

Your Excuses Do Not Impress God

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I have to say some more things about Isaac Watts. He's one of my favorite [hymn writers]. Especially you younger people, when we sing songs like [the hymns we sang today], you're probably thinking, "Oh, no! [It's] one of those tunes that's not even a tune." Maybe it sounds more like a funeral dirge to you, and it just doesn't do it for you. Let me encourage you a little bit. Before Isaac Watts came along, this is how it worked. You went to the psalms and you just sang the psalms. The problem is [that] the psalms [were written] in Hebrew, not in English, so you can imagine trying to sing the psalms that we have. It was painful. So, Isaac Watts came along and [wrote] at least one and sometimes three, or four, or five hymns for every single psalm in the Psalter, in the book of Psalms. He incorporated with [each psalm] teaching from the New Testament and [about] Christ, and they're just so rich and so wonderful, and they all rhyme.

Now, if you don't like to sing old things, and you're thinking, "Well, I'm glad we got Isaac Watts over," don't set aside the words with the tune you don't like. I would encourage you to get *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts*. I have a really small copy, it's less than three-inches tall, which was written in 1832. It has really fine pages and gold leaf. Man, it is neat. But, you can just get a \$12 version with bigger print that's easier to read, and you can take that and when you read the psalms or have a quiet time, you can just read a couple of them. They will bless you. They are so rich, they

are so full of good truth, and they rhyme, so they have a way of sticking with you. I would encourage you to do that.

Also, remember that Watts, when he was [writing these hymns], was a radical. He was like electric guitar in church. He was freaking people out. Even today [people think he is radical]. I talked to one Scottish pastor, [and] I said, “Do you guys sing Isaac Watts[‘ hymns]?” He kind of looked at me like [I was a] heretic. Today in many churches [they still] only sing psalms from the book of Psalms with no instruments and no rhymes. So, you be thankful [for Isaac Watts].

With that, let’s look at Luke 9. We’re back into the Gospel of Luke, and we’re going to finish up the chapter this morning if the Rapture doesn’t occur in the next hour or so. If it does, then I’m sorry, but that’s OK.

When I was growing up, there was this old man who lived next door. We called him “Uncle Bill.” He wasn’t our uncle, but he was a character. He had a peg leg and he was proud of it. He would pop it off and hand it to you. He was a real character. He was a retired railroad engineer. He was standing behind a train and another train boxcar came and pinched his leg off. He had all kinds of stories. He was something else. Anyway, I used to mow Uncle Bill’s lawn. It was huge. I was ten, and he had a giant yard. I would mow it and endure the pain of mowing that whole thing, but in the summer, it was a little bit more of a trial for me. I found all these reasons and excuses to put mowing the lawn off when it should have been mowed. I would tell him things like, “I’m really busy. I have stuff to do,” which meant I had to play basketball, or play in the ditch behind the house, or watch *Gilligan’s Island*—you know, something important. I’d say, “I’ll mow it tomorrow.”

Then he would always tell me this thing that I never quite understood when I was little. He would say, “Jack, tomorrow never comes.”

I would always think, “What does he mean by that? I mean, tomorrow has always come every other day. Why doesn’t tomorrow ever come?” I just never realized that what he was trying to tell me was [that] today is the day of lawn mowing, and never tomorrow, just like today is the day of salvation [see 2 Corinthians 6:2] and never tomorrow because no one ever

gets saved tomorrow. People only get saved today. The lawn can only be mowed today.

Well, in a similar way, when you gather around people who come to church and call themselves Christians, there are many who have excuses for not really following Christ, for not really getting involved. They'll do it tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes. As we get into the text [in Luke 9] this morning, we're going to see this same kind of thing—excuse makers.

Remember, Luke is presenting Jesus as the Son of Man. We've seen His miraculous birth, His temptation, His miracles, and how He is doing all of these incredible things. People are following Him by the thousands. They're very fascinated with Him, but most people are following Him because He's the miracle worker, and He's cheap entertainment, and He's able to make food out of nothing. Who wouldn't want to have a miraculous loaf of bread or [a] fish? So, people are following [Him], but most [are doing so] for the wrong reasons.

There is a righteous remnant, though, of women and men who are following Him. Luke tells us that there were many women and many men who were Jesus' disciples. This is something you have to remember when you read the Gospels: a lot of times as you're going through [a] Gospel, and it says "the disciples," it doesn't always just mean the Twelve. Sometimes it means this big multitude. We don't know how many [people there were] because anybody following Him was a disciple in a minor sense. The ones who believed [in Him] were disciples in a more intimate and true sense, and then there were the close disciples, the Twelve, who later become apostles. Keep that in your mind.

