

BELPRES CHURCH

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Mark 8:35, John 10:10, Luke 14:25-27

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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So Jesus asked that you would come and do what my words cannot do, help us surrender everything to you, be refined by you to be the people you created us to be. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, hello to our 11:00 service and middle schoolers, high schoolers, all of you guys who are joining us. Thank you for being here. Many of you have heard of The Babylon Bee. It is a Christian satirical website, and I read something there recently that's kind of snarky, but it makes a point so I want to read it to you. The title was After Years of Quarterly Church Attendance, Parents Shocked by Daughter's Lack of Faith. And the article went this way. Remember, this is satire, okay? So it went this way. Trevor Michelson and his wife, Kerri, are reeling after discovering that after years of taking their daughter, Janie, to church every Sunday, they didn't have a more pressing sporting commitment, which was at least once every three months, she no longer demonstrates the strong quarterly commitment to the faith they raised her with. "I just don't understand it," said Trevor, "almost every time, there was a rained out game or a break between seasons, we had Janie in church. It was obviously a priority for our family."

"I can't tell you how often we prayed the prayer of Jabez on the way to the game," said Janie's mom. "This just shows how the church is failing this generation." The Michelsons plan to chat with their pastor about this after their son's soccer season is over. Kind of snarky, and I got three kids who did sports so I know all the pressures and all of that. I get it, but still, it makes a point. Unless we make our relationship with Jesus a priority, nothing happens. We don't feel connected to him. We don't receive the courage, the power, the joy that he's promised to give us. We are not refined by fire like he has promised. A faith that costs nothing yields nothing. We're doing a sermon series about how we can be all in following Jesus rather than just consumer Christians who kind of view God's job as to make us happy and give us what we want. And so many of you, this is a church, so many of you are earnestly seeking to be all in.

We are a church of people who want to do this, and there's some amazing rewards, there's some amazing things happen when we go all in, we experience more joy, more courage, we become who he created us to be, we live a bigger adventure, but those things don't happen unless we make Jesus our top priority, our number one priority. And that's what Jesus is getting at when he says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." Whoa. That is a harsh statement, isn't it? Right? And on the one hand, you look at that and go, "That's terrible. Why would Jesus want me to hate mothers, brothers, my family? Why am I going to hate my family?" And others of you might look at that and go, "It's unnecessary. I've already done that. I'm all in, Jesus."

But it's not really about family, it's about priorities. And what is the highest claim, what has the highest claim in our lives. And Jesus is using hyperbole here. He doesn't really mean that you should actively be hostile to your family, which may come as a disappointment to some of you. Some of you might, "That's my verse, my life's verse." Anyway. That'd be awkward at a baptism, wouldn't it be? What's your life verse? Anyway. I'm so off script. Anyhow, we know he doesn't mean to be hostile to your family because in other places, he criticizes religious leaders who use their faith as an excuse not to care for their family. So what does he mean? The word hate in Jesus' [inaudible 00:03:43] didn't just mean to be actively hostile, it also had a comparative function, so to love one thing less than another. Jesus is saying, in order to have the bigger life he promises to give us, we have to love everything else less than him.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus puts it this way, "Anyone who loves their father and mother more than me is not worthy of me." In other words, put Jesus first above everything, even family, which, back then, was a big deal because family was absolutely everything. Because without the right priorities, our lives get out of whack pretty quickly and every one of us has a top priority. We all have made something in our life, whether we admit it or not, we all have a top priority. It might be popularity, it might be grades, it might be your job, it might be sexual satisfaction, it might be money, it might be a whole bunch of stuff. We all have a top priority that is governing our lives, but which top priority we choose makes a huge difference.

So what is Jesus getting at when he says top priority? What is he really getting at? Well, the heart of it is that the main thing here is that he wants us to put Jesus first in our hearts. He talks about mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, he's covering the whole scope of life. When he says we should hate even our own life, what he's saying is don't come to me with your life plan and want me to bless it. I will not be used. Come to me for me, for the relationship with me, and I will be the most thrilling, fulfilling thing there is and give you abundant life, but my definition of abundant life might be different than your definition of abundant life and my way of getting you there may be very different than your plans for how you'd like to get there.

