

Five Things God Uses

Listen Up!

September 2, 2018

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

Greeting – Richard

Video – “Growth Is Hard”

Congregational Songs – Called Me Higher /

What A Beautiful Name / T&G

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature – “Back When I Knew It All” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

One of the really *good things* about growing older is that you are able to look back over the span of your life and assess what you’ve learned along the way.

One of the really *bad things* about growing older is wishing you knew *back then* what you know *now*.

For instance ... for me personally ...

- I wish I'd known 20 years ago what was going to happen to a company by the name of *Amazon*. I read the other day that a thousand dollars invested Amazon stock back then would be worth \$1.3M today.¹
- I wish I'd known in my 20s and 30s the cumulative impact that my affair with Little Debbie and her evil twin, Sarah Lee, was going to have on my body; how hard it would be to get back to a healthy weight.
- I wish I'd known back when we started NHCC (almost 25 years ago) that, as a leadership team grows older, you have to begin putting a disproportionate amount of energy in connecting with younger people. It doesn't happen automatically like it did back when we were young.
- I wish I'd known in the first 10 years of

marriage that my overly-demanding and arrogant nature was going to create a barrier between me and my wife and three daughters that would take years to tear down.

- I wish I'd known when I started playing golf that the goal isn't to *hit the ball* but to *swing to the target* and simply let the ball get in the way.

If course, you don't have to be "old" (like I am) to have this experience of wishing you knew *back then* what you know *now*. If you're a young person you, can look back just a year or two or five and say "gosh, I wish I had known that <fill in the blank>."

In fact, let's take a minute to do that right now – to fill in the blank. What do you know *now* at this stage of your life that you wish had known back *then*?

Think about that for just a minute.

Now turn to the person next to you and tell them.

Three Obstacles

Truth is ... there are some things in life you can only discover through time and experience. There isn't a fast-forward button on reality, so you just need to slog through it.

Sometimes the only way to learn hard truth is to learn the hard way.

However, that can also become a cop-out.

In other words, when things don't go well for us, we tell ourselves "well, you know, there really was no way I could have known that particular action was going to produce this result. I guess I just had to go through it and find out for myself the hard way."

But that may or may not be true because ...

- Sometimes the reason we have to learn things the hard way is that we're hard-headed or hard-hearted.
- Sometimes the reason we don't know *now* what we're going to find out *then* is arrogance. We already know it all (we think) and we're just not open to listening to wisdom. We're not open to learning and growing and changing.

Sometimes, the biggest obstacle to learning life's lessons *now* instead of *then* is *us*.

And know that to be true because I've experienced it so many times. I bet you have, too.

And if that's not bad enough, there's yet another villain that stands between us and "enlightenment" (so to speak) ...

The misinformation and deception that constantly comes to us from the world around us.

I'm talking about the bad ideas continually propagated by our culture at large – TV, movies, music, social media, news media, political parties, corporate advertising – and, at times, the bad ideas and false perspectives that come even from our family and friends.

We never stop hearing messages from all of those sources telling us how we should look at life and think about life and, therefore, how we should then act in life.

Now, to be fair, not all of those messages are destructive. But some of them are ... because the reason some of us wish we knew *then* what we know *now* is that we listened to those influences and followed their lead.

For instance ...

- One message many of us heard was “buy now pay later” and so we did.

And we wish we had known *then* the financial pressure and stress that was going to bring to our lives *now*.

- A lot of us heard “sleep with whoever you want; just be safe about it” and so we did.

And we wish we had known *then* how we would feel about ourselves *now*; how the choices we made *then* were going to impact the relationship we have *now* with our spouse and our children.

- Many of us heard things like “God doesn’t really love you” or “you’re worthless – you’ll never amount to anything” and we believed it and we let ourselves be used and abused.

And we wish we had known *then* the truth

we know *now*:

- That we are of such great value to God and that He loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die in our place so we could be redeemed from all that crap.
- And that because of our faith in Jesus we are God's masterpiece; we've been re-created in Him to do great things for His Kingdom in this world.
- Some of us heard “you're so special; you deserve to have everything given to you just because you're you” and that's what we expected.