[At this point in Luke,] Jesus is pretty much finished with His ministry around the Sea of Galilee. If you think of the Sea of Galilee in your mind, there's a little river, and then the Dead Sea. He has ministered from the northeast area all the way around, in all the hills, [and] all the way down toward Jerusalem. He has saturated that area with His preaching, teaching, and miracle doing. Now He's getting ready to move down toward Jerusalem.

If you have your Bible, you can look and follow along as I read Luke 9:57–62.

As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

From this portion of Luke, you are given three exemplary excuses, excuses that have been made for thousands of years [as reasons] for people [to] not follow God. These excuses are typological, or representative, of many excuses. As we get to the end [of this sermon], you'll see [that] they [basically] cover the whole gamut of any excuse you might make [for] not want[ing] to follow Jesus. Luke includes them here so that you can examine your own life and see if these excuses are either keeping you from coming to Christ to salvation, or, if you are saved, are keeping you from obeying Him and following like you should as a Christian.

The first is: God is not impressed with your fair-weather Christianity. If you look at verse 57, Luke writes: "As they were going along the road." If we compare this text with Matthew 8, we discover that two of the excuses that are mentioned by Luke here happened earlier on in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was walking around, going from village to village, [and] He would encounter people along the road, talk to them, [and] call them to follow. [The excuses Luke describes here are] representative of the kinds of excuses you always get when you preach the kingdom of God to people. Two of [the

excuses] came earlier [in Jesus' ministry, and] one came later, [but] Luke lumps them all together to emphasize the point, since they're all excuses. Though [each one comes from] a different motive, they all have the same effect: not following Jesus.

So, Jesus is walking along the dirt road, He stops by some small village, maybe heals some people, preaches the kingdom, [and] people are amazed, a few maybe even believe sincerely. A few express their desire to follow Him, but they really don't know what that means. If Jesus just showed up in your village and did some miracles, and He's got 200–300 people with Him, and they're all heading down the road, [you would probably think], "Well, I want to go and see what happens." There's an emotionalism there, a desire to get involved just because it's happening, it's a cool thing, it's miraculous.

Look at the middle of verse 57: "Someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go.'" Does that remind you of anybody? Maybe Peter? "Lord, I will never deny You!" Then what happened? He did. According to Matthew 8:19, the person who said [what we read in Luke 9:57] was a scribe. So the guy says, "Yeah, I will follow You wherever You go." At first look, man, this is noble. The guy's noble. He's throwing down, man. He is really committing, big time—"wherever You go." Not [just] "I will follow You," but "[I will follow You] wherever You go." [However], what we don't see that Jesus sees is what's going on in this guy's heart. This guy's got things going on in there, and as we are going to see from Jesus' response, they aren't that good.

William Hendricksen, in his commentary [on Luke], says:

This man's intentions were not altogether honorable. He saw crowds, miracles, enthusiasm, etc. It seemed so good to be closely associated with the one who was in the very center of all this action. So, he wanted to be Christ's disciple, but he

failed to understand the implications of discipleship, namely, self-denial, sacrifice, service, suffering!¹

Jesus saw an excuse buried in this man's heart. We can see how He uncovers it. Look at [Luke 9:]58: "And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'" This is pretty telling, isn't it? People live in houses where they're comfortable. Even foxes have holes they dig in the ground, and in the heat of the day, they curl up in their nice, cool dirt, and wait to raid the chicken coop at night. Birds have nests in the hollow of a tree, or [in] some dense shrub, where they raise their little families, and just rest a little bit. Everybody has a nice, cozy, little pad they go to, but not Jesus.

Jesus knows what's ahead, and this guy doesn't. Jesus knows He is going to Jerusalem; that He will be increasingly hated by the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees; that they will eventually falsely accuse Him, try Him, scourge Him, [and] crucify Him to death. This man doesn't know that. What Jesus knows is that if this man did know that, he would not go. See, this little first phrase appears with two other excuses, and we know this is an excuse. If Jesus goes to this guy, and says, "Foxes and even birds have homes, places they go to kick back and veg a little bit, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head," what is He getting at in this man's heart? What's the man's problem? What's his excuse? The man is a fair-weather Christian. That's the deal.

I used to be a fanatic fly fisherman with a capital "f"—not in "fly" or "fisherman," but in the "fanatic" sense. I loved fishing so much [that] I would go as much as I could, even on a lunch break. If I had an hour-long lunch break, I would punch out, get in my truck, drive to the river that was in the middle of town, get out, put on my waders, put on my vest, put on my wading boots, go out there in the middle of the river and just cast for half an hour. Oh, yes. I didn't care if I caught anything—just fishing was good. I loved to fish.

