



Fatal Excuses-Part 2

I Can't Lord, I Have to Put Family First

Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, indulge your pastor this morning, if you would, by allowing me to begin the sermon with a little math.

We'll begin the math by having you pick a number between one and 10. Got it? Let's multiply it by nine. Back to your times table—good. Nine. If you ended up with a two-digit number, add those two digits together. Got that? Subtract five. Got that. Turn that number into a corresponding letter. And do that by: if you have the number one, that'll be A; if you have the number two, let's make that B; if you have number three, make that C, and so forth. You got it?

That's your letter. I want you to pick a country that begins with that letter. Okay—country of the world begins with that letter.

I want you to take the name of that country and I want you to take the second letter in the name of that country. So whatever the second letter is, I want you to pick an animal that begins with that second letter there. Okay, you following me? Just pick. And if you can picture—just picture, you know—that animal, like maybe standing on the landscape of your country, if you can even envision the country that you picked.

Now I want you to focus on the skin of that animal. Focus on that. And you focus on the color of the skin of that animal. Now you focus hard on that. And let's see if I can pick any of that up. Black—no. White—no. Somewhere... gray, gray—it's gray. But I really don't think there are any elephants in Denmark.

"My pastor can read my mind." No, I can't. I don't even wish to read your mind. But I do know a few parlor tricks, and that's one of them. And the reason I can't read your mind is because the Bible says very clearly, when it comes to us human beings—1 Corinthians 2:11—only you know your thoughts. You only know. We can guess; we can do tricks; but we cannot look through your forehead and read



your thoughts. And that's very important. Human beings cannot do that. We cannot read one another's... I don't care how long you've been married, you cannot read another person's... you can only guess, you can guesstimate—you cannot read their thoughts.

With that in view—and the Bible is clear about that—you should really take note of passages like Luke 5:22, which is one example of several, where you see Jesus Christ standing there in human form, and the Bible says this: that he perceived their thoughts, and he answered. Now, when you read a passage like that, you think, “Wait a minute—there's no normal human being,” because human beings cannot read my thoughts, and yet Jesus Christ has that ability. Well, that's the thing: he's not just another human being. He is—he's God. And because he's God, he can read people's thoughts.

And if you do not keep that in mind when you get to passages like the one we're studying this morning, you will absolutely miss the point. Because when you read Luke 9—not just today's text, verses 61 and 62—but when you read the whole section, 57 through 62, and you look at these three would-be disciples, as I've called them, that come to Christ and they get turned away—at least that's the impression we're left with—we understand that what Jesus is doing in these passages is not responding to their words; he's responding to their thoughts. That has become increasingly important for us to underscore, because when we get to the third would-be disciple, we recognize that what this man asks for seems so incredibly reasonable that you'd have to think Jesus has lost, I mean, any semblance of reality, to look in the eyes of a would-be disciple who's saying, “Yeah, I'll do it. I have one small request,” and for him to deny that request, you think, “What is going on here?”

Right—every disciple in the passages that have preceded, that same thing—just glance back up at it; you got your Bible open to this passage—verse 57–58. When he responds in verse 58 to that first guy who starts with these words, “I'll follow you wherever you go,” and now all of a sudden we're talking about foxes and birds and places to live—what in the world? What kind of response is that? Well, Jesus is not responding to his words; he's responding to the man's thoughts. And his thoughts are: “Well, I'll follow you wherever—asterisk, footnote—it's not anywhere. I mean, I certainly have to have a place to stay and a place to sleep, a place to call my own.” You see, Jesus knows exactly what this man's limitations are, and what he's thinking.

The next guy—remember this last time we got together—he just wants to go and bury his dad. Whether that means you see him out to the end of his life, which seems like a very reasonable thing—“You know, gotta take care of my elderly father”—or deal with the family that's grieving because father died—whatever the situation is. Either way, it seems pretty reasonable. And Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” What are you talking about? And then he reiterates this thing, which we can only anticipate as we get into chapter 10: he wants these guys to go and proclaim the kingdom. Well, it just



doesn't seem reasonable if we're only reading the words. But if we understand there's something going on in this person's heart that Jesus has to deal with, because it's critical and urgent, well then our passage this morning—same thing.

With that in view, knowing that Jesus is responding to people's thoughts, you have to read this passage carefully. Verse 61: "Yet another said, 'I will follow you, Lord, but...'" And now we're kind of bracing—oh no—another big excuse. "'Let me first say farewell to those at my home.'" Now I'm just thinking—you want to say bye before we leave? Fine. That doesn't seem like a bad request. I mean, come on—before you go on your missions trip, you can't tell your family goodbye? Are you kidding me?

Look at his response, verse 62. Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom." You mean, if I want to call my family or have a little dinner before I go on this missions trip and say goodbye, I'm not even fit to be a member, a citizen, in the kingdom? Well, that's because Jesus isn't responding to his words; he's responding to his thoughts. In his heart, there's something going on there that we have entitled this series. And that is—it's an excuse.

An excuse, you need to understand, is something that we put out on the surface that looks very reasonable, but all it does is obscure the reality of what's going on in my heart. Because the things going on in my heart I wouldn't say, because that would sound bad. So I'm going to come up with an excuse that sounds good. Excuses are that—they allow us to sleep at night when, in reality, we're not responding to the call or the authority or the command of Christ. And I feel okay about that because I've got an excuse. I've got a reason I can't do that. And the reason—it's only a good excuse if it sounds really reasonable and rational and logical, and everyone would agree with me. I think anyone standing there would agree, "Hey, you want to say goodbye before we go—no big deal." No big deal is a big deal to Christ. It's a big deal to Christ because Christ is dealing with the issue under the surface. And the surface issue is reasonable; the heart issue is unreasonable. It's not only unreasonable; it's fatal. It is. It's so far out of bounds with anything that we see in terms of biblical Christianity. That's what needs to be exposed, and that's what I hope this sermon will do this morning.

