



Fatal Excuses-Part 1

I Can't Lord, It Would Be Too Painful

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Well, having grown up here in Southern California, I remember places like the El Toro Raceway—remember that one?—or the Orange County International Raceway, places like Ascot Park a little further up the road. Remember that, some of you? The DeAnza Cycle Park. And speaking of cycle parks, there was one I went to as a kid: the Cycle Haven at Terminal Island—we used to call it Honda Haven. There was the Lions Drag Strip. Remember that? And of course the inimitable—and the best of the best whenever I was invited to go, it was the best place in Southern California—Saddleback Park. Remember that? Motocross tracks—the advanced motocross track, flat track. If you want to ride your motorcycle in the dirt, Saddleback Park was the place to go.

Now, all those places I just named don't exist anymore. And you know why? It isn't because the owners thought, "Well, I can make a lot more money if I sell this to some developer to build condos on it," although I'm sure that was probably a pretty good financial deal. And it's not certainly because teenagers don't like to race their cars anymore. Because not only did the professionals go there—anybody could go there on the right days—and they could race their cars, they could race their motorcycles, they could do all the things that you watched on, you know, the TV, and we did them, and it was exciting. And I don't think teenagers have changed much. They'd be happy to go do all those things.

But these places don't exist, at least as I read about them, because of the millions and millions and millions of dollars of liability lawsuits against the owners of these places. That's why. Now it's odd when you think about it that people who say, "I'm going to ride a two-wheeled vehicle on uneven dirt and try and jump these motorcycles and race my car"—it's amazing that when they crash, they find a way to make it not their fault, not even the fault of the guy that happened to hit them. It's the fault of the guy who owns the dirt.

That's just an interesting way to think about it. Because if you had a piece of dirt and you said, "Well, I'll let you ride on my dirt. Give me a couple bucks and you can ride your motorcycle here," and someone fell down, you would find it hard to figure out that somehow this was your fault. Matter of fact, at least some of us would sit back and say people need to take personal responsibility. They need to assume the risks into themselves. And they need to realize just because someone lets you ride on their property for a certain amount of money, that somehow they're responsible for your accident.



Now, I'm not here to bash on all the lawyers in the room—because when we need you, we really like you a lot. But even the lawyers in the room have to realize there are a lot of frivolous lawsuits out there, right? I mean, when the temperature of your coffee can be a point of liability, or someone who, you know, thinks there needs to be a clear sign that you can't take your hairdryer into the tub, or whatever it might be—these people that sue other people for ridiculous reasons—you have to realize, listen, people do need to start taking more personal responsibility for their actions. And then when they do something, they need to assume the risks of what they're doing.

I get that. And I certainly understand that. And while we are a society now that has become expert in making excuses—if there's a problem and I have somehow been involved in it, let's see if I can blame someone else for that. Or if I didn't do something that I should have done, I can come up with a rationalization or a justification or some kind of excuse to show you that it's really not my fault. We've become experts in that. And if you're not good enough at making excuses, you can hire someone who's better at it, and you can go make excuses for just about anything.

And while in our day it seems to go over pretty well—you can win a lot of lawsuits, you can do a lot of things, get out of a lot of trouble with an excuse—when it comes to your relationship with God, you can't. As a matter of fact, all you have to do is read the Bible and look for any situation where you find someone making an excuse, and you might be able to look at that excuse and say, “Well, that may help explain the behavior.” But when it comes to what the word “excuse” means, it certainly doesn't excuse you from the behavior. If you were called to do something and you didn't do it—referring to this morning's Daily Bible Reading. Did you read the DBR this morning? If not, you'll read it tonight—the first half of Matthew 25: when they came and tried to make excuses for their behavior—or with the one with the talents, for the lack of behavior—and the excuses were given, what did God say? “I have no interest in your excuses.” Excuses just don't fly with God.

And sometimes those excuses will count not just for this life, but they'll have an impact in eternity. And in some cases, as we examine the last six verses of Luke chapter 9, you'll find these are eternal consequences that may even be the difference between heaven and hell. So when it comes to making excuses, that's something I think we need to, in our own lives—particularly in our relationship with God—do away with. We've got to be very sensitive to when our heart starts to make excuses.

Now, we've come to the end of Luke 9, and in our study of this particular chapter, I've left the six verses for this last and very short series—it's only three weeks—but it does slow things down considerably. And I wanted to do that intentionally because I think every two verses between verses 57 and 62 are so important as we watch the excuses—some explicit, some implicit—we watch these excuses used in the text show up in our own thinking, in our own lives. Even as we share the gospel



with others, we find it's there resident in people that we share Christ with. We need to detect these first in ourselves, and also in others, so that we realize that we need to do away with excuses, because some excuses can be fatal.

Take a look at this text, if you haven't already pulled it up—verses 57 through 62. Today we'll only deal with the first two verses, but because you may think I'm stretching the text a little bit here and being a little loose with my interpretation in the first two verses, I want to read the whole thing—verses 57 through 62—because when you recognize these three scenes all go together and explain something about the problem of what I like to call the would-be disciples—the would-be Christians—you'll recognize that even the first one, though it's not an explicit excuse, there's one implied, and we need to recognize it, see it, and make sure it doesn't happen in our lives.

