If one thinks being a Christian means Jesus is your hobby or just one more thing on your resume—like Rotary, Chess Club, Jesus—then there is a great misunderstanding.

If one thinks that being a Christian means you sprinkle Jesus lightly in your life rather than having Him as a major ingredient in your diet, then there is a great misunderstanding.

When we truly let Jesus into our lives to lead us, then we discover that we don’t do things the same way. We have different attitudes, different goals, and our lifestyle is radically different. We shouldn’t be living the same way as before.

Case in point: for decades, there was a crosswalk on University Avenue near my house. I crossed it many, many times. It spanned six lanes.

Some months ago, I crossed that street with my dogs, Max and Molly, where we normally do. Midway after crossing three lanes, I noticed that cars were approaching me with three more lanes yet to cross. I made a startling and scary discovery.

The crosswalk was gone! It was painted over black. Someone in the City & County Transportation Department decided that the crosswalk was no longer needed.

Somehow, in my mind, as I saw the faint outline of the crosswalk, I thought it was still there and boldly walked across as if it were. Midway through the six-lane street, my heart stopped. I realized as cars were coming at me and I had made a terrible mistake. Augh!

Later, I discovered that another neighbor did the same thing. We thought the paint had just faded over time. We can be such creatures of habit that sometimes we fail to see a major change that has happened, so major that not to acknowledge it may have life or death consequences.

I want to use this incident as a metaphor for how we can be tempted to keep living in our old ways, to walk the old comfortable paths when trying to reach our goals in life, even after we decide to follow Jesus, even after He says don’t walk the same ways and has even erased the ways we used to walk and live.

As Christians, we can tend to use Jesus to make us a little more ahead of where we were without Him, maybe a little richer, more healthy, more famous, more powerful. We can make Jesus just a motivational speaker, like Tony Robbins, who helps us find our own potential. Or we wear the jersey of Jesus but we treat Him like He is just a super vitamin that makes us a bit more energetic, maybe even keep to our selfish ways and just talk like a Christian but don’t act like one.

I remember when a friend of mine, who was kind of a jerk, became a Christian. But he didn’t change much. One day someone who is not a churchgoer said “Yeah, Tom was a jerk and now he’s a Christian jerk! Same guy but just tells people he’s a Christian and goes to church.” Not a good witness.

Actually, when we follow Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to enter us, if we truly want Jesus to be our Lord in all the areas of life, including our business, our generosity, our home, our relationships, our social life, our sex life, then our lives will drastically change.
When we put aside pride and strive to live more humbly, we find that our life is transformed, revolutionized, turned upside down, and all because we let ourselves be changed by Jesus. Things start to happen in our hearts from the inside that eventually make their way to the outside through our actions and our choices.

I often call the Kingdom of God the “Upside-Down Kingdom” because what we thought was left or right or higher or lower in status prior to our life with Jesus is now all turned around. What we once thought was hard is now easier, and what we thought was ugly is now beautiful. We see that loving the unlovable is good and possible. It’s an upside-down kingdom where Jesus says we have to forgive everyone and even love our enemies and treat others how we want to be treated.

What? Love our enemies?!

Jesus says if you want to be rich, then know it is harder for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven.

What?

The Lord says that a widow who gives just two pennies into a temple treasury has given more than anyone else that day.

What?

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the Earth.

What? No, no, no. That’s wrong. The world says I have to be assertive, pushy, competitive, and ambitious even to the point of arrogance to get to the top and inherit the world.

But getting to the top is not where we want to go according to Jesus. And that is what our passage is about. How can that be? Jesus says, when we follow Him, it’s like being born again. We become really different, radically different.

You hear stories of Jesus-changed lives—prisoners who repent, people who once were flirtatious and unfaithful now become faithful, people who were once greedy now become generous, people who only like to be with the beautiful, high-status strata now are willing to be with the disadvantaged.

In our Rooted Class, there is an exercise called cardboard testimonies, where people briefly write down on one side of cardboard how they were at the beginning of the class. Then on the other side of the board, they write how they have changed by the end of the class. It may seem small but it’s significant in being incremental, for that always leads to transformation. Here is a sample of these changed lives in our last Rooted class: https://vimeo.com/575080710.

