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NOT CHOOSING PILOT WINGS AND MATCHBOXES

1 Peter 1:6-9

In their book, *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldredge and Brent Curtis wrote, “Some years into our spiritual journey, after the waves of anticipation that mark any pilgrimage have begun to ebb into life’s middle years of service and busyness, a voice speaks to us in the midst of all we are doing. *There is something missing in all of this*, it suggests. *There is something more*…We try to silence the voice with outward activity.” They suggest part of what is missing is passion, a beating heart at the core of it. They conclude, “**A life without heart is not worth living**.”

That rings true for many. We sense something is missing. There ought to be more to it. And we are aware that doing all the right things, even to the best of our ability, is not the sum of what our lives should be. In Psalm 63:1 David wrote, “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water.” Back at the end of the summer you might remember we had a few days that got ridiculously hot. One of those days I got out of our air conditioned car and the heat washed over me. The feeling took me back to my youth and those summer days in Bakersfield where the heat just gob-smacked you. It enveloped you and felt like it was sucking every bit of energy and every bit of moisture right out of you. I recall my brief experience working in a carrot packing shed where it was about 2000 degrees. I remember on breaks gulping down water seemingly by the gallon because my body was desperate for fluids. David said his whole being craved God like that. Like I couldn’t get enough water, he couldn’t get enough of God. Have you ever found yourself thinking, “I want to long for God like that, but I really don’t.” In Psalm 42:1 David said, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you, my God.” And we think, “I wish that were true of me.”

I’ve known people who were going about their roles in life, doing their jobs, but without heart. They do their best, then come home, go to bed that night, get up the next morning and do it all over again. I knew a guy who was a solid follower of Jesus, a man respected by others, very successful, but at one time he admitted to me that he felt dead inside and he had felt that way for a long time. He had no real passion, no real heart, no real enthusiasm for anything. He just did what he was supposed to do. I admired his discipline and his faithfulness, but I thought it a terrible way to live. It seemed like a lifeless life. That’s not how God wants us to live. Today we are going to touch on that issue as we look at one important idea from 1 Peter 1:6-9.

Suffering is a theme that runs throughout 1 Peter. As we saw last week, the believers Peter wrote to were seriously oppressed. A big part of the motive behind this letter is to encourage and strengthen these persecuted Christians in their suffering. We see mention of this in verse 6 where Peter says, “now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” There was no “may” about it. They were suffering grievous trials. Notice that in the middle of the ordeals they were dealing with Peter said, In all this you greatly rejoice” in verse 6 and then in verse 8 he wrote of “an inexpressible and glorious joy.” They had joy when there was none to be found in their situation in life. I plan to discuss that more next week. Joy, passion in life and fullness of heart and life all go together. How were they able to have that in their circumstances?

Faith was a significant component as we see here. Their faith is more precious than gold, because, as he tells us at the end of verse 9, the result of that faith is the salvation of their souls. Nothing is more important than that, which means that nothing is more important than the faith that brings it about.

There is another crucial component of the full and passionate life, one that is joyful, that we see in the middle of this discussion about suffering, rejoicing and faith. It has to do with having real passion in life. In verse 8 Peter says of Jesus Christ, “though you have not seen him, you love him.” These people, even in their trials, loved Jesus Christ. That was critical for them surviving and standing firm in their difficulties. That’s what I want to focus on today.

WHY IS LOVING JESUS IMPORTANT?

In John 1:18 the apostle John said, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” For a moment focus on the statement that “No one has ever seen God.”

Our culture insists that everything that exists is an accident. It’s all here, we are told, because in one miraculous moment when nothing existed, that nothing somehow blew up in an inconceivably massive explosion that brought everything into existence. We have trouble with the concept of nothing. When we try to think of nothing, we instantly start thinking of something. All right, nothing existed, but where did nothing exist? What is nothing? When our kids were young I remember asking them what they did in school today and they’d say, “nothing.” So apparently nothing is whatever my kids did in school many days. But let’s leave that alone for a moment and focus back on this idea that this enormous explosion of nothing caused everything. I don’t get how nothing can blow up, or why it would blow up, but that’s the assertion. I know, it sounds ridiculous, but you have to have a little faith, right? Religion requires faith, and if I’ve ever heard a religious narrative, that one definitely qualifies. It has a miracle and it requires big time faith. Sounds like a religion.

The religion didn’t stop there. There wasn’t just one miracle. What followed that initial stupendous and incomprehensible miracle was an inconceivably long chain of accidents and mutations that turned the chaotic results of the explosion of nothing into…us! All of it guided by the providential wisdom of random chance. In other words, it all required an unimaginably long series of miracles.

