

“The Passionate Pursuit”

Someone says, “salt”, and you immediately think- “pepper”. Someone says, “hot”, and you immediately think- “cold”. Someone says, “dark”, and you immediately think- “light”. There are some associations between words and concepts that appear to be almost automatic. In some respects, this documents that we cannot help what we think. Our responses are frequently conditioned to becoming almost automatic. On the other hand, some associations are much more constrained and learned, and while they may seem to be automatic or subconscious, we can change them.

For example, what one word comes to your mind when you think of the following words or phrases?

- go to church
- study the Bible
- pray
- give money to the church
- avoid worldly pleasure

Did you think “Christian” or “disciple”? If so, then you would fit right in line with the Pharisees of Jesus’ day who frequently found themselves irritated by Jesus and His teaching.

Keep in mind, the Pharisees were the experts. They knew their religion. They knew what they believed. They knew what they should do and what they should not do. In fact, the word “Pharisee” means “separated ones”- and that is precisely what they did. They literally separated themselves from what they believed to be all ungodly influence. They became so consumed with keeping God’s law that they made up a whole slew of extra laws and practices that were designed to make sure they kept God’s law. Being a Pharisee was a lot of work, but as they would quickly learn, this wasn’t exactly what Jesus had in mind for His followers.

When Jesus invited people to follow Him, He did so with a completely different agenda. So, uncharacteristically, He did not insist on ceremonial hand washing before His disciples sat down to eat. He did not mind if His followers walked through a wheat field on the Sabbath and broke off heads of grain to eat. He was not overly concerned with the precision of execution in religious practice. Beyond this, He was always spending His time socially with the worst sort of people. All these things bundled together infuriated the indignation of the Pharisees.

Many of us are guilty of thinking the word “disciple” means “super Christian”, or someone who is more dedicated to spiritual things than the average person. Not surprisingly, “discipleship” is mistakenly understood to be the training of the new or nearly new believer. The perceived objective is to finish the training so that the new believer can look like, talk like, and then act like the rest of us. If that sounds like a novel thought, forget it. This is exactly what the Pharisees were doing in the day of Jesus. Well guess what? Today, in the midst of a shifting spiritual landscape, no one wants to be a “super Christian”. I don’t even think anyone wants to know a “super Christian”.

The truth is, too many of us have grown up in broken homes. Too many of us have been disoriented by tragedy in our lives. Too many of us have lost faith in cultural institutions, including the Church. Too many of us grow up wondering if anyone really cares about us. In a world like ours, who needs a plastic, disingenuous “super Christian”?

What we really need are people who enter into relationships with other people who are not necessarily shiny and pretty on the outside, but who are real and authentic with the life God has given them, as messy as it may be.

Until the 1990's, family shows dominated television programming. "Family Ties" and "The Cosby Show", while not as traditional as "Leave It to Beaver" or "Father Knows Best", still had mom and dad working together to provide a safe harbor for their children. Since the early 90's, those shows have been replaced with others that reflect real life. "Friends" and "Seinfeld" depicted a group of very different people held together not by blood, but by loyalty. Changes in our culture have changed how we define community- yet, community is still what we are all hungry to find. If we no longer have a traditional family to which we can "belong", where can we belong?

The mega-marketing machine of our culture spends billions to tell us what we can be- if only we will buy their products. Young people find their identities in song lyrics and movie dialogue, on MTV, in brand-name shoes and jeans, in cell phones, and of course, the internet. When they get a little older, they look for a house worthy of the image they wish to project and a steadily growing 401(k) fund with just the right mix of mutual funds. With everyone else in the world telling us who we are, is it any wonder we are confused about who we want to be and how we need others to connect with us?

When Jesus walked the roads of Galilee, He used words to teach His students- parables, sermons, prayers. The first disciples passed these on to the next generation of disciples, and to the next. When the gospel writers finally recorded Jesus' words and life several decades after He died, large gatherings of followers listened to the words as they were repeated publicly. People learned the Scriptures by hearing and memorizing.

Since the advent of the printing press- and more recently, the internet- we no longer have to remember something we hear. We can now just go look it up again when we need the information. Our advances in technology have come at the cost of our ability to store and retrieve large quantities of information using only our minds.

We are living in an increasingly visual society. Small children recognize marketing logos long before they can decode the letters that make up the names of their favorite places. Every parent in the room knows what I'm talking about. Children know a McDonald's when they see the golden arches a mile away. Teenagers wear their clothes and hair just so- much to the consternation of their parents- because they are trying to achieve "the look". Magazines for all ages have a visual edge because information is not enough to keep the reader's attention. Some great books have been made into movies and many adults would quickly agree they would rather see the movie than read the book. Family games during long car trips have been replaced by DVD players that conveniently flip down from the ceiling of the car.

Trust me when I tell you I am not on a tangent, I'm really not. I am, however, interested in trying to help us cut through the muck and mire of the changing spiritual landscape around us in order to get back to following Jesus during these times of seismic change. I'm talking about encountering Jesus at a fresh level. I'm talking about building our lives around the framework of truth. I'm talking about building biblical principles into our lives. I'm talking about growing together with other disciples in an authentic community of faith.

