

BE (i'm) PERFECT

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

FEBRUARY 17, 2018

Discussion Guide

BE IMPERFECT

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- WHEN YOU HEAR THE STATEMENT, "YOU NEED TO GET YOUR ACT TOGETHER," WHAT KINDS OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, IF ANY, COME TO MIND? COULD YOU ELABORATE?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- DISCUSS THE CONCEPT OF LEGALISM AND HOW IT IS WIDESPREAD IN CHRISTIANITY TODAY.
- READ MATTHEW 5.48 ALOUD. PAUSE. READ THE TEXT AGAIN.
- WHAT DO YOU HEAR JESUS SAYING HERE?
- WHAT ISSUES, IF ANY, DO YOU HAVE WITH WHAT JESUS SAYS HERE? COULD YOU EXPLAIN?
- MANY TIMES, WE ARE TAUGHT THAT SALVATION (JUSTIFICATION) COMES BY GRACE, BUT TRANSFORMATION (BECOMING LIKE JESUS) REQUIRES A LOT OF EFFORT ON OUR PART. IN REALITY, THIS IS A FORM OF LEGALISM. HOW MIGHT THIS BE THE CASE? WHAT EFFECTS MIGHT THE PURSUIT OF THIS FORM OF LEGALISM

HAVE UPON FOLLOWERS OF JESUS? WHERE, IF ANYWHERE, DO YOU SEE THESE EFFECTS IN THE CHURCH TODAY?

- READ ROMANS 7.14-24 ALOUD. PAUSE. READ THE TEXT ONCE MORE.
- IN YOUR EFFORTS TO BECOME LIKE CHRIST, IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DO YOU RESONATE WITH ISRAEL'S STRUGGLE TO KEEP THE LAW?
- READ ROMANS 7.25-8.4 ALOUD.
- ACCORDING TO PAUL, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR LEADING US TO BECOME LIKE JESUS?
- PONDER THE TRUTH THAT GOD BOTH JUSTIFIES US AND TRANSFORMS US. IT IS HIS JOB TO MAKE US PERFECT. WHAT FEELINGS, IF ANY, DOES THIS TRUTH EVOKE IN YOU? COULD YOU ELABORATE?
- WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE TO LIVE A LIFE OF FAITH IN LIGHT OF THIS TRUTH?
- CONSIDER CLOSING BY TAKING TIME AS A GROUP TO RESPOND TO GOD IN KEEPING WITH THE FEELINGS YOU ARE EXPERIENCING, SEEKING TO BE AUTHENTIC AND REAL BEFORE HIM. YOU MIGHT CONSIDER CLOSING BY READING THE WORDS OF ZEPHANIAH 3.14-20 AS WORDS OF SENDING.

CONTEXT, BACKGROUND, AND COMMENTARY

LEGALISM

LEGALISM IS ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS CHARGES WHICH CAN BE LEVELLED AGAINST ONE ON THE JOURNEY OF FAITH. THE ACCUSATION OF LEGALISM HAS BEEN LEVELLED AGAINST VARIOUS PRACTICES (RITUALISM, TITHING, ICONOCLASM, ASCETICISM, AND MORE) AS WELL AS CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS AND GROUPS (CATHOLICS, BAPTISTS, PENTECOSTALS, LUTHERANS, CALVINISTS, AND MANY MORE). HOWEVER, BOTH HISTORICAL AND MODERN USAGE OF THE TERM DEMONSTRATE THAT LABELING SOMETHING AS "LEGALISM" HAS OFTEN BEEN DONE HASTILY WITH LITTLE UNDERSTANDING AS TO THE PROPER MEANING AND APPLICATION OF THE TERM.