An alternative to that religion is the one that notices that all that exists is replete with what appears to be design. That suggests an impressive and powerful intelligence at work. Let’s call that creative intelligence God. But if we do, we must ask who is this God? That’s where we hit a wall, because as John pointed out, no one has seen this supposed God.

Doesn’t the fact that no one has ever seen this God make you suspect that he’s a figment of someone’s imagination? When our daughter was young for a time she had a friend named Silsa. We never saw Silsa. She was invisible. We had no trouble concluding that Silsa didn’t actually exist, except in Carissa’s imagination. Why would anyone believe God is real when no one, not one person out of the billions on the planet, has ever seen God?

John says, “Not so fast, there, Buckaroo.” He says that in his lifetime something had changed. That something was that what had never happened before had now occurred. People *had* seen God. John said the Son of God, referring to Jesus of Nazareth, has made God known. He has revealed him. In fact, John said Jesus actually is God! In Jesus, we got a glimpse of God. It is reasonable to wonder why God doesn’t reveal himself if he is real. In this verse John said, “He did show up. He made himself visible to humans in the form of Jesus. He has proven that he exists and shown what he is like in Jesus.” John claimed that when people saw Jesus, they saw God.

How does that help us know why it is important to love Jesus? The answer to that hangs on something Jesus said that he got out of the Old Testament. A person once asked him what was the most important thing an individual should do. He said, “Love God with all your heart, soul and mind.” Why is loving God number one out of all the things we can do?

Ultimately it is because it is the starting point for life. God is the source of all life and all true, pure good. What happens if we put anything or anyone else in that starting point? You condemn yourself to failure and futility when it comes to life.

For my birthday Carissa and Michael gave me a book called *Saving Bravo*. It tells the story of a dramatic rescue mission to save an American airman who was shot down and trapped on the ground in Vietnam during the war there. He was surrounded by a massive force of thousands of enemy soldiers. They couldn’t get to him by helicopter because of huge numbers of surface to air missiles and anti aircraft guns around him. American forces were able to talk to him by radio, but couldn’t get close to him. So they devised a plan to have him walk to a river, skirting enemy locations on the way, and go down the river to a point where a rescue team would rendezvous with him. They couldn’t give him directions around the enemy forces and to the river over the radio because the enemy could hear what they were saying and would follow the directions and capture him. They had to come up with a code to use to direct him, but what code could they use that he could understand but the enemy couldn’t? They came up with an ingenious plan. This guy was an avid golfer. So they used a series of golf holes at his favorite courses to direct him. They would say things like, “First, play the number 4 hole at August National.” At first he thought they’d gone crazy. But then he got it. He knew how long the hole was and what direction it went. He was supposed to go that direction for the number of yards that corresponded to the length of the hole, and then they would give him the next hole. Consider this: what if he got the distance correct, but was wrong about the direction? What if he thought a hole lay northeast when it actually ran southeast? It would have been a disaster. By going in the wrong direction, no matter what else he did right, he would never have safely gotten to the rendezvous point. My point here is that if we go in any direction other than loving God as the most important thing in our lives, it is going to end in disaster. We will never get to the place we need to go.

God is the true, pure good. If we make anything else our first love, thus the focal point of our lives, what we are doing is making something less that the true pure good our focal point and pursuit. By definition, if it is less than good, what is it? It is evil. Loving anything in place of God inevitably results in evil, for others and for ourselves.

Here’s an example of how that might happen. We know that God loves us and wants the best for us. The way to have the best possible life is by doing what God tells us to do because he created us and knows what will bring about our best. So let’s suppose that, knowing that, our primary motive in life, rather than loving him, is actually to have the best, the fullest possible life. We do what God wants because we want to have that life. At some point we will run into great hardship and disappointment. Life will go completely sideways. That is going to happen to all of us because that is how life is in this fallen world. When that happens, it doesn’t *feel* like doing what God wants is the best way to live. It feels like somehow God has failed us. When that happens we will be tempted to give up and seek some other way to live. It is only when our goal is to love Christ above all else, that we will continue doing that even when life gets hard and crazy and we don’t understand.

Peter’s audience had life blow up on them. It would have been easy for them to think that this Jesus business did not work. They put their faith in him and their already difficult lives got worse. But they continued faithful to Jesus and full of joy because they loved him.

Hopefully we are all sold on and committed to the idea that we want to love Jesus the way Peter and his readers did. But that leads us to some other questions.

WHAT GENERATES LOVE FOR JESUS?