Verses 57–62 of Luke chapter 9: “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’” And Jesus said—verse 58—“Fantastic, welcome to the family.” Highlight those words. Are they there? No. That's what we would say. Someone comes up to you after church and says, “I want to follow Christ wherever he leads,” you'd be like, “Ah, praise the Lord. Convert right there. Great.”

Here's how we know there's an implicit problem with that kind of superlative statement. Jesus said, “Let's think about the animals for a minute. Foxes—they have their holes, and the birds of the air—they have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Now that's kind of an abrupt ending to this first would-be disciple. But when, in conjunction with the next two would-be disciples, I think we understand what's happening here.

Let's keep reading, verse 59: “To another he said”—now Christ is saying—“‘Follow me.’ But he said”—the person who has just said that—“‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’” We've got a little argument on our hands here. Seems reasonable for me to go and bury my father, and you're telling me, “No, don't do that.” Wow. Conflict. In other words, “Yeah, you told me to follow you. That's something I want to respond positively to. I just got an asterisk and a reason I can't do it right now.”

Verse 61: “Yet another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’” Well, family's important; I get that. “Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”



Can you see the negativity here in the implied commentary on these three would-be disciples? This isn't going very well. They're put here in part to show, as we wrap up the northern ministry of Christ in Galilee and he's making his move down to Jerusalem—you remember that, that's where we left this study—here we have some scenes of Christ calling people to follow him and others who come forward and say, “I want to follow him,” but the inadequacy of that kind of resolve—the flimsy statements of devotion, the words that really don't have meaning, they just sound right in my ears. You have people saying this: “I want to be your follower. I want all the benefits of being your follower; I just don't want all the responsibilities. I'll take some of the responsibilities, but... I want all the spiritual blessings; I just don't want all the risks. I'll take some risks, but if the risk means I won't have a house, I don't want to assume that risk.”

I want to break this down into the next three sessions that we spend together in this text, trying to summarize the core of the either implied or explicit excuse, and let's start with the first one today. I've subtitled the message, “I Can't, Lord—It Would Be Too Painful.”

Now, when I use the word “painful,” you might think back to where we were earlier in this chapter where Jesus talks about taking up your cross and following him. And that seems real painful, because a cross, of course, was the Roman means of executing people in the worst possible way. And so we brought that idea of pain. But in this context, it's not pain of persecution; it's the pain of deprivation. Because here, implied in this response, is: you know, the birds—they've got nests, and the foxes—they have their dens. But if you follow me—listen, if you really mean “wherever”—I don't have a place to lay my head tonight. And so if you did follow me, you may suffer the pain of not having everything you want, of not being as comfortable as you might be if you had your nice little condo over there that you called your own.

And so you just need to realize that when you follow me, it's a following that includes even things that may be deprived—even the kinds of pain of not having all that you wanted: the things you prayed for, the kind of lifestyle you would hope to maintain as a follower of Christ. Sometimes we say, “No, I can't follow you,” because in some way, it would be too much trouble, it would be too much pain, it would be too much hassle, it would be too much deprivation.

Now, as I preach through the next three messages here, you can immediately look at the text and say, “Well, would-be disciples—would-be Christians... Listen, I'm already a Christian, so I guess this is something that I need to think about in terms of other people becoming Christians.” And in one sense, yes, of course. You're going to meet non-Christians as you share the gospel that are going to be full of



excuses that you need to think about, look at, and realize that Christ isn't going to take those. But you need to remember that even those that are disciples—much like Peter, who claimed in Matthew 19, “We’ve left everything to follow you”—and Jesus didn’t chide him for that. He said, “You have, and you’ll be rewarded for it.” Just in a couple chapters, he ends up saying something else as a disciple who’d already given up everything. He says, “You know, Lord, you talk about the sheep being scattered when the shepherd gets arrested. But here’s the deal: I’m ready to be arrested; I’m ready to die with you. I’m never”—listen, here’s my statement of resolve. And Jesus’s response, knowing all things, is, “Well, it won’t be just a few hours until you deny me, and you’ll do it three times.”

So we can look carefully and analyze these problems and see, really, it all comes down to the same thing. There’s a certain expectation that we may hold in terms of what it means to follow Christ. And I’ll say superlative things, extreme things, devoted things—“I’ll do this for you”—but when it comes to cost, there’s a conflict. And I say, “Oh, I can’t, I can’t pay that.” And my excuse is, “I would do that, but I don’t think I will because—I mean, it seems unreasonable. It’ll cost me too much.”

Let’s start in verse 57 and just think through this man who was asked by Christ to be a follower—either that was implied by the messages he had given, whether that was looking at the disciples that were following—but whatever, he felt the call to follow Christ. And his response was to look at Christ and say, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus has to clarify, “Does ‘wherever’ really mean ‘wherever’? I don’t think it does.” That’s the implication, I think, because of the context.

And I just want to make this first observation that I think we should all remember. If we don’t know it already, it needs to be at the forefront of our mind. When it comes to people with resolve, statements of devotion, or testimonies about Christ—number one: we need to remember talk is cheap. It really doesn’t mean much. Talk is cheap. When it comes down to it, anyone can say they’re going to follow Christ. Anyone can say they love God. Anyone can say that. And the Bible often says, “Now wait a minute. Words are one thing; how that statement is tested in the laboratory of the pains of life—that’s what matters. Then we’ll test the resolve.”