TRADITIONALLY, LEGALISM HAS BEEN UNDERSTOOD TO BE THE ACT OF PUTTING A LAW/CODE OF CONDUCT ABOVE THE GOSPEL BY ESTABLISHING REQUIREMENTS FOR SALVATION OTHER THAN FAITH IN JESUS. WHILE

THIS FORM OF LEGALISM CAN EXIST, IT IS ACTUALLY QUITE RARE. MOST RELIGIOUS FAITHS WITHIN THE ABRAHAMIC TRADITION (JUDAISM, ISLAM, AND CHRISTIANITY) UNDERSTAND GOD'S SALVATION TO BE AN ACT OF UNMERITED GRACE. RATHER, LEGALISM WITHIN THESE FAITH TRADITIONS MIGHT BE BETTER DESCRIBED AS THE PRACTICE OF REDUCING BROAD AND INCLUSIVE PRECEPTS INTO A NARROW MORAL CODE WHICH MUST BE FOLLOWED TO EXPERIENCE LIFE AS GOD INTENDS IT FOR HIS REDEEMED PEOPLE, AND TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THOSE WHO ARE REDEEMED BY GOD AND THOSE WHO ARE NOT.

WITHIN CHRISTIANITY, THIS FORM OF LEGALISM CAN BE OBSERVED AS TAKING THREE DISTINCT, THOUGH NOT MUTUALLY-EXCLUSIVE, FORMS. THE FIRST FORM INVOLVES TAKING GOD'S LAW OUT OF CONTEXT IN ORDER TO REDUCE IT TO A MORAL CODE OF "DO'S" AND "DON'TS" IN SUCH A WAY THAT GOD IS ISOLATED FROM THE PERSON OF FAITH. FOR INSTANCE, A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST MIGHT ACCEPT GOD'S SALVATION BASED ON GRACE, BUT THEN SUBMIT TO A MORAL CODE BASED UPON SCRIPTURE WHICH HE SEEKS TO FOLLOW ON HIS OWN STRENGTH IN ORDER TO LIVE "THE CHRISTIAN LIFE." THE PROBLEM WITH THIS APPROACH IS NOT THE PURSUIT OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN KEEPING WITH OBEDIENCE TO THE COMMANDS OF SCRIPTURE BUT RATHER THE INTENTIONAL CREATION OF A CODE SEPARATE FROM SCRIPTURE WHICH MUST BE FOLLOWED IN ONE'S OWN STRENGTH. GOD DOES GRACIOUSLY REDEEM HIS PEOPLE, AND HE DOES COMMAND THEM TO FOLLOW SPECIFIC MORAL COMMANDS. OBEDIENCE AND GRACE ARE NOT IN OPPOSITION SO LONG AS OBEDIENCE IS IN RESPONSE TO GRACE RATHER THAN AN EFFORT TO GAIN GRACE. HOWEVER, THE NATURE OF THIS OBEDIENCE IS ALWAYS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AN ON-GOING, LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, INFUSED AND SUSTAINED BY GRACE. GOD'S GIVING OF THE 10 COMMANDMENTS (EXODUS 20) WONDERFULLY PORTRAYS THE INTENDED JUXTAPOSITION OF GRACE AND MORAL OBEDIENCE, WHILE PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS DEMONSTRATES THIS FORM OF LEGALISM WHICH ELIMINATES GOD IN THE PURSUIT OF AN UPRIGHT LIFE.

A SECOND FORM OF LEGALISM, CLOSELY RELATED TO THE FIRST, INVOLVES THE PRACTICE OF SEEKING TO FOLLOW THE LETTER OF GOD'S ETHICAL COMMANDMENTS WHILE INTENTIONALLY IGNORING THE SPIRIT OF GOD'S COMMANDS. THIS KIND OF LEGALISM INVOLVES A RIGIDITY IN WHICH PEOPLE SEEK TO MAINTAIN A MINIMUM THRESHOLD OF OBEDIENCE TO GOD BY KEEPING TO A BLACK AND WHITE UNDERSTANDING OF HIS COMMANDS IN ORDER TO PURSUE PERSONAL DESIRES WHICH FALL OUTSIDE THIS BLACK AND WHITE INTERPRETATION. THE PURPOSE OF THIS OBEDIENCE IS FOCUSED NOT ON ENGAGING GOD IN A LOVING RELATIONSHIP BUT PLACATING GOD ENOUGH TO GAIN FLEXIBILITY IN PURSUING ONE'S OWN SELF-CENTERED DESIRES. FOR INSTANCE, A PERSON MIGHT GIVE TEN PERCENT TITHE OF HIS INCOME WHILE USING TAX LOOPHOLES TO RECLASSIFY INCOME AS NON-SALARY RELATED IN ORDER TO SHELTER LARGE PORTIONS OF HIS SALARY, SO HE MAY KEEP MORE MONEY WHICH HE CAN SPEND AT HIS OWN DISCRETION. A MORE PRESSING EXAMPLE OF THIS KIND OF LEGALISM IS PLAYING OUT IN REAL-TIME CONCERNING THE ISSUE OF IMMIGRATION. BELIEVERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE POINT TO LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF GOD'S ETHICAL COMMANDS IN A WAY THAT GIVES THEM GREAT LIBERTIES