¹William Hendricksen, *Gospel of Luke*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1978), p. 560.

I had friends who liked to fish, but they never fished by themselves. They only fished with other people because they liked the companionship of fishing. In the wintertime, when it was twenty, ten, zero degrees and chunks of ice were floating down the river, and I was out there fishing, breaking the ice off the guides of my fly rod, catching white fish, and I would ask my friends, “Hey, want to come out and go fishing?” [they would say], “Oh, no, no, no. It’s way too cold. I’ll wait until spring or summer and then we can go together.” You see, those guys, they *liked* fishing, but they didn’t *love* fishing. They weren’t willing to hurt to fish. I was. I still am. No problem—I would go fishing pretty much in any weather.

The excuses they would come up with, “Well, man, it’s snowing outside. Why would you go fishing?”

[I would respond], “Well, it’s wet. The fish are in the water, they don’t care if it snows. They’re always wet, you know?”

There are Christians who are like this. They’re fair-weather Christians. As long as they don’t have anything else to do on Sunday morning, as long as they got plenty of rest, as long as they don’t have a better offer, then they come to church. But ask them to hurt, ask them to suffer for Christ, [and they say], “No way. I’m not going to do that.” They are like the seeds sown among the rocky soil that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 13:21, where He says, “Because it has no firm root, as soon as persecution arises it falls away.” That’s how many Christians are.

[They think], “I’ll be a Christian as long as it doesn’t hurt, as long as it’s only about receiving and not me giving, not me sacrificing, not me serving, not me going out of my comfort zone, not me being hated because of Jesus. As long as it’s easy, yeah, I’m a Christian, man, I am with you, but don’t ask me to go out into the winter of persecution. Don’t ask me to suffer any storms or trials because of Christ. No, thank you.” The whole sin that is driving this, when you think about it, [is what]? Why would this man not follow Jesus? What was the core issue here? He loved his pleasure more than Christ. That’s it. He wanted the comfort and pleasure of home, the convenience of home, the security of home more than [he wanted] Christ.

Maybe you're sitting there, and you're thinking, "Whoa, whoa, Jack. Could you move on to the next point?" This is convicting, isn't it? Maybe you know in your heart that you're a fair-weather Christian. Maybe you profess to be a Christian, but you [think], "I don't like suffering either. I never volunteer, and if I find out it's going to be painful, or it's going to cost me, or I have to give, or serve, or sacrifice, I always say 'no.'" Then what are you going to do? You're out there, and you're thinking to yourself, "Man, I hate that one hymn. What is it? 'I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold, I'd rather be His than have riches untold, I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land, I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand. I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause, I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause, I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame, I'd rather be true to His holy name: Than to be the king of a vast domain Or be held in sin's dread sway! I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.'" You're thinking, "Man, that hymn kills me! I'm glad we don't sing it very often because whenever I sing it, every line just seems to read, 'Hypocrite, hypocrite, hypocrite,' the whole time through. I'm not that way, so how do I get there? What do I do when I realize [that] I do like my comfort, I do like my pleasure, I don't want to be led by His nail-pierced hand. I do, but I don't." Well, I'm going to tell you at the end [of this sermon].

Let's look at the second excuse: God is not impressed with your desire to be self-sufficient, either. Look at [Luke 9:]59, where we encounter the second almost-follower. He is somebody who is not coming to Jesus, and saying, "Jesus, I'll follow You wherever You go," but Jesus approaches him, and says, "Follow Me. Follow Me." Look at the middle of verse 59: "But he said, 'Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.'" At first glance, this one here seems rather innocent, doesn't it? I mean, come on, the guy's father died, right? He needs to deal with him. They didn't embalm people then, [so it was] like, "OK, we've got to get him in the ground." The problem is [that as] you get him in the ground, you touch the dead body, [and] then there's seven days you have to wait before you're clean again. So [it would have been] maybe eight, nine, ten days after the mourning and

everything, [when] finally the guy can follow Jesus. By that time, Jesus is long gone.

Look at Jesus' response: "But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead,'" which seems a pretty harsh response, doesn't it? [It seems] almost insensitive. [It's] like, "Let your dead dad be buried by what? Zombies? What's that mean?" So, it not only seems harsh, [but] it's [also] a rather strange phrase [for Christ to use]. Well, one way to understand it [is to] just [take it] literally. The guy's father has just died, and he, being the son, has to go home, make arrangements, get his father in the ground, go through the cleansing process for seven days so that he can be around people, and that's how it's going to happen. OK? That's one [way of interpreting it].

