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WHY STONES NOT LOAVES

John 5:19-47

We have a glass door on the shower in our master bathroom. When we are done showering we use a squeegee to clean the water off the inside of the door so we don’t get water spots and calcium build up on the glass. The glass has 3 parts. There’s a panel on each side that’s 5 or 6 inches wide and then the door itself that swings open. Using the squeegee is not totally straightforward because you have to maneuver it around hinges and the door handle. I recently noticed that when I clean off the door I follow the same pattern every time. I have not done an analysis to determine the most efficient way to clean the glass. I have never consciously decided that this is the best way to clean it. I don’t consciously choose to do it in a particular pattern. Without thinking I just do it the way I’ve always done it. It is a habit I do naturally without a thought. Once I realized this, I began paying attention to how I do some things. I realized that I followed the same pattern every time I floss my teeth.

I don’t do these things consciously. They are just habits that I do without giving it a thought. I have no doubt that there are other habits that I repeat while unaware of them. When I was in college my baseball coaches identified a flaw in the way I swing a baseball bat that robbed me of power. They worked with me to correct this flaw hitting off a tee, doing toss drills, hitting in the batting cage off a pitching machine, in batting practice off live pitching. Sometimes in the evening I would even go outside my dorm room and swing a bat at a bush, working on correcting this bad habit. I got to where in practice I eliminated this flaw consistently. And then a game would come where I would be hitting against an opposing pitcher for real. And all that practice went right out the window. Somehow I reverted back to my old habits. I was never able to conquer the problem. And that happens with us in life as well. Our defaults and our habits can be deeply ingrained and we often fall back into them. Jesus is going to show us in John 5:19-47 a way to live that is quite different from our habits. but I warn you, it’s not always easy.

WE NEED TO KNOW THE WHY

This passage is going to challenge us to live in a way that is contrary to our natural bent. It will be hard because our long and deeply ingrained habits will incessantly push us in the opposite direction. It will often feel unnatural, and at times will feel counter to everything that is in us. So it will not be easy to live like this. That raises the question, why should we do it? Why not just do what our culture says, just do what feels right. If it feels good to do it? That seems like it would be a lot easier.

We can see embedded in this passage two powerful reasons for taking the harder, much less traveled road. One of them is because in the end, everything in this world will be summed up in Jesus, including us and everything in our lives. After Paul mentioned God is making known the mystery of his will in Ephesians 1:9, Paul wrote in verse 10 that God’s purpose is “to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment, to bring unity in all things in heavens and on earth under Christ.” That’s not a great translation. A more literal translation is that the purpose is the summing up of all things in Christ. What does it mean to sum up all things in Christ? Andrew Lincoln said in his commentary that it means all of creation will be summarized in Christ. He is what it is all about.

Yes, but where do you see that in this passage? In verse 23 Jesus said, “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.” Christ is the judge of everyone and everything in the end. So everything will be ultimately evaluated on the basis of what Jesus thinks of it and whether it has done what he wants. In verse 27 he said the Father, “has given him (Christ) authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.” The Son of Man was a reference to Daniel 7:13-14 where Christ is envisioned coming with the clouds of heaven and being given, “authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiping him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away.”

All that exists has been made and is sustained by Christ. It all exists to serve his purposes. Our grandson, Wesley, now has enough toy trucks and cars to depict rush hour stop and go traffic on I-5. He loves to play with those toys. When we are at his house he will often ask me to come play with him, but what he means is come where he is and watch him play with his trucks and cars. He doesn’t want me to do anything, just be there with him as he plays. At times I will try to enter in and play with his toys too, but he doesn’t like that. He doesn’t want me playing with his toys. At one point Laurie was working on teaching him to share his toys with one of his cousins and his brother, Hunter. He said, “Nana, I am not a sharer.” We all hope that will change. But there have been a couple of times when Wesley works on lining his toy cars up in a particular way. I see a way I can make it better and I change it. He doesn’t like that. He says, “No, Bapaw, this is mine. You just watch.” Then he puts it back the way he wants it. The truth is, those are his toys, and he has the right to do what he wants with them because they belong to him. The only issue is what he wants done.