TO PURSUE THEIR OWN PERSONAL POLITICAL AGENDA. A GOOD BIBLICAL EXAMPLE OF THIS KIND OF LEGALISM IS FOUND AMONG THE PHARISEES AND SCRIBES IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S COMMANDS SURROUNDING THE KEEPING OF SABBATH (MATTHEW 12.9-14).

A FINAL FORM OF LEGALISM—THE MOST COMMON FORM OF LEGALISM WITHIN CHRISTIANITY—IS THE PRACTICE OF CREATING A MORAL CODE OTHER THAN THAT PROVIDED BY GOD AND THEN USING IT TO BIND SOMEONE'S CONSCIOUS OR TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO ARE OR ARE NOT PEOPLE OF FAITH. FAMOUS (INFAMOUS?) FORMS OF THIS LEGALISM INCLUDE PROHIBITIONS AGAINST DANCING, SMOKING, DRINKING, OR ASSOCIATING WITH ANYONE WHO DOES. CERTAINLY, IT IS APPROPRIATE TO DEVELOP GUIDELINES FOR NAVIGATING CULTURAL REALITIES AND SCENARIOS. FOR INSTANCE, IN A CULTURE WHERE ALCOHOL IS OFTEN ABUSED, IT CAN MAKE SENSE TO CHOOSE TO AVOID ALCOHOL TO MAINTAIN ONE'S WITNESS TO CULTURE. HOWEVER, WITH NO BIBLICAL WARRANT FOR SUCH BEHAVIOR, ONE CANNOT THEN TURN AND FORCE OTHERS TO FOLLOW THIS AS SOMETHING COMMANDED BY GOD NOR USE IT TO DRAW LINES OF ACCEPTANCE WITHIN THE FAMILY OF FAITH. THE BIBLICAL EXAMPLE OF THIS IS THE PHARISEE'S PRACTICE OF CREATING A "FENCE" OF RULES AROUND THE LAW SO THEY MIGHT NOT BREAK THE LAW BY KEEPING THE SECONDARY COMMANDS THEY HAD CREATED (MATTHEW 15.1-9).

