

Looking for Something

The last couple weeks, we've been looking for a car for our daughter Ellie, who is away at college. When I look for a car, I do a ton of research, which is great because you can do most of that research online ahead of time.

I check out reliability ratings. We're not buying a new car for her, it'll have some miles on it, so I wanted to make sure we were buying a car that had a good track record. Then, what do people who have owned this car say about it? Did they like it? Then I compare what I found out about that car with other cars like it.

And then, most helpful of all is you can find the exact car you want online. After doing all my research, I landed on a Mazda3 Hatchback. It has great reliability ratings at the price-point I wanted. So, I started looking for one of those.

The first one I found was on Facebook marketplace from a personal seller. I agreed to meet her for a test-drive Monday after work way over in Wayzata. I liked it, but it seemed a bit noisy and had a little shake in the back end. It made me uneasy enough that I wanted to drive some others to compare.

That's when I made my error in judgement. I knew I had seen one online in the South metro, rather than looking it up and going right there, I figured I would just meander my way through the southwest metro (during rush hour) and stop at some dealerships along the way to see if there was anything else that caught my eye.

But it turned out to be one of the most frustrating days I've had in a long time. I ended up wandering around (usually at about 15 mph), not finding many dealerships. And the ones I *did* find only had late-model cars—much more than I wanted to pay.

Well, as I drove, I could feel myself getting agitated. Of course, I was getting annoyed with the other drivers because they were in my way. I was hungry and I wasn't making any progress. That's when I realized driving around without a plan was a terrible idea. How could I know if I was making any progress if I didn't have a destination?

By the way, did you know that your phone can track everywhere you've been? It's pretty scary, actually! But also, useful. Because here's where I drove on my quest Monday [wandering pic]—all 129 miles! For those of you who think this is creepy and you have an Android phone. Pull out your phone, go to <settings> <google> <location> and turn off location. Unless you think you might need an alibi someday, then keep it on.

It was so bad I almost gave up and went home. But I knew if I quit, I'd just have to do it again another day. So, I pressed on. I decided I needed a plan. At about 6:30 I stopped at an Arby's in Bloomington, pulled out my computer and targeted two cars I wanted to drive. One was in Burnsville and the other in Inver Grove Heights.

From that point, my whole mood changed. I knew where I needed to go. I drove with purpose and conviction. I knew I was making progress and that made all the difference. In fact, it was so successful that I bought a car and I don't regret it.

Looking back, it occurs to me that this is what many people experience today—living without a real sense of purpose. As kids, they had purpose. *I'm going to be a firefighter. I'm going to be doctor. I'm going to get married, have kids, make a bunch of money and I'll be happy.* But things happen and the story goes one of two ways—either circumstances or poor choices in your past derailed your quest for the life you wanted or you accomplished pretty much everything you wanted, but it's left you asking, “Is this all there is?” Either way, today I want you to consider that just maybe Jesus is the answer to what you're looking for.

Each week of this series, we're talking to people at one of four stages of faith. Some of you would say you're “Looking for Something.” Others would say you've Found It in Jesus, but you haven't really gone beyond a basic belief. Most of you would probably say you're “Following It” and yet you have times in your life where you get stuck and can't seem to make progress. And a few of you have gotten to the point where you are “All About It”—everything centers on Jesus. Today, I want to talk to the first group.

When we say someone is “looking for something,” I think most people know what I mean. But when we say someone has “found it” or are “following it”, what are we talking about? Well, we're talking about something very specific. We've talked about the fact that we live in a society that tells us the “it” is different for everyone.

A perfect example comes from the old movie *City Slickers*. How many of you have seen it? Well, the message here is clear. [City Slickers clip] Now, there's something I agree

with here, but something I want to clarify. First, I think it's great Curly recognizes that in order to find purpose and peace, you need to have an end in mind. My car buying trip became much better once I had a destination. It gave me purpose and direction.