And *now* we wish we had known *then* that self-esteem and well-being are most often born of initiative, responsibility and fruitfulness.

See how it works?

**How we think ... determines how we live ...
which determines our impact on the world
around us.**

There's a chain. There's a cause and effect.

In fact, would you say that with me please?

*How we think ... determines how we live ... which
determines our impact.*

... which means that:

- When you're "just waiting on life" to teach its lessons
- Or when you're arrogant and closed off to wisdom
- Or when you're misinformed and deceived by the world around you ...

You're going to make a lot of foolish decisions in your life.

If you remain at the mercy of those three villains (time, your own arrogance and the influence of the world), not only will you never become the best possible version of yourself; not only will you will never reach the full potential in this life of who God created you to be, you will actually be a detriment to the world around you!

Your impact on the world will be ... how shall I put it? *Problematic*.

And no one wants to be that.

A Quick Review

Now, at this point, some of you are probably thinking, “Ok, Rick, this is a pretty good analysis of how life works. Thank you very much. But isn’t this series supposed to be about *the five things that God uses to grow our faith*? What happened to *that* idea?”

Well, nothing happened to it.

In fact, let's recap that idea for those who weren't here last week or who may have forgotten.

Very simply ... we learned that the great invitation of Jesus issued again and again to all who will listen ...

- Was not “clean up your act and try to behave better” ... though Jesus did explain how that would help your life be better and you be better at life.
- And it wasn't “believe in Me so you can be with God when you die” ... though that is true.

Instead, the all-encompassing great invitation of Jesus was and is “Follow Me!”

And what He meant by that wasn't “come travel the countryside with Me” (though some did do that).

In addition, He also wasn't implying anything overly-mystical or super-spiritual. And He certainly wasn't talking about Twitter!

Instead, by calling people to follow Him, Jesus was simply doing what every major rabbi of His day was doing (and there were quite a few), which is best understood by the way He once put it when He was traveling through the Galilean village of Capernaum (which was a center of rabbinical teaching in that timeⁱⁱ).

Using a phrase identical to that of the other rabbis, Jesus said:

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me ...” Matthew 11:28 (NIV)

That sounds odd to us but in that day “the yoke” was a way of describing a particular rabbi’s unique interpretation and application of Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures which we call The Old Testament). They would travel from town to town

explaining their “yoke” in hopes of attracting people to study under them and learn their way of doing things.

In fact, there was actually a little bit of *competition* among the top rabbis.

Often, a rabbi would send one of his best students to test the yoke of another rabbi. The student would show up and ask a question like, “Suppose a woman marries seven successive brothers and they all die; whose wife will she be in heaven?” ... which you may recognize as a question Jesus was once asked.

This was done respectfully, but rabbis did it in order to sharpen their own yoke and expose what they thought were fallacies of another rabbi’s teachings.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, when Jesus showed up in Capernaum – which again, was a major center of rabbinical teaching – it’s likely that this was a bit of a

throwdown between Him and the other rabbis because, as we'll soon see, *He was actually promoting His yoke over and against theirs!*

But what we really need to know at this point is that for a person to *follow* a rabbi and *take* his yoke meant for them to get in lockstep with him in the same way that two oxen are in step when they are yoked together.

It meant ...

- To think like he thought.
- To live like he lived.
- And, therefore, to impact the world like he was impacting the world.

In essence, the invitation to follow was an invitation to *become like the rabbi* – the teacher.

And not only that, according to one biblical scholar^{iv} the invitation to follow indicated the rabbi believed the potential student had the

ability and commitment to *actually do it* – to become like him.

... which is so encouraging because when Jesus – the perfect Son of God who lived a perfect life; when Jesus says to you and me “come and follow me; take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” He *really believes* that it’s possible for us to become like Him.

He really believes that it’s possible (as the Apostle Paul would later put it) for you and me to ...

... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:13b (NIV)

... to think like He thought, to live like He lived, and to impact the world around us like He did.

But that doesn’t happen overnight ...

... which is why we have to ...

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

2 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

... which brings us, again, to those five things – those five catalysts – that God uses to accomplish that in our lives.

Practical Teaching

And the first of those, we discovered last week, is *practical teaching* ... which is what we're going to focus on in the time that remains for this message. (We'll talk about the other four catalysts in the weeks to come).

