

To the Messy / “As Yourself”

Sermon 1: Two Paths

January 10, 2016

Now, if you are not a Jesus follower, this will sound a little weird to you. I am going to try to describe two paths that are open to a Jesus follower: a path of pleasing God, and a path of trusting God. If you are not a Jesus follower, both of these paths may seem odd to you. But I'd still encourage you to listen in, because it will explain a lot about us, and it may clarify the options you will choose from ... some day (maybe today).

But for those of us who call Jesus “Lord,” there are these two paths. One of them is the path you might call “Pleasing God,” and the other is the path you might call “Trusting God.” Now this path, the pleasing God path, is well worn. You can tell immediately it is the one usually chosen. There is a verse reference on the sign: 2 Corinthians 5.9. I look it up, and I like it – it fits who I am, and how I want to shape my life. It says, “So we make it our goal to please him...” Our goal is to please God, our life purpose to please him. He's my Lord – I try to take that seriously -- and so a lot of us want to live a life that is not only acceptable to him, we want to dazzle him, if we can.

And along the pleasing God path I can see these encouraging trail markers. One marker says, “Striving hard to be all God wants me to be.” I like that. I can do that. I do do that. I try to be a good husband, I try to be a good dad, I try to be a good papa, I try to be a good pastor – why should it be any less with God. I can strive hard to be all God wants me to be.

And then there is a trail marker that says “Self effort: God does his part, I do mine.” I kind of like that one, too. It means there is a piece of this path I can control. God has done his part – on a cross. Now it's up to me to do mine, right – to do what he wants me to do, to be what he wants me to be.

A little later on there is a trail marker that says, “Working on my sin to achieve an intimate relationship with God.” Well, been there, doing that ... it's hard. I've got these sins that I know are keeping me from getting close to God. I have tried to defeat them, many times. I'll do something stupid. Then I'll promise never to do it again. I'll try hard, kind of, and then I'll fail ... again, and again, and again. Sound familiar? But I'm on the right path,

I'll tell myself. If I can just further down this path I'll be able to get by the sin that is contaminating my life with God.

And at the end of this pleasing God path I see a room. And there is a sign on the door of that room. It's called "The Room of Good Intentions." That's where people on this path, this "pleasing God" path ... that's where they cluster. And I peek in a window, and it is so beautiful. It's massive, ornate. There are winding staircases, and cascading fountains, and elegant sofas and chairs, all this white marble, and gold leaf. It's stunning!

And the room is filled with beautiful, good-hearted people: businessmen who have given massive amounts of their money to charity, pastors who have spent themselves to build great churches, missionaries who devoted their lives to service in remote and scary places. So many Christian giants, it seems. People who have devoted their lives to God, to studying his character, spreading his word, serving humanity in his name, to pleasing God.

But as I peered into their eyes, so many looked tired. Sometimes there were even glimpses of loneliness, and fear, and pain. Which makes sense to me, after all, they've been fighting the good fight. And sometimes the words I heard from them did seem rather superficial, and guarded, and sometimes judgmental and braggadocios. Been there too, I guess; done that too, I guess.

And then there is this other path: the "trusting God" path. It's got a verse on it to: Hebrews 11.6. I looked it up and it says, "Without faith – without trust – it is impossible to please God." It sounds pious, and ... sweet, But it feels too passive, compared to pleasing God. How can I really make a difference, how can I really live life to the fullest if my goal is to ... trust God? Clearly the trusting God path is not as well used. It's a little rougher, a little steeper, more slow going. And neither is it as well marked ... although there are what appear to be markers laying face down, here and there. I pick one up and it says, "Living out of who God says I am." I'm not even sure what that means. And then I read another. It says, "Humility." Which, to be honest, I'm not so good at. But there is a wild beauty about this path: stone bridges over flowing streams, and these narrow ledges overlooking scenic vistas. And what looks more like a cabin at the end of the path.

I peek in a window of the cabin and it is beautiful in its simplicity. Instead of gold leaf and marble, I see carved wood and chiseled stone. Instead of elegant sofas and chairs I see rocking chairs, and recliners. And the people there are ... laughing. I edge towards the door of the cabin and I see a sign over it that reads ... Grace.

Now I've got to tell you that I know this pleasing God path far better than I know this trusting God path. How many of you guys have a life verse? Is there one verse that is extra special to you, and you want to live it out? I've kept a slip of paper by my desk for about 25 years. When one of my heroes died in 1990, another of my heroes wrote this about him. He says, To think of Fred Bruce is to be assured that the Psalmist's vision can come true: 'Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.' I love that. That's the kind of man I want to be, the kind of legacy I want to leave: A man in whom mercy and truth are met together; in whom righteousness and peace have kissed each other." (Ps 85.10) It's the kind of man, for the most part, I have tried to make of myself. I have tried to make myself into what I wanted to be... And it's hard.