And the current state of marriage should make this very obvious to you—that it happens all the time, does it not? You know what it is to go to a wedding—or maybe you’ve been a participant as a groom or a bride—and you stood in front of a bunch of people, and you heard a preacher say something that’s reminiscent of the Common Book of Prayer that’s been said for hundreds of years. “Hey, listen, do you take this person? Now let’s give a few stipulations here: for better or for worse—things can be good; they could be bad. In sickness or in health—this person that seems very healthy right now could be very sick. And the whole terms of this can change. For richer or for poorer—you might do well, it



might be comfortable; you may not have anything. Are you going to stick with this person? Now here's how it ends: till death do us part. Are you ready to say that?"

Now, the current state of marriage really should communicate to us that though people still say that every day in our country, they don't carry through with it. As a matter of fact, our stats—though they are fluctuating a little bit in the current decade—in reality, I mean, marriage is not seen as a lifelong commitment: for better, for worse, sickness and health, richer, poorer—not really seen that way. It's really—though the talk bubble comes out of my mouth at the front of that auditorium—the think cloud coming out the other direction says something different. I'll say "better or worse," but really, I mean, until you become too much of a nag, then I'm going to look for someone else. "For richer, for poorer," but if you're a bad money manager and you really prove to be someone who really can't manage the household funds, then I'm out of here.

If you think through the distance between the statements we make and the reality, you know that really the statements mean nothing. What really matters is the resolve behind it all. Jesus made it very clear in Matthew 19: he said the two in a marriage covenant become one, and what God joins together let no man separate. And if you watch the most profound covenant relationship between human beings in this life, you see them come together, make grandiose statements, and then cash it all in when the going gets tough. Then I think you realize that people say the same kinds of things to God all the time and really don't mean them. The talk cloud comes out of their mouth when they say, "I'll follow you wherever you go. You will be my King and my Lord." We sing songs like the one we just sang that speak of these total statements—these extreme, superlative statements—regarding "I'm with you; you're the leader; I'll follow you." But the think cloud says something else. There's an asterisk. There's a limit: "I'll follow you as long as..." "I'll be in this thing until..." "I'll do this—unless it turns into this."

We've got to remember talk is cheap. The only kind of talk that really matters is the kind that accurately reflects your heart. And even today in our Bible reading—and if you haven't read it yet, be sure to read our Daily Bible Reading, our New Testament reading in Matthew 25—the picture of the ten virgins with their oil and the lamps, and then the talents and the accounting for the talents that are given out to these people. And you realize this: there's a lot of talk about "Lord, Lord." You see it repeated: "Lord, Lord"—you're the boss, you're the King, you're in charge, you're the Master. But those words mean nothing. And we already learned that in Luke, did we not? Luke chapter 6, verse 46—at the end of the Sermon on the Plain—Jesus says to the crowd, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I say?" Because there's a big difference between your life and your words. And like your mom used to tell you when you were little, actions speak louder than words.



So my words—I'm all into that we should confess Christ as Lord (Romans 10). I want to do that. I want to be able to say, "You're my Savior; you're the King; I'll follow you." I want to let God be God. But those words have to be backed up with a resolve. Because the scariest verse in all the Bible, as I often share with you, in Matthew chapter 7, verse 21, is when Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one"—you know the rest of the verse—"that does the will of my Father." So you say "Lord"—that's one thing. But the resolve and commitment that is with that—to say, "I trust you; you're in charge; you're my Savior; you're my King"—the reality that needs to be played out in life.

And there are three components, at least in this, that I think we need to keep in mind, because the words only mean something if what's behind those words includes these three components.

Number one—let's start very simple; let's alliterate it so we can remember it, perhaps without looking at our notes down the road—number one: there needs to be attraction. Just like in a marital relationship, there needs to be, before this commitment, a sense of "I want Christ to be my King. I realize he is the Savior; he's given his life for me; I want to put my life in his hands." There has to be a desire that speaks to choice and volition. God creates this ability in our hearts to say to him—and this should be the experience we look back on—it's not just the testimony that's filled with words; it's a testimony that describes a point in time when my heart is drawn to be with Christ. That desire has to be there. Much like the last chapter of the book of Joshua, when he said to the people, "You've got lots of choices. You've got the gods of your forefathers beyond the River; you've got the gods here in Canaan; you've got a lot of choices for who you're going to serve. But you've got to make a choice. Choose you this day whom you will serve." And then—maybe this you have on a plaque somewhere at your house—"But as for me and my house"—what does he say?—"I serve the LORD." That's what I want to do. That's my choice. That's who I'm following.

If there's not that desire and that attraction and that sense of "You are my King; I want to serve you," well, then the words don't mean anything. And that's pretty simple and basic—don't need much comment on that.

How about the next "A"? Here it comes: there needs to not only be attraction; there needs to be a sense of allegiance—allegiance and loyalty. That's why Jesus asked us to count the cost. He's always saying no one sits down to build a tower unless he sees if he's got enough provisions to do it. You've got to count the cost. That's why he says to people stuff like this: saying "yes" to Jesus is not enough. This guy says "yes" to Jesus—"I'll follow you." But he said, "Well, wait a minute. We're talking about an allegiance here to me. You used the word 'wherever'; let's just define what that means." You think about what that means to be loyal to me. That's why at weddings we spend so much time focusing on



that: you are committing—you're covenanting—with your partner to say, "Yes, I'm with you." "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" Here is a picture of you saying, "I will be loyal. I will be faithful. I'm going to be yours." And in the picture of the Scriptures, it's this picture of the Bride of Christ and Christ.