Now, if Jesus were here preaching today, that would be great—hopefully we'd have more people here. If Jesus were here, it would be great because when he preaches, he doesn't just respond to what he sees on the surface; he looks into your heart. He can look right through your forehead and know exactly what's going on. So that would be an amazing sermon because he'd know exactly what—he'd speak right to the issues of your heart.



But it's not, "All hope is lost," because what he did is made sure—in the third person of the Godhead—is that he coded and inscribed on paper his living and active words that, according to the passage I'm now quoting—Hebrews 4:12—the last thing that it says about those words that are in the Word of God is not only are they sharper than any two-edged sword, and that's a nice analogy, but let's get down to it—they will discern the thoughts and intentions of your heart.

So today, as we gather and we look at the Word of God, we look at this passage, and we try to understand it in light of the rest of Scripture, and we start talking about those biblical principles—let's let the Word do what Jesus did in this encounter with this man. And that is: he exposed the excuse of his heart. Something more than just saying goodbye was going on here. And whatever it is that you might be doing in your own thinking to say, "Well, God, this is why I don't do that, and this is why I don't do this, and this is why I don't get involved in that, and that's why I have to have this little part of my life, and that's why I have to keep this intact, and I can't give up"—all the things we say to make that something where we can lay down tonight and go to sleep and not feel like a really disobedient Christian—we need to let the Word of God see through all of that and expose that—discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. And those that are out of sync with biblical Christianity—then it's time to do some correction in our lives.

Let's take a look at our text, and let's understand something going on here in the verbiage, in the vocabulary of this man that we've already seen in the second man in verse 59, and that is the word he uses to address Christ. Let's just start with that observation. Verse 61: "Yet another said, 'I will follow you...' Messiah? 'I will follow you, Rabbi...'? 'I will follow you, Jesus...'? No. What's the word he uses? Lord."

Now, in our English texts the translators put a capital letter on that at the beginning, and of course that's a good way to translate this because, though the word has a broad usage in ancient Greek, and even in the Bible from time to time, when we talk about the one who's already described himself in verse 58—look back up at that—as the Son of Man, which, only if you're a Sabbath School graduate, would you understand is a reference to Daniel 7: the one to whom all dominion and power and authority belongs, and all the nations—they bring their obedience to him. That Son of Man, the second person of the Godhead that was looked forward to in Daniel 7—that one—when you call him "Lord," it's not with a small "l." You call him "Lord" with a capital "L."

And certainly when you see this man tossing around the word "Lord," Jesus is going to call you on that. If that's what I am—and we've already referenced this a million times in our series in Luke—Luke 6:46: "Why in the world would you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I say?" Just by calling me that, you are saying I am the ultimate authority. I am the one in charge. My agenda goes first.



Now here's the excuse. On the surface: "I've got a very reasonable request for you," and that is, "I've got to go home and say goodbye to people in my hometown." But apparently there's something going on there that defies the word "Lord." Maybe something more like, "Well, you know what, I'd rather disappoint you and your time schedule than disappoint these people in my hometown. I really think your agenda is less important than the agenda that I have. And my agenda is to go and make sure these relationships are okay."

Now we're speculating. But we could come up with a number of things that we could speculate that clearly invokes verse 62, which is really a stinging response: "Hey, you're not even fit for the kingdom if you're looking back over your shoulder when you're plowing." I understand that's an illustration and a metaphor, but it means something that this guy obviously qualifies for, and it ain't good.

So whatever is going on here with your word "Lord," clearly your heart defies that word. And that's a problem. Because if Jesus said to do anything to us right now, I assume the only right response is, "Yes, sir." Or, to use the word in the most extreme sense, in our mind in biblical language: "Yes, Lord, I will do it. You're in charge. You're the King." Not, "I'll do this, but..."

If Jesus wanted you to spend the rest of the sermon standing on your head against the back wall, I hope you'd all stand up and walk to the back wall and stand on your head. If he walked out and said, "Here's what you're supposed to do," you do it. He's the Lord. It's what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ. How in the world can you say you're following Christ if you don't follow Christ? It's always tested. When Christ said, "Do this, do that," we must respond to the Lordship of Christ, knowing that nothing else comes in the way.

Now I understand what's happened in this series on fatal excuses. Every would-be disciple had something that we tried to highlight that was a rival to the Lordship of Christ. We looked at pleasure and convenience and comfort. We looked at family and children and our spouse. And today I want to look at—I called it relationships—but we can make it as broad as we possibly can because let's make sure in this series we catch everything. So let's just use this word when it comes to the first point on your worksheet. And if you're taking notes, I wish that you would jot this down:

Number one: let no one displace the Lord.



And once you put the word “no one,” you might want to put the two words “no one,” you might add, “but nothing”—the word “nothing,” “anything.” There shouldn’t be any priority in our lives that, if they’re on an inevitable crash course—when they cannot be resolved and I cannot please them both—Christ has to win. He has to be the Lord, and he has to be the one that no other rival agenda or person, whatever, takes that place. And if I’m going to disappoint my family or my friends because Christ wants me to do something, well then so be it. I can’t say, “I’ll do that, but I’ve gotta make sure these people are okay.” I can’t.

