

Happy New Year everyone! There were plenty of challenging experiences about 2020, but we capped it off with a white Christmas, which was wonderful. I was on Facebook a few days ago, and I shared this picture of my son (picture of Hudson with crazy bedhead). I asked for help coming up with the best caption - here's some of my favorites. "This new 5G is electrifying." "The Kentucky wildcats aren't really 1-6, are they?" "Hey Siri: Find a Greatclips coupon." "Hey Siri: find the highest rated satin pillowcase."

Something fun to start the new year off with! Today we are beginning a new series called "What's Next." And over the next several weeks we are going to talk about the next step that God might have for each of us. No matter who you are or where you are at in life, whether you are 10 years old or 100 years old, whether you are married or single, whether you are a student, looking for a new job, have your dream job, or recently retired, God has something next for you. God's plans and hopes for your life aren't to put you in a rut or to send you around a circle in a lazy river, doing the same thing again and again and again. He had new ground he wants you to take. And in this series, we are going to talk about what it looks like to step into God's best for us, to say yes to the call he is making in our lives.

In this series we are going to talk about baptism, about forgiveness, about overcoming any addiction in our lives, about serving, and giving, but we are going to kick it off where it all begins, making the decision to follow Jesus. No matter where you are at in your faith today, this is a call that God has for every single one of us. If you are just asking questions about the faith and wondering what Christianity is all about - it's not about stale religion and rules and creeds, it's about following Jesus. If you are new to your faith and wondering how to grow and mature, it's all about following Jesus. If you have been a Christian your entire life, in church for as long as you can remember, this is still the invitation to you, as well. You never outgrow the call to follow Jesus! And there are a couple of passages I want to center our conversation on. The first one is Luke 5. Turn there with me.

Luke 5:1-11:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus

said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

There are a lot of interesting elements of this interaction we could look at, but I want to dive deeper into just a few of them. And the first is Peter’s default disposition to trust Jesus. After Jesus gave his teaching, he told Peter to try to fish in deep water. Peter has got to be thinking, “Jesus is a Rabbi, he has domain expertise in his area. I’m a fisherman. I have domain expertise in my area. I kind of know what I’m doing. And I fished all night and didn’t catch a thing. I just finished cleaning my net and all my gear. Jesus’ instructions don’t make any sense!” But instead of debating, arguing, or ignoring Jesus, he simply said: “*Because you say so, I will.*” What a perfect response!

What if this became a one sentence description of your approach to life this upcoming year? *Jesus, because you say so, I will.* Even if what you are calling me to do doesn’t make a lot of sense to me...because you say so, I will. Even if what you are calling me to do is hard...because you say so, I will. Even if most of the people in my family are going to think I’ve lost my mind...because you say so, I will.

If you are going to make this year about following Jesus, there is a question every single one of us has to wrestle with: Who is really in charge of your life? You, or Jesus? When push comes to shove, you are backed into a corner and have to make a decision, who calls the shots? Who has the final say? No matter the subject: who and how you date, or how you treat your spouse, or how you respond when someone wrongs you...do we follow our thoughts about what is best, or do we follow Jesus? The world is going to tell you to be true to yourself. To follow your heart. Which is honestly the worst piece of advice we can ever be given. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things.” Your heart will deceive you; your heart will say anything and spin the most complicated web of outlandish lies to justify what it wants.

And while the heart is lying to serve its own purposes, Jesus is standing there, always telling us the truth. And when we follow him - when we listen to him and actually put into practice what he says, just like Peter saw a miraculous catch of fish, we too experience the blessing and provision of God in our lives.

After seeing what Jesus was able to do with a little bit of trust, with a little bit of obedience, this is how the story ends:

So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. They left their boat and their nets, they left their livelihoods and their way of providing for themselves, and they devoted their entire lives to following Jesus.

Following Jesus came at a high cost, but it was the greatest decision they ever made.