Maybe a different analogy might be helpful. In John 10, it's the shepherd and the sheep. And here the sheep are described in John chapter 10 this way: "Well, listen," he says, "I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. My sheep—they hear my voice, and they follow me." They want to be counted in my team, and they are loyal to be faithful to follow, and they're committed to that. You don't join a flock, in this analogy, with a shepherd and not say, "That's the one I'm following," and, "I'm not going to follow someone else. That's the one I'm following."

And speaking of "not someone else," whenever you see the discussion of what it means to be someone who's "in" with God—whether it's the Old Testament picture or the New Testament picture of a disciple—you know this: there will always be rivals. And we're always reminded that when it comes to the relationship with God, it's exclusive. It is one not only of allegiance—let's add another "A"—it's also one of abandon. I abandon. That's why at the marriage ceremony you often hear, "Do you take this one to be your lawfully wedded wife"—you have all that talk, and then you have this phrase: "forsaking all others." Remember that phrase? Forsaking all others. That means all your past girlfriends—done. No more. No more chatting and texting and giggling and flirt—done with that. And then here's the thing: the allegiance, and abandoning all others, is even an imaginative sense of looking forward in time and saying, even when there are other options, they're not going to be options for me. We're moving forward, and no matter how tough this gets, no matter how many questions I have, or how baffling your will is for my life, I will abandon all others.

The Bible says it's the way it has to be—just like in a love relationship. Because in the very beginning, when God gave the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20, what did he say? "No other gods before me." Why? Here's the rationale for it: "Because I, the LORD your God, am"—you know the word—"a jealous God." Jealous God. That may sound like weakness, but in a marriage covenant, that's not weakness—that's appropriate, is it not? You start flirting around with other people—there should be jealousy, because this is an exclusive relationship, because there's an agreement not only to be attracted and to have allegiance, but an allegiance when it's tested. There will be an abandon to all others—I will forsake all others.

Now, unfortunately, when this man comes to Christ in verse 57 of Luke 9 and says, "I'll follow you wherever you go," clearly there may be attraction. There's a statement of allegiance. But there's



certainly not an abandon. In what area? Let's think this through. Here's his response: Jesus said, "Foxes have holes; the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Now, if you're going to follow me—the Son of Man speaking in the third person about himself, using that phrase from Daniel 7: I am the Messiah; I am the Son of Man—if you follow me, you just need to know, for now, you may not have things that even animals have. They have a place that's their own. Those foxes—they dig these burrows into the ground, these dens—they're usually about five feet deep; they go back many feet depending on, you know, how this fox digs that den out, and they last their whole lives. As a matter of fact, though there are no keys to toss to their kids, you've had multiple generations of foxes live in that very same den. It becomes a base of operation.

And then he gives another animal that's very clear—if you've just seen them putting a nest in your yard or something—those birds build nests. It takes on average about 35 hours for a bird to make a nest. The average lifespan of a bird in the first century in the Middle East—as it is here—is about seven years. They're building that nest for a good proportion of their young lives, and then they make that their base of operations. They don't flit around and go from here to there; they leave that nest anywhere from five to eight times an hour and come back to it. They leave, they come back; they leave, they come back. That's their base of operation. And there's some comfort in that.

If you've ever come across a nest in your yard or whatever—it looks, you know, they're fluffy little... It reminds me often—though it's not much—when I watch those TV shows, these documentaries of these prisoners in the penitentiary. Have you noticed that even in the penitentiary, you get this tiny little cell, but it turns into something that looks like a college dorm room? Have you noticed that? They have a little place to call their own. They've got the little art; they've got their little artwork they like; they've got their things arranged the way they like; they've got their bookshelves up with the books that they like. It's their little spot. Even if you're a prisoner, you've got your place to lay your head and the comfort of your "home." It may not be all that comfortable, but it's something that brings you some security. It's something that brings you some peace; it brings you some tranquility. It is your home.

That sense of ease and security and comfort is something that Jesus says here to this man: if you really have the attraction, allegiance, and abandon to me, you do understand you may not have that in the future. It may be that following me at some point leads you away from the comforts of ease and convenience and security in this world. And you've just got to be ready to say, "I'm not going to have that as a rival ambition or priority of my life."



This gets really odd—follow me on this. It doesn't mean, like the medieval monks, we take a vow of poverty. But what it is, is that thing in my life that brings me security, comfort, pleasure—whatever it might be—can never be a rival. God's speaking of abandon. Because anything that rivals as a priority, that says, "I'll follow you until this gets touched; I'll follow you until this becomes something you encroach upon"—then that thing is your idol. If that's the limit of your devotion to Christ—whatever that is—it's an idol. An idol is something you say, "You can't touch this, God. I'll serve you, but you can't get to that part of my life." That's idolatry.

And this is not just something—gold statues in temples. As a matter of fact, even in the Old Testament, when there were gold statues in temples, the prophets made it clear: the problem with idolatry is that it always is an issue of your heart. You have a priority and a loyalty and a dependence and a hope in something else that really supersedes your hope for Christ—or in that case for Yahweh. At some point, you say, "I'm all about God, but you can't touch this corner of my life. That's still going to be a priority for me, and I'm only going to follow you insofar as that doesn't get toppled."