Now, I know these are extreme examples, and I doubt God is ever going to call you to go on a missions trip without being able to say goodbye and have a final meal with your family. I doubt that’ll ever happen to you. But Jesus is painting a sharp contrast between interests in our lives, because inevitably there will be a showdown with something or someone, and you’re going to say, “That person and their expectations for me—I want to meet those, even if I disappoint or delay Christ.” And that can’t happen. Christ has to be who he is, and that is—he’s the one in charge. He’s the Lord. Let no one displace the Lord.

Now, we don’t even need to turn there because we’ve really echoed this theme throughout our series, but jot down the reference just to make your notes complete, if you would—Matthew 10. You can jot down the verses 16—let’s go all the way through 37. 16 through 37—here’s the section where Jesus says, “I’m going to send you out,” speaking now to his apostles, “and you’re going to be like sheep among wolves. You’re going to have a message and an agenda. You’re going to have something I’ve assigned you to do, and the people aren’t always going to receive it well. So you need to just understand: you stay pure, you stay innocent, you’ll be ready, you’ll be aware. And just know that you may think I’m a God who’s going to bring peace, but in reality sometimes in relationships it’s going to be like a sword, and there will be sharp divisions in your relationships.”

And just to put it frankly for us in the 21st century: you cannot become a Christian and think that your relationships will not be disrupted. Not all of them—some may even be enhanced—but a lot of them, there’ll be damage, there will be sacrifice, there will be relationships that will be divided, and they will certainly be in some way diminished, because you’ve said “Christ is my Lord.” It’s going to happen. So we’re ready for that. We don’t even need to quote it—you know it. We’ve looked at this passage in the series. But you’ve got to realize that, and you’ve got to remember that when it comes to becoming a Christian.



There are some people—and you’ve shared the gospel with them—and you’ve watched them walk away. And they have been willing to trade their eternity for a temporal relationship. If you know that, nod with a sad look on your face—if you’ve noticed that, you’ve seen people do that. You need to be aware, Christian, that may really mess up this... “But I don’t want to become...” We’re talking about your soul. We’re talking about eternity. We’re talking about where you end up and how you relate to your Creator, and whether you’re forgiven or whether you’re not. You’re willing to keep this one relationship happy—for that?

Oh, and by the way, as Christians, this battle doesn’t end just because you knew what it was to embrace the gospel and to say Christ is the King and all that started well. Don’t think that there’s not continual, everyday struggles with this. Let me prove it to you. Turn, if you would, to Revelation 2. Let’s look at the first four or five verses of this letter—or this postcard, maybe more apt—to the church at Ephesus. And I want you to think now, Christian, if you’re, you know, kind of comfortably ensconced in your testimony and you know you’re saved—“I’m a Christian, you know, all this fear mongering about maybe not being—I know I’m a Christian.” Well, that’s great. But you do understand that all of us, if we’re honest, have known people that have cashed in their sanctification at some degree, or at some level, because of a relationship with a person, or some pursuit, or some priority. They didn’t have as their top loyalty the agenda of the Christ who is the Captain or King of their lives, and that is something that is a perpetual and continual temptation in our lives. Just be ready for that and know that’s going to be the case.

And, by the way, don’t be led astray in your thinking when the word employed there in verse number four is the word “love.” Because if you think, like most moderns, that love is an emotion and a feeling and describes a warm, green, fuzzy thing in my gut—that is not what the word “love” means in the Bible. Love is a verb that relates to loyalty and commitment, and the commitment to someone’s well-being, or the commitment to devotion. And the idea of love in this particular passage, as you’ll see, is not just your feelings inside; it has to do with the loyalty—the ultimate loyalty—of the hearts of the people in the church at Ephesus.

Let’s read a little bit of it, starting in verse 1: “To the angel”—which might very well be the preaching pastor, the messenger who stands at the front and teaches the people—“of Ephesus, write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’” That’s Christ’s autobiographical way to describe himself. And if we had read the first chapter recently, or you remember it, you know that means he possesses all authority. He walks among the churches. And it wasn’t only in Asia Minor in the first century—Christ is walking through the churches of South Orange County this morning, holding all authority, and he has opinions about every one of them.



Let's think about this text that I know is a corporate text, but let's think about it individually—even in your own heart. He's walking among us now, knowing the heart and the thoughts and the loyalties and the devotion of every person in the room. And what does he say about this church? Something I hope he can say about you—verses 2 and 3. Sounds like a good report card. "I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance; how you cannot bear with those who are evil. You've tested those who call themselves apostles and are not—you've rooted out the imposters, you've found them to be false. I know you're enduring patiently, and you're bearing up for my name's sake, and you've not grown weary." And if that's where the report card ended, I mean, Mom and Dad would be happy. That's a good report card. "Oh, that's great, church at Ephesus. That's good, Christian. I'm glad that God looks at your life and sees all that." And it is—it's fantastic.

Verse 4: "But"—wish maybe there was a coupling conjunction and not a contrasting conjunction here—"All that's true about you, but..." Here's what he says: "I have this against you: that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Now I point this out every time I read it. This is not first in time, because the Ephesian people had had other primary loves in their lives before the primary love of Christ invaded their life. So this is first in terms of priority. Clearly, they had enthroned Christ in their lives and in their church as the ultimate authority, and now you've abandoned that.

Now again, as most people read this in pulpits today across the country, they read the word "love" as an emotion. And therefore they read it this way: verses 2 and 3—oh, they're doing all the right things, but in their heart they're really not—they're not having the green fuzzy couch-time with Christ, feeling good about him. They don't really love him. They're not getting the goosebumps like they used to. And that's not what this passage is about. And I'll prove it to you—next verse: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen"—and most people think, "Well, the emotions you used to have..." It's not about emotion. "Repent and..."—feel the feelings you felt at first? Underline that. Is that what it says? All those F's there—"Feel the feelings you felt at first"? Is that what it says? No: "and do the works you did at first."