And what's interesting is the God that comes to us in Jesus is the only God in any religion who asks

to be loved. Other gods and other religions, they want to be obeyed, feared, all of that stuff, but only the God who comes to us in Jesus asks to be loved. Jesus is saying, "I want your heart. You have to get emotional about me." And right now, some of you are going, "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. I come to a Presbyterian church to make sure no emotion ever rears its ugly ad. Let's just keep emotions out of this. Keep it intellectual pastor." Right? Or you might be thinking, "How do I love someone I can't see?" I'll get to that in a minute. But here's the question, the question Jesus asks is not do you believe in me. Doesn't ask that question. The question Jesus asks is not do you give intellectual ascent to my existence. The question he asks is, do you love me? Are your prayers routine? Are you connecting with the living God? In worship, do you allow yourself to feel something for God or do you shut it down?

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has said to me after a service, "I was so moved in worship today, I wanted to shout out hallelujah." And I said, "Well, why didn't you?" And they said, "Well, because I was afraid that people around me would judge me or give me dirty looks, right?" Well, they're stupid. Right? If you're happy and you know it, shout amen, right? Amen, there you go, right? Now you don't have to shout amen, you can experience Jesus quietly in your heart. It's all good. But the main point here is what Jesus said was the top commandment. When asked, what is the greatest commandment, his response was, you shall, what? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Think about that for a minute. Of all the words that could have gone there, of all the words, obeyed, feared, revered, the God who comes to us in Jesus wants to be loved.

Because see, the proper ordering of our loves is the key to a transformed life. The way to noble character, courage, forgiveness, a bigger life, it's not willpower, it's the proper ordering of our loves. It's like buttoning a shirt. You know how if you get the first button wrong, the whole shirt just doesn't work, right? I do that frequently, like, "What's wrong? Oh." But if you buttoned it, first button right, everything else falls into place. Some of you right now may feel discouraged because you're not getting the grades you want or the job performance that you want, or maybe it's a health problem or maybe there's a relationship that's really rocky right now, and those things are important and we need to grieve those things when we lose those things and all of that is normal and human, but what all those things also have in common is that there's something we love more than Jesus, friends, job, health, reputation, more than Jesus. They're too important to us and so they own us.

But if we love Jesus more than anything, then the one thing we love the most, we can lose those other things, but we won't be devastated because the one thing that we love the most, Jesus, is the one thing we can never lose, not even in death. It's like that famous verse in the Bible. You all know that famous verse, right? "Seek first all these other things and the kingdom of God will be added to you." Isn't that a great... wait, that's not how it goes, right? "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you." Well, how on earth did we do that? How do I learn to love Jesus? I can't even see him. How do I put him first in my heart? A couple of things.

First, to put Jesus first in your heart, remember that you are first in his. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must take up their cross daily and follow me." And as Pastor Tim Keller points out, crucifixion was so common back then, everyone knew, if someone was carrying a cross, that meant that they were a condemned criminal. So what Jesus is saying here is put yourself in the place of a condemned criminal. Whenever you feel guilt or shame or regret or remorse over something you've done or haven't done, feel like a condemned criminal and all of us, at some point, we all feel that way sometimes. Whenever you feel that way, remember, Jesus paid it all for you, died to pay the price for your sins and mine. And now, God sees you as pure, holy, spotless, righteous in his eyes, so take up your cross means to remind ourselves all the time, when I was a condemned criminal, Jesus died for me.

And to do that daily, hourly, so that we can slowly begin to understand and feel how much God loves us. Because when we feel loved, the funny thing about human beings is, when we feel loved, we tend to love back. So the more we feel God's love, the more we love God back. So here's part one of your homework. Every day this week, pray this prayer, Jesus, help me to experience your love. Jesus, help me to experience your love. To make Jesus first in your heart, remember that you were first in his. Second, obey him. Part of loving Jesus is to do what he says to do in the Bible. Because if he loved us enough to die for us, he's not going to tell us to do something to make us miserable, right? It may not be easy, you may not like it, it may be hard, but all of that, but ultimately, his commands are for our good.