Turn with me, if you would, to 1 Samuel chapter 5. First Samuel chapter 5 is a good, illustrative, almost poetic, historical event that I hope brings a great lesson of moral and spiritual meaning to your life whenever you think of it. Because our theme is the comforts and convenience and ease of the world, let me use an old phrase that I used to hear back in the day. I need to make sure there are no rival gods. I'll put it this way—number two: you need to topple the idols of ease.

Doesn't mean I won't have a recliner to sit in tonight. Doesn't mean I won't have air-conditioning in my car. Doesn't mean I might not move from an apartment renter to a homeowner. I get all of that. But I cannot make that a rival priority and say, "God, I'll only serve you so long as I can have a comfortable place to sit. I'm only going to be faithful to Christ as long as I can have a car that I like. I'll only be faithful to Christ as long as I can have a home in the ZIP code that I want." I can't ever say that to God. Everything's on the table. "I'll follow you wherever you go," and I've got to mean that—even if it means my life looks to be less than someone in a penitentiary, or a fox, or a bird. I'm going to follow you, no matter what it costs.

I know when it encroaches on my sense of pleasure or ease or comfort or convenience, I start getting a little testy. I start getting a little clingy. I think, "God, I don't want you to take that from me." But I've got to, before the crisis, say, "God, you know what? I'm not going to hold on to that. If your path for my life leads me to give up certain conveniences and comforts and things that make my life easier, I'm ready to give those things up."



Here's the illustration—1 Samuel chapter 5, which comes from a historic event when the Israelites were in the doghouse, so to speak, with God—and God wasn't happy with them. To try and circumvent God's displeasure with the people of Israel, they toted the Ark of the Covenant into the battle. "Ark" just means "box." It was a box that the law was in, the jar of manna, the branch that budded that showed Aaron's line—you know what's in the box. It was a gold-gilded box. It had rings on it and poles on both sides. It had this sculpture, if you will, of the cherubim with their wings touching. And here was the box that was at the center of the holy place in the tabernacle, and they said, "Let's take that into battle, because God may not be happy with us, but if we take God's box into battle, well then we'll certainly win it." They're like soldiers marching out with a rabbit's foot in their pocket. Didn't work.

Verse 1: "When the Philistines captured the ark of God"—imagine that—"they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod." That was the stronghold of the Philistines in that time. "Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon." Now think this through. You get the religious artifact that's at the center of the worship in the tabernacle of the Israelites at this point in history. What do we do with it? "Well, I don't know. Let's take it into the temple of our god—Dagon." Dagon—the root of that in Hebrew relates to "fish." Archaeologists debate a little bit about this, and historians debate about it. But Dagon certainly was a god of the Mesopotamians and the god of the Philistines at this particular point, and they think it was this half-fish, half-man idol that they had. And there are, you know, representations of that in the old Bible encyclopedias and historic books. And we realize we're not sure what it is, but picture something like that—gilded—some statue. And they said, "We're going to bring it into the temple, the house of Dagon, and we'll set the box up here next to Dagon, and we'll go about our business."

Verse 3: "When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day"—these are the Philistines now—"behold, Dagon had fallen face-down on the ground before the ark of the LORD." How embarrassing is that? We just won. We'll take the little golden box and put it in the same room as our big statue. But now the next morning the statue looks like he's bowing down to the box. "Oh, quick! I need some help. Get some people in here and prop up Dagon." So—bottom of verse 3—"they took Dagon and put him back in his place. Little scaly idol."

"But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face-down on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both of his hands were lying cut off on the threshold." This time it fell; it smacked—head came off, hands came off. And if we're right about the depiction of what this might have been, then you've got nothing, it says here, but "the trunk of Dagon," which probably looked like a scaly fish. So, headless, scaly fish-man is now broken in pieces on the ground.



Now again, I don't want to sentimentalize this text, but what a great illustration. You want to bring in the God of the Bible into your heart—let's say the arena of your life—and you just want to keep a few of your favorite little untouchable things that you have to have. "I've got to have the family... I've got to have a life in this ZIP code... I've got to have this job... I've got to make sure I fulfill my career goals." And you keep that idol up. I guarantee you: God—the God of the Bible—will not coexist with your idols. I'm saying let's topple them now. Because if you don't, God will always make sure that he does if you're his child. And if you think you're going to presumptuously bring God into your life and not topple your idols, he's not going to be a part of that. He won't. No idol in our hearts should stand. And I think one of the most convenient ones for us in our day is this idol of ease, which was very much like the people in Laodicea.

Laodicea—if you've heard me preach on Laodicea, I like to call it the Orange County of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). It was influential; it was rich; people cared about how they looked; they worked out; they had nice clothes. They were—as he puts it in the third chapter of Revelation—they said things like this in their own hearts, if not out of their own mouths: "I'm rich; I'm wealthy; I'm in need of nothing." They had it all going on in their lives. Now, here's the thing: whatever was going on in their lives, it was a compromise. The picture was painted in the postcard from Christ in Revelation 3. It's like they had one foot in the church and one foot in the world, and they wanted to maintain both of them. "I've got Dagon; I've got Yahweh. Just—can't we manage this somehow?" And he says, "You're neither hot nor cold." What does he call them? Lukewarm. And he said, much like the tepid waters that you guys don't want to drink, "It makes me want to spit you out of my mouth." God won't have it.