And people are still leaving their former lives to follow Jesus. It reminds me of the story from my friend Kami. Listen to her story in her own words:

Before surrendering my life to Jesus, I had what I thought was a good life. I had every material thing I wanted, but I got so caught up in trying to find “happiness,” that I neglected the people who were most important to me. I was living what I had been

calling the good life, but the truth is, I was selfish. I was mad. I was miserable. I had become a serial dater. I couldn't tell you the last time I prayed. Though the strangest set of circumstances, God crossed my path with people at The Creek. And my life changed. I started spending time with other Christians. I went through Rooted and then joined a life group. And then I made the decision to be baptized. She went on to say: I have never felt such happiness, such peace. Choosing to follow Jesus and leave my "old life" behind wasn't a decision I had to think twice about. I gave up that control I held on to so hard and finally told God, "You do it." When you surrender your life to Jesus, you will never be the same, and for that, I am forever grateful.

Kami was so excited about her decision to follow Jesus, that for Christmas one of her family members gave her this calendar. Her entire year is going to be marked by this decision. My old life left in the water, my new life now consumed by the commitment to follow Christ. Does following Jesus cost a lot? Absolutely. Is it worth it? Without any question. And can I tell you, next week the focus of the entire message is on baptism. I want to ask you to consider making this decision, as well.

But here's the deal. Sometimes even though we have the best of intentions to follow Jesus, we end up having competing priorities that take precedence over him. Jesus talked about this in Luke 14. Turn there with me. In this passage Jesus tells a story about three different people who were invited to join his kingdom. But instead of coming, this is what we are told: "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'" Three different responses with three different people. All of whom were interested in following Jesus, all of whom said they wanted to be a part of his kingdom and make it a priority in their life, but none of them actually ended up accepting Jesus' invitation because, in their minds, they each had something more important to do.

One guy said: I bought a field (probably where he was going to build his house), another guy said, I bought some oxen (probably represents what he does for a living) and other guy said, I just to married (he has just started his family). I want you to see the three sources for excuses: the responsibilities of my home, my career, my family. Now, let me ask you, what are the three biggest consumers of time and focus in your life? My best guess is that these three are either at the top, or very close to it. For all of us, these are important, even essential aspects in our lives. And sometimes we can feel as though they are competing in our lives for priority with Jesus. Have you ever felt that way? You have countless projects to do and things to clean at your house. How can you make time for Jesus? You are working 8, or 10, or 12 hours a day, how can you make time for Jesus? You have a family...you have 3 kids under the age of 5, between changing diapers, feeding them, dressing them, and picking up after them, and keeping them alive, you don't know how in the world you can spend the time you want focusing on your relationship with Jesus.

Does this resonate with anyone? This is probably the greatest area of tension that I have presented to me as a pastor. "I want to grow in my relationship with Jesus, but I have all these other things going on in my life, I don't know how to make it happen." It's not about doing them

instead of Jesus, or pursuing Jesus and neglecting these areas. In fact, God's word tells us if we are rejecting these areas, we are doing the exact opposite of what he wants. Instead of feeling the constant pull between Jesus and these areas, we honor God and grow as disciples as we invite Jesus into each of these spaces, we incorporate him into the most important aspects of our life. It's not home or Jesus, it's home and Jesus. Not work or Jesus, work and Jesus. It's not family or Jesus, it's family and Jesus.

When you are doing work around the home, what if you turned on worship music, praised God, and thanked him for giving you a home to clean? It transforms chores from an obligation into an opportunity. When you are going to work, what if you viewed it as the mission field God has called you to, a charge to not only make a great contribution to your company and provide for your family, but to share the love and light of Jesus with your coworkers and customers. Last year, as we were going through the book of Ephesians, we shared this prayer:

God, as I go to work today, help me to honor you and represent you in all I do. Give me the grace and strength to work with excellence, joy, creativity, passion, and integrity. Make me a great leader, a great follower, and a great teammate. Help me to be at my absolute best today. May my work be worship. May I demonstrate your love to everyone I come in contact with. Use me to open doors for the gospel, so that the work I do today will last for eternity. All for your glory and honor. Amen.