When we see that Christ is the Judge, the summation of everything, that means it all belongs to him and is to serve whatever his purpose is for it. That includes you and me. This is a radical thought for us, because we think we are about ourselves. Everything in us tells us that and rebels against the idea we only exist for someone else’s purposes. But this means if we don’t fulfill his purposes for us, we will discover the whole thing was a waste. Our lives will have amounted to a bunch of useless garbage. At some point we will likely even sense that, but we will certainly know it when we stand before the Judge.

This raises the question, why should we believe that? It is more than outlandish that Jesus, a human being, made this claim. What would you think of me if I claimed that all of creation will be summed up in me and that I will judge every person and everything on the basis of whether they did what I wanted them to do? Uh, megalomaniac much, Rick? You’d think I was so far out of touch with reality that I can’t even imagine it. As actor Owen Wilson says, I’d be crazier than a road lizard, though I’m not exactly sure what that means. Why should anyone believe Jesus? He gives us some reasons in this chapter.

In verse 31 Jesus said, “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true.” In other words, he acknowledged if he was the only one saying this then we can write him off as nuttier than an Almond Joy. But he’s not the only one. In verses 33-35 he said that John the Baptist had said the same thing about him. That would have carried some weight with some people back then. It doesn’t have that same weight for most of us today, but it is something we should note. However, there’s more.

In verse 36 Jesus said, “The works that the Father has given me to finish, the very works that I am doing, testify that the Father has sent me.” Jesus said that a main reason for the miracles that he did was to show that he was who he claimed to be. They were powerful evidence, his divine credentials.

There is a scene in the classic movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, where Luke Skywalker is being trained by Jedi master Yoda. Yoda tells him to use “the Force” to move his fighter spacecraft, but Luke says he asks him to do the impossible. Then Yoda reaches out with his little claw, aims it at the fighter, then using the invisible force raises it out of the swamp. Luke is stunned, but he now knows the Force is real and powerful. That’s kind of what Jesus did, only for real, when he healed a paralyzed person, a blind person, a leper, when he stopped a storm on the lake with a word, when he walked on the water, when he raised a friend from his tomb, and finally when he defeated death himself. What more do you need him to do? No human being has the power to do those things. His work proves his claim.

Finally, in verse 37 Jesus said the Father himself testified that what Jesus claimed was true. Jesus’ opponents hadn’t heard that, though Jesus and John the Baptist and others had. But they had heard the Father’s voice through the Law and Prophets. Much of the Law points directly at Jesus. The sacrifices and the feasts all depict him. The Passover, the Law’s holiest observance, specifically pictures Christ, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. In addition the prophets spoke of Christ and identified him as the King whose reign would never end. For more than 1000 years the Father had been testifying of Christ, all they had to do was listen.

We should do what Jesus calls us to do, because it is why we exist. It is what we are all about. It is the purpose of everything. All that we are and all that we do will ultimately be judged, tested by whether we have fulfilled Christ’s purpose for us. If we fail, everything we are and do is a waste, a great big pile of nothing. When Laurie and I got married like most newlyweds we got lots of wedding presents. There were every day dishes and fine China dishes and silverware. We also got 4 crockpots. It’s been a long and almost all those dishes and utensils are long gone. But one gift sticks out in my mind. It came in a box that said it was a 3 place tray. But it was a plastic tray that had 4 sections in it. How was this a 3 place tray? We never knew, and we also never had any use for it. I’m pretty sure someone re-gifted it to us. They’d been given it but had no use for it, so they wrapped it up and gave it to us. We kept it for a while but eventually got rid of it. No, we didn’t re-gift it to someone else. My point is, whatever that thing’s purpose was, it never fulfilled it. It was useless, and got thrown out. If we don’t fulfill Jesus’ purpose for us we are the 3 place tray of human beings and will at some point sense that. We will have the same end as that tray.