But if that's the case, it seems Jesus is a little bit harsh here, and you think, "Well, is there another way of understanding it?" You know what? There is. The other way of understanding it is to understand that culture a little bit. Let's say you were a son, and you had a father who was older, and before you went on some big adventure, or [did some] big thing, you would say, "I need to stay and bury my father." In other words, "I need to stay around, take care of the family business, honor my father, take care of him in his old age. Then when he dies and is buried, then I can go do my own thing. But now I have [a] responsibility to my father."

So, the phrase "I need to first bury my father" I think means, "My father is still alive, but he's getting old, and he'll be dead soon, and [then] I'll follow you." When you put it that way, then things start [taking on] a little bit different angle. There was one thing that you got from your father['s death] when you were a son. What was that? Inheritance. Yeah. Everybody wants the inheritance. The oldest son would get a double portion, or all of it if he was the only son, and then every other son would get what was left, [divided up equally]. What I think the man is really saying [in Luke 9:59] is, "You know, I'd follow you, but my dad hasn't died yet and I don't really have the means. But when he dies and I get [my] inheritance, and I've got plenty of cash, and I'm self-sufficient, then I can follow you." That matches

up with Jesus' response: "Listen, pal, you let those who are godless bury the bodies of those who are dead physically." That's what Jesus is saying: Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, and you come and follow Me. That's what Jesus is saying.

You remember the rich young ruler, right? Turn over to Luke 18. Let me just show you. This is a very similar type of situation. As a matter of fact, the gospels have several of them, but this is one that is very parallel. Look at verse 18 of Luke 18: "A ruler questioned Him, saying, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" That is a good question. But notice it's "what shall *I do* to inherit eternal life?" [Verse 19:] "And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.'" Then Jesus brings up the commandments. Now, the reason Jesus brings up the commandments is because the normal response is: "I haven't obeyed the commandments like I should."

Jesus said, "You're right. You aren't righteous enough to save yourself, you can't do anything to save yourself. I'll tell you what, I will forgive you and save you by grace, and give you the free gift of eternal life." So, Jesus says, here are the commandments.

He's waiting for the man to say, "I haven't done this quite right." Surprisingly, [however], the guy says, "I've kept all of those commandments from my youth."

Jesus says, "Really? Really? Mr. Righteous, here." So then Jesus decides to go for the man's idol: [his wealth]. Look at what He says in [Luke 18:]22: "When Jesus heard this, He said to him, 'One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'" Have you ever read a gospel tract that said, "God is a holy God, God is a just God, and if you want to get to heaven sell everything and give it to the poor"? No.

Some people have taught that, and said, "You need to make a vow of poverty or you can't be a Christian," [but] is Jesus saying we have to give away everything in order to be His follower? Well, no, we don't have to make a vow of poverty. Is He saying that, "Well, if you're rich you just

can't go to heaven"? No. He's not saying that. Now, the rich man here, he is grieved because he has a lot [of wealth], and so he doesn't follow Jesus. But the point Jesus was making, the reason Jesus said, "Go sell everything," is [that] He was seeing if the guy was willing to give everything he had up to God or not. The guy wasn't. He didn't love Christ more than his money, and that was the problem. He idolized his own self-sufficiency.

This is the same thing we see happening back in Luke 9. You sometimes you look at these texts, and you think, "Why is Jesus being so mean?" Well, the guy is [a] mercenary.

He's [saying], "I'll follow You, but man, I've got to get some cash together because I don't really trust You. I don't even know You that well. I need to make sure I can take care of myself, God." Jesus reveals the idol in the man's heart: [that] he was willing to trust his inheritance, but not Jesus. Whenever people love their things more than God, it's like a huge, iron ball shackled to their leg that they can't even get off. Jesus says, "There's the narrow gate [see Matthew 7:14]. Come, follow Me. I'll lead you through it," and they can't move [that iron ball]. Any time they want, they can undo it, but they won't because they love that iron ball, that thing that is going to keep them from entering into the kingdom of heaven.

I've heard that you can catch monkeys by cutting a hole in a coconut. You drill a little hole in there that's just big enough for them to fit their paw into, and then you drill another hole and attach the coconut to a rope or whatever. Then you put a little, shiny trinket in there, or a little, yummy morsel, and the monkey will come along, look in there, and [think], "Ooo, [a] present." He'll stick his hand in, and he'll grab onto [what's in there], and he won't let go. You can approach [him] and he can't get his fist out because he's not letting go. Though it kill him, he will not let go. That is how money is to some people. Though it kill them, they will not let go. They will not have God tell them what they're going to do with "their" money, though it kill them. They will not let go.

