of the pleasure and the meaning that we seek of it and demand of it. Because it's full of monotonies and frustrations. It's full of setbacks and betrayals. It's full of crises that you have to address at any moment that rob it of being a true source of joy. And so we work away in quiet desperation. As it becomes simply, and I would say definitely today, it becomes a means to pay the mortgage or to secure us in our social circle.

We lose the nobility of its creative and redemptive purpose. When we live for pleasure, that too becomes a constant pursuit of the next thing. New pleasures, new hobbies, they're exciting, they're fun. But over time, the patina dulls.

[4 : 07] We need only to look back over our lives or perhaps into our storage units to see the path of abandoned pleasures that no longer do it for us anymore. And that is why Thoreau's words have grabbed us for hundreds of years now. Because what they're doing, what he is saying in those words, they touch at an ache in all of our souls. See, when the aim of your life doesn't reach beyond your work and your games and your amusements, it is a life of resignation. You've retired from living towards something meaningful and transcendent. But here's the thing, we don't have to remain there. We don't have to remain in a life of quiet desperation. There is something more beautiful to live for. There's something life-giving. There's something meaningful offered to us all. And you don't have to change jobs or relationships or hobbies to get it. So what is this hope? How do we pull ourselves out of this rut of desperation? Well, it all depends on the answer to the question, what is the aim of your life?

And let me propose what that answer should be for all of us. Your life's aim should be lived toward eternity. Your life's aim should be lived towards eternal life. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way, the chief end of man, the chief end of all men, is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

That's our chief end, to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever. That is the call that we are being pulled towards, the aim of our life. And that is a good summation of eternal life, enjoying God and glorifying Him forever and ever. And for that, that is the aim for every Christian. That is our ultimate aim.

Romans 6.22 puts it this way, but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. But this brings up another question that begs answering, I think. How does one escape of life of quiet desperation and live towards this end, live towards this eternal life of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever?

Now, it's tempting for me, the preacher, to want to jump to those how-tos right away. But that might confuse us into trusting our own strength and thinking it's on us. So let's start where the gospel starts.

[6 : 44] Eternal life is a gift from God. Meaning you receive it by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Romans 6.23 says, for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life.

Free gift is eternal life in who? Christ Jesus our Lord. Eternal life is not an achievement award you earn through your own merits. It's given based on Jesus's merits. And that's the good news of salvation.

It's not on you to earn it. It's received by grace through faith. That's what we are told. Now, this free gift, it comes by faith alone, but it doesn't come with a faith that is alone. The book of James tells us that our faith is going to come and followed by works that we are given to do. Whereas Dallas Willard puts it, grace isn't against effort, it's against earning. So what is this effort that doesn't earn? What are these works? What are we called to do in response to faith?

Matthew 4.18-20 says this, while walking by the Sea of Galilee, he, Jesus, saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

And he said to them, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. So we see the answer to this question, what is this effort that doesn't earn? We see it in Jesus's calling of his very first disciples. Now, I want to say this, because some context for that moment when he calls his disciples, when you go back and you cobble together the different stories of the gospel leading up to this moment, what you begin to realize is that these guys have already seen and believe that Jesus is the Messiah, right? And for them, this was the best gift that they could have ever been given. This guy comes and he calls us to follow him. Nothing could surpass that.

[8 : 48] And they didn't have to earn any of that. So this calling to follow isn't to earn eternal life. It is a response having already received it, already having received the person of Jesus.

And yet at the same time, it is a call to live toward eternal life. It is a call into living towards something. We live toward eternal life by doing what these disciples did, by following Jesus.

Now, that sounds great until you realize that it means a major disruption to business as usual. Jesus called those disciples to lay down their nets, to leave their fathers, to become something else.

And now these guys, you have to remember, they're professional fishermen in established family businesses. Jesus is asking them some big stuff. He's asking them to trade the known for the unknown, to trade the thing that they are competent at, their competency in their craft, to become beginners, novice student learners. He is asking them to leave the security and the identity of their family and their roots in the Galilean community to wander around with him in a new community that has no earthly roots. See, following Jesus sounds great until you realize what he's calling you to leave behind. Your hope in your political party, he's calling you to leave it behind.

Your pursuit of the American dream, he's calling you to leave it behind. Your pride in being the expert with an answer for everything. I'm speaking to myself here. He's calling you to leave it behind.

[10 : 31] The meaning and identity you can get from career or family or money, he's calling you to leave it behind. See, that's why you need the gift of faith before following Jesus. Look how risky, look how costly it is, which is why many without faith, this sounds great and they follow Jesus for a little while, but then they end up falling away because you need faith first and foremost to be able to do this thing. And there is a big difference between professing faith and possessing faith.