Now I'm going to make you ponder this passage—at least I'm going to exhort you to ponder this passage—on the discussion questions on the back of the worksheet. And I want you to do what I'll at least sketch out for you now, but you can color it in and fill it in in your thinking. And that is: I want you to look at how someone who has a good report card—at least a lot of areas of their lives are looking good—and they are serving and obeying Christ, but their ultimate loyalty is not Christ. And therefore there are certain works that they are no longer doing that they used to do when Christ was their ultimate loyalty and love. And I think that should be a convicting sentence for most of us in the room. That when we look at our lives and we say, "Well, I know I don't do those things that I know God wants me to do. I know I don't do those things that the Bible commands me to do. I know that I still do some of these things. But I kind of feel like I'm doing all of those things, and those are good things." And so, all of a sudden, now a fairly good report card in areas of their lives helps them



rationalize and make excuses about things they don't do. And Jesus diagnoses the problem: the reason you don't is because your ultimate loyalty is no longer Christ.

You do understand we can do a lot of Christian things and not really do all that Christ would have us do. And we're willfully disobedient about areas of our lives, but we justify it because we can look at other areas of our lives and say, "Well, I'm not..."—as he goes on in the verse—"I'm not hanging out with the Nicolaitans. I cast them out. I hate those guys." Well, I understand—that's all good, he says, and I'm glad. "I hate them too." But when it comes to your heart, you've got a problem. Christ is not Lord. You do not have him enthroned as the one who is the primary love of your life. And by "love," I don't mean emotion—there may be some emotion, obviously, that's attached to it, but all of that is secondary to what love is. It's the commitment and loyalty to Jesus Christ as the ultimate.

And unfortunately some of us, as is illustrated here with a church, can be Christians and still struggle with this on a daily, annual basis.

Verse 5—we stopped in the middle; I suppose we should keep reading; there's another sentence here. "If not..." If not what? If you don't repent—"Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the works you did at first"—"I am a gracious Lord, and I will love you anyway, and nothing will change in our relationship at all, and everything will go on just like it was before because I'm merciful." Highlight all that. Does it say that? That's what most people want it to say. He doesn't say there's no consequences. He doesn't say, "I'm merciful and gracious, so it doesn't matter." He doesn't say, "You can do that—don't do all that I've asked you to do—part of what I do, most of what I've asked you to do; you don't have to do all of it, and if you don't do all of that, I understand—only legalists want you to do it all; I'm Jesus, and I think it's okay—no consequences." No—I read that wrong, didn't I?

"If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." Verse 6: "I know you're going to bring up the Nicolaitans—oh, but we hate those guys; we really hate the really bad guys." I understand that. "I hate that too. But you better listen up," verse 7, "you better hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And when he speaks, it discerns the thoughts and intentions of our heart, because most people would look at Ephesus and say, "There's a good church," because they're 80% faithful to Christ. They really have Christ enthroned as... pretty much. I mean, he's at least in the upper Parthenon of gods in their heart. But really, they have a few other things that have gotten in the way—a few other relationships, a few other priorities.



“To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

“Let no one displace the Lord.” We gave you that point, did we not?

There’s something there that I want to point out just for you overachievers—Bible study people—you people with your Bible programs on your iPads right now. I want you to note the word that translates “farewell” in verse 61. “I’ll follow you, Lord”—he’s really not acting like he’s the Lord or he wouldn’t have this request, because it really is something that just masks, in very reasonable language, some big problem in his life. But he puts it this way: “Let me first say farewell to those in my home.”

Now, there’s an infrequently used Greek word that translates the word “farewell.” Put in the margin of your Bible or on your notes as a cross reference—“cf.” Here comes Luke 14:33, where we see this Greek word *apotassō*—*apotassō*—compound word. When you see that word—which means to... it’s a compounding preposition at the front—has the idea of letting go—of strongly letting go. It is translated this way in Luke 14:33: “to renounce.”

Now, here’s a bit of a play on words, at least theologically. The play on words is this: the guy says, “I will follow you, but first I have to go and relinquish—*apotassō*. I have to let go of, I have to renounce—I have to,” translated here softly, “say farewell to my family. Let me go and let go over here; then I can go with you.”

Here’s the translation “renounce” in the context in Luke 14:33: “So anyone of you who does not *apotassō* all that you have cannot be my disciple.” If you don’t renounce what you have—yeah. And you’re saying, “Well, the guy says he’s gonna go do it.” You see the problem here? And it may be just one of timing. I don’t want to make too much of the word here, because certainly there’s a breadth of usage of this word. But I get the play on words that I think we should understand only because this word is used very infrequently in the Bible. And that is this: that the guy says, “Let me just go relinquish this, and then I’ll come.” And Jesus is saying, “You can’t even come unless you relinquish this.” “Well, I’m going to get to that. I gotta go deal with that. I gotta go button that up.”

Here’s the thing: a lot of us think that way about our Christianity. “I know I’ve got to do these things. I know Christ has called me to this. I know he wants this. But I’m going to get to that. I just need to do this, that, and the other, and then I’ll have that behind me.” You want the macrocosm of this? People



say, “Well, I’ll get to those things in the Christian life once I get through the harder years of raising my young kids,” or, “You know, when the company finally ramps down and I kind of move toward where I can really ratchet out of the office work, well then I’ll get serious about those things that God wants me to do, that clearly are in the Bible that I should do, but I just need—I need the season to...” “Let me button it up over here; then I’ll do it.”