If you talk to anyone who has been following Jesus and who has grown in their faith, more than likely they'll talk about a time or a place when they heard someone take the Bible and teach it in a way that changed their life. They may have grown up in church hearing Bible stories in Sunday School,

but it never made sense to them until a pastor or a speaker or a small group leader or a writer was able to make it come alive in a way that was practical and transformative.

Now, what's interesting about that is that it just so happens that, of all the things for which Jesus of Nazareth was noted – and He was famous for many things: His incredible compassion for the lost and the least, His astounding miracles ... of all the things Jesus was famous for, nothing compares to reputation He gained for exactly that kind of teaching.

In fact, on at least two separate occasions ...

... after Jesus gave a sermon ...

The people were amazed at his teaching, because He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Mark 1:22 (NIV)

There was something qualitatively different about *His* “yoke” compared to the “yoke” of the other rabbis and teachers. The people who heard Him perceived it as “authority” but what does that really mean?

I think it means that whereas the other teachers tended to *complicate* things by coming up with additional rules and regulations to keep people from *breaking* God’s law, Jesus *simplified* things so that people could understand what it looked like to *keep* the law.

In other words, Jesus had a way of minimizing complexity and getting to the heart of the matter. When other rabbis wanted to debate to which of her seven deceased husbands a widow would be married in Heaven, Jesus basically said, “That’s a silly question because there is no marriage in Heaven. Let’s talk about something practical; something that matters in real life.”

And that’s what He did so often: *practical teaching*.

And of all the things Jesus taught that are preserved for us in the New Testament Gospels, I think nothing illustrates that better than what is known as *The Sermon on the Mount* which is recorded in Matthew's Gospel from chapter 5 through 7.

By the way, if you're not a church person or a Bible person you need to know that a Bible chapter isn't like a chapter in a novel or a non-fiction book. They're much shorter.

So, if you were to sit down and read straight through those three chapters of Matthew, it would probably take you less than 20 minutes and I'm going to challenge you in a bit to do just that this week.

But before we get to that, I want to give you just one example from this sermon of how practical Jesus' teaching truly was. However, we first need to define exactly what we mean by "practical

teaching.”

How do you know if teaching is practical?

Well, remember that earlier we said that ...

**How we think ... determines how we live ...
which determines our impact on the world
around us.**

**When teaching is practical it will *guide* us in
one or more of those categories.**

- How we think
- How we act
- And how we impact the world around us

More specifically, when biblical teaching is truly practical, it helps followers of Jesus know *how* to become more of the person God meant them to be in their worldview, their walk and their witness. It's transformational.

For example listen to how Jesus addresses the way

we so often think and live – our worldview and our walk – in the middle of this sermon. Beginning in chapter 6 verse 25, He says:

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.”

He starts out talking about how we live. Next He’s going to tie it to how we think about the world, including God.

“Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

See it? Walk and worldview.

He continues in the same pattern. He begins by challenging how we live.

“And why do you worry about clothes?”

And then challenges how we think about the world, again, including God.

“See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

“If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”

And then, He concludes this section by repeating the same pattern.

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or

‘What shall we wear?’

That’s our walk – how we live every day.

“For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

That’s our worldview – how we think ultimate reality, including God.

And then, one more statement that sums it all up.

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:25-33 (NIV)

Friends, *that* is practical teaching.

And if you will begin by applying what Jesus says to your view of the world (how you think about ultimate reality), you will also be able to apply what he says about how you live when you’re tempted to worry.

That's how it works.

At NHCC

Now, let's talk about how we try to provide practical teaching here at NHCC.^v

Obviously (I hope), the primary environment in which we do that is right here, every Sunday morning. In fact, the guiding principle in how we plan what happens each week is to be as clear and practical as possible in everything we do.

- It's why the band so often does a secular song (like we did today) to raise the issue we're going to address in the message.
- It's why they so often do a CCM tune after the message which restates the main point of the message in a different way.
- It's why messages and sometimes entire

series deal with questions of “Why believe? Who is God? Who is Jesus?” Those are worldview questions – how we think about life and ourselves and God.