Jesus makes it crystal clear in Luke 16:13, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be

devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” That’s about as clear as you can get it. You either have God controlling your life, or money controlling your life, but you can’t have both. Either God’s having say, or wealth is having say. [Which] is it? You either let go of the ball and chain and follow Jesus, or not. There’s no getting into heaven with the ball and chain. That’s why when the disciples were surprised that rich men couldn’t enter the kingdom, [Jesus] says, “Well, with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [see Matthew 19:26]. What God’s grace does in a person’s life makes you want to get down there and unshackle the ball.

Zaccheus, who was very rich, followed Jesus. Many godly people who have had great abundance have followed Christ. So what is the difference? The difference is this: you either love Christ and are willing to have Christ have control of you, your life, and your money, or not. If you’re not, then what’s happening? You are unwilling to let Jesus rule over you.

Let me just give you a quick diagnostic tool. Let’s just say for a second that you’re sitting there, thinking, “Jack, you’re kind of poking your finger in the wound, here. I think I may love money, but I’m not sure. I’m not sure if my money is a ball and chain [that] is keeping me from coming to Christ or not. How can I tell?” Let me give you a little, quick diagnostic test—three questions. Answer these in your own heart, and then you’ll know.

First question: Do you understand that all that you have is given to you by God? Everything that you think is yours is His, and you’re just a steward of it? Do you understand that? If, when I say that, you’re thinking to yourself, “Well, just wait a minute. I’ve worked hard for what I have. I have labored, and I went to school, and I got an education, and I have stayed up nights and invested wisely. I have accumulated all this wealth. This is mine,” then you have failed the first question.

Second: Do you give to the Lord’s work in accordance with how He has blessed you? Think about that one. If I say that, and the first thing that comes to your mind is, “Hey, I give my fair share. I know I probably give a lot more than other people do. I’m paying my dues,” then you’ve failed

the second question. God doesn't ask you to give in comparison to other people. He asks you to give in comparison to what He has given you. "To whom much is given, much is required" [see 2 Chronicles 25:13]. If your only thought is, "I'm probably giving more," you don't even know how much other people are giving. I mean, any godly person wouldn't let you know. So you don't know. God wants you to give, yes, a freewill offering, but in accordance to how He has blessed you. If you're not willing to do that, you've missed that question as well.

Finally: What happens in your life when you have a crisis—especially a financial crisis? [When] some trial comes in your life, what's your first thought? "OK, how can I take care of this? Let's see, I've got this much money in the bank. I've got my credit cards. I've got this much. I could sell this. I could do that." Is that your first thought? Do you run to your money when you have a trial, or do you run to Christ, and say, "Lord, I've got this situation. I pray that You give me wisdom. Help me"? Who do you run to when you have a trial? That is your god.

God says this through the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17: "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, *but on God*, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" [emphasis added]. That's who your hope is. That is the hope of a Christian. So, if you understand that all you have is the Lord's, that He gave it to you, that He gave you the power to make your wealth, and it's all His, and if you're willing to part with it without being undone, and unraveled, and fret, and have a heart attack because you've lost your fortune, and if you're giving according to the Scriptures in accordance with what He has blessed you, then you're probably all right as far as your love of money category [goes]. But if you didn't answer those questions right, then you need to get rid of that excuse because it is shackled to your leg, and it will keep you, and make you unfit to enter the kingdom of heaven.

If [a] man is not willing to deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Jesus [see Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23], he can't be His disciple. That's why Jesus says, if you look in the middle of [Luke 9:]60: "But

as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.” Go proclaim it and proclaim it everywhere. Go do the Lord’s work. This is nothing more than the Great Commission in condensed form. This is something we’re all to do—follow Jesus. Again, it’s not so much about location, it’s about our heart attitude because following Jesus means having a transformed life, and allowing God to reign over every part of your life, even your finances. “Yes, Lord, yes, to Your will and Your way.”

What if you’re sitting out there, and you’re thinking, “Jack, this one got me, man. This one got me big time. I think I have the love of money in my life, and I don’t know what to do. How do I get to the place where my wealth is Christ’s? How do I do that? How do I get rid of that excuse?” We’re getting there.