Anyone can profess their faith in Jesus, but to possess it is another thing entirely. Now, if you're feeling uneasy in your seat, don't run away and don't go out and try harder. Maybe this is just God showing you that you've been going about following him all wrong. Maybe it's time to resign from following without faith. This living toward eternal life, it's a gift first and it's a calling second.

And you can pray to God to give you that gift of faith right now. And I'm sure there are many of us in this room thinking, hey, you know what, Jess, that's awesome, but I'm still good here. I've got faith.

I know I possess him. I'm pretty sure that I am living toward eternal life and that's awesome. But before you start feeling too comfortable, here's another challenge to this call to following Jesus. And it comes with the promise of ongoing transformation. He promised to make those disciples fishers of men. And the implication was that Jesus was going to change who they were. Following Jesus means we are constantly being challenged and changed by him. So be careful in saying yes to follow Jesus. Count the cost because here's my own experience. He will strip you down to the studs.

I've gone through this countless times in my life of following Jesus. And in my experience, each successive time doesn't get easier. He just gets deeper into my soul than before.

[12 : 42] See, I can remember years back when he dealt with my porn addiction. And that was tough. And it was beautiful. It was healing. And it was freeing. And I needed it desperately. And I thought, done with that. That was my biggest problem. Once I got over that, it was just going to be smooth sailing following Jesus from this point on. Oh, sweet, naive Jesse.

See? Lurking underneath that porn addiction was a legion of insecurities and fears and ways of being dishonest. See, the porn addiction, it needed to be dealt with. But I soon found out that was just a coping mechanism to distract me from things I didn't want to face about myself. And the same was true about my addiction to the pursuit of knowledge. Right? And pursuing knowledge isn't a bad thing.

But man, sin does this all the time. It takes a good thing and it corrupts it. It ruins it. And I can remember when Jesus pressed me to stop wowing people's minds and start wooing their hearts to him. And I needed to hear that from him. Because a core part of my sinful nature makes me a scoreboard guy. Okay? I need to know who's winning and losing in any given situation in any relationship I'm in.

Right? And I always need to be the guy who's winning. I always need to be the guy who's on top and better than everybody else. And so for the pursuit of knowledge, for me, it was me knowing more than you.

And it was a way that I can quantify that I'm better, that I'm superior, or that I have significance that I so desperately need and desire. And for me, the pursuit of knowledge, it wasn't a noble one.

[14 : 25] It was a red herring to suppress the fundamental fears in my troubled soul. What are your red herrings? What are your fundamental fears? Because those are the things that Jesus wants to get at. Those are the things that he wants to get into and change and transform.

Now let me say, for myself, there's a part of me that doesn't want to change. When God comes and he's like, hey Jess, I'm gonna show you some stuff that we're gonna start dealing with now, buddy.

I'm just like, oh, how can I get out of this? Every time he starts working on a new thing in me, I am tempted to avoid it and rest in the truth that God loves me just as I am. He loves me no matter what.

And you know what? That is absolutely true. My eternity is absolutely secure. God doesn't love me any less knowing all my insecurities and inconsistencies. And trust me, there's still plenty of them left in me. His love for the old Jesse is the same as his love is for me today.

It's always perfect and it is always complete. But because of that same love for me, he keeps leading me into new circumstances and using people to cut through all my pretenses to get at the other things in my soul that aren't good for me. Those sinful tendencies, the abiding sin that is in there. And he does that for my sake because he loves me so much. I am convinced of that.

[15 : 59] You know, if you came to my house and smelled mold, you would say something, right? And if you didn't, I would question your affection for me.

But what if my response to you was, you know what? I'm not going to do anything. Let's just spray some air freshener. If you love me, you wouldn't let it go at that, would you? You'd be like, um, Jesse, that ain't going to work. You're just going to get sick and it's going to be smelling good.

But that's what God is doing in our lives as we follow him. When he saves us, it's kind of like he moves into our house, right? He gets into the living room. He gets into the kitchen. He turns the lights on. He cleans things up. Things start smelling good. We're cooking. We're having fun. We're playing games. We're enjoying. We're imbibing with him and it's good. But after a while, Jesus mentions the strange smell coming out of the room down the dark hall. We don't want to notice that room.

We don't want any attention drawn to that room. We definitely don't want anyone knowing what's in it. We don't even want to know what's in it ourselves very often. So what do we do? We play the pivot game away as fast as possible. God, let's not spoil a good thing here. We're having a good enough time in the living room, in the kitchen. Let's just, hey, but the smell down the hall will only get stronger as time goes on. And after a while, all the air freshener of your religious activity or your busyness or your good deeds or your games and amusements aren't going to be enough to mask the smell. All the while, that's happening. God's still there loving you, loving me just the same. And he keeps gently prodding, are you ready to let me into that room yet? See, Jesus isn't going to let us live in denial forever because he loves us. He loves us way too much. That smell points to something that needs to be dealt with in the darker recesses of our hearts.