I know some people think what I'm preaching this morning is varsity Christianity. It's really not. This is Christianity 101. God will not be a part of the pantheon of gods in your life. And you know what gods you can have—much like the Laodiceans: "I want to be rich and wealthy. I don't want to have any concerns regarding my finances. I want to have a nice, cookie-cutter, Southern California, Orange County life." I've watched so many people cash in their sanctification for a neighborhood and a house or a yard or a career. You've got to recognize God will not join your pantheon of gods. Christ has to be King of kings and Lord of lords. And therefore anything that rises up in your heart as a necessity—"I have to have it"—you've got to topple the idol of ease.

Now, I spoke briefly about the monks in the Middle Ages that took vows of poverty. Follow me on this. You might think, "Well, that sounds like that's what you're asking me to do." I'm not asking you to do that. I'm asking you to be willing to give up whatever it might be that you enjoy in this life. But here's what the Bible says to people—much like the people of Laodicea. The people in Ephesus weren't doing so bad either. And when Timothy was pastoring those people, Paul wrote to Timothy and he said, "Hey, you've got a lot of wealthy people in your church. Tell them this. Tell them this: that the God that you worship is the God who richly supplies you with all things for your enjoyment." Ah,



fantastic. “But tell them not to put their hope in the uncertainty of riches, because just as easily as he can give you those blessings, he can take them back. Instead, don’t focus so much on your portfolio; would you focus on this—being rich in good works, being generous, being ready to share. And in so doing,” he says, “you’ll lay up for yourself a foundation for the future”—and he’s not talking about retirement—“he’s talking about eternity. And then you’ll take hold of that which is life indeed.” Real life.

Now, here’s the problem of people that have idols of ease in their life: you will never have an idol of ease in your life unless you think real life is here. Jesus said, “Can you stop thinking it’s all about this life? Store for yourself treasure in heaven.” He’s not opposed to you worrying about—in a biblical sense—concerning yourself with doing what you need to do to have a future. That’s good. The question is: which future are you planning for? What are the non-negotiables in your life? They should be things that relate not to this world, but the next one.

That passage, by the way, I think is so helpful that I had to put it in the discussion questions this week. And if you’ve never done our discussion questions in the back of the worksheet—even if you don’t join a home fellowship group, which I would invite you to do—at least in your own quiet, private time with God, work through those questions. And they’ll make you grapple with that sixth chapter of 1 Timothy, because we’ve got to learn what it means to be able to enjoy the gifts that God has given us while not allowing those ever to raise themselves up as idols in our hearts. You’ve got to learn that balance—enjoying them without making them the non-negotiable thing that you set your hope on. That is not as easy as it sounds—especially in places like Ephesus and Laodicea and in Orange County, California. Topple the idols of ease. You can’t serve two masters; you’ve got to pick one. We choose to serve Christ, and that means that it may be that the path will lead me to a place where my lifestyle seems less than foxes and birds.

We focus now on the last line of verse 58: “But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” “But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” That’s the most paradoxical, crazy statement a Jewish Sabbath-school graduate in the first century could ever hear. What are you talking about? Because when they hear the word “Son of Man,” and it’s applied to Christ, the Messiah, their mind goes back to Daniel 7. And in Daniel 7 is one of the most amazing statements about the power, the riches, the dominion, and authority of the Messiah—all authority, all dominion, all power is given to him. The kingdom is delivered over to the Son of Man—that’s the picture in Daniel 7.

Now, nothing could be more oxymoronic than this: “Hey, that Son of Man? He didn’t even have a place to lay his head. He’s worse off than the guys at the county jail. He’s worse off than a bird in your backyard. He doesn’t have a place to call his own. He’s an itinerant on this earth. And sometimes he



goes into town—as we saw last time—and they kick him out and say, ‘We don’t want you here.’ That’s the Son of Man.” How in the world can that be?

I think it’s helpful that Jesus from time to time—and I think strategically—calls himself the Son of Man, because he wants us to remember, much like they would have in the first century, that he possesses everything. And yet the reality of this current life looks like sometimes he possesses nothing. He has all authority, but it’s “not yet”—until he takes that authority and he puts it into practice. When all the kingdoms of the world become his, when he takes his great power and begins to reign—that is a future event. The question is: will you ally yourself with him now? And if you understand who he is, I think you’ll do that gladly. If you really believe he is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It’s much like—and I often analogize it to—the time when David, this young man, was anointed as the king of Israel, and yet for the next decade and a half he ran around the countryside like a fugitive. And the Bible says there were people that rallied around him—not many, just a few hundred. And those that did—like that scene in the cave, the Adullam—dark, damp cave in the middle of the wilderness—they went out to him and they said, “You’re our captain. You’re our prince. You’re the boss.” And yet they were watching arrows, so to speak, fly over their shoulders as the armies that were well-financed were out to get David. Saul was running the show. You ask anyone in Israel, “Who’s the king?” And except for those few hundred people, everyone would say “Saul.” But he wasn’t the king. In God’s mind, David was the king. But he hadn’t taken his power and begun to reign yet, because God hadn’t opened up the door for him to walk up the steps of the palace. That hadn’t happened yet—but it was going to happen.