See, Jesus never intended for His principles for kingdom life to be theoretical. He meant for us to actually live by them! Jesus fully intended for each of us to leave the world of the walking weary and to live a life full of purpose and passion. Let me just warn you now- this is the kind of discipleship that is certain to raise eyebrows! Jesus was never afraid of scandal. He was no so much concerned with perceptions of public morality as He was with hearts genuinely turned toward God. When we are committed to walking in His footsteps, powerful emotions erupt- intense feelings, convictions, life-shaping experiences- a passionate life.

More than likely you have, at one time or another, felt as if the events of your life were beyond your control. Life is a challenge. Every day we are presented with 1,440 new moments in time. What happens in many of those moments may be beyond our control, though not beyond God's control. Yet it is these very moments that make up the sum of our lives- and determine whether we feel like we are living a life of significance or irrelevance.

As a follower of Jesus you want your life to count- to have a purpose and meaning beyond what is offered to you by the world- because you know that it is the kingdom life that will have lasting value. Jesus, our Teacher, reveals to us how we can learn from the moments of our lives.

MARK 1:14-15- *"The time has come," Jesus said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

At the very beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus tells us of a great opportunity: God's kingdom is within our reach. To enter the kingdom, however, we must repent and believe. This involves the necessary step of voluntarily laying down our lives, picking up the cross, and following Jesus. This is the initiation into the kingdom of God. The *kairos* moments of our lives become the portal through which we enter into kingdom living.

In the language of Jesus' day, there were two primary words for "time"- *chronos* and *kairos*. The first is a reference to chronological time, such as when you check the clock to see how long you have to wait for lunch or when you announce dinner will be at seven o'clock.

Kairos, on the other hand, reveals an event that happened at a particular point in time. If that seven o'clock dinner turns out to be the most fun you've had in a long time and you feel some relief from the pressures of your life, then it become a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* refers to a significant event- good or bad- that alters your life. Something happened or something was said that made an impact. It may even have made *chronos* time seem to stand still.

Do you remember the day you were married? How about the birth of your first child? Think about a favorite vacation you took with your family. These are all *kairos* moments you cherish. Some *kairos* events, however, leave an impact because of their tragic consequence: the death of a loved one, a divorce, an argument with a coworker, the horrific events of September 11, 2001, or hurricane Katrina.

Kairos events may be positive or negative; but they are never neutral. By their very nature, *kairos* moments make a lasting impression on you. Maybe you receive a promotion and a raise at work. The additional money will allow you to move into the size house your family really needs. The new position lets you use your talents in a more creative way. You are more energized than you have been in years.

On the other hand, perhaps you offer a word of encouragement to someone, but the person takes it the wrong way. Others find out and think that you are spreading gossip. You notice the whispers and fingers pointed back at you. You feel anxiety and fear. You are passing through a *kairos* moment. Emotions are a great indicator of *kairos* events. Often the events that trigger negative emotions present the greatest opportunities for growth.

Most of us are an analytical lot. When a *kairos* moment occurs, especially one that stirs up negative emotions, we want to study all the events that led to this crisis with the hope of preventing a similar thing from happening again. We think what we need to learn from our mistakes is how not to ever make that mistake again.

Really, we're looking through the wrong end of the telescope! Instead of looking back at the event to prevent circumstances from converging in the same way again, we need to look forward to the growth that we can experience from it. Rather than focusing on what we want to leave behind from an experience, we should be proactive about what we want forward from the experience as we move into the next task or relationship or season of our lives.

Typically, we look at the journey of faith as linear, with a starting point (salvation) and an ending point (heaven). We are headed toward a specific destination, and the road that will get us there is straight and flat. All we have to do is stay on the straight and narrow.

Unfortunately, this does not give the best picture of the walk of a disciple. Let me explain. Here you are walking on what you consider to be a straight path; no expected bends in the road, no intersections where you have to make a decision you are not prepared to make. Perhaps you have a specific purpose in mind or perhaps you are simply walking in the general direction that seems best. Then, seemingly out of the blue, a *kairos* moment happens and bring you to a screeching halt.

Now you are at an intersection that requires a reaction, a decision. You can keep on walking forward, ignoring the door for growth, act as if the event never happened and had no effect on you. Or, you can stop and refuse to move in any direction at all. The event affects you so strongly that you are not sure you even want to be on this road any longer. Or, you can go backward to a part of the path you already know and stay where it's familiar and safe. Or, You can pass through the portal and enter into the process of growth. What propels us is the *kairos* event.

Change is inevitable in the life of discipleship; it is part of the passionate life. Doesn't everyone long for a passionate life? I mean, we love passionate and enthusiastic people- they seem to carry something of the nature of God with them. It really does seem as though the human heart was created for passion and enthusiasm. Yet, as we face life's challenges, we can suffer a sequence of losses and disappointments that have the capacity to kill our passion. Missed opportunities, broken relationships, the stresses and strains of life that cause us hurt take their toll.

Eventually we try to protect ourselves and our passion is gradually restrained, starved, and weakened. We begin to feel less alive as a result. This is a dangerous position to be in because a hungry heart is a persistent predator looking to devour anything that will give temporary respite to the ache within. Our hearts become more vulnerable to the quick fix and can be drawn into a season of darkness and depression. We don't have to go there- and if we find ourselves there, we don't have to stay there.

Jesus loves us too much to leave us as we are. As His disciple, we are called to a life of constant renewal, revival- of change. By learning how to identify the kairos moments in your life and choosing to repent and believe, you can transform the way you view the challenges of your life. You can find hope and healing for your past, present, and future. You can face life enthusiastically.