It is potentially dangerous to us and to others if it stays alive and growing. And so he's not going to let it stay as it is. And he brings us to the place where we can't suppress it and ignore it anymore.

[18 : 32] And it doesn't feel good at the time. We don't like to be told we're wrong. We don't like to be told we've got some brokenness or we're messed up or we need to, things need to be dealt with. But that's what it looks like to follow Jesus. It's the pathway to healing. It's the pathway to freedom. It's the pathway to the real you, the one that he sees. See, he's like a sculptor looking at you. And he sees the masterpiece inside this hunk of marble and he's pulling it out. He's chiseling away the rough edges.

He's pulling, he's pulling you out into who you truly are. But here's the thing, we're not going to let him do that. You won't follow Jesus into those difficult places, those inward dark places of your heart until you're convinced of his love for you. And abiding in Jesus gives you the courage to do that. Abiding in Jesus gives you the courage to follow him anywhere. It's amazing how much my kids change during vacation with them. And the longer the vacation, the more I see them change.

And I think it's because they spend more time with us than usual, where we, me and Haley, their mom, we become their greatest influencers. On vacation, what are we doing? We are doing the work of abiding. That is what's happening. It's like what we are called to do with Jesus. And this abiding, what it is, this abiding is a part of an ecosystem that creates love and it creates trust. And the more we have of that love and that trust, the easier it is for us to listen to obey Jesus. The easier it is for our kids to listen to obey us, their parents. And as their dad, sometimes I have to call them to do hard things that stretch them, that go against their desires. I do it to grow their character or I discipline them because they're acting a fool and they need correction and because their trajectory isn't good for them or anyone else. But I do those things not because I like to see them squirm and uncomfortable. I do it because I love them. And for them to obey me in those moments, there needs to be a foundation of trust that's already been built. And the more that they abide with me, the more that they are secure in my love through that abiding, the more they are likely to trust me.

And that is what builds the foundation of trust for when it comes time to challenge them to grow. And most often, the best growth in them, the best growth in us, comes through discipline. And I'm not talking about the spanking timeout kind of discipline. It's the discipline of teaching them the importance of following through on important responsibilities of practicing the denial of instant gratification.

But that is part of the parental discipline package. We discipline because that's what love does. Love sees the potential in our kids, right? I see them as they are right now, but I also see the potential of what they can become. And love, that love for them, what I see in them, it moves me to take action to cultivate them into the fullness of that beautiful potential.

[22 : 12] And God the Father, He does the same exact thing. Hebrews 12, 5 to 7 in verse 11 say this, and have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons or as daughters?

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him, for the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. Down in verse 11, it says, for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. If you're like me, I thought I was going to be done with being disciplined when I became an adult, right?

That was when I was a kid. I was like, man, I cannot wait to get old because some people, they grow up and they live that dream out. But if you're a disciple of Jesus, you never outgrow it. You never outgrow the discipline of your heavenly Father.

Following Jesus means a new life of discipline. If the highest aim as a Christian is eternal life, right? Glorifying God, enjoying Him forever. And if eternal life means following Jesus, and if that means abiding in Him, then to live toward the highest aim requires a life of discipline for you and me. That's just what it is. That is not anti-grace. That is part of the grace package.

I hope I've said enough so far that when you hear that, that you think of an invitation into knowing and experiencing more of Jesus' love rather than more rules and regulations and suffering.

[24 : 15] See, this highest aim, this superlative goal that we are called to in the Christian life is captured in a Greek word used in the Bible. It's a word, it's telos. And this ancient word, the Greeks believed, it was something they believed that determined who you were. And they believed that the universe determined this highest aim for your life. It would be given to you, it would be endowed upon you by the class you were born into. So if you were born a slave or a servant, guess what? That was your telos.

That was it. Your highest aim for your life was to be the best servant or slave. If you were born into privilege and wealth and power, that was your telos. So whatever the universe decided, it was your responsibility to live your life toward that. There was no alternative. There was no breaking out of that.

You couldn't trade it in for a different career like you can at the game of life. That was the message of the ancient world into which Christ was born. But the message of Christianity went against all that. It undid all that. So let's revisit that Romans 6 passage we started with, but let's put it a little more context on it. Romans 6, 17, but thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed and having been set free from sin have become slaves of righteousness. And then let's jump down to verse 20. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification or being changed more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end? Eternal life.