One of our excuses is that way—they have a time element to them. “Oh, I agree that God should have that part of my life, and I’m going to give him that part of my life. But I’ve got to go—I’ve got—there’s things I’ve got to do before I let that go.”

It’s just ironic to me, as I read the Greek text here, that he uses the word *apotassō* to say, “I’ve got to go relinquish, renounce my family.” Renounce your family? Now, it’s a lot like the guy in front of—“Hey, I’ve got to go bury my father.” “Let the dead bury their dead.” This should be a done thing for you. Now, all that sounds harsh unless you know that Christ is speaking to their thoughts. And in every one of these issues, there’s idolatry there. And Christ won’t tolerate that, even with Christians who at one point had it right and are playing around with other priorities.

Let no one—let nothing—displace the Lord in your life. And I use the word “Lord” because I want you to remember—that’s the word he used. The man here in verse 61. But he certainly didn’t mean it the way the Bible uses the word. If Christ is the Lord, there can be no rival lord in my heart.

“Well, we hear you preach about that a lot.” Well, great—let me give you a little bit more from the response of Christ that may be helpful in what this looks like.

Verse 62—Jesus employs an analogy. Here it comes. Luke 9:62: “Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.’” Now, if you read all the ancient historians, they’ll say, “Well, that’s a phrase that’s been used before,” and there’s a punchline that may be different. But the idea of looking forward when you’re plowing—well then, that’s something we got ident... Well, clearly we’re not into, “Hey, how you plow your field,” man—has nothing to do with that. It’s an analogy. Obviously the analogy would be helpful if we were all coming in with blisters on our hands because we’d all been out plowing this week. I’m assuming none of you have plowed a field this week. Am I right? And someone will say, “I plowed.” I say, “Did you plow behind oxen?” “No, I plowed in the tractor.” The oxen had yoke; they had straps; there was this V-shaped piece of wood—goes all the way back even to Egyptian days—you had a piece of metal in the ground, and you plowed up the fallow ground; you put a trench, you put furrows in the field, and then you could plant. And you



did that, even as we do today with our machines and our tractors—you do that in straight lines. And that was important.

Now, since most of us haven't plowed a field, let me employ the closest thing I know of, at least in my experience, and that was mowing my dad's lawn as a kid every week. When I mowed the lawn, it was interesting because, though I wasn't plowing a field, I could look back and see how straight I mowed the lawn—which wasn't super straight every week. I tried. Not real hard. But I tried. I remember going to Dodger Stadium when I was a kid—remember that first time you walk down and see the green grass, maybe with the lights late afternoon, and the perfectly manicured outfield, and the cross-hatching—and you look at it, “Wow, it's a work of art.” Then you think about how you mow the lawn at home—“That's not very good.” And the point is: certainly if you're going to mow straight, if you're going to plow a field straight, you've got to be focused ahead. You can't be looking over your shoulder. Go try to cut the grass looking back—well, that's dangerous, especially if you have the Briggs & Stratton, you know... yeah, that's, you know, that's not good—that's dangerous. But you've got to be focused on the task. If you've got the oxen and you're plowing, you better be managing—forward thinking and looking forward. You can't be looking over your shoulder.

And, by the way, I used the participle there—“looking over your shoulder.” And the reason I say that is because when you read this—again, this time—it's not that Jesus reads his thoughts that we don't quite catch it; it's sometimes that we don't translate these things as strongly as we should. Because Greek has five tenses, and that variety is helpful, because there's one tense that, while grammar books sometimes call it the “present” Greek tense—my professor said in the classics department, “Listen, this would be better even to call it the ‘continuative’ tense.” Because if you want to use the aorist tense, that's one thing. But if you want to use this tense, you've got to translate it in a continuing way—like the verbs “ask” and “seek” and “knock” in the Sermon on the Mount. It's not “knock”; it's “knock and keep on knocking.” It's “seek and keep on seeking,” because it's in that tense that focuses on continuative action. We have the same thing here. It's not the person that glances over their shoulder once or twice; it's the person who continually is looking back over their shoulder.

Now, this is all one analogy. Jesus doesn't really care how straight you plow the fields. But he does care about this man who's looking back—at what? Something at home—relationships at home—his old life, before he starts the missionary life of being the itinerant preacher, like the guy was called to be in verse 60. He now is saying, “I've got to go deal with this,” and Jesus diagnoses the problem by saying, “You've got a real problem. You want to put your hand to the plow? You say, ‘Well, hold on, I've got to go relinquish my family—that's going to take me some time.’ I diagnose the problem,” Jesus says, “In your heart, you really aren't going to put your whole heart into this. You're going to keep looking back. You're going to keep longing for that life.”



Let's put it this way—number two: never long for the life you left. Never long for the life you left.

Peter left his nets behind, and at one point in John 21 he longed to go back to be the fisherman again because he'd scraped his knees in his spiritual life and was feeling sorry for himself. And I think I got that analysis right—we'll check in with him when I see him. But he certainly shouldn't have been fishing. Jesus had to show up—make a special trip after the resurrection—to sit there baking some fish on the shore, which he didn't have to fish for, amazingly enough—which was a point in itself—saying, "Peter, stop it. I said you are going to be a shepherd, not a fisherman." If you want to make the analogy fit, at least—I mean, you're going to be a fisher of men, not a fisher of fish. Get out there and tend my sheep, Shepherd.