There is a second reason that we should take the harder road that Jesus lays out for us. At the end of verse 21 Jesus said, “the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.” In other words, we get life from the Son. This goes back to what we saw in chapter 4 where Jesus promised a woman living water that would flow in her, life eternal, life so full she would not need anything else. This is a reminder that a big reason we would want to go down this harder road is that it is the road to life.

Where does life come from? That is a fundamental and crucial question for every human being. Literally billions of dollars have been spent trying to answer that question. The answer our culture loudly and insistently proclaims and seeks in its search, is that life is an accident. It is the result of random forces. If that’s the case, where can you go to get life? The implication of that narrative is finding it is a random accident. There is no particular place you can go to get life. And that is what our culture believes. Everyone is just wandering around looking for life, true life, but finding it is an extremely rare accident that can’t be predicted.

John has a very different answer to that question. In 1:3-4 he wrote of Jesus Christ, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life.” There is a convincing argument backed by lots of scientific evidence that life is not a random accident. There is a powerful intelligence behind it. John insists that is true, and that Christ is that intelligence. He is the source of life. In fact, he said, all of life comes from him. There is no life that does not find its source in him.

If he is the source of life, true life, where should we go to get life? Every human being is trying to find life as it seems like it should be, something much more than just existing. Does it not make sense that we should go to the source of life to obtain the purest form of life? I recently read an article about lithium. That element is essential to the batteries for electric vehicles. The article said that the need for lithium is creating an environmental disaster that the proponents of electric cars and trucks are not addressing. Let’s do a little thought experiment. Suppose that lithium is not merely rare, but that there is only one place in the entire world where you can find it. We’ll call it the nation of Lithistan. If you were in the business of building electric vehicle batteries that require lithium, where would you go to obtain it? If Lithistan is the only place lithium can be found, wouldn’t you go to Lithistan to obtain it?

If you go someplace else searching for lithium, what is going to happen? You will waste your time and end up disappointed and frustrated. You will be looking for lithium in places it just does not exist. It’s Lithistan or nothing. So it is with the search for life. There is only one place to find it, one place it comes from. If you look for it anywhere else you are wasting your time and guaranteeing yourself disappointment.

Taking the road that Jesus exemplified while telling us to follow in his footsteps is sort of “Lifestan,” the place to find life. It is the source of life, the only place to find it. Let’s go there so we can truly live.

WE NEED TO KNOW THE WHAT

There are two verses in this section of John that show us what we are to do. In verse 19 Jesus said the Son, meaning himself, “can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” Jesus said he only did what the Father did, and only does what the Father tells him to do. We saw this in chapter 4 where Jesus said that his food, that which fuels him and empowers his life, is doing the Father’s will. So what we are to do is to do what Jesus did. Do what the Father does and live to do his will.

In Ephesians 5:1 Paul wrote, “Follow God’s example.” I’m not a big fan of that translation. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Version both are more accurate. They correctly translate that verse “be imitators of God.” When you imitate someone you try to look like them, sound like them, act like them. You try to be just like them. To imitate God is to look at what God is like, then seek to be what he is like and do what he does.

Gordon MacDonald and his wife boarded an airplane for a flight. They were seated toward the back of the plane. They noticed a woman coming down the aisle followed by two small children and another woman. This group ended up in the row just in front of the MacDonalds. One woman sat in the aisle seat with the youngest child on her lap, the other woman had the window seat with the other young child sitting in the middle seat between the women. MacDonald said he prayed that the kids would not be too noisy or troublesome. His prayer was not answered, at least not answered yes. There was a lot of turbulence on the flight. The kids were upset, plus their ears hurt so there was a lot of crying. The woman in the aisle seat tried to comfort the child on her lap and the woman in the window seat did everything she could to distract and occupy the child in the middle seat. MacDonald said he thought both women deserved medals for their efforts, but then things got worse. Toward the end of the flight the child in the middle seat got sick. MacDonald said, “The next thing I knew she was losing everything from every part of her body.” The stench began to rise throughout the cabin. He said it was unbearable. He said the diaper completely failed and there was stuff everywhere, all over the seat, on the floor, on the woman’s clothes. It was one of the most repugnant things he has ever seen. The woman next to the window did her best to clean up the mess and comfort the child. When the plane finally landed there was a mad rush to get away from the horror. A flight attendant brought some paper towels and handed them to the woman in the window seat, saying, “Here Ma’am, these are for your little girl.” The woman said, “Oh, she’s not my little girl.” The attendant said, “Aren’t you traveling together?” The lady answered, “No, I’ve never met this woman and her children before in my life.” That’s the kind of thing we will do if we are being imitators of God, because that’s what Jesus would do.