That means that he is Lord of everything. That means he is Lord of our money when he says to give 10% to his mission. He is Lord of our sexuality when he says to save sex inside a marriage so that marriage becomes, and sex becomes holy. He is Lord of our internet browser. He is Lord of our careers. Because see, if he's not Lord of all, he's not Lord at all. If we got this [inaudible 00:10:59], "Hey, you can be Lord of everything else but not my money, or not my career," then he's not Lord at all. And one of the things I've noticed about people who are all in and filled with the courage and joy of Jesus, like the Muslim refugee that became a Christian I told you about last week. To one of them, they simply read what God says to do in the Bible, and they do it. And what they discover is it works. No matter how hard it is, they do it. And they discovered that on the other side of obedience is courage, hope and joy.

When I obey and give, I discover it's very rewarding. When I treat people the way the Bible says to treat people, I end up with much better relationships. But I don't experience those things unless I obey. And then when we experience that, we love him all the more because we see he's telling us his commands for our own good because he loves us. And on the other side of that are blessings, and then we love him more. One of our kids' choir directors, name's Karen Nelson, some of you may know her, she told us a story about how years ago, during in the first and kindergarten choir, so the littlest guys, there was a kid one day in rehearsal, he got a bloody nose, so Karen took him out to find his mom to tend for him. And when she went back into the choir room, all the little kids looked at her and they said, "Is he dead?" No, it's just a bloody nose, right?

But that's how we can be about obedience. It'll kill me, right? It's going to keep me from having fun. Is he dead? No, no, no. If you lose your life, you find your life. To put Jesus first in your heart, remember that you are first in his. Obey. And then third, it's gradual. It's gradual. Jesus does not say, take up your noose and follow me. He says, take up your cross, and crucifixion was a slow death. Our death to south is a slow death. And by saying, take up your cross, Jesus is saying, I am willing to be patient. I am willing to work with you. I'm willing to have you mess up over and over again and I'm still going to be here and I'm still going to love you and I'm still going to keep working with you until you're everything I created you to be.

So then practically speaking, very practically, how do we live this out? I'm going to give you three things today and then on Wednesday night, at the rest of the story, we'll talk some more about how to go deeper and applying this in our lives. Also, come on Wednesday night, bring your questions, your comments, we'll talk about those as well. But for now, in addition to part one of your homework to pray that prayer, do at least one of the following three things, at least one of the following three things this week.

First, put Jesus first in your reputation, publicly identify with him. Maybe that's just to say, I went to church this weekend, or maybe it's to pray for someone, someone going through a hard time and just say, you know what? I follow Jesus. He helps me through hard times. I'm going to pray for you this week. And for graduate level, public identification with Jesus, speak the name of Jesus. Don't just say, I go to church, say the name of Jesus, and yes, this can be costly to your reputation. When I was working on my PhD, I was the only Christian that Stanford English Lit department had ever had, ever, right? In living memory, no one could ever remember there ever being a Christian graduate student getting a PhD in the Stanford English Lit department, and I was a freak of nature to them, right?

And I was open about my faith in Jesus and I would speak the name of Jesus, not constantly, but I'd speak the name of Jesus and most people were cool with that, although one of my colleagues did call me Bible boy. She did not mean that as a compliment. And then there was this one professor who said to me one time, he looked at me and he said, "I have never understood why they let a Christian like you into the Stanford Graduate School. I mean, aren't we beyond that? It's just embarrassing that you're here." And then he said, "Don't get me wrong. Your work is great, you're doing great scholarship, but I mean, come on man, a Christian? Oh well, it doesn't matter because no, you're never going to be a professor. No university's going to hire a Christian. I mean, maybe Baylor or something like that." I'm like, "What's wrong with Baylor?"