Now here's the thing: some of us can look over our shoulder for a variety of reasons. In the Psalms, a lot of times it was because the guy who was not living under the authority of God seems to have a better life than you do—seems to have more fun than you do—seems to have more pleasure in his life than you do. And you can look across the street and you can say—as the Psalms constantly remind us not to do—you can envy the wicked. And you can say, "Well, you know what, when I wasn't a Christian, when I didn't have these strictures of moral obligation, when I didn't have to give to the church, when I didn't have to pray..." You can have those feelings and those thoughts. But let me exhort you, as Christ does in this analogy: stop looking back. Don't look back. You're not even fit for the kingdom if that's the way you are going to function. When you leave behind the nets in your old life, you're moving on. You're going to follow Christ. Life—when you are the lord of your life—is no longer something you are allowed to dwell on.

And let's start with this motivation for just a second—jot it down, if you would—2 Corinthians 11:2–3. 2 Corinthians 11:2–3. Paul says this regarding the relationship of the Corinthians with Christ: "I feel a divine jealousy for you"—not a first-person jealousy, a third-person jealousy—"since I betrothed you to one husband, and it wasn't me," Paul says; "it was to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. I set you up so that you could love and honor Christ. Now," verse 3, "I'm afraid that just as the serpent in his cunning deceived Eve, that he might be doing that to you. And he might, in your thoughts"—remember that—"in your thoughts, be leading you astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ."

Now when you put it in those terms, then the emotional side of this comes through. You feel emotions only because you were created in the image of God—you know that, right? The only reason you have feelings is because God honored you with experiencing some of the emotions that he has, and he created you in his image. And you can only imagine, when we use an analogy like this, that if you were engaged to someone—or let's make it even worse—you're married to someone, and someone there is constantly tempted to be looking at someone else—let's use our analogy—looking back to someone



previous—that would hurt your feelings. Wouldn’t just get his feelings—let’s think about what you do to Christ when you and I look back at, “Well, you know, if I weren’t a Christian... You know, before I was a Christian, I would...” Let’s stop with all of that. Let’s recognize how painful that is.

Now, I remember the guy my wife was dating before she started dating me—that punk. I remember that guy, all right. He had straight A’s, he was really smart, he was really popular, really successful—I get all that. And I also get that he’s become some super hot-shot surgeon, chief of staff at some big hospital here in Southern California. Big deal. But I’m thankful that my wife doesn’t constantly throw his name around. I think she’s smart enough to never throw his name around. Can you imagine what that would do to our relationship if she said, “Well, you know, if I could have been a surgeon’s wife with a lot more money and... yeah—what’s that, Mike?” That would kill me, right? Don’t think that you can constantly look back at what you could have had and think that’s not going to damage our relationship.

It may seem harsh for you to hear him say, in an agrarian illustration, “Hey, if you keep looking back, you’re not fit for the kingdom,” but I think you’d say you’re not fit for marriage—wouldn’t you say this? If you’re constantly going to be talking about your former love, that’s not going to work.

I had a gal—and she’s so far removed from where we’re at now; it’s many years ago, so you don’t know her; I can finally use this illustration publicly. This old gal in our church—she is a sweet gal, except for the fact that in her marriage—and she’d been married for years—she constantly talked about the guy she loved before she married this guy. It didn’t take very long with this gal to have her start talking about—I forget his name, you know—Armando or whatever. And I thought, “I can’t imagine being married to you.” Can you imagine? It caused serious... I finally had to take this lady aside as her pastor, and I was so much younger than her, but I thought, “This is wrong.” And I’d say, “This is not good. You’ve got to stop talking about this guy. You talk about him so dreamy and so amazing and what I had with him...” “Stop it.” And then she compares her present husband—and I think, “And you wonder why you don’t like your present husband? I mean, he can’t possibly be enjoying this marriage much at all when you’re constantly looking back at the guy before.” That’s just—it’s absurd.

You know, the Bible is very clear—you’ve been betrothed to Christ. Your attention ought to be there. And the practical ways we do this—when we start thinking about what it was like or what it would be like if I were still calling the shots and I weren’t under the authority of Christ—don’t ever find yourself thinking that way. And whenever that comes up, remember your thoughts are as bad as your words, because Christ read your thoughts. You get that? And shoo that right out of your mind. You’re a child of Christ. You are a follower of the King. You’re in this thing to the end—no longing to live the life that your neighbor lives that you think is so much better.



One passage on this—would you look at this with me? Hebrews 11:13–16. Let’s jump in here to this divine commentary on the patriarchs’ lives who, you might remember—starting with Abraham—was called out of the southern Mesopotamian area at something called Ur of the Chaldeans to go up the crescent valley there and go over into what is later described in the Bible as Canaan. And he was promised—even of this great family, and he would have this big nation come from his family—and that they would occupy this land. So God promised them all of this, and then he never got any of it except a few little parcels to bury his loved ones—you remember that?

Verse 13, Hebrews 11: “These”—look back up: Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—these patriarchs—“they all died in faith, not having received the things promised”—now the things promised was this land; they were going to have all these descendants—more than the sand on the sea or the stars in the sky—“but having seen them and greeted them from afar”—that’s what this chapter is all about: by faith—“you know, one day it’s going to happen. One day it’ll be there”—“and having acknowledged that they were”—now here’s the present tense for their lives when they lived on this planet—“they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” “I guess the promise is going to motivate us to change our life now. We’ll leave our old comfortable home in the southern Mesopotamia region where we were living, and we’re going to go and we’re going to live in tents, and we’re going to go from place to place, and we’re going to be exiles and strangers. But that’s okay. Christ has called us to a future, and we haven’t even realized that here after decades and decades and decades of life, but we’re going to trust—one day it’s coming.”