Our Bible passage today talks of the upside-down nature of following Jesus. We shall see two young disciples struggling with their old ways of religion versus the new way of following Jesus.

Matthew 20:20-28

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, and kneeling before Him, she asked a favor of Him. 21 And He said to her, “What do you want?” She said to Him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your Kingdom.” 22 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They [James and John] said to Him, “We are able.” 23 He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, but to sit at My right hand and at My left, this is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.”

24 When the ten [other disciples] heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to Him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!
Who are you in the story? Are you the mother who is pushing her sons forward, jockeying for them to be eternally sitting next to Jesus in heaven? Talk about obnoxious or arrogant!

I was talking to Sim Fulcher the other day. (Gee, two sermons in a row about our former associate pastor who retired and lives in Augusta, Georgia, with his wife Mimi and their dog Malasada or Mala for short.)

Sim said his brother loved coaching football. He loved working with young people, but one day he said he was going to quit. “But why?” Sim asked. “You love coaching football!” In a few words, Sim’s brother said, “moms and dads.” These fathers and mothers were always pushing their kids forward and complaining, “Why wasn’t our son getting more playing time? Why didn’t he get to be first string? Why didn’t you give him the ball more? Why wasn’t he honored more? He has skills, man!”

And here we see that this parental pressure is nothing new to the 21st century. It’s been happening since around 30 AD!

You see, the mother didn’t get it. When you follow Jesus, you do not seek the top position, especially not to lord it over people. You seek the lower position to serve others to make them higher, not you.

We are beginning to see why I say that the Kingdom of God is the upside-down kingdom. What we see in this secular society as being in the top position would be the low position in God’s upside-down Kingdom. Jesus would say your ambition should be the position of a servant, which is much lower.

So, as you look at this story, are you the ambitious mother in this story, trying to make your family the one with the most glory and power and honor?

But that’s not to let her sons off the hook. The Gospel of Mark doesn’t mention the mom, but Mark’s account of this story underlines how James and John themselves really wanted the top positions of honor to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus and to be able to lord it over other people as the nonbelievers do.

So, are you James and John in the story? Do you tend to be highly competitive and maybe cut-throat ambitious?

Let me tell you more about James and John. At times, Jesus re-named His disciples. They would be great future-telling names. In fact, Jesus renamed Simon as Peter, which means Petros in Greek, or “the Rock.” That’s a good name. Movie stars have that name, like “The Rock Johnson.” Good name! Strong name!

Do you know what Jesus called James and John? He gave them the name Boanerges, meaning “Sons of Thunder.” While you may think that is a good name because it sounds solid and strong like The Rock, it isn’t!

“Sons of Thunder” initially meant they were loudmouths, arrogant, a bull in the china shop. Can you imagine people saying, “Oh no! It was so tranquil but here comes the Sons of Thunder!”

Here’s an example of their outspoken, loud, hot-headedness.

In the Gospel of Luke in the 9th chapter, Jesus and the disciples enter a village of Samaritans. The Samaritans don’t like Jewish people and vice versa. When Jesus and His entourage walked into the village, the Samaritans did not receive Jesus well and so how did the Sons of Thunder respond to this? James and John asked Jesus, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

What?! It’s like they were asking “Lord, shall we go nuclear on them and can You use Your miraculous powers to obliterate people who disrespect You? Call on the drones of fire to drop heavenly hellfire missiles on them! Badda-bim-badda-bam!”

When Jesus heard their remark, Jesus got really angry at them and rebuked them.

Hotheads, loudmouths, violent, unforgiving, sensitive, and then they also want power and status to sit next to Jesus in heaven and rule over people. You get the picture. These are the disciples who should have...
known better. They lived with Jesus for at least a year or so. They were followers of Jesus, but they were still living in their old ways. Is that like us?

Here is where we get into the heart of the matter for today. When we decide to follow Jesus, it is not to accentuate our sinful nature but to be transformed by Him and be more godly. And the godly way may be opposite day for you, contrary to how you have behaved and thought for years.

This is where commitment to Jesus begins. Are we willing to remove our old worldly ways of walking on those old crosswalks and instead be led by the Holy Spirit?

For some of us, overcoming our racist tendencies or lazy habits or stingy, non-generous ways or polarizing ways is not easy. That is understandable. It is very hard if we try to do it on our own power. But it is possible if we ask Jesus for help.