THE TEXT

MATTHEW 5.17-20, 48: *WHAT REAL LIFE LOOKS LIKE*

ZEPHANIAH'S PROPHECIES CONCERNING THE COMING DAY OF THE LORD JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW 5-7) IS HIS MANIFESTO CONCERNING LIFE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. THE CONTENT OF THESE CHAPTERS APPEARS REGULARLY THROUGHOUT JESUS' TEACHING MINISTRY INDICATING WHAT IS CONTAINED HERE LAY AT THE HEART OF HIS PROCLAMATION AND PRESENTATION OF THE KINGDOM AND HIS INVITATION TO BECOME PART OF THAT KINGDOM. JESUS IS VERY CLEAR THAT THE KINGDOM LIFE HE IS DESCRIBING IS NOT SOMETHING WITH WHICH HIS AUDIENCE IS UNFAMILIAR. THEY HAVE ALREADY BEEN PRESENTED WITH THIS LIFE THROUGH THE MOSAIC LAW. THEREFORE, JESUS' KINGDOM MINISTRY IS NOT ABOUT DOING SOMETHING NEW, THEREBY DOING AWAY WITH THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE EXPOSITION OF THE LAW BY THE PROPHETS. RATHER, JESUS' MINISTRY WAS CONCERNED WITH DEMONSTRATING THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW; THAT IS, JESUS' LIFE WAS INTENDED TO BE A LIVING EXAMPLE OF THE FULL KINGDOM LIFE TO WHICH THE LAW POINTED. SOME HAVE INTERPRETED JESUS' WORDS HERE TO IMPLY HE WAS FULFILLING THE LAW IN THE SENSE THAT HE WAS BRINGING IT TO A CLOSE. HOWEVER, NEITHER THE CONTEXT NOR THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPECIFIC STATEMENT OF FULFILLMENT POINT TO THIS INTERPRETATION. RATHER, THIS IS AN INTERPRETATION WHICH HAS BEEN IMPOSED UPON THE TEXT, DRAWN FROM A MISREADING OF PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE ROMANS AND THE GALATIANS.

JESUS PLAINLY STATES THAT THOSE WHO WISH TO BE GREAT IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD MUST LIVE AND TEACH THE LIFE WHICH THEY SEE IN HIM, THE LIFE TO WHICH THE LAW POINTS. HOWEVER, HE IS EQUALLY CLEAR THAT APPROACHING THIS LIFE WILL REQUIRE AN APPROACH WHICH DIFFERS GREATLY FROM THAT OF THE PHARISEES AND THE SCRIBES. HERE,

JESUS' REMARK CONCERNING RIGHTEOUSNESS REFERS NOT SIMPLY TO A RIGHT STANDING WITH GOD BUT A LIFE RIGHTLY LIVED ACCORDING TO GOD'S STANDARDS. JESUS THEN PROCEEDS TO GIVE 6 EXAMPLES DRAWN FROM THE MOSAIC LAW IN WHICH HE DEMONSTRATES HOW THE KINGDOM LIFE GOD INTENDS IS FOUND IN THE MOSAIC LAW AND HOW THE PHARISEE'S AND SCRIBE'S APPROACH TO THE LAW HAD CAUSED THEM TO MISS THIS KINGDOM LIFE. THE KEY ASPECT WHICH SEEMS TO BE AT ISSUE IS A FORM OF LEGALISM WHICH FOCUSES ON A LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE MOSAIC LAW, ALL THE WHILE MISSING THE LIFE TO WHICH THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW POINTS.

AFTER HIS EXPOSITION CONCERNING HOW TO SEE THE LIFE GOD DESIRES IN THE MOSAIC LAW, JESUS CONCLUDES HIS DISCUSSION CONCERNING THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KINGDOM LIFE HE IS PROCLAIMING AND THE LAW OF MOSES. HAVING POINTED TO HIMSELF AS THE LIVING EXAMPLE OF THIS LIFE, HE CONCLUDES BY TURNING AND POINTING TO THE HEAVENLY FATHER AS THE SOURCE AND ORIGIN OF THIS LIFE. THE KINGDOM LIFE HE IS PROCLAIMING IS FIRMLY ROOTED IN THE CHARACTER OF GOD HIMSELF. THEREFORE, ONE IS LIVING A FULL KINGDOM LIFE WHEN THEY ARE COMPLETELY LIKE THE FATHER. HERE JESUS POINTS BACK TO THE FUNCTIONAL PURPOSE OF HUMANITY, CREATED BY GOD TO BE LIVING IMAGES (GENESIS 1.26-28). JESUS' LANGUAGE HERE MIRRORS THAT FOUND IN THE LEVITICAL HOLINESS CODE WHICH ALSO NOTED THAT THE POINT OF THE LAW WAS TO DIRECT ONE TO BEING HOLY LIKE GOD (LEVITICUS 19. 2).