[Let’s cover the] third excuse first. God is not impressed with your higher-priority relationships. [Look at Luke 9:61:] “Another also said, ‘I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.’” Again, this seems so benign and harmless. [It seems like he’s saying], “OK, Jesus, I’m going to follow You. I’m just going to run home, get a few things, and say, ‘Mom, Dad, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, I’m leaving [and] I’m following Jesus. Later.’” But for all we know, the guy lived in Athens, or Rome, or Alexandria, Egypt. Let’s just say, [however, that] he lived 200 feet away. The fact is: the man was not willing to follow Jesus because he had an excuse, just like the other people had an excuse. All these excuses at first light seem very legitimate.

Jesus’ response, again, is telling. Look at [Luke 9:]62: “But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’” What does that tell you? If you look back, you will go crooked. That’s what’s happening. [The] simple plows [used in that day] are still used [today] in many countries around the world. A plow is just a stick with a piece of sharp metal, two handles, and a little harness [attached to it]. It’s just a rig, and you hook it up to an ox, or horse, or mule, or whatever. You slap the reins, and you start walking, and it digs the dirt up. It’s pretty basic. Everybody knew how it was done, [and] knew that

the only way to go straight and not wander all over the field was to look forward and keep your eyes on the business at hand. If you didn't do that, you'd go crooked.

If that [illustration] doesn't work for you, just imagine this. [Drive] down the freeway, hold the wheel straight, then look behind you, and say, "Man, look at that! Look at where I came from. I've never seen the freeway from this lane, in this direction, except for [in] my rearview mirror and it's always backwards. This is fascinating." You know what? The next thing you see [will be] Jesus. That's it. That will be the end of you. You will go crooked. Why? Because you can't go forward and look back or you go crooked.

The Apostle Paul said it this way in Philippians 3:13–14: "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." If you're out there, and you're thinking to yourself, "What does that mean? Does that mean I have to erase my past, never think of my memories, and [not celebrate] birthdays [or] anniversaries [anymore]? [Am I not supposed to] tell anybody about my conversion? [Am I to] never share the gospel—that happened in the past?" No, that's not what Paul or Jesus is getting at.

What Jesus knew about the man that we don't know about the man is that when that man was going to go home, and say, "Mom, Dad, Uncle Bill, [I'm leaving to follow Jesus,]" they'd say, "Hey, don't. I mean, come on. You've got family here. We love you. You can't just walk away from your family! It's almost harvest time! We need you. This Jesus guy is great, [but] you can follow Him *later*." Jesus knew that these family members would turn this man away from following God's calling on his life.

Are you engaged in an immoral relationship? You need to leave it and not look back. Whatever sins you engaged in before coming to Christ, don't look back to those sins. If you know the Lord, then you're constantly going to be tempted to think about things that you did in the past, and to go back and wallow in the mire. You have to not look back because you can't stay

on the straight and narrow to heaven if you're looking back to those things that will cause you to deviate from Christ's will for your life.

When we get to Luke 14:26 [(if we ever get there)], Luke is going to tell us some of the scariest words, I think, in all the Bible, where Jesus says: "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Those are some serious words. Hate—a translation from a Greek word that means "hate." What's going on there? Is Jesus saying, "Don't honor your parents?" No, He got down on the scribes and Pharisees because they did not honor their parents [see Matthew 15:1–9]. So, what is He saying here? He's making a comparative statement that, "When mother, father, husband, wife, brother, sister, whoever it may be—your dearest, closest family ties, whatever—if any of those people ever want you to sin against Me, to disobey My calling on your life, you must say 'no.'"

There is only one way to show love—we talk about this all the time—and that's what? To obey. If your parents are saying, "Don't do it," and God is saying, "Do do it," then you have to hate the one and love the other. It's the only way to do it. You have to put Christ above all your other earthly relationships. You can't let them stand in your way.

Thomas Watson said, "If our dearest, closest friends should stand in our way in our pursuit after heaven, we must either jump over them or trample them under foot." You can't let anybody let you sin. You [might be thinking], "Well, if I do, this person will get mad at me." I want you to know, there are many in this congregation right now who have been ostracized [and/or] divorced because they wanted to follow the Lord. They wanted to love the Lord, and their spouse, or their family members, or close friends, said, "Listen, [if] you do that, I'm not having anything to do with you." It happens all the time. I think [all] Christian[s have] experienced this to one degree or another, and it's painful. It's painful because [you may say], "OK, [if] you want to be an unbeliever, fine, but I've got to talk about Jesus. He's Lord of my life. I'm kind of consumed with Him, [and their response

is], “No, it’s either you and no Jesus, or we don’t want you.” When that happens, you walk away because you aren’t going to sin against the Lord for anybody.