The worst thing we can do is to see the Christian life as a way to increase our selfish desires, to use Jesus to serve us and our wants rather than to serve Him.

James and John already had this sinful bent toward wanting to be on top of people. They already had this tendency to be prideful. You see it seep out in the Gospels.

In the gospel story John wrote, John had to refer to himself as, and I quote, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He doesn’t write that once but four times! Four times he had to tell us that he was Jesus’ favorite disciple! Really? Of all of the twelve disciples, you had to point out four times that you were, in your opinion, the one Jesus loved most? Oh, Son of Thunder!

His pride shines out again when he talks about Jesus’ resurrection in John chapter 20. When Peter and John were running to the tomb to see if Jesus was still there, John had to write,

John 21:4

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple [meaning John] outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

Really, John? You had to tell us that you were the Usain Bolt of the first century? For God’s sake, the story is about Jesus being resurrected, and you want to tell us that you were a fast runner so fast that you beat Peter

And then he ends the entire Gospel of John by writing his conclusion with these two verses:

John 21:24-25

24 This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. 25 But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Wait, John. Are you saying that there are so many other things you could have written but it would make the document too long, so you had to edit all those other things out and just keep to the most important, which is you had to put in that you beat Peter in a foot race to the tomb on Resurrection Day? Really? You are not only the most loved but also the fastest?

My point is this: James and John—and especially John,—were desiring to want Jesus to serve them, serve their sinful, ambitious, earthly human desires to be number one and two after Jesus.

They wanted Jesus to serve them and they want to lord it over other people, which is similar to how the rulers of pagans would lord it over them.

Friends, this is a gut check: are most of our prayers really asking Jesus to bless our day’s agenda and not His? Do most of our prayers sound like, “Please do this and that for me?” Do we even begin in the morning with, “Lord, what do You want me to do today?” Are most of our prayers about asking God to prompt people to serve us rather than how can I serve others?

This is the upside-down kingdom.

In our earthly world—the culture of People Magazine, Vanity Fair, and TMZ—we like the attention and the glitz. In our earthly world do we use Twitter and Instagram and Facebook to mostly show people how
great we are rather than to show how great other people are?

Why do we, the followers of the Lord Jesus, want to be above Jesus? We might say, “Oh, but I don’t want to be above Jesus!” Oh, but that’s what we are desiring if we are trying to use God to advance ourselves and our agenda, and we are not devoting our life to serving Him, and through Him to serving this community, this city, this state. If we are not doing that, then we have—dun dun!—the James and John syndrome.

Are we beacons of light trying to make this world a better place or is it all about us? Listen to your prayers and your thought life. What are we normally praying for and who are we normally praying for?

If we decide to follow Jesus, it is not to use Him like a holy butler who can make our life better. It is to realize that, oh my gosh, Jesus is God. He is the Lord and if I want to be great in His eyes, then I must be a servant to all who I meet—the cashier, the waiter, the neighbor, the laborer, the colleague.

Take a look at this image:

James and John wanted to be at the top of the pyramid and have other people look up to them and serve them and they can lord it over the people or be a tyrant, as Jesus said, and push them down.

But in the upside-down Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Jesus, the pyramid looks like this:

James and John, as followers of Jesus, are to be on the bottom to serve and push up other people so that they have better lives. They push people above the water so that they don’t drown.

Jesus calls us to be servant leaders of all. We are on the bottom pushing other people up, helping the downtrodden and the vulnerable, loving others and wanting to encourage and affirm them to help make their lives better, not just ours.

Indeed, there are givers and takers in this world. There are those who want to push people down and those who want to push people up. Can our church be known for being generous in our efforts to serve others in this community?

To go even deeper—this is important—can we become givers because we love God, and not so that we can earn His love?

Yes, He does love us, whether we are givers or takers, but if we truly love Him, we would be givers. For example, I wash the dishes at home not because that will make Pam love me more, but because I love Pam. I don’t want her to wash dishes, especially if she just spent hours cooking the meal. So, I do it out of love, not out of obligation, not to win points with Pam, and not so she will love me more. It’s all about love.