ROMANS 7.7-8.4:

KINGDOM LIFE AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE LAW

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE HOUSE CHURCHES IN ROME IS HIS ATTEMPT TO UNIFY A GROUP OF CHURCHES WHICH WERE DIVIDED OVER THE INTERPRETATION AND USE OF THE MOSAIC LAW IN THEIR DAILY LIVES OF FAITH (ROMANS 14.1-15.13). WHILE OFTEN INTERPRETED AS AN EVANGELISTIC LETTER PROCLAIMING SALVATION, THE LETTER IS ACTUALLY WRITTEN TO PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY ON THE FAITH JOURNEY. THE LETTER IS AN EXPLORATION OF THE DEEPER REALITIES OF GOD'S REDEMPTIVE PURPOSES AND WORK INTENDED FOR THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY BEGUN THE FAITH JOURNEY, NOT FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL CONSIDERING FAITH; THAT IS, THIS IS A LETTER FOCUSED ON DISCIPLESHIP, NOT EVANGELISM.

BECAUSE THE MOSAIC LAW LAY AT THE HEART OF THE DEBATE IN THESE CHURCHES, PAUL MUST DEAL HEAD-ON WITH THE LAW AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE REDEMPTIVE PURPOSES OF GOD. PAUL DOES THIS IN ROMANS 4-8 WITH A COMPLEX ARGUMENT WHICH MAINTAINS A TENSION BETWEEN THE GOODNESS OF THE LAW AND THE BELIEVER'S FREEDOM FROM THE LAW. THIS ARGUMENT DRAWS TO A CLIMAX IN ROMANS 7-8 WHERE PAUL BEGINS TO HIGHLIGHT SPECIFICS OF BOTH REALITIES. HE DOES THIS BY ENGAGING IN WHAT, AT FIRST, APPEARS TO BE A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTING OF HIS STRUGGLE WITH KEEPING THE LAW. HOWEVER, THIS INTERPRETATION DOES NOT FIT WITH WHAT PAUL HAS SAID ELSEWHERE CONCERNING HIS KEEPING OF THE LAW (PHILIPPIANS 3.6). MOST LIKELY, ROMANS 7 IS A RHETORICAL STRATEGY WHERE PAUL PERSONIFIES ISRAEL AND RELATES ITS STRUGGLE WITH THE LAW OF MOSES WHICH NECESSITATE A FREEDOM FROM THE

LAW IF ONE IS TO EXPERIENCE THE LIFE INTENDED BY GOD (ROMANS 7.6).

ACCORDING TO PAUL, THE LAW OF MOSES IS GOOD, SOMETHING INTENDED BY GOD. THE LAW MADE PEOPLE AWARE OF THE LIFE GOD INTENDED THEM TO LIVE. HOWEVER, THE LAW WAS "FLAWED" IN THAT IT WAS POWERLESS TO ENABLE PEOPLE TO LIVE AS GOD DESIRED. BECAUSE THE LAW DID NOT HAVE THIS POWER, THE SINFUL STATE OF PEOPLE SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY AND BROUGHT DEATH TO PEOPLE; THAT IS, THE SINFUL STATE OF PEOPLE LED THEM TO BREAK THE LAW SO THAT PEOPLE WOULD BE CONDEMNED TO DEATH UNDER THE LAW. HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT THE FAULT OF THE LAW. THE LAW WAS GOOD. THE ISSUE WAS WITH THE SINFUL NATURE OF PEOPLE, NOT THE LAW.

IN ISRAEL'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE LAW, THEY WERE ABLE TO AGREE WITH THE LAW AND THE LIFE TO WHICH IT POINTED. THEY COULD ASSENT THE LAW CONTAINED GOD'S WILL FOR THEM. HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE LAW WAS POWERLESS TO EMPOWER THEM TO LIVE THE LIFE FOUND IN THE LAW THEY WERE CAUGHT AS A PRISONER TO THEIR SINFUL NATURE. NO AMOUNT OF DESIRING TO OBEY THE LAW WAS ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THEIR SINFUL BENT TO DISOBEY THE LAW. THEREFORE, THEY FOUND THEMSELVES IN A WRETCHED POSITION IN WHICH THEY WERE CONDEMNED, KEPT FROM THE LIFE GOD INTENDED, UNABLE TO EXPERIENCE ANYTHING OTHER.