But where I think I disagree with the movie is this: Curly seems to imply that the "one thing" that will bring peace can be anything you choose, just as long as you stay focused on that one thing. That's popular to say, but I don't believe it's true.

Last week, I told the story of Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School who talked about how unhappy so many of his classmates became chasing money or career success. I've rarely seen someone who chased career success who didn't regret it later. People on their deathbed don't say, *"I just wish I'd spend more time at the office."*

You see, *what you choose* as the "one thing" is critical. Money won't do it. Career success won't do it. Sex won't do it. A life of comfort and ease won't do it. Raising a family is closer, but even that isn't enough. Not coincidentally, I'm in agreement with Jesus on this one.

In the book of Matthew, Jesus tells these two parables, **"⁴⁴The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.** And he tells this one after it. ⁴⁵**"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."**

According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is so good and so valuable that it's worth trading everything else. The man didn't do it out of obligation. He did it out of joy. He wasn't hesitant, he did it because he was so excited about what he found, he considered it a no-brainer. But if the Kingdom of Heaven is worth selling everything for, "*What is the Kingdom of Heaven?*" That seems to be a critical question.

Some people say the Kingdom of Heaven is just heaven. In other words, getting to heaven is so important that nothing you do here on earth matters. Well, there's certainly some truth to that. Just to give you some perspective, here's a visual.

Let's say you live to be 80... [line on a rope illustration] If that's true, then whatever changes you were to make in this life, to gain that life would be a good investment. This a point Jesus makes in a number of places. In Mark 8:36-37, Jesus asks the question, **"³⁶What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"**

It's also why Jesus encourages us, **"¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Mt 6:19-20)** So, don't minimize eternity. But if the Kingdom of Heaven is *only* about eternity, it doesn't have much to say about what you're looking for now.

But, it turns out that the Kingdom of Heaven has a lot to do with right now. You see, when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, he's talking about *a new way of living*. It *starts* with the decision to follow Jesus and culminates in life after this life, but it also has everything to do with how you live now. In fact, I believe that whatever it is that you're "looking for" here is just physical expression of a spiritual desire. For instance...

Some people return to church when they have a child and suddenly realize they're responsible for this precious life. They need a guide. Some people come because the world can be a lonely place and they need friendships and people they know will care about them. Some people come because they feel a general sense of hopelessness and don't even know what they're looking for. They just know that what they're doing does seem to be working anymore—they're driving through life without a clear destination.

Each of these seem like simple, practical longings, but they all have a spiritual source. I believe that what you're feeling is God tugging at you and saying, "Hey, here I am. Don't forget about me." Like Augustine famous prayer, "*You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.*" If we are made for God, then every longing finds its fulfillment in him.

So, where do we start? Well, following Jesus *starts* with a decision. If you want to be on the chess team, or go to college, or fly to Hawaii, you first have to make up your mind—sign up, enroll, or buy a ticket. But the decision isn't the end. If you're on the chess team, you have to practice and play matches. After you're accepted to college, you

have to go to class and study. When you decide to fly to Hawaii, you have to buy the ticket and get on a plane.

In the same way, following Jesus starts with a decision. And when you make that decision, no matter who you are, where you're from, or what you've done in the past, God welcomes you into the family. But it doesn't stop there. You become Jesus' apprentice and you learn about life from him. You'll learn hard lessons along the way. You'll probably mess up, but he's patient, and over time through his teaching and a lot of grace, your life is transformed. But it starts with that decision to follow.

Now, there are some of you who say that sounds good. And you're almost there, but not yet. Because there are barriers that keep you from making that decision. So, let's talk about some of the barriers to belief for next few minutes.

Last week, we said there are four ingredients to growth; Right Knowledge, Right Affections, Right Practice, and the Right Community. Well, as I thought about it, I realized that these same ingredients can also be barriers to faith. Let me show you.