It cost me something to be open about Jesus in the Stanford English Lit department. But you know what? There was some cool stuff for me in that too. The most fun thing for me was I was messing up their narrative that Christians are a bunch of brain dead idiots. I wasn't a brain dead idiot. I was doing really good scholarship, even he had to admit it. So I was messing with their narrative. Do you know how fun it is to mess with people's narrative? They're like, "I'm so confused. My

worldview is crumbling. You're not stupid." Sorry to mess with your narrative. Not really. And it also felt good to be brave and not constantly worrying about my reputation. Just be brave about it. Put Jesus first in your reputation.

Second, and/or, make Jesus first in your time. And this is the hardest one because we're so busy, right? We got to go to school or we got to go to work, you got to sleep, you got to take a shower, you got to floss your teeth at least a week before you go to the dentist so you don't get the lecture, right? There are friends to see. If you're single, you got to go out on dates. Then you got to spend time getting ready for the date. Sometimes, it takes more time to get ready for the date than to go on the date. Sometimes, it's more fun getting ready on the date than the date, right? Sometimes, see, there's just so many things we're doing, all over the place. See, if the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy. If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy. So the key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, it's to schedule your priorities. And that might mean there's some stuff that doesn't get done this week, maybe some chores or whatever. Your dirty house can glorify God.

So for starters, this week, spend at least 10, we're just doing the starters, okay? At least 10 minutes a day for four days this week reading the Bible, one of the Psalms, something out of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Ask the question, what does this passage tell me about me? What does it tell me about God? 10 minutes on that, four days, at least four days this week. And then pray five, six, seven minutes, pray for five or six or seven minutes after that. And then be paying attention to your thoughts, some of which may be from God, okay? 15 to 17 minutes, four times this week. And the goal here is that we pray throughout the day, okay? But just, we're doing training wheels here, okay? So just for starters, try that. Put him first in your reputation, first in your time, and then finally, put Jesus first where you live, work, play or learn.

So if you're a computer engineer this week, how would Jesus be a computer engineer in your office? Try to live like Jesus would live in your job. If you're an airline attendant, how would Jesus do that, right? Hi, welcome to Virgin Airways. Speaking of virgins, did you know Jesus was born of a virgin? Not that way maybe. Pray that prayer, choose one or more of those three options to put Jesus first. One final thought, and it's a question that hovers over this entire series. What if I go all in with Jesus, do what he says to do and it doesn't work out? What if I get burned? What if I lose something that's really important to me? What if it doesn't work out? Because you know what? Sometimes, it doesn't the way we want it to. I've never understood the whole prosperity gospel thing. If you follow Jesus, you'll have health, wealth, success. I don't know what Bible those preachers are reading from. Because my Bible says Jesus was crucified for doing everything right and my Bible says the prophets and the apostles were martyred for doing everything right. If we've really gone all in, it doesn't always work out the way we want. However, however, however, if we've really gone all in, we discover the no matter what happens, we still have Jesus and we discover that his presence is all we need and we discover that he is always there pulling good things out of bad things.

One of the best parts of my job is that people in crisis come to me and I get to partner with the Holy Spirit to help bring hope to them. I love doing it, I can't do it as much as I like because I've got all these other things, but I love doing it. And sometimes, the people come to me, they don't know that they're not coming to me for themselves, they're coming actually to help me. And there's one encounter I had about 10 years ago that has really stuck with me and I talked with a couple, they were about to lose their home, it was the recession, he'd lost his job, couldn't find another one, and the bank was about to take possession of their home. And they came to me and when they walked in to my office, right, they had kids and they were worried and understandably, they walked into my office. The first thing the wife said to me was, "We want you to pray that the bank will give us a break."