Now Randy, my preaching partner, has a life verse too. In fact it's the verse written on the start of this path: 2 Corinthians 5.9. It says, "We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." Randy says, 'It has been my life goal to please God, to bring him pleasure. To do whatever I can do, to accomplish whatever I can, to bring him pleasure; to make myself whatever God wants me to be to bring him pleasure. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Almost as noble as my life verse.

So when Randy and I were working on this sermon together he said, "I know this pleasing God path. I've been on that path 60 years. In fact, I've been all the way to the end." And he said ... "Being in that room at the end, the room of good intentions, isn't what I hoped it'd be."

I know that path too. In fact, the first 40 years or so of my life were spent on that path. I have strived so hard to be all God wants me to be. Which has been frustrating, because I have expected so much more from myself than I have achieved. I have drifted to this – self-effort – over and over

again. Which has been frustrating, because what I have learned is that Jesus was right when he said, “Your spirit may be willing, but your flesh is weak.” The truth is, all that my self-effort has taught me is that I am not smart enough, and I am not good enough, and I am not strong enough to do what I want to do, and to be what I want to be, in order to bring God pleasure. And so when some of you see me as a holy man, I chuckle. Because when I look in the mirror, when I am on this road, what I see staring back is a ... fraud.

And I have worked on my sin to achieve an intimate relationship with God. And do you know what I have discovered? No matter how hard I work on my sin, I still sin. I still lean towards sin a lot. Even though I understand temptation more than most people do, I suppose – I’ve studied it; even though I understand God’s power more than most people do, I suppose – I’ve taught about it; even though I’ve spent my life helping people find God and victory over their sin ... I still find my own sin creating this wedge between me and God. And I rarely ever, over on this path, really experience peace with God, or joy as a God-follower.

And in my experience that room – that room of good intentions at the end of this path – that room advertises way more than it delivers. But I will leave it to Todd, next week, to describe the experience of most people in that room.

Now, about 20 years ago I started exploring this path – this trusting God path – a bit. It’s hard for me to stay on the trusting God path too long. I usually drift over to the more known, the more comfortable – the path with God over which I have more control – I tell myself. Now it’s interesting that along this trusting God path, there are all these little crumpled bits of paper, almost like breadcrumbs leading down the trail.

- I pick one up: “Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith” ... Since we are made right by faith? Just by faith? Not by what we do? So it’s not about pleasing God? It’s about trusting him? That’s what makes us right with God? It says, therefore “we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.” So my peace with God is not something I achieve, it is something he does? Now that would be so cool, but it’s something I rarely feel. And it says, “Because of our faith (because of ... trust),

Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory." (Romans 5.1-2) Don't you wish that were so? But doesn't it sound just a little too good to be true? And so we drift back to our quest to please God.

- But we turn back and try this trust stuff again. And we pick up another breadcrumb. It says, "So now (right now) there is no condemnation (zero condemnation) for those who belong to Christ Jesus." (Romans 8.1) So right now, just because we belong to Christ Jesus, God does not condemn us at all, even though we still battle our sins? Are you serious? Do you mean the guilt that I lug around is not from God? Doesn't that just sound a little too good to be true? And so we drift back to pleasing God.
- But that trust path is so alluring. And I pick up another breadcrumb. This one says, "I am convinced that nothing (nothing, nothing) can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow — not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below — indeed, nothing in all creation will ever (ever, ever) be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8.38-39) Do you believe that? For you? Do you believe that despite your repeated failures? Despite the fact that so often you feel like a fraud? ... If only it were true ... for me. But again it sounds too good to be true. So I hesitate.
- But it is so intoxicating. This one says, "I will never again (never again) remember their sins and lawless deeds." (Hebrews 10.17) God says, He will wipe my sin-slate clean, completely clean, forever. Can you trust that?
- And this one says, "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" (1 John 3.1) So God sees me as I am and he loves me anyway? Really? He sees my underachieving, he sees my rebellious failures ... and he still calls me his kid, he still wants me to call him "Abba." Really?

- And this one says, “May you have the power to understand (because it’s going to be hard), as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.” (Ephesians 3.18) Because it seems unbelievable! You see, I can believe God’s love for you. But do I dare trust that for me? Isn’t it just a little too good to be true? But I find that I am right near the door of that room called “grace.”

And because it seems too good to be true, way too often we buy into a lie – a lie about God, that leads to a twisted view of ourselves as people of God. We do not trust God as he is, and so we do not accept ourselves as we really are. Because what we really are is what he says we are. I am not who I think I am; I am not who you think I am; I am who God says I am. Do you believe that? Do you trust that? You are not who you think you are; you are not who I think you are; you are who God says you are. And if you are a Jesus follower, he has told you what you are. You are unconditionally loved; you are completely forgiven – in Christ, past, present, and future; you are prized by him ... even if it seems too good to be true. Trusting that is really hard, isn’t it?

Now we’d like some third path. Or we’d like to figure out a way to pull these two paths together. Maybe we could try walking with one foot on each path. But here’s the deal: you’ve got to choose. Choosing one path means not choosing the other. You have to choose.