There are a couple of reasons why people love Jesus. The first one is that Jesus is so appealing, he is someone you just want to love. Jesus was, and is, a terrific person. He was loving, kind, compassionate, smart, interesting, wise, insightful, funny, good, courageous and strong. People were drawn to him. It was easy for people who knew him to love him. We typically think that people followed Jesus because he did miracles, but there was more to it.

John 2 tells the story of an incident that happened at a wedding in the town of Cana. Verses 1-2 say, “On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.” This was when Jesus miraculously turned water into wine. Note verse 11. “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory.” This was the first miracle that Jesus performed. But verse 2 tells us he already had disciples. They were already following Jesus before he had ever done anything miraculous. It is easy to think that they followed him because he performed miracles, but this tells us that people were drawn to him even before he began doing those amazing things.

It’s remarkable that those disciples were so drawn to him. They weren’t scholars or philosophers or religious zealots. They were rugged, down to earth people, much like what we would call blue collar people. They weren’t looking for the smartest rabbi or latest guy to come along with some new philosophy or religious innovation. They were just trying to get through life. Along comes some random guy from a nowhere town, a woodworker, far from an intellectual who was educated at the finest of schools. What did they have to gain from following a random woodworker? What that tells us is that there was something about Jesus that drew people to him, something beyond his divine power. They were starting to follow him before he began revealing that power. That suggests that we would have loved being around Jesus. People were powerfully drawn to him.

Jesus still draws people. It is common to hear people say they don’t like the church or don’t buy our theology, but somehow they admire Jesus. Actor Jim Carey said in an interview a few years ago that while he doesn’t believe in Jesus, he can’t stop thinking about him. Actor Andrew Garfield said in preparing for a role as a priest in Martin Scorsese’s movie *Silence* that “What was really easy was falling in love with Jesus.” Writer John Jeremiah Sullivan, who is not a Christian, says he has a problem. He says, “It is that I love Jesus Christ...Why should he vex me? Why is his ghost not friendlier?”

Peter had the advantage of knowing Jesus personally. His readers were like us. They didn’t have that opportunity. But, as Peter tells us, though they had never seen him they loved him. I think that is at least in part because of what they learned about him from people like Peter. We have that same opportunity. As we read the story of his life in the gospels we see that character. We see the goodness, the compassion, the love, the kindness, the wisdom, the intelligence, the humor, the courage and the strength of Jesus. I have heard many times from people who do not actually have faith in Christ, who nevertheless have great admiration for Jesus. The more we see him as he is, the more we know him, the more we will love him.

The second factor in us learning to love Jesus is what he has done for us. That is ultimately the biggest factor for us. It is literally inconceivable what Jesus Christ has done for us. The gift he has given us is the biggest, most precious gift anyone could ever give us. He has given us new life. He has made it possible for us to have our biggest needs fulfilled, the need for God, which is in every human being, and the need for eternal life. That gift is more valuable than anything else we will ever have. And he has given it to us as a gift. It is totally free! But it cost him dearly.

We cannot fully comprehend how enormous sacrifice that Jesus has made for us really was. Just the act of living in this world as a human being was, for him, a sacrifice beyond measure. Philippians 2:8 says, “Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Jesus humbled himself inconceivably. Even being found in appearance as a man was humbling for him.

About 6 years ago Laurie and I had a huge blessing when we got to have a vacation on Maui with all our kids, Carissa and Michael, Toby and Anna. This was a few months before Ella, our first grandchild, came on the scene. We had a blast. But at the end of that week we got to do something unusual. We rented a small, single engine airplane and Michael flew us on an aerial tour of several of the main islands of Hawaii. Before we could do that, Michael had to be checked out on the plane, meaning he had to have another pilot verify that he was able to safely fly the little plane. I get why they do that, but this was absurd. Michael was a fighter pilot. He had flown F-18s, one of the most dynamic and powerful airplanes in the world, and at the time he was a flight instructor, teaching Navy and Marine pilots how to fly high performance jets. It was ludicrous that he had to have a pilot who was not one tenth the pilot Michael was, check to make sure he could fly a simple little plane that he could have flown in his sleep. The F-18 he had flown could fly at Mach 1.7, which is nearly 1200 miles per hour, and it can reach altitudes above 50,000 feet. Comparing the plane we were renting to an F-18 is like comparing a tricycle to a high powered Porsche. This was like insisting that a Nascar driver who has steered race cars at 200 miles per hour has to be checked out to make sure he can drive a golf cart. It wasn’t a big sacrifice for Michael to do that, but to submit to the process and had to humble himself before a check pilot as though this made sense.