AT THIS POINT, GOD ENTERS AS THE PERSON JESUS. WITH JESUS, GOD DOES WHAT THE LAW WAS POWERLESS TO DO. WHILE PEOPLE WERE POWERLESS TO KEEP THE LAW EVEN THOUGH THEY WISHED TO DO SO, GOD CHOSE NOT TO CONDEMN PEOPLE TO DEATH SO LONG AS THEY WERE INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO JESUS; THAT IS, THOSE CONNECTED TO JESUS IN FAITH WERE NOT KEPT FROM THE LIFE GOD INTENDED EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE POWERLESS TO OBEY THE LAW. IN THE PERSON OF JESUS, GOD OPENED THE WAY TO A LIFE LIVED ON GOD'S TERMS AND THEN BROKE THE POWER OF SIN IN PEOPLE WHICH KEPT THEM FROM LIVING THIS LIFE. HE THEN OFFERS THE ABILITY TO LIVE THE FULL LIFE GOD INTENDS—THIS IS THE SAME LANGUAGE JESUS USES IN MATTHEW 5.17—SO LONG AS THEY LIVE THIS LIFE BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT RATHER THAN THEIR OWN POWER. IN THIS WAY, PEOPLE CAN LIVE THE LIFE TO WHICH THE LAW POINTS, BUT THEY DO SO NOT BY FOLLOWING THE LAW IN THEIR OWN STRENGTH. THEY LIVE THE LIFE GOD DESIRES (DESCRIBED IN THE LAW) BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THIS CREATES THE SAME TENSION TO WHICH JESUS POINTS IN MATTHEW 5. IT IS NOT THAT THE LAW IS BEING PUT ASIDE AS SOMETHING GOD NO LONGER AFFIRMS. THE LAW IS GOOD, AND IT POINTS TO THE LIFE GOD HAS ALWAYS DESIRED. WHAT IS PUT ASIDE IS THE APPROACH TO LIVING THIS LIFE BY SEEKING TO KEEP THE LAW ON ONE'S OWN STRENGTH. RATHER, ONE MUST LIVE THIS LIFE BY THE SPIRIT.

INTERESTINGLY, IN PAUL'S DISCUSSION WHICH FOLLOWS, HE NOTES THAT THIS WORK OF THE SPIRIT WHICH LEADS THE BELIEVER TO THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE IS A WORK IN PROCESS. BELIEVERS EXPERIENCE THE BEGINNINGS OF THIS LIFE IN THE PRESENT, BUT THE FULL EXPERIENCE OF THIS LIFE COMES AT A LATER POINT IN THE FUTURE (ROMANS 8.22-25, 30; SEE ALSO PHILIPPIANS 1.6 AND 1 JOHN 3.1-3). THEREFORE, ONE MIGHT SAY THAT THE LIFE OF FAITH IS EXPERIENCED AS ONE IN WHICH THE BELIEVER STEPS FORWARD TOWARD THE PERFECT LIFE OF GOD IN AN IMPERFECT MANNER.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

"How can I be a follower of Jesus? I can't seem to get my act together." This or some version of this statement runs through my mind all the time, a constant loop reminding me how far from the life of Christ is the life I now live. This bugs me. . . a lot. You see, the whole point of following Jesus is to become like him, to live the life he lived, the wonderful Kingdom life. It isn't just that I want to be like Jesus. I want to be like Jesus because his life is the only life that makes sense of this world and provides any semblance of hope, peace, and joy in navigating it. I want to be like Jesus because Jesus really lived. He was fully human in a way I want to be fully human. There is just one problem. I can't do it.