The first barrier is knowledge. Last week, we said that to grow in knowledge is to align your view of the world with reality. But the fact is, life is complicated and it's often hard to know what's true. And yet, people often try to give simplistic answers to complex questions—even Christians. Now, some people are satisfied with simplistic answers, but others are not. But when people who think deeply get simplistic answers, they believe Christianity doesn't stand up.

But we don't have to give simplistic answers. I don't know that Christianity will answer every question, but then, I don't believe any belief system can answer every question. At the same time, there were and are great thinkers in virtually every field of study and walk of life who have come to believe in the truth of Jesus. That doesn't prove it's true, but what you can't say that it's impossible to be a _____ (biologist, geologist, philosopher, etc.) and believe in Jesus.

I believe the Christian faith gives the best answers to complex questions. But if you're not sure, in your notes, we've pointed you to some resources to explore for yourself. Including a series we did this last fall called "Beta." There are many people for whom the big questions weren't a barrier, but the thing that led them to Christ.

Now, maybe you agree that Christianity can answer some of the big questions, but you have a hard time committing because there are so many options out there and you wonder, how can anyone decide? There are so many religions, philosophies and ways of life, you're paralyzed by choice. Well, if that's you, I have a question and an encouragement for you.

The question is, *"Do you want to believe it?"* Because that makes a huge difference in whether you find the answers satisfying. We had someone contact the church office with some questions about Christianity. I wasn't in the office at the time, so Keith answered her questions, to which she replied with more questions. But the one of her

messages weren't inquisitive, they were argumentative. It seems she only contacted us to try to refute our answers. I don't expect any answer would satisfy her.

But here's my encouragement. Explore from the posture of wanting to believe. That doesn't mean you should accept simplistic answers, but it does mean that you explore with a sincere heart. I doubt anyone is really open to belief until they *want* it to be true.

The second barrier is Right Affections. This barrier is less strictly intellectual as it is existential. In my experience, for most people, this is a greater barrier to faith in Jesus than intellectual questions. Think about the problem of evil, for instance. We think of it as an intellectual barrier, but for most people, it's more of an emotional barrier. Even if you can find intellectual answers that make sense, some people still can't get over existential hurdle that an all-loving God allows what seems to be an excessive amount of suffering. That doesn't make the hurdle less real, but it does require different answers.

Or maybe the emotional barrier has more to do with parents who claimed to be Christians, but were abusive or hypocritical. Of course, it's not hard to say that any individual Christian doesn't represent all Christians, but it's another thing to live through that kind of childhood. It makes sense that this is usually a greater barrier than intellectual belief since the psychologist, Jon Haight shows us that our lives are directed 85-90% by our emotions and only 10-15% by conscious rational choice.

Listen to Linda's story [Linda clip] Emotions don't have to be the barrier to faith. They're often what bring people to faith. Linda's struggles after her brother's death and divorce shortly after caused her to try to find comfort in wild living. But it was only after Christ found her that she found peace.

The third barrier for many people is the barrier of practice. People inherently know that when you follow Jesus, you have to live differently. Self-control is a higher value than self-expression. It's about delayed, rather than instant gratification. Denying yourself rather than indulging. Then there are the practices like worship and prayer and Bible study. And some people just don't want the constraints.

The world today often says that freedom is the greatest value. And it's true, freedom is something we all desire. But most of the time, our society defines freedom as the absence of outside constraints. The fewer rules there are, the freer I am. Freedom from feels nice. It's good not to have restrictive rules.

But there is a greater kind of freedom—it's the ability to do what's more valuable. Sometimes these freedoms are in conflict with each other. Let's say there's a man in his sixties who loves to eat. (I know it's hard to imagine, but try your best.) He also loves to spend time with his grandchildren. But at a checkup, the doctor tells him he needs to stop eating his favorite foods or he'll have a heart-attack.

Most people today think of freedom as the ability to do whatever we want. In this case, for the man to eat whatever he wants and the ability to play with his grand-

children. But he can't have both. If he eats whatever he wants, he won't be free to play with his grandkids because he'll be bedridden or dead. So, he has to choose one over the other. You see, the other kind of freedom is the ability to do what is best.