That was a very trivial illustration of what Jesus did. He had to humble himself and submit to limitations and trials that he had never faced in eternity past. He had to let beings who are puny and pitiful compared to him, rule over him, scoff at him, ridicule him and ultimately reject and kill him. He went through an ordeal more painful than anything any other human ever has or ever will experience, and he did it to give us the greatest gifts we could ever receive. He did it all for us. The gift of grace that he has given us is something we never could repay.

When someone gives you something you need more than anything else, something of such value you that you cannot calculate it, don’t you feel gratitude toward that person? Don’t you love that person? What if that gift cost that person in ways that can never be measured or repaid? Again, don’t you love that person? That is why we love Jesus.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE JESUS?

**It means having a passion for him**

When we love something or someone, we have a passion for that thing or person. If you love music, you care about it, you think about it, you enjoy it. It matters to you. Those things are also true when we love a person. I remember in the months before Laurie and I got engaged that the biggest factor in whether I felt my day was a good day or a bad day was whether I got to talk to Laurie. These days we have cell phones, texting, email, all producing instant electronic communication. In those days back in the electronic dark ages, if you wanted to talk to someone you either had to physically be with them or both you and the other person had to have access to a phone that was anchored to one location. So talking to each other, keeping in touch with each other was way more difficult. Yeah, I know, and you had to walk up hill through snow to get to school, right? Well, no, but relationships required more effort. Anyway, I remember a couple of times when I knew I wasn’t going to get to see Laurie or talk to her, but when I went to my car after I was done with my classes I found a note from her on my car. I went from trudging through a day a little down to being full of joy. The thing that made the difference was just knowing that she cared enough to go to the trouble of writing a note and putting it on my car. Yes, there is always that infatuation phase in a relationship, but I’m still in it, because being with Laurie is still the best part of my day. My point here was loving her, the passion I had for her made her the most important thing in my day.

For us to love Jesus is to have that kind of passion for him. It is to know that what we need and want most every day is to be with him. It is to know that if we have him, then everything else will be all right, but if we didn’t have him then we would never be happy.

In Philippians 3:8 Paul wrote, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” He was talking about all the things that he thought were important, things that were crucial to him, that were his identity and his worth in life. He literally lost all those things by following Jesus. He said he didn’t care. What he cared about was having Christ. All that other stuff in comparison was garbage.

Laurie recently commented that a drawer in her nightstand was a mess. Well I can one up that. I’ve got one that’s a nightmare. I console myself that we all have a drawer like that. It’s that drawer you dump stuff in that you don’t know quite what to do with but you don’t have the decisiveness to throw away. I did the unthinkable and looked through my nightmare drawer. I found some things that are some of my little “valuables.” There’s a little plastic toy that I can’t even identify. There’s a small box of matches from the Sheraton Moana Surfrider Hotel in Hawaii. There’s an expired annual pass to Disneyland from 8 or 9 years ago. There’s a really valuable one, some plastic American Airlines pilot wings that we got at least 25 years ago. This stuff is junk. It’s worthless. Paul realized that the things he had pursued in his life, his religious knowledge and prowess, the status that it brought him, the approval of people, was just like those pilot wings and matchbox. Compared to knowing Christ it was worthless.

All the things that Paul’s life had been about he now realized amounted to one big pile of rubbish. Do you want your life to be about rubbish? He didn’t. He chose Jesus, knowing that he was far better than all that other stuff combined. For us to love Jesus means making that same choice. Our choice of Jesus won’t mean anything unless we keep making it every day. So loving Jesus means having that kind of passion for him, knowing that having him is better than all the other stuff we can have in life.

**It means obeying him**

In John 14:15 Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” In John 14:23 he said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.” If we love him, in addition to having passion for him, we will express that passion by doing what he wants us to do. I find myself puzzled by the increasing number of people who claim to love Jesus, but refuse to live by his teaching. I guess they have some sort of religious affection for Jesus, which is understandable because he is so appealing, but that’s awfully shallow if you absolutely reject what he tells you to be and do.

Laurie has a great fondness for butternut squash. She likes butternut squash soup, and one of her favorites is butternut squash ravioli. I have tried to like it. I failed. Miserably. I do not like butternut squash. I don’t care how you try to serve it or disguise it, I don’t like it. Suppose Laurie said to me, “We’re having butternut squash ravioli and for dinner tonight.” I would say, “Um, what’s the alternative?” And she says, “No alternative. Eat the ravioli because it’s what I want.” Would you say she’s loving me? It’s not loving if you know a person doesn’t want you to do something and you do it anyway. If we do what we know Jesus doesn’t want us to do, we are not loving him. If we love him we will do what he says.