If you’re out there, and you’re thinking, “But this is hard. I don’t know if I can do this. Is it worth it?” You know what? Peter had the same question. Turn to Matthew 19:27–30: “Then Peter said to Him, ‘Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?’” If you remember, the apostles, man, they did [leave behind everything]. Jesus called them—Peter, James, John, Andrew—[and] they just left their nets, left their boats, left their lucrative family business, their father who was running their business, and just walked away from it. Matthew, Mr. Tax Collector, Mr. Fortune 500 Guy, he just walked away from it all to follow Jesus. They all just walked away from it all, and Peter’s saying, “Lord, we don’t have anything but You. We’ve left [it] all. What’s going to happen? We don’t have anything to go back to.” Look at Jesus’ encouraging words in verse[s] 28[-30]:

And Jesus said to them, ”Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

Isn’t that great? No one is going to get to heaven, and go, “Man, this is a gyp. That wasn’t worth it. I had to sacrifice a pretty close relationship and now look what I’ve got.”

Maybe you and your wife want to be missionaries but your parents don’t want you to follow God’s calling on your lives because they want to be close to the grandkids. Don’t look back. Maybe you have an unbelieving wife, or

an unbelieving husband, and he or she doesn't want you to go to church, he or she doesn't want you to read your Bible, he or she doesn't want you to be so fanatical. [He or she says], "Can't you just go to church once a month, and be religious, and not talk to me about the Bible, and not live the truth out?"

"No! It's either me and Jesus or you don't get us if you don't want us [both]. We come as a package. I am a Christian, a follower of Christ."

Maybe you're dating somebody, and that person says, "Can't you just lower your standards a little bit? I mean, you don't have to be so literally biblical."

You just say, "No!" You dump the person and you don't look back. Don't let any relationship take you away from following Christ. Don't look back because those relationships, as wholesome as they may appear at first glance, if they hinder you from doing God's will, they're bad relationships.

[Those] are the three excuses. You know what? It's hard to even think of an excuse that you could offer that doesn't have something to do with pleasure, money, or relationships. That pretty much covers the whole gamut. It's amazing how it works, isn't it? [Do] you know what's interesting about this? All three of these men had what appeared to be good intentions, but what else is interesting is [that] all three of these men had higher priorities than Jesus, and what's scary is [that] all three of these men were unfit to enter the kingdom of God.

If excuses are keeping you from following Jesus, from giving your life to Christ, I want to tell you how to break free right now. First, I want to speak to you who don't know Christ. Oh, I know you're here, and you probably call yourself a Christian, but when you look at your life [and] you [think], "Listen, I don't serve in any ministry. I don't ever, or rarely, read my Bible. I don't love God. I don't love the things of God. I don't love the people of God," you're not a believer. Just tell yourself the truth. Having got that over, what are you going to do? What are you going to do? You've got these excuses in your life, they're shackled to your leg, and you can't even bring yourself to look down at the latch [to undo them]. Well, this is how

it works. You're a sinner. You've sinned against a holy God, and how does God feel about that? He does not like that because He is perfectly holy, and perfectly just. He has to punish sin.

People think, "Oh, well, God forgave so-and-so here, and God forgave so-and-so here and He forgives me." What comes in their mind is: "God can choose, whenever He feels like it, to just say, 'You're forgiven,' and kind of gloss over His justice." Never. Never, ever happened. It can't happen. It would undo God if He ever didn't punish every sin to the fullest extent. He must have satisfaction to the fullest degree, and since He is infinitely holy and perfect, and every sin is an infinite offense [to Him], the punishment is huge. Here we are, we're all sinners. We all have our little idols in our hearts that are keeping us from coming to Jesus, so what happens there? If they're going to plunge us into hell because we won't come to Jesus because we have these excuses, how do we break free? What has to happen? Here it is: God's grace has to change your life.

God's grace comes to you in the person of Jesus. God says, "OK, there are a bunch of excuse-offering rebels down there. If I wait around for some of them to come follow Me, it'll never happen. So, what I'm going to do is I'm going to go down to earth, I'm going to be born of a virgin. Through My Son, I will have a sinless life. I won't have any sin nature. I'll just live this perfect life. Jesus will live, and He will willingly offer Himself up on the cross as a sacrifice. He will bear the sins of the many. He will be crushed for their iniquities, the chastening of their well-being will fall upon Him. He will be bruised, beaten, tortured in their place, in substitution. I will pour out My wrath on My Son. He will be the perfect Lamb of God [see John 1:29], the substitute who takes away the sin of the world. Then anybody who is willing to believe in Him, and trust in Him, and what He accomplished on the cross, and His resurrection, I will save that person and wipe out, cancel out, the certificate of debt so that before Me they are perfect, and holy, and just." [Do] you know what happens? You receive the Holy Spirit and the power to walk away from those things that are keeping you from Christ. It's all by God's grace.