You see what is going on here. Today, we don't believe the universe gets to decide what we can be, right?

And that is true. Nobody is truly stuck in the material circumstances they are born into. But we aren't here to talk about changing addresses. You can break out and be a success and still live stuck in a life of quiet desperation. See, the ultimate problem we have isn't physical or material.

[27 : 01] The ultimate problem we have is spiritual. You and I, we are born slaves of sin. So our aim that we're born into, what we were stuck in, that we couldn't break out of, our telos, is to sin against God and to sin against others. And the ultimate end of that was death, eternal death.

And you and I, we had no chance to change that. We couldn't break out of it. So Jesus had to step in. And by God's grace and power, he saves us. He does it by giving us a new start through making us a new creation, or in Jesus's own words, you must be born again. Think about what that means.

You have to be born again. That's what it takes. You can't trade out for a better telos. You have to die to it. And by faith, we follow Jesus into his death. And that's how we die to the old telos, slaves of sin with the ultimate end of eternal death. But that death is not the final act. Joining Jesus in that death isn't the final act because by faith, we are also united with him in his resurrection. We are raised to walk in newness of life. We are born again. That's our new birth. And what we are born, what are we born of? Jesus says in John 3, 5 to 6, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. When you're born of the spirit, what you get comes from a different father, a new father. And you know what he does? He gives you a new telos. He gives you a new aim of what you live your life toward. You're now a slave to righteousness, following Jesus to become more like Jesus, united with him, abiding with him until we reach the end which is eternal life. In the next few weeks, we are going to explore what it looks like to live out this better aim. This better aim of following Jesus and where that will take us to, the different places, the different environments. And we're going to explore how those different places that Jesus takes us into provides unique graces. Unique graces where we find that we are formed, by him, into him, and where we grow in greater and greater assurance of his love for us.

So how do we respond today? Well, I want to say to you in the room or those listening online, if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, man, I, as much as I would love to, I can't magically make you convinced of how much Jesus loves you. I just can't. I wish I could. But you know who can do that?

He can. And he is calling you to come to him today. He is calling you to invite him in. Test him on that. Say, Lord, I want to know this love that this guy's been talking about. I want to know what that's like. I want to know what it means to follow you. And you don't have to get yourself together. You don't have to do better, try harder to earn a spot on Jesus's team. Actually, you have to do the exact opposite. You have to give up. You have to let go of trying and trusting in yourself and your own work. And you have to try and you have to trust him. You have to trust in his work and what he's done for you, his death on the cross that paid for your sins. Trust that he has the power to save you to the fullest. That he has the ability to change your aim from sin and death to righteousness and eternal life. In a moment, there's going to be an opportunity for you to respond. There's going to be a prayer up on the screen. I want to encourage you, have the boldness and courage to pray that prayer. I believe God will meet you right where you're at. If you're here, you're already a follower of Jesus. In a moment, we're about to, we're going to take communion. It's what we do as believers.

[31 : 17] It's how we say, I belong to Jesus. It's how we demonstrate I am committed to following him. It's a recommitment ceremony of sorts. I'm going to follow him wherever that leads.

But it's also a reminder that as we partake of his death and this bread and his blood, we live in the promise that we are dead to our old way of being, our old way of life, our old aim.

And now we live in a new one. We live in his. And our aim is righteousness. And our aim is eternal life. And it's life in him. And it's life with him. And as the band comes up, before you come to the table, we're going to examine our hearts. And I just want to say in this moment when you're doing this, just go to God, pray for fresh revelation. Pray for fresh conviction for what this means to follow him.

Pray for increased faith. Maybe that's what you need. So like, man, Lord, give me, I just need more faith for this. I've been trying so hard and I've just, I've just lost some of this desire to do this.

Maybe you just need the assurance of his love. Pray for that. Be reassured of that. Whatever it may be, as God meets with you, whenever you are ready, come to the table and take it back with you. And I want to say this, if you want to take it with someone you came with, that's great.

[33 : 01] Take it with each other. Pray over it. Do it together. If you don't want to do that and you want to take it privately, that's good as well. Now, what I want to do is I'm going to say a blessing over this time and then give us a time to examine. And when you're ready, come to the table nearest you.

So let's just begin by closing our eyes. And so Lord, we just pray that you would come and you would bless this moment we're about to take. We are coming to you both in prayer and then in communion.

And I pray you would meet us in both places. Do the work that only you could do. Lord, thank you. We bless the bread and the cup that we're going to take.

And we thank you that it points to the reality of that. It's your body broken for us and your blood that was shed for us so that we can draw near. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.