Christianity values freedom. In John 8:36, Jesus says, **“When the son has set you free, you are really free.”** The Apostle Paul in the book of Galatians writes, **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”** What they mean is Jesus can give you both kinds of freedom.

The Bible says that Jesus frees us from sin. I know that sounds old-fashioned, but the truth is that sin makes us slaves. When we indulge our desires, we become slaves to our desires—it could be alcohol, money, sex, power—all of these can enslave us. But when we align our lives with the way of Jesus, we don't have to be enslaved to these things and we'll be free to be everything God created us to be. Practicing the way of Jesus isn't restrictive, it's life-giving and leads to a life of purpose.

Finally, the reason some people don't get through the barrier of faith is the problem of community. And usually this barrier is the result of a bad church experience. For instance, some people grew up in strict churches that squashed questions as being unspiritual. This was the case for our friend Daniel Brick.

When we did our Beta series, I asked him what questions he had about Christianity. At first, he was floored that I asked, so he responded with a number of questions. When I thanked him for his honesty, this was his reply.

"I'm so grateful for your response. I've kept so much bottled up inside for so long either because I assumed no one is interested or feared the response will be judgmental in the extreme. But your response has been to open the door wider, a door I expected a believer to slam in my face. That's what happened in high school when I confided in two priest a year apart. The first one told me to stop reading literature because it was challenging my faith in "Holy Mother Church" and her "Teaching Authority." I kept reading. The second one in my senior year said it was good I wasn't going to a state university, but rather St. Thomas; he actually said if I kept thinking these non-Catholic thoughts, my soul would turn to dust. That image really disturbed me, but fortunately reading secular humanist literature made my inner life a garden. So, by 18 I turned my back on Catholicism and by extension Christianity."

Now, the point is not to denigrate Catholicism because he could have just as easily had this experience in a protestant church. The point is that his experience closed the door on Christianity for most of Daniel's life.

It might be when a teenage girl gets pregnant and treated harshly and is rejected by the church. It might be spiritual or sexual or other kinds of abuse, it could be the

hypocrisy of people who are supposed to be Christian leaders. Whatever it is I don't want to make light of it or make excuses. I want to say, I'm sorry.

But if a bad church experience is a barrier, a good one is an invitation. Daniel would tell you that he re-opened the door on Christianity that was once closed. And a big reason is the acceptance of the community he's found here with you. When he first came, I'm not sure he would have said he was looking for anything. He's always been an inquisitive guy, but largely he came to support his friend, Sonja. But he's found much more.

I don't believe it's a coincidence you're here. Whatever issue or longing or coincidence got you through the door, I believe the real reason is because God is calling you—he has placed whatever circumstance or desire inside you to draw you to him. And I know the barriers we talked about can be real and strong. But they can also simply be excuses that keep you from taking the step you know you need to take.

Now, I'm not asking you to become super-Christian right away. It's not out of the realm of possibility, because when God get a hold of willing person, he can do amazing things. But what I am asking you to do is take one step...to ask yourself first, "Do I want to believe?" and second, "*What is the barrier that keeps me from putting my foot in the ground, turning and following Jesus?*" And rather than allowing that barrier to be an excuse that you never seriously try to overcome, break it down.

There are two ways it can happen. Sometimes, when you make that decision, God enters your life and shatters that barrier. You find that what you thought was a wall, is actually just a giant snow-bank and the power of God melts it away.

The other way is that you look into and strongly and sincerely you chip away at it. But this takes some of your will cooperating with God's power. It means putting in work and effort to study, or discipline yourself or seek out a godly Christian you admire and let them guide you. One way or another make a decision to respond to God today.

God, if you're there
I want to know you
I want to live how you would have me live.
I don't know everything it means to follow you, but I'm willing to try.
Show me more of who you are as I follow with what I have
Help me to become all that you created me to be
Today I'm choosing to follow you - as best I can with as much as you've given me.