If you've never done this, if you've never come to God, and said, "God, save me! I can't save myself. Help me believe. Help my unbelief. I can't do it!" that is right where you need to be. That's where everybody gets to when they get saved: "I can't do it!"

When you can't do it, then God says, "Bingo! You've got it! You can't save yourself!" Then what does He do? He saves you. He gives you the Holy Spirit. He causes you to be born again, and now you have all the things you need to begin to walk away from those excuses that want to keep you going crooked.

Let's just say, though, that you are saved. You're a Christian, you're born again, your life has been changed, but man, you keep going back. You just think, "Oh, I am such a sow returning to wallow in the mire, or the dog that returns to its vomit [see 2 Peter 2:22]. That is me! I hate that! What is going on here? What can I do to get to the place where I'm not so enslaved to those things that I supposedly repented of and I keep going back to?" Know this: When you are saved, you don't become instantly perfect unless you die right after that. You begin to grow in godliness, and that process of growth is called "sanctification." It is a process. God does it in His own good timing. Just as you were saved by grace [see Ephesians 2:8], you were also sanctified. [You will] grow in godliness, by grace.

What does that mean? I think people have this misconception of grace. They think that grace is kind of like magical verbiage that God throws on people, like pixie dust, to make them godly. That's not it. If you were to ask somebody, "OK, what is grace?"

[They would say,] "Grace is undeserved, unearned favor or gifts from God."

Right. What gifts does God give you to grow in godliness? He gives you prayer, He gives you the Bible, He gives you the fellowship of the saints. He gives you spiritual gifts. He gives you resources to use. All of those things you have are all God's gracious gifts, and He gives them to you, and as you use them, you grow. [If] you don't use them, you don't grow. You could put a plant out in your yard, barely water it, barely keep it alive, [so]

it's just this anemic-looking little shrub. Or, you could cultivate around it, fertilize it, water it, and, man, that thing will thrive. What is the difference? One's neglected, and one's nurtured. Let me ask you: If you're having a hard time turning away from those things from your past, are you using the gracious resources God has given you to thrive in your life? I can tell you this: if you do that, you will find the power resident within you to say "no." It's already there.

If you don't take the resources and use them, if God just lays them in front of you, and says, "Here's the Bible, which will transform you from one glory to the next. Here is prayer, which I will answer. Here is the fellowship of the saints to encourage you to love and good deeds [see Hebrews 10:24]. Here are spiritual gifts, which you can use to be blessed. Here are these resources, and skills, and gifts, and finances, and whatever it is that you can have. If you use those I will bless you. Here you go. Use them and then I'll change your life," and you say, "Well, I don't want to do that. Just [give me] grace, Lord," it's not happening. It's not happening. You use God's gracious resources; God changes your life. You don't, you're anemic and you'll find yourself weak and unable to turn from those things that are hindering you in your walk with the Lord.

You're going to leave here this morning, and the question is this: Are there any excuses that are keeping you from following Christ, from becoming a Christian, from being born again? If there are, repent of those excuses and cry out to God, and say, "I cannot save myself, but Lord save me, change me, make me new. I receive Jesus. I believe He died on the cross for me. I believe He suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day. I trust that and only that to save me. Please make me new."

[Do] you think God's going to [say], "No way!" No, He answers those prayers—always. He is a merciful God, and He will grant you everything you need to live for Him.

If you are a Christian, and you're haunted, ask yourself, "Am I keeping my sins confessed, and am I using the resources He has given me?" That's how people grow. Whatever you do, don't look back. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this great text this morning. What a blessing it is. And, Father, it's neat to see how Your Holy Spirit has assembled just a few phrases that are so packed with soul-searching truth. Father, I know that all of us fall into the love of pleasure, the love of money, the love of relationships over You, and, Father, we want to confess that. Father, if there is somebody here who doesn't know You, Father, I pray he or she would see that tomorrow never comes, that this morning is the day of salvation, that he or she would cry out to you today, be saved by placing his or her faith alone in Christ alone, and His death, and resurrection alone to save him or her. And for the rest of us, Father, help us to keep our sins confessed, help us to use Your gracious resources to live a life that is pleasing to You so that other men can see by our lives that we are followers of Jesus. We pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

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