Verse 14: “For people who speak thus...”—I love that phrase because that includes us, I hope. I hope that includes you. People who speak that way—like what? Like, “I’ve left the life that, let’s just be frank, had some temporal advantages, and I left that to be a follower of Christ. I’m now going to be ridiculed. I’m going to be in the minority. It’s going to be hard. I’m going to have to exercise self-control. I’m going to have to die to my own passions and self. This is tough. And all the benefits—they’re not here yet. Matter of fact, in this world he promised I’d have tribulation. But I’m going to greet the promises from afar. I’m going to come to church and hear my pastor rant about the coming kingdom all the time. I’m going to sit there and have to realize that the ultimate desires of my heart aren’t going to be met now—they’re going to be met later.” People who speak this and say, “Well, I’m only a stranger and an exile on the earth”—they “make it clear they are seeking a homeland.”

“If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out”—right? If they really say, “Well, I really miss it,” just like they did when they left Egypt—“Oh no, the leeks and onions we ate by the Nile—it was so good. Why’d you bring us out here to die?”—if they really wanted to go back, well, I guess they would have had opportunity to return. I mean, Abraham could have gone back to Ur of the



Chaldeans. “But as it is, they desire a better country”—a better one than the one they left—a better one than they’re experiencing now—“that is, a heavenly one.”

One of the best sentences in all of the 11th chapter—here it comes; we’re about to read it: “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” I love that. It’s almost too convicting to invert, but let’s invert it for a second: if that’s not our thinking—if we are looking back longingly to the life we left—I guess God is ashamed to be called our God. But I want to say: I’m ready to leave behind the old life that I could have had—that old life where I got to call the shots and do whatever felt good and be happy and have no moral strictures in the privacy of my own thinking. That was a life I’ve left behind. But I’m ready to say I’m living now in the difficulty of the present reality of the Christian life, waiting for the coming King. And when one day it arrives, I know it’ll be worth the wait. And God says, “If you’re willing to think that way, I’m not ashamed to be called your God.” And like Jesus said, “I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare for you, I’m going to come again, and I’m going to receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also. But right now, I’m leaving you not as orphans—you’ve got the Spirit.” But that’s going to be the only consolation sometimes you have in the difficulty of being an alien and a stranger.

Never long for the life you left. Look ahead.

Let’s end on that. The one who puts his hand to the plow—he can’t look back. Let’s invert that for a second. That means I’ve got to look. I’ve got to look forward. Fit for the kingdom—I’m in the kingdom. I’ve got a job to do. And this guy in verse 62 probably was a lot like verse 60—to be an itinerant preacher with Christ, following along with the physical Messiah in the first century, preaching the kingdom of God. Now, we can’t do that—at least we can’t follow him physically—but you’ve got a job to do. And when you became a Christian, you were assigned a job. That job—to speak in the most general terms—let’s just call it the “kingdom-first assignment.” You were called to seek first the kingdom of God—not the earthly things that all the pagans run after. You weren’t called to have a great life—comfortable, live healthy, kids, good retirement, nice car. That’s not your calling. Now, God can add things to you that you’re afraid you might not get and that you need. But “seek first the kingdom of God.” If you don’t know that verse, it’s Matthew 6:33. Seek first the kingdom of God. That’s your kingdom assignment in the most general terms.

Let’s jot it down: that needs to be your focus. Stay focused on your kingdom calling.



Now, how do I promote the kingdom? How do I advance the kingdom? Well, plenty of ways. Let's think in three categories real quick.

Every day in your work—you do something Monday through Friday, Monday through Saturday. Whatever you do, that is a place that God has called you—let's put it down this way—2 Corinthians 5: to be ambassadors for him. Oh, I understand—you've got a business card, and on that business card it says something. But as it says in 2 Corinthians 5, "We're not any longer going to consider people according to the flesh." We're not going to care about their business card; we're going to care about their influence for the kingdom—being ambassadors—so that when the opportunity avails and arises and surfaces, they can—as though God were making his appeal through them—implore people to be reconciled to God. You have a mission field wherever you work, wherever you live, whatever it is that you do Monday through Friday.

You've also got a family—many of you. And if you don't, that's fine. The Bible says, "Great—more attention on the kingdom in your Monday through Friday work." Fantastic. But if you have a family—and in these passages that may be confusing because you think, "Well, it looks like he wants them to not care about them." No—he does. Matter of fact, we looked at this last week at our marriage retreat. If I have a wife, I'm not supposed to say, "Hey, I don't care about you, I don't love you, I'm going to leave you and only care about God." No—I need to care about God. My kingdom priority now becomes, in my marriage, to love my wife as Christ loved the church. In other words, my priority in my home—even as it says in chapter 6—is to raise my kids according to the admonition of the Lord. Therefore, my home is not now run the way the neighbor's house is run. My goals and priorities and agenda now are kingdom-agenda priorities as I look at my marriage and my parenting. That's how I'm supposed to live. So I'm not living like they're living, and I don't live for the reasons they live. And sometimes our lives may overlap and look the same, but when it comes down to it, the bottom-line priorities for my home are different than his home. Why? Because I'm a child of God. Christ is my Lord. I live as an emissary of the kingdom. And I do that in my work life; I do that in my home life.