And here’s the irony, here’s the paradox: You can’t get to pleasing God by taking this pleasing God path. You can only get to pleasing God by taking this trusting God path. Isn’t that weird? You see, we think that if we can do less wrong and if we can do more right we will please God. If I can do less bad and more good, God will be pleased with me ... we think. But to be perfectly honest, we can’t do either one well enough. We don’t fix ourselves so well. I’m just not that good at eradicating my sin. And no matter what good I do, I know I could do more, I should do more. I know, when I am perfectly honest, that given the gifts and the opportunities God has given me, I am an underachiever as a Jesus follower. And if I am not pleased with me, then how could God be? ... I tell myself.

I suppose there are some people on this pleasing God path who actually believe they have done enough to earn God’s pleasure. Some of you may

think you have conquered enough sin, and they have done enough good that God admires your efforts. Dorks. You are either clueless or you're prideful. But I'm telling you, most of the people who spend time on this path feel like frauds. Maybe you can accept that God loves you, sort of, because God has to love you, because God is love. But God can't really can't be pleased with you, you fear. When you look into his eyes, on this path, you fear seeing disappointment, and disapproval, and disgust. I'm just telling you guys, you can't please God on the path that is called "pleasing God." Isn't that weird?

Instead, it's over there, on that path. It's ironic, isn't it, that it is on the path of grace that you find the pleasure of God, not on the path of good intentions. Do you know how I know?

There is a verse that is hard for us to believe. It's that verse, on the signpost. It says, "Without faith it is impossible (it is not possible) to please God." (Hebrews 11.6) Without faith ... But remember, the New Testament was written in Greek, not English. And in the Greek it says, literally, "Choris pisteos" it is impossible to please God. Without pistis – you cannot please God. Without pistis, it doesn't matter how many sins you beat down, without pistis it doesn't matter how many great sermons you preach, how many worship services you endure, how many towels you hang in the foyer. You cannot please God without pistis.

It's kind of a weird word: this pistis. Sometimes we translate it "faith": Without faith, we cannot please God. And sometimes we translate it "belief": Without believing in Jesus a man cannot please God. And sometimes we translate it "trust." Now that would put a different spin on it, wouldn't it? Without trusting God, you can't please him – no matter what you do. Without trusting his grace, you can't please him. Without trusting that he loves you anyway, without trusting that he completely forgives you, without trusting that despite all your failures he still considers you his child. Without trust – it doesn't matter what you do for him. It's the trusting him, it's the acceptance of his grace that brings him pleasure. It's weird, isn't it, that what we pursue by taking the pleasing God path can only be found by taking the trusting God path?

And ... what if it's true? What if the too good to be true is actually God's truth? What if, on this path someone could ask you how you're doing, and

you could actually be honest? Someone asks you, “How are you doing?” And you hesitate, and then you admit – haltingly at first, “Well actually, I’m not fine. (Have you ever wanted to say that?) In fact, I’ve been not fine for a long time. I’m actually kind of tired, and confused, and angry, and afraid. Sometimes I feel guilty and lonely. And so I am tempted to pretend, “I’m fine.” But to be honest, my life doesn’t work so well most of the time. I’m so far behind where I want to be, and I’m not sure where to go next. And if you religious people knew just half of the freaky stuff that goes through my mind, you’d probably kick me out of your little club. So, to be honest, I really am not fine.”

Over on that path, those words wouldn’t play so well. But Todd is going to unpack that next week. But over here, on the path of trust, his response to those words, well, what seems too good to be true becomes true. We look into his eyes, and we see no disappointment, no disapproval, no disgust. Instead what we see is delight, we see love. Because: without trust, it is impossible to please him; but trust – in itself, in his grace – does please him. So, he pulls you into a bear hug, so tight you fear you can’t breathe. And you want to push away and cry out, “Please stop, I don’t deserve this! I am not who you think I am!” we tell God. But you discover, he knows who you really are. He knows your struggles, he knows your failures, your disappointments. You hear him say, “I know, I know ... I know! I’ve known from before time began. I’ve seen it all. And I’m still right here. I’ve got you covered. I’ve got you. Thank you for trusting me. I am so pleased with you!” And he hugs you long enough, and tight enough, that you begin to feel a sense of indescribable peace, and just an inkling of inexpressible joy.

Can you trust that our God is that big? That he is that good? Of course I try to please him, because I’m so grateful that he loves me anyway. We don’t try to please him to make ourselves acceptable to him; we try to please him because he accepts us, as messy as we are.

Guys we’ve been talking about being willing to lean in to the messy. Well, for a lot of us, the toughest mess to lean into is your own. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor – as we love ourselves. For a lot of us, we try to love a neighbor, but we hate ourselves. Trust, in God, can break the chains of that self-loathing. Guys, he loves us with a love that is so wide, so long, so high, so deep that not even the powers of hell can separate you from

his love. Your sins really are completely forgiven, in Christ: past, present, and future. In fact, the deepest love you have for anyone in your life is only a pale imitation of the love he has for you, right now, just as you are. Can you believe that it is your trust, in him, that brings him pleasure? ...