And I always ask the question: what would it be like to be one of those—as it’s described—malcontents, those in debt, those that were disgruntled? What would it be like to be those followers of David for those 15 years, and then when he is coronated as the king of the whole nation—what’s in it for those guys? I think they’re doing all right. I think they’re marching in right behind him, and David lavishes on them all these great things—as we learned in our Daily Bible Reading this morning in Matthew 25: “Enter into the joy of your Father.”

Now, what’s really going to happen? If you know that’s the case, are you willing to spend the night in a cave—or do you want to spend the night in the palace with Saul? Saul’s on his way out. He’s defeated. David doesn’t look like a king. Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Are you willing to follow him in a world where we will be embattled—hostilities will always be pitted against us—where you are going to be, and if you don’t feel that already, you will be, in a way that you have yet to imagine in our country, the outcast, the loser? Are you ready to stand with him and sacrifice a little bit of comfort in this world? I think you should gladly do that if you know where this is all headed.



Number three: let us gladly sacrifice comforts. Not taking vows of poverty. Not saying we are somehow, you know, masochistic and saying, “We’ve got to suffer, so let’s try and be walking into all the suffering and enjoying it.” Not saying that. But when there comes a turn in the road following Christ where something is taken from you that you enjoyed—let it go. Let it go, because it’s not an idol. Your hope is not set on it. Let it go. It’s okay. God will always—even if it’s a cup of cold water—he will restore and reward his servants when they lay down and sacrifice anything.

That’s why, when Peter said, “We’ve left everything to follow you,” Jesus didn’t chide him for that—“you prideful disciple.” He says, “You have.” And I love this: “In the new world, in the next age, when the Son of Man”—there it is again, Daniel 7—“sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me in this life, you will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” What’s in it for the guys that gather around David in the dank cave of Adullam? A lot of good things.

It’s not so hard to gladly sacrifice comforts if you know who you’re sacrificing them for. You watch it in our world all the time. Does a mother conceive a child in her own body, not knowing the costs involved in this—not to mention on her own body, and her future sleep, and all the money that’s involved in raising a kid in this world? But she does it. Why? Even before she meets this kid, she sacrifices her comfort for this child. And it happens generation after generation after generation. Why? Because when you understand something of the love that a mother has for a child, you say, “I’ll gladly do that.” As Paul said to the Corinthians: “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls.” Why? “I love you.” That’s what the rest of the verse reads.

And even the soldier—if he knows he’s on the winning team, if he’s fighting a just cause, and he’s out there in a foxhole, and he’s not in a nice fluffy bed—and he says, “I am willing to fight this good fight,” knowing that one day, because this is the right war, the right side, the winning team, there’s going to be a ticker-tape parade. I’m not focused on that now, but I know that’s coming. Right now I’m willing to gladly sacrifice. There are people that love their country more than we love Christ. There are moms that love their babies more than we love Christ. That’s unacceptable for us, when we can’t let go and say, “God, we’re willing to let go of some comfort in our life to follow you.”

Did you click on that video link this week? I know some of you didn’t have the stomach for it. I understand that. When you heard news that this Jordanian pilot was burned alive in a cage, did you click on it and see it? I think it’s helpful sometimes for me, when I preach sermons like this, and I always recommend on the back of the worksheet in sermons like this—I recommend books, some of my favorites on the martyrs—and I give them to you, and I say, “Here are some books you might want



to read.” And in those martyr books, you’ll read about men that were willing, for the sake of Christ and the call to follow him wherever he leads, they were willing to die—and many of them burned alive.

Now, you’ve got the old editions—like I have some old editions of these books on my shelf—you’ll see the etchings and the drawings of these things. Well, that’s one thing. It’s another to watch a Jordanian pilot writhe in pain in flames, with his face melting off and falling down, burned in a cage, and say, “There’s the living-color example of what the people we read about as we sip our coffee...” Yeah, I want to give my life for Christ. Barring the political mess that we’re in right now—and I’m not talking about the modern-day politics of what’s going on in the Middle East; that’s another topic and another sermon—but when you watch someone die like that at the hands of people that hate him, and you ask yourself the question, “Where am I in terms of having to have my life comfortable and protected, protected and easy? I’ll follow Christ until it starts costing me.” And you know that the heroes of the Christian faith—they were burned alive at the stake, not to mention a lot of other gruesome ways to die. And then you say, “Is that varsity Christianity, or is that just fundamental Christianity 101?”

The Bible’s pretty clear on that. See, Christ died for us, and he says, “You know what? I gave my life for you. Are you willing to lay down your life?” Now, the object of that is often for your brother, but we know we only serve the church, we only serve the kingdom, we only serve the lost because we do ultimately all of our work for the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, think that through. Am I willing to lay down my life? That’s the way it’s always posited in the Bible, isn’t it?

I think of that passage that I alluded to in 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 3: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits.” Why? “Because his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.” What if it costs you your life on the battlefield—the spiritual battlefield? Paul said, “I’ll gladly spend and be expended.” As a matter of fact, when he said in Acts chapter 20, “I don’t account my life as worth anything to me. I don’t see my life as precious to myself. My only concern is that I finish the course and the ministry that I received from the Lord.” “I want to serve the Lord. Wherever he leads me. And my life—secondhand. I’m willing to give it up.”