Humans instinctively and incessantly imitate. A few years ago Dr. Kathleen Wermke at the University of Wurzburg in Germany published the startling results of a study. She and her team had made extensive, precise recordings of the cries of newborn babies in maternity wards in both Germany and France. They digitally graphed the pitch and cadence of the babies’ cries. When they studied them they found this surprising result. Babies in France cry differently from babies in Germany. What they found was the intonation patterns of the cries exactly mimicked the patterns of speech of the mother’s national language. In other words, babies in the womb listen to their mothers speaking and from early on begin mimicking those patterns. That shouldn’t surprise us. We are watching our now almost 2 year old granddaughter Bria mimicking speech and beginning to actually form words. My point is that we imitate from the very beginning, even before we are born. And we never stop. We may not be conscious of it, but we form an image of who we want to be by watching and imitating other people. Jesus calls on us to imitate God himself. Look at what he is like. See his unfailing love, his patience, his kindness and compassion, his joy, his goodness, his justice, his righteousness, and seek to follow in his footsteps.

Recently when we were taking care of our grandsons, Wesley and I were out in the yard and he decided he wanted to play catch with this toy football we had given him. The problem is, he’s only 3 and he hasn’t really learned out to either catch or throw a ball very well. So I have to throw the ball so it lands harmlessly near him where he can pick it up and throw it. But, as I said, he has not really learned how to throw. Throwing overhand like you would do with a football or baseball is not actually a natural motion for the human body. So Wesley is going to have to learn that motion. Right now what he does is the best imitation he can do of throwing a ball. That means he kind of flings it sidearm, which is his imitation of throwing. I always have to be alert because flinging the ball that way means he has no idea of where it is going to go, nor do I. My point here is over time he will develop the skill of throwing by watching and imitating what he sees adults do. That’s how we develop. And that is how we develop spiritually as well. We imitate God.

Notice verse 44. Jesus said to those opposing him, “How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” There are totally different approaches to life there. One is to seek glory from people, to look good to others, to win approval and applause, to be somebody. The other is to seek glory from God because you are doing his will. Everyone is living on one of those two tracks. The first one is the express to frustration, emptiness, disappointment and ultimately death. The second is the track to life.

But wait, I’ll never be perfect like God is. This is impossible. The point is not to be perfect, which is good because we won’t be. The point is to use God as the model we follow in who we become and what we do. How does God deal with people who are unlovely, even repulsive? He loves them unconditionally. How does God deal with people when they seem to take forever to get the most obvious things? He is patient with them. How does God deal with people who are annoying, even ugly? He is kind to them. How does God deal with people when they offend him? He forgives them, even dies on a cross for them. How does God deal with undeserving people? He is good to them. God serves, gives up self, always does good. To imitate him is to seek to be like that to the best of our ability. It is to seek glory from him, meaning to seek hearing him say, “Well done!” because we have done what he wants us to do. No, we won’t be perfect, but the more we imitate him the better we will be.

WE NEED TO KNOW THE HOW

Yeah, that’s going to be hard. How are we supposed to do that? We forget Jesus was human. Yes, he was more than human, but he was true human. We imitate God the same way he did. In verse 19 Jesus said, “The Son can do nothing by himself.” Jesus said he did nothing on his own. He needed the Father in order to do what the Father wanted him to do.

This was the precise point that Satan attacked when Jesus was all alone out in the wilderness. Jesus hadn’t eaten for weeks. He was hungry and weak. Satan showed up and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” He wasn’t questioning Jesus’ identity. The grammar indicates he meant, since you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread. He was telling Jesus he needed to eat and he had the power to instantly make the rocks into loaves of bread. And he did have that ability.