I want to close with two thoughts. First, what is this ransom idea that Jesus talks about? And second, what does this have to do with love? The answer to both questions has to do with understanding the meaning of the word “ransom.” Jesus said at the very end of our passage:

Matthew 20:26-28

26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Famous verse. When we think of the word ransom we often think of kidnappers and the ransom is the payment to them. Not so in this case.
In Greek, the original language of the Bible, the word for ransom is *lytron*, meaning to free a slave or prisoner. So, the biblical meaning of ransom is that we buy the freedom of a prisoner or a slave. That is the payment of a ransom.

If we really think about this, this should choke us up a bit. Jesus paid a ransom to free us from the penalty and the prison of sin. Jesus paid a ransom for us even though, so often, we are selfish, sinful, ungrateful, narcissistic at times, self-centered at the least and very much like James and John. But He loves us that much. How can that be?

It's like how parents can love a child. When children are babies, they are super needy, self-centered, and demanding. They cry all the time. Their waste material is messy and gets on you and you have to clean them up several times a day. They are hungry and insist on their own way. They don’t always sleep when you want them to or get up when you want them to. You lose sleep and patience. But you love them so much that you will sacrifice your time and energy and money for them. Your work may suffer, your social life may suffer, but you sacrifice and hope that someday, when they are much older, they might give you the respect and love you deserve and would appreciate.

Church, I ask us: when are we going to get out of our infant stage and not always demand spiritual milk? When will our prayers and thoughts change from “It’s all about me,” to “It’s all about God,” and “How we can serve others?” Will we ever get out of that infant or adolescent stage where we will finally give God the respect and love and worship He deserves and do what He says? When will we be in more of a constant serving and sharing mode?

For example, when the next Alpha Course starts, can we ask ourselves instead of “I don’t want to go. I’ve been to it before,” to a changed attitude of “Who can I invite and maybe join them so that they might know this Jesus who sacrificed so much for us?” Same for Rooted or Life Groups. “Who can I invite?”

I said that ransom, in the biblical sense, is about Jesus making a payment with His death on the cross so that we might no longer be prisoners to our old ways.

One way to test to see if you are still in the old ways is to do this self-inventory: As you look at the fruit of the Spirit as listed in the Bible, have you grown over the years in each of the areas? This might be good news or maybe not.

Let’s look at these verses:

**Galatians 5:22-23**

*22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*


A friend of mine took the self-test and honestly said, “Over the years, I have not grown in any of the areas, except in faithfulness. I feel my faith has grown but none of the other areas. I am not more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, or gentle and I am worse at self-control. And he had been a Christian for a long time.

Friends, that is an indicator. Later, he and I learned more about the Holy Spirit and together we began a journey that made us be filled more with the Spirit and we both experienced more fruit in our lives.

You see, the Bible says we are all slaves or prisoners to a cosmic evil led by and perpetuated by Satan. Many of you might not believe in Satan, but He does exist. Did you know that Jesus believed he existed? Most cultures outside of the Western world have no trouble believing in Satan, who is a personal evil.

To free us from the chains and bondage of Satan’s hold on us, Jesus paid the ransom by dying in our place so that we might be free. It was kind of a cosmic payment, for that is how the universe works. Someone has to pay the price and God said He would pay for it Himself, not humans. He would pay the ransom, and He is waiting for humans to turn toward Him and acknowledge Him as the one true God, Ke Akua. It is not enough just to believe Jesus exists. Think about it. Satan believes Jesus exists and no one would...
call Satan a Christian. Belief is not enough. To be a Christian, it means action. It means to follow Jesus in every area of our lives.

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 10, it reports the same episode of James and John but adds these lines:

**Mark 10:37-40**

37 And they said to Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory.”
38 But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” 39 They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at My right hand or at My left is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

What is this baptism Jesus talked about?

Pastor scholar Tim Keller says this is the kind of baptism, not like our water sacrament, but more like an “overwhelming experience, an immersing experience of taking upon the very penalty and judgment of our sinful crimes and saying I will pay for it.”


And what is even more upside-down kingdom is that it is like Christ is the actual judge and He comes from behind His bench to stand with the convicted and says, “I will go to jail for the prisoner. I will also pay his sentence and I will pay for any reparations.”