I've talked to several who have placed this on the dashboard of their car, or at their desk at work, to help them shift from viewing their job primarily as an obligation to viewing it as an opportunity. Maybe that is something you could keep with you this year. It's not work or Jesus, it's work and Jesus.

I'm close friends with a man who is in his retirement years. God has blessed him with enough resources that he doesn't have to work again. But about a year ago he started working an hourly job and a local retailer. His main desire was to build relationships with coworkers and customers he interacted with on a daily basis. I asked him a few weeks ago how it was going. He said it was incredible. He goes in on his off days to take his coworkers coffee and apple cider. His boss loves him and tells him he can work any shift he wants. He said that after a few months of him being there, all the negativity and gossip in his department stopped entirely. He's had his coworkers over to his house for meals, he takes them out to lunch on their break. He buys really nice presents for those who are getting ready to have kids. He has had the chance to share the gospel with almost all of them. The place where he works has been changed. He's an hourly employee working a few shifts a week...but he's doing it all for the purpose of honoring God and serving people. What do you think could happen if you approached your work that way? If we all approached our work that way? With thousands of folks at this church, our city would be a different place in a matter of months!

And on that front, I'll give you a little teaser. In 2021, we are going to roll out a marketplace ministry mentorship program, where anyone at our church who wants to focus on honoring Jesus in the workplace through professional excellence, inspiring leadership, Christ-like character, and kingdom impact can be mentored, coached, and equipped by some outstanding leaders who also attend The Creek. Keep your eyes open for more details coming soon.

Home doesn't have to be a distraction from Jesus, work doesn't have to be a distraction from Jesus, and neither does family. One of my favorite ways to spend time with God these days is when I pray over my son every night before I put him to bed. I was talking with a new mother in our church, who as she is feeding her newborn, 10 minutes here, 20 minutes there, all throughout the day, she reads aloud from her Bible app. Not only is she drawing closer to the Lord, but in this little babies first year of life, the entire Bible will have been spoken over her. How beautiful is that?! You could serve as a family. One of my favorite things to see at The Creek is not just an individual greeting guests at a door, but a family greeting guests at the door. Not just an individual serving in our children's ministry, but an entire family serving in the children's ministry. There are a lot of ways to have wonderful family time, invest into your spouse and kids, while keeping Jesus right at the center.

These are the places we spend 95% of our lives. These are the places Jesus wants to meet you and transform you. So, when we ask the question, "what's next?" the answer should always be, "I am going to follow Jesus." Following Jesus is a big commitment. There will be a cost. There will be a change. But in every way, it will be worth it. There was a time in Jesus' life when he had thousands of people following him. They were with him for a while, listening to his teaching, observing his miracles, but never really making a commitment. Just hanging out on the edges, in a non-committal way. Then Jesus began to raise the bar. He said that these people needed to draw their strength, their joy, their sustenance not from the food they ate and the water they drank, but from him. That's how essential he told them he wanted to be.

John 6:60: "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" And as you keep reading, we learn in John 6:66 that, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." They weren't really committed to Jesus, they liked Jesus, but they weren't committed to following him no matter the cost. So as all these people are walking away, Jesus had a conversation with his closest followers. Look at this interaction: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67). Jesus asked the Twelve. And consider with me what Jesus' tone is when he asks this question. Does he have some bravado and confidence with it, "You don't want to leave too, do you!?" Or is there a softness, a vulnerability? "*You don't want to leave to, do you??*"

And Simon Peter, the guy we started the day talking about in Luke 5, the guy who left his boats and nets to follow Jesus gave the best response possible in verse 68: "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'"

I want to challenge us to have this be our heart this year when it comes to following Jesus. Yes, it is costly. Yes, it is demanding. Yes, he'll call us to make a lot of changes in our lives. But in reality, to whom else would we go? Jesus is the one who has the words of eternal life.