But Jesus said, “It is written man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In other words, To live, I only do what the Father tells me to do. It’s what comes from him that matters and that sustains life, not what comes from me. So no, I won’t do that. I’ll do what the Father says, and he says “Fast.” When he says “Eat,” then I will eat.

Ray Stedman wrote, “Note how Jesus puts this: ‘the Son can do nothing of his own accord (nothing coming from me), but only what he sees the Father doing (everything from God).’ Does that sound familiar?...(in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul) says something very similar: ‘This is the confidence we have in him, not as though there were anything coming from us, but everything coming from God…That, Paul declares, is the new covenant…Here is the secret of the release of the power of God, nothing coming from me, everything coming from God.”

This new covenant principle, everything coming from God, nothing from me, is key to all of life. It starts with how we get God to accept us, invite us into his eternal kingdom and adopt us as his children. What makes that happen? It is what comes from God. It is what God has done for us through his Son, 100%, nothing coming from us. But this principle applies to all of life.

What about how we can serve God and minister to others? Paul says the ability to do that is what comes from God, not what comes from us. Our job is just to be faithful to what God gives us to do, and God will make it be enough. Laurie and I recently watched an episode of *The Chosen*, that depicts the life of Christ, in which we saw this principle come into play. In this episode Jesus tells his disciples he is going to send them out to do what he has been doing, proclaim the Kingdom of God. They are stunned. They aren’t ready for this. They don’t know what to do. Then he really shocks them, telling them they are going to heal people in his name. Their reaction essentially is, “We can’t do that. We don’t have the power to heal anyone. How are we supposed to heal people?” This is where they got an early taste of the new covenant principle. Jesus tells them, “No, you don’t have the power, but I will make you able to heal them.” It’s not what they can do that matters, but what Jesus can and will do.

Being around young kids can be a humbling experience because they haven’t fully developed filters and tend to just blurt out whatever pops into their little heads. This week one evening Laurie and I took care of our granddaughters so their parents could go out to dinner together. I was going to pick up some food for us to eat with the girls. Little 5 year old Cara wanted to go with me. At one point as we were going about that errand she said, “Wapaw, (I’m Yapaw to Ella, Wapaw to Cara and Bapaw to Wesley, Laurie calls me Rick), what happened to the other half of your hair?” That kind of thing can make you a little self-conscious. The older I get the more flaws and weird things I have. But what can give me the security to keep loving people, including brutally honest grandchildren, is that what comes from God is what matters. I can be secure and unconcerned with myself because of what he gives me in Christ, not because of what I provide or how I look.

This principle touches our lives in so many ways. Years ago a friend of mine who is a pastor told me about a situation he was dealing with in his church. A man in his church had been doing a number of things in his job that were dishonest and unethical. His conscience finally got to him. He knew as a believer what he was doing was wrong, was disobedient to God, and he had to make it right. So, though it was humiliating, though it was hard, though he knew he was going to lose his job, he confessed what he had been doing. So far, so good. He was trusting God even though it meant being fired. But then it began to get tricky. As he was applying for jobs he did not tell prospective employers the real reason he was out of a job and needing a new one. He was covering up what he had done. This man had gotten into some financial trouble, and he thought it was up to him to find a way out, so he had chosen unethical means to cut corners and try to solve the problem. That was old covenant, everything coming from him. But then he decided to do things God’s way. He began to live in the new covenant, trusting that what God supplies is enough. So he did the right thing. But then he began to be concerned about how he would get a job, how he could avoid financial disaster and decided it was up to him to solve the problem. He began living out of the old covenant again.

Living out of this principle is a very peaceful way to live. It means thinking about being faithful to what God has given us to do and be, then trusting him to make that be what he wants it to be. We don’t have to manipulate anyone or anything, we don’t have to do super human things, we don’t have to scheme, we just keep our eyes on him and be faithful to him and let him do with us whatever he thinks is best.