**It means honoring him**

I heard a woman making disparaging remarks about her husband. I found myself cringing when she said them. I think she doesn’t realize what she’s doing. Every one of those negative comments inflicts a wound. It does not make that person feel loved. What makes a person feel loved is when the person supposedly loving them boasts about them and praises them. I know sometimes when I wax eloquent about Laurie people think, “Yeah, we’ve heard it all before. Get some new material, Rick.” But what I care most about is that Laurie might just glow because her husband loves her so much he can’t stop singing her praises.

I know people keep calling today Mother’s Day. This needs to stop. Today is Laurie’s birthday. We had a couple of plumbers at our house this week. Laurie mentioned that we wanted to get the jobs they were working on done because we are having the family over to celebrate her birthday. One of them said, “So how old will you be, about 28?” She had a good laugh, but he was serious. I tell you that because I love my wife and I want to honor her.

That’s one of the ways we love Jesus. It is by honoring him in every way we can. It is why we sing praise to him. It means the one thing we want everyone to know is how blessed we are because we have Jesus and how awesome and majestic he is.

**It means loving what he loves**

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus discussed the day of judgment. He talks about how the king, the judge well tell righteous people, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.” They will ask when they did that. In verse 40 he said, “Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Jesus was saying the way we treat each other is the way we treat him. He loves us. When others love us they are loving what he loves. Loving others is a way of loving him.

Someone called and left a message on the church phone number, but I didn’t get the message for several days. The person said he wanted to attend our services so could we call him back and tell him when and where we are meeting. Laurie said I should call him right away, but I knew it wasn’t that urgent. After decades of ministry I have had many encounters with people who are actually looking to get money from a church and are not genuine. I could tell just from the message this guy was one of those. But as I thought about it I realized Jesus wanted me to love this guy, no matter what. By loving him I would be loving what Jesus loves, so I would be loving Jesus. So I called him back. My conversation with him pretty well confirmed what I thought. In the brief phone conversation he told me at least two lies. I didn’t confront him or try to embarrass him, but I did ask him about what he said, which caused him to start some pretty fancy verbal dancing. It was obvious he knew he wasn’t getting away with it. But I tried to be patient and loving. Who knows? Maybe it will actually reach him. I reminded myself that I should treat him as I would treat Jesus.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP DEEPER LOVE FOR JESUS?

My guess is that most of us would say that we wished we loved Jesus more than we do. We love him, of course, but we wish there was more passion and consistency in our love for him. None of us want to be like those first century Christians who were neither hot nor cold, but were room temperature lovers of Jesus. So, how can we increase the level of love we have for him?

***Get To Know Him Better***

As we saw, Jesus is really an appealing person. The more we know him, the more we’re going to love him. We get to know him by looking at his life as recorded in the gospels. So spend time reading the gospels and actually thinking about and envisioning what Jesus was like.

But another way we get to know him is by living with him. Make him a part of everything you do. Talk to him, ask him to do his will in your life, live with him each day. I knew the second time I had a conversation with Laurie that she was special, but we had to spend time together for me to truly come to love her. After 41 years together my love for her is vastly stronger and deeper today than the day we got married. As we walk through life daily with Jesus our love for him will grow stronger and deeper, but only if we walk with him.

***Honor Him***

The more you praise Jesus, the more you express your love for him, the more you will be reminded of how great he is. It helps to say it and sing it because it reinforces the truth.

***Trust Him***

Always remember Hebrews 11:6, which says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” One of the most important ways we can build our love for Jesus is to trust him deliberately, volitionally. As we trust him we will see his work and his wisdom and this builds our admiration and love for him.

***Ask Him***

Remember that Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. That is a command. Do you think if God commands us to do something, that it is his will? Of course. If I tell you, “Please open the door,” and you open the door, then I say, “Why did you open that door?” you’d think I’m crazy. If I ask or tell you to do something, you know it’s my will.

So we know that it is God’s will that we love him passionately. Now comes the big question. Do you think if we ask something that is in accord with his will, that God will answer the prayer? I’ll give you a hint. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we asked of him.”

Um, that’s not a hint, that’s the answer. Well, yes, you’re right, but I really wanted you to pass this quiz. Actually I really wanted you to get the point. The point is if it is according to God’s will, and asking him to give us more love for him clearly is, then he will answer that prayer. So ask, and you will receive.

***Choose To Love Him***

Go back to the thing we just saw, that God commands us to love him. What do you know about commands? You can choose to either obey them or not. They don’t happen to you. Obeying a command is something that is in your control.

That means that we control whether we love Jesus or not. It means we can choose it. We can choose to make him our passion. We can choose to live for his praise and for doing his will with every atom in our being. Or we can choose not to. Let’s choose to love him.