Tim Keller points out that many fiction books get this sense of sacrificial love, like the famous Harry Potter series. The only way you break the cycle of evil and sin and despair in our lives is if someone makes a major sacrificial act of love.

Lord Voldemort (called The Dark Lord), who is kind of the Satan character in the book, the one whose name you must never mention, searches for the baby Harry Potter to kill him. When he finds him, Voldemort fires a death spell on little Harry, but his mom, Lily Potter, intervenes and gets hit with the spell instead and dies. Substitutionary sacrifice.

When Harry is much older, Lord Voldemort tries to kill him again, but Voldemort discovers that he can’t physically touch Harry. His hands burn when he touches Harry.

Later, Harry goes to his mentor, Professor Dumbledore, and asks why Voldemort couldn’t touch him. Here is what Dumbledore says. Very profound. “Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love, as powerful as your mother’s for you, leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign .... To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever.”

[Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, J.K. Rowling]

Dumbledore gets it. Harry Potter gets it. Do we get it?

**Only in a pure, sacrificial love will there ever be an earth-shattering change in society and in our hearts. Jesus Christ was that.**

He sacrificed His life for us by taking on the death spell of Satan on the cross. It was an act of pure love. Even though He is gone from this earth, His protection is forever if you follow Him.

Can we comprehend that Jesus loves us so much that He took, in a sense, the spell for us? He took the bullet. He literally took the punches and the whips and the nails for you and me. Sacrificial love and service.

When we get that, then out of love for God, we won’t mind being at the bottom of the triangle, where we can push others up because we are so grateful that we want them to flourish, instead of flounder, wither, or die.

When someone is saved from a drinking addiction, they don’t mind helping other alcoholics. When someone is saved from pornography, they don’t mind helping others who are still addicted to porn. When someone is truly saved, that person really wants to lead others to Jesus.

We are all just beggars trying to help other beggars find food. We’re not above them. We don’t mind pushing others up so that they might find out what it
means to know Christ as Lord. We don’t mind serving. We don’t mind doing it because we love Jesus so much. We are so thankful for what He did for us that we want to be like Him and do His will.

But James and John were young in their faith. They didn’t get it. They wanted to use Jesus to make them great. The crazy thing is that, in the paragraph prior to our scripture passage, Jesus tells them that He is going to die. That makes James’ and John’s response even more horrible because already they are asking, “Oh, You’re going to die? In heaven, can we sit next to you?” So selfish. They have no concept of the sacrifice Jesus was making.

Is that us? If we don’t have the concept of Jesus’ sacrifice for us either, then Satan wins and we are still prisoners. The real Voldemort wins. Why? Because we make our so-called Christian life all about us and not about others and not about love, and that can be polarizing.

So, we can get angry at James and John and call them jerks. But are we the ones in the story who continue to make our prayer life be all about our self-centered requests?

By the end of their lives, James and John get it. In fact, James is killed for his faith and John is put into exile on an island. He later writes the Book of Revelation. In that sense, their testimony shows they are indeed Sons of Thunder who loudly proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

We will become a greater church when we learn to look beyond ourselves and see that we are but humble servants for whom Jesus died.

If we are like young James and John and just want our way, others will become irritated with us and our actions will become divisive and polarizing. Or, as Dumbledore says in fighting evil, and I quote, “We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.”

So, let’s not become a polarizing, divisive force. We’re following Christ.

When we truly become followers of Jesus, we become, as He said, born again. Really! We are new creatures with new hearts. The Holy Spirit actually enters us when we make that confession of faith to Jesus. We begin to act differently. New habits form. Old, self-centered and destructive habits, maybe even addictions, can start to fall off. We have new eyes that see that the old ways of crosswalks across six lanes are gone and new paths must be followed for the safety of our future. It’s a new day.

It starts with a very serious prayer saying, “Jesus, I really, really mean it when I say I want to follow You and You alone for the rest of my life. Come into my life. Please lead me.

For some of us, it might start today as a leap of faith of, “Okay, Jesus. I want you to be my Lord.” It might be a first time ever decision or it might be a recommitment. Are you ready to make that decision and say, “Lord, please come into my life?”

I have a hunch there is someone out there who might be saying, “Okay, this week. If Dan asks that question, that is a sign. I’m ready to make that commitment.

Let’s pray.

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