

There is an old Japanese legend that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful--full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears! A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

If I were to put an addendum to the legend, I would include a “Lip Room.” In there would be shelves stacked with lips – all those who gave lip service to Christian faith, praising and making promises to God with their lips, but never practicing them with their lives.

True Christian discipleship is not just what we hear, not even just what we say, but most importantly what we do. This is the point of this brief parable Jesus tells about the two sons’ responses to their father who told them to work in his vineyard. In both cases, it wasn’t what they said, but what they did that mattered.

But perhaps the brother who said “Yes” had every intention of going out to work in the vineyard. It’s not that he was outright rebellious of his father. He just never got around to it. Other things came up in the meantime.

We know how that goes – to have every intention of doing something and then not getting around to doing it. Like when we have a sick friend, and have every intention to go and visit...but then other things come up, and we end up sending a card, which is

still a kind and loving gesture, and we are satisfied...or maybe too much time passes, and we end up doing nothing at all. Or, we promise to do something – a favor for someone, or complete a project...but then we get busy, there are more pressing matters to deal with; or we might even forget all about it, and it just doesn't get done. I hope I'm not the only one who does these kinds of things! As I was preparing my sermon, my list of “yeses” and “intentions” kept growing in my head! I have a lot of catching up to do!

And there are the more significant inconsistencies, like when we hold to certain beliefs, but then make choices that don't support them. Maybe we feel strongly about our need to protect the environment, but then use energy inefficiently, or even something as simple as neglect to recycle because it's not always convenient. Or, to be fully committed to having an inclusive church such as ours, except when it means welcoming and including those who think, believe, behave, love, ARE radically different from us. It's like if you caught me buying a lottery ticket after taking such a strong stand against it.

This discontinuity between what we say and what we do, what we believe and how we live that exists within each of us is what we call sin – it is “missing the mark” -- coming up short when measured against the perfection of Christ. We know we are never going to BE perfect. We are always going to miss that mark! But we can seek to become more and more like Christ, working to close the gap between promises made

and promises kept, having consistency in our beliefs with our actions, aligning our priorities and values with those of Christ's.

This is why Paul calls the early Christians in Philippi and us to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in each of us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.” The first act is to hear the good news of God's saving grace in Christ, and then to say YES to Christ as we receive that gift of salvation through faith. We then say YES to Christ's call to follow Him as faithful disciples by aligning our attitude and our actions to His through humility, self giving love, and obedience to God's will. And then we seek to live that commitment with consistency in all of life.

It is always really awesome to witness the change that happens in someone when they do say YES to Christ! It's even more awesome to experience it personally! To know that Christ died for my sin, that we are saved and set free by grace, to have a new beginning in Christ! There is great enthusiasm when we give our lives to Him and commit to follow as his disciples. There's also great excitement in someone who feels led or called to a particular ministry, or has a passion for something God has put on their heart to do! So much so that it can even be contagious – what witnessing and ministry should be!

But what can be challenging is to keep that joy and excitement alive...to sustain that passion once the initial rush of the Spirit seems to settle down, or when the challenges come. We can be so easily distracted! Our enthusiasm ebbs and flows, our

focus waxes and wanes. Our willingness to be obedient in ALL things wavers. That initial commitment can be so easily tested.

So we must work out our salvation with FEAR & TREMBLING!

It's an awesome gift to be saved by grace!

It's an awesome blessing and honor to be used by God for God's purposes!

It's an awesome responsibility to make the commitment to not only receive that gift but live into it!

To seek to become more and more like Christ in our daily lives – the exciting times and the ordinary times... to try to close the gap between promises made and promises kept; and to align with more consistency our beliefs with our actions. Our priorities and values with Christ's.

I have even heard individuals says that they have a problem with commitment – it feels so much like you're “tied down,” “locked in,” with expectations put upon you to be invested and consistent and faithful that seems too constricting. And no, it's not just old boyfriends I've heard it from!

I have heard Christians tell me they have a problem with commitment. But friends, that's what discipleship is! It's about TOTAL obedience and faithfulness to Jesus -- to give our lives to him, and to become like him. To quote Soren Kierkegaard, Jesus wants followers, not admirers! And not just fair-weather followers!

Discipleship is a lifetime commitment!

To work out our salvation means to take that commitment seriously in every aspect of life!

God is at work in each of us.

God has plans for how to use us for God’s purposes.

God has ways we can be vessels of God’s goodness and mercy, and witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ.

God is ready to send us, and enable us to do God’s work in the world.

That’s a little overwhelming! But it is also an enormous privilege!

It requires the right attitude, and the right actions – the same attitude and actions we see in Jesus – humility, obedience, self-giving love.

It requires constant effort to have consistency in promises made and promises kept, and absolutely aligning our beliefs with our actions.

It requires saying YES to Christ...and meaning it!