The problem is not that I have not tried. I have tried, and tried, and tried, and tried, and failed. . . So, I am told to try again, and this time to try harder. All I need to do is live like Jesus. I need to look, listen, and then obey. How hard can it be? Turns out, pretty hard. So, I am told I should follow these principles or read this book. I need this new attitude or this relationship of accountability. The idea is that if I find the right strategy, then and only then will I finally live like Jesus. I can't say I have tried them all, but I have tried more than the average bear, all to the same end. No matter what I do, I can't seem to pull myself together and live like Jesus. I have failed so many times that doubt of ever living and experiencing life as Jesus did begins to creep in, along with a good bit of shame for repeatedly failing. But I try and try again. The problem is, every time I have to start over it gets harder. With the doubt instilled by my previous failures robbing me of any hope of ever living as Jesus, I find the only motivation left is self-abuse, condemnation, and shame. So, I heap this unholy trinity upon the shame I already carry only to fail and add another layer of shame on for good measure and start the process over again. It is a vicious and terrible ride and I want off, but is it possible?

I am coming to believe it is. More and more I am coming to view the way I was disciplined to follow Jesus as the insidious handing off of subtle legalism. Jesus had saved me. Therefore, I was to do what Jesus did. . . on my own. That is legalism. And if that brand didn't work, then what I needed was a distillation of Jesus' life or a modern spiritual hack to help me out. This, too, is legalism. And it doesn't work. It isn't supposed to work.

Putting me together is God's job, not mine. On the journey of faith, I can put down my rules, my efforts, my practices of shame and self-condemnation and just breathe. I don't have to put myself together. What a relief that brings even as I type the words. God does not expect me to stop being a mess. He expects me to be a mess, and he is responsible for dealing with the mess. That is good news, gospel. However, there is a twist here, one I am pondering. God doesn't seem to be in a hurry to put me together, to end my mess. Sure, God is putting me together. . . slowly, like watching grass grow slowly. On his way to dealing with my mess, he seems perfectly content to leave me a mess. That means my faith

Journey looks like moving to Jesus' perfect life in an imperfect manner. That kind of faith isn't even on the faith map I was given much less what it looks like to live that way. So, I bumble and stumble, discovering what it looks like to have God deal with my mess as I follow him as an imperfect mess. But, maybe that is what it is supposed to be like.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do you follow Jesus when you can't get your act together? Can someone who struggles to do the smallest thing Jesus did ever be great in the Kingdom of God, even be in the Kingdom of God? These and other similar questions often plague those of us who have had faith handed off to us in the American Church. The gospel of the American Church goes something like this: God saves you by grace. Now, in response to this salvation, go and act like Jesus. . . on your own. The American Church proclaims a gospel which begins with grace and finishes with works. It sounds right. It just doesn't work. No matter how hard we try, we just can't seem to live like Jesus. We feel great shame in this, because we know the journey is to become like Jesus, to be perfect like Jesus. So, we keep trying, and failing. We live this endless cycle, heaping greater and greater amounts of shame and self-condemnation upon ourselves because we just can't seem to get our act together.

However, there is a way out of this mess. It is to stop trying to be like Jesus, to stop trying to be perfect. If that sounds like giving up on the journey of faith, wait for the rest of the story. We don't have to be perfect because it is not our job to become perfect. That is God's job. You see, the gospel begins and ends with grace. It is God's job to transform our lives from what they are now to the lives we are meant to live, lives which look like his. We can breathe and rest as we stop trying to be perfect. This does not mean we do nothing. Because it is God's job to transform us, we partner with him by making space for him to work. In the coming weeks we will explore what that looks like. However, for now, consider what it might look like to stop trying to be perfect, to stop trying so hard to get your act together. What might it be like to allow the gospel to begin and end with grace for you? Take some time this week and ponder this truth about the gospel. Perhaps you might ponder the following statement: The gospel begins and ends with grace, therefore, I don't have to get my act together. I don't have to be perfect. Take some time and allow this truth to soak in. Notice how it makes you feel. Respond to God in a way that seems to fit how you are feeling, in prayer, in praise, in thanks, or perhaps, even in confusion. Be honest with where you are and ask for grace to journey to learn what it is to allow him to make you perfect.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP

 twitter.com/blake_shipp

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