One more—1 Corinthians 12—let's do that in your church life. This guy was called to put his hand to the plow. That probably meant, like verse 60, he was going to be a preacher standing up in villages as an itinerant, preaching the kingdom of God. Now, that may not be your job—matter of fact, it's likely not your job. But according to 1 Corinthians 12, you have a job. It may be more like a foot than a hand; it may be more like an ear than an eye. But whatever it is, it's there—variously placed, as the Bible says, just as God assigned—so that the church can be what it's supposed to be. And what is that? An advancing kingdom. That in the church he would establish it, and the gates of hell will not prevail against a constantly expanding, growing organization that represents and expands the kingdom of Christ—the lordship of Christ continually expanding. You've got to keep that kingdom calling in view in your work life, your domestic life, and in your church life. And that's pretty much how we think,



isn't it? You've got three big spheres of your life, and in every one of those the kingdom priorities are there.

Keep your hand on the plow. Don't see your work the way your colleagues see their work. You're there to glorify Christ, to represent Christ. It may make you a good worker; you may get promoted—you may not, depending on the circumstances. You could be demoted. But your agenda is the kingdom. In your family—same thing. Sometimes kingdom agenda means my kids aren't happy; sometimes it means my wife's not happy. And in my church life, we should all be pulling to advance the kingdom in our church, and whatever your role is—I put my hand to the plow, and I don't look back. And it isn't even like some other churches that may just want to please their culture. I'm here to advance the kingdom as a counter-cultural organization. And I need to recognize that. And at the church, that's what we need to be doing—everyone doing their part. Stay focused on your kingdom calling.

Star Trek and Leonard Nimoy in the news this week—I couldn't help but think about when I was a kid, seeing those Star Trek episodes on the television and walking through the den, watching my brother sitting in the beanbag chair, eating jam out of the jar without his shirt on, watching Star Trek. And I would walk through there, roll my eyes, and think, "What a dork. What a dork. This is the dumbest show on television. Turn on the ball game. Let's watch F-Troop or Hogan's..."—something else. "This is weird—guys with weird-shaped ears. Klingons, you know, beating me up—I don't get it. Looks phony, anyway—change the channel." My brother didn't give a rip what I thought. He was going to watch, and since he was bigger and stronger, he kept the remote under his armpit and I couldn't touch it. I mean, I had to either leave the room or whatever, because he was going to watch his show. He liked it—Star Trek. I was a kid when this was originally on TV as an original TV show.

Little did I know how mainstream that Star Trek franchise would become. You recognize what an amazing thing—I mean, even as Leonard Nimoy dies and they have all these retrospectives on his life—it is amazing. That went through six different television series. They did 12 feature films—they're making the 13th. Little did I know that decades later, when I rolled my eyes at my brother, I would be shelling out 10 bucks a person to go with my wife to watch a Star Trek film. Had my brother known that—unbelievable. Amazing.

You know, for you to be a "Jesus freak" in this present era, a lot of your siblings calling you "over the top," "overextended," "your zeal is self-injurious to you," "You know what? You put too much into it. You don't have to always talk about Christ; it doesn't have to be the center of your life. You know it's going to ruffle feathers—it will offend people, it will damage relationships, even relationships where they name the name 'Christ'—'I'm on Christ's team; I don't have to be like you. You're over the top—too much—freak—crazy.'"



You do know that time will vindicate your craziness. You realize that one day the kingdom will be so mainstream that those that can't be in it will be scratching on the walls of its perimeter, saying, "Let me in." You understand that every person that mocks your loyalty and zeal for Christ will one day have their forehead pressed against the ground, and their tongue will be confessing that Jesus Christ really is the Lord. And guess what—at that moment, they will understand exactly what that word means.

Let them roll their eyes as you fixate on the kingdom agenda, putting your hand to the plow, not looking longingly over your shoulder, saying, "Well, maybe I am taking this a little too... you know... too much, too far, over the top." It's not science fiction, right? This is prophetic truth. Jesus said, "I'm going away, and I'm coming back." He says, "One day I will return, and the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. One day I will rule and reign." And those that were willing to be the crazies during this present age will be the princes and princesses of the kingdom. I understand people can call you whatever—they call our church "weird." I get that. I get that. Time will vindicate our craziness.

Let's make sure we understand—there'll be no excuses. As we follow Christ, there should be none. When we see them creeping up, we fight them vigorously in our own hearts.

Let's pray. God, help us. As people that understand the challenge—just living in this world—just like the church at Ephesus, there are so many things that tempt us. As Paul put it to the Corinthians—like Satan's cunning and his temptation trying to lure us away from that sincere devotion to Christ—let us see our work life and our home life and our church life all as arenas in which we can live out this priority of trying to exalt the King and advance the kingdom of God. Do this in and through us. And the more we see that as the preponderance, or the majority, or even the super-majority in this church of people that are doing that, then we hope that you would never say to us corporately what you said to the church at Ephesus in the first century. But you'd look at this church and say, "I see your works," and it isn't selective and it's not partial—the things you're doing, you're doing because you love me. "I see that you haven't left your primary—your first—love." Let that be the reality for us, not for our sake or our fame, but just so that we can be a church that brings glory to you. And that's never going to happen unless there are individuals in this church—the large majority of individuals—that are doing that. So God, by your Spirit, allow us to have our hearts guarded and give us the wherewithal to do this—to love you and to not let any rival, any idol, any pursuit, any agenda, any person—anything—become the excuse we use for turning our back on you, delaying you, saying, "I'll get to that—not now, Christ." Let us learn to love you—love you first—as Lord.



Thanks for this reminder in these six verses that we've studied the last three times together. I pray it would be indelibly marked in our hearts as a safeguard. Do that, God, for your own glory and for our good. In Jesus' name, Amen.