And I said, "I will pray that and let's believe in faith that God can do that, but let's talk about what happens if you do lose your house." And she said, "No, no, no, no. I don't want to hear about how all this could be good for us in some way. I just want it to go away." So we talked for a while and I told her about my grandmother who had six kids and my grandfather deserted the family and then they were homeless and my dad grew up homeless, but my hard work and perseverance, my grandmother got all six kids to college and all of that. And in the process, she gave our family a narrative, a family narrative of hope and perseverance. And they found that very helpful. And then I said, "Look, this is super hard, but if you lose the house, it might be a relief. The worst that's going to happen is you're going to have to rent an apartment or a house, but then this house will get sold, the debt is off your back. It might actually be kind of a relief."

And then the wife said to me, "Oh, this is kind of a country club problem, isn't it?" And I said, "No, no, no, no, no, no. Losing your house is a real thing. I would hate to lose our house. I would hate that." And she said, "I know, but I want to be filled with hope and joy and courage. I don't want to be a country club Christian." And I said, "Well, if this happens, hasn't happened yet, but if it does, your kids are going to get a great lesson from their parents about faith in difficult times. They'll see your fears, they'll see your doubts, your struggles, and then they'll see how God helps you through all of that. And they will have a great story, just like I have a story of my grandmother, they will have a great story of God's faithfulness that they can draw on for the rest of their lives and neither you nor they will ever be country club Christians again."

And I will never forget what she said after that. She leaned forward and she looked at me and she said, "I can lose a house for that." And I said, "You can lose a house for that." And so then we prayed and just like everything was different, it's like this weight lifted off of them. We prayed and when we were done, she stood up with this huge smile on her face and she said to her husband, "Come on, honey, let's go home and pack." I said, "It hasn't happened yet." But a week later, the bank took their house. They lost their house. But she said, "We have peace about it and God is with us and we know that he is at work in all of this. So we're good. It is well with our soul." That's how an all in Christian loses a house. They didn't get what they wanted, it didn't work out the way they wanted, but they found some freedom, and so did I.

Because see, the moment those words came out of my mouth, I knew they weren't mine, they were God's, and I knew for sure they weren't for them, they were for me. Because I fear losing many things, job, reputation, house, you name it. And in that moment, God was showing me why I did not need to fear, and it stuck with me for a whole decade. It's still with me. And now, when I worry about losing things, my own words from 10 years ago come right back at me, one of the perks of my job, and it brings me peace.

So let's take a step forward to being more all in. Ask Jesus to help you experience his love and practice putting him first in at least one of those three ways I mentioned, to be more all in.

Let me close with this. One of the best examples of an all in Christian ever in history is Martin Luther King, who we celebrate this weekend. He had profound faith and driven by the Bible's call for justice and reconciliation, and he paid the price for it. He was called a traitor by some people, he was called an Uncle Tom by others, he was killed, and yet look at the difference he made. I mean, we still have a long way to go on racial reconciliation and justice, but he helped us take some steps forward. And look at the freedom he had. He was unafraid, bold, changed the world. And you see that so clearly in the last 60 seconds of the last speech he ever gave the night before he was killed. And I know probably all of you have seen this before, but I want you to watch again and just notice the freedom that is in his soul.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really don't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Amen, right? Amen. The next day, he was killed, and it's like he knew. It's like he knew his end was coming and he was still all in and he had joy, not happiness, but he had joy because he'd been to the mountaintop and you see how God was using him to bring God's healing and justice right here on this earth through him because he'd surrendered it all to Jesus. And the result for him was unbelievable freedom. I'm not fearing any man tonight, unafraid of death, unafraid of hardship, unafraid of the systemic racism he was fighting. His eyes had seen the glory of God. And so as he said in his very famous speech years before that, he was free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last. Because that's what happens when you're all in for Jesus.

So Lord, thank you for men like Martin Luther King, women like Sojourner Truth and others who show us what it means to be all in. And Jesus, thank you that you call us there too. We can't get there on our own. So help us, Jesus, to be more all in with you and know the freedom you came to give us. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Luke 14:25-34

1. What do you think Jesus means when he uses the word hate in reference to family and even our own life (see also Matthew 10:37)?
2. What does the salt analogy emphasize about following Jesus?
3. What are the potential costs in following Jesus? Why is it important to count the costs?
4. What most hinders you from making Jesus your first priority?