And the next chapter, as he’s saying goodbye to the people he loved in Ephesus—he had spent three years there—they walked him to the boat, and they were weeping and wailing because the prophecy had been given that he was going to suffer. Bonds and chains awaited him in Jerusalem. And he said this—verse 13, Acts 21: “Why are you doing this? Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I’m ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”



As others have rightly said, you're really not ready to live for Christ until you've grappled with the idea of dying for Christ. Have you given that some thought? Are you ready to give up—you know, talk about comfort—how about the ultimate comfort and ease of just living on the planet? I hope God would give me the grace to do that if I was... Listen, it starts within your mind saying, "Listen, I know what it is to be attracted; I'm going to say I'm allegiance—there's going to be an allegiance and loyalty to you—and there's an abandon. No matter what else comes my way, there's no other option for me but to be obedient to Christ."

But I doubt there'll be many martyrs in this room. I doubt many of you will be killed or flayed or beheaded or burned at the stake. Maybe some of you—I don't know. But the real martyrdom of laying down our lives—it happens on the installment plan. I quoted that passage where Paul looks at the Corinthians—who he had to put up with a lot of problems with—he says, "I most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." Once you're ready to give up everything for Christ and you count your life worth nothing, now it's going to be stuff like this: an extra hour, an extra mile, an extra dollar, as I often say. That's where the expending of our lives is often calculated. "Am I ready to go the extra mile, stay the extra hour, spend the extra dollar to serve Christ?" That's the kind of comfort that comes off incrementally in our lives.

I don't think you can do that unless you make this resolve that Paul did in Galatians 6:14. It's been one of my favorite verses for years—and it may seem a little too telling for me to admit that to you. The first part, I think, you'll smile and you'll say, "Well, that's good. I'm glad my pastor has that as one of his favorite verses." Well, that is: "Far be it from me to boast in anything except the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ." Bravo. Great. You live for Christ; you live for the message of the cross; you live for the redemption that's found in that cross; you want to spread that message and advance the kingdom—fantastic. Here's the complementary statement: "By which"—right, because of that message, because of the cross, because of what Christ has done—"by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to it."

Now there's a verse we can use. Because of this commitment to Christ, this attraction to the cross, this allegiance to his name, the world has been crucified to me and I to it. They don't like me; they won't stand for what I stand for. I reveal the truth of the Scripture—at some point I will be persecuted and suffer hardship in this world. And here's the thing: I... there's nothing here—to quote Psalm 73—"Whom have I in heaven but you? Besides you I desire nothing on earth." When it comes down to it, you can keep your pleasures and your comforts—give me the cross of Christ.

Gladly sacrifice your comforts. This is a hard message to give; I'm sure it's a hard message to hear. But given the title, I hope you recognize—I trust you recognize, if not, I don't know if saying it will help—



but it's out of love in my heart for you that I would slow this pace down in the exposition of the last six verses of Luke 9 and say: how important is this, that we don't idolize comfort? That's the first thing. That pain in my life is not something that I so desperately want to avoid that it will cost me loyalty to Christ. Because whether it's your salvation—as in the case of Judas—or whether it's that grief that you feel when you deny Christ, like Peter—making these excuses and having these roadblocks and putting an asterisk after the statement, “I'll follow you, Christ,” and having some kind of provision in there that says, “...until... and only if...” You'll always regret the excuses. Let's not have any—certainly when it comes to my own concern about my personal comfort. We're exchanging it for something greater.

Speaking of a modern-day martyr—you know the Jim Elliot story, and I've quoted him many times, and others have too—you've read it in print. But before he died—not looking for martyrdom, you know the story of him with the...—Jim Elliot made very clear something that should make perfect sense to us: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Or the words of A. W. Tozer in his little book *Born After Midnight*, page 140: he said, it makes perfect sense to you that when we bring ourselves under the fuller, plenary authority of Christ, you're inviting trouble from a hostile world. You're adding to that the temptations of the devil—now you're on his radar; he's after you. And you'll have a lifelong struggle with the flesh. If those things are true of every Christian in this room, then it should be obvious that we will need to defer most of our enjoyments for another time. The kingdom is coming. And he'll say to us one day, after he says, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” “Enter into the joy of your Father.” Right now, though, we're willing to give up whatever it might take. No excuses.

Let's pray.

God, it is hard for me to think about how these words may be received, but I've got to worry more about what's at stake when our Christianity has limits—when our statements of devotion have some kind of asterisk, some kind of footnote, some kind of provision that says, “Well, at that point it has to stop.” God, I know you give grace upon grace when we face the challenges of life. And while we think of the most horrific kinds of death that many Christians have suffered throughout church history, it makes us shudder in fear—which we have to grapple with. But in reality, God, we know that it begins with a heart that is not only attracted to you as the King of kings and Lord of lords, but is ready with a sincere allegiance to say, “You know what? I'm all about your leadership. Abandoning all others.” I've got no other agenda or priority that will supersede my devotion to you. That's the definition of God, isn't it? Lord, you know that to be God is to be first.



Give us the grace—for most of us, it will not be, certainly this week. I can't imagine anybody being burned at the stake in this congregation that hears my voice. Certainly other Christians around the world face that danger every day. But God, for us, once we grapple with that thought, it will be the extra hour, the extra mile, the extra dollar. Help us not to cling too tightly to the things of this world. Great—you do give so many good things for us to enjoy. But let us never make those our gods. Give us the grace, the ability, the infused sense of your presence and your Spirit's work in our lives to follow you wherever you might lead.

In Jesus' name, amen.