- It’s why we talk so much about issues like grace and forgiveness and generosity and service and relationships. Those are “walk” questions – how we live every day.
- It’s why we talk so often about how to relate to people who don’t believe what we believe as Christians; how to love people who are against us and think we’re against them. Those are witness questions – how we impact the world around us.

Now, this is *also* why people aren’t always comfortable with the way we do our services.

From time to time ...

- I’ve heard people say that what we do “feels

more like a show.”

- Or “I didn’t feel like I was even in church.”
- Or “it felt like I was listening to a motivational speaker instead of a preacher.”

And I think that’s because the image a lot of people have is that church is supposed to be quiet and reflective and calm.

Now, there’s a place for that and we’re actually going to talk about it next week, but that typically isn’t the goal in our services. Why?

Because anytime somebody opens the Bible in this setting and teaches not for the purpose of *information* but for the purpose of *transformation*, it can be a little disturbing; a little upsetting.

In fact, that was sometimes the case when Jesus taught.

His buddy John wrote that once Jesus was preaching and when he finished, the people who

were listening picked up rocks to stone him to death.^{vi}

How's that for the end of a church service? "Thank you for coming today, pick up your rock and let's pray."

Luke tells us that one time when Jesus was preaching in his hometown, "all the people were furious" when they heard his sermon. They were so angry that when He finished they literally removed Him from the synagogue, took Him to a nearby cliff and were going to throw Him off!^{vii}

Now, just to be clear, I'm not anxious to be stoned or thrown off of a cliff. But, as I sometimes say, "my goal is to be an equal opportunity offender" because if what we're teaching doesn't offend everybody at some point, we're probably not doing our job.

So, if you walk out of here sometimes not agreeing with what's been taught and a little perturbed

with me, that's OK.

What's not OK is when people walk out saying, "what the heck was that about? Well, I don't know but at least Jesus knows we were in church; we endured to the end."

The point is ... somewhere in your life and somewhere in my life, on a regular basis, preferably weekly, you need to be listening to someone who takes the teaching of Jesus and messes with your worldview a bit; messes with your walk and messes with your witness (what you think, how you live and how you impact the world around you).

And sometimes – and this makes people *really* uncomfortable – that might make you feel a little guilty and even ashamed of yourself. After all, when you hold your life up against the life of Jesus and see where you fall short, that's going to happen.

But that's not a bad thing. That doesn't mean God doesn't love you!

In fact, it means *just the opposite*. It means that He is willing to push that button in your life because He loves you so much! And He wants you to become the very best version of yourself; the person He has created you to be ... which brings me to the final point I want to make.

Call to Action

I said earlier that when Jesus walked into Capernaum and said "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" it was something of a throwdown.

Actually, what He was doing was even more brazen than that. He intended to directly challenge those other rabbis and the large numbers of disciples who followed them because what He was going to say would not only illustrate the difference between His yoke and theirs but demonstrate that His way of thinking, living and

impacting the world was *better* than theirs.

And then, as if that wasn't enough ...

He issued an invitation to *their* disciples to follow *Him* instead!

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

In other words, Jesus was saying:

- “Your teachers make it complicated. I make it simple.
- “Their way is complex and burdensome. My way is practical and easy to understand.
- “Their way wears you out. My way leads to

rest for your soul.”

Now, fast forward to our day and time. The challenge you and I face isn't the yoke offered by well-meaning but misguided rabbis.

Instead ...

- The challenge we face is the cop-out that “I’m just going to have to let time and experience be our teacher. I guess I just have to learn hard truth the hard way.”
- Or the challenge we face it’s our own arrogance. “I don’t need anyone to be my teacher because I already know everything.”
- Or the challenge we face is the deception and misinformation that comes from the world that has the power to squeeze us into its mold.

Now, here’s what’s fascinating. All of those

challenges are, in reality, yokes. They commend to us certain ways of thinking, living and impacting the world.

And they each produce the same result that the teachers of Jesus' day produced: complications, complexities, burdens and weariness.

And in the middle of all that, the voice of Jesus calls out to us, offering the same opportunity he offered to them. "Come to Me. Learn from Me. Do what I do and you will find abundant life and rest for your soul."

Friends, that's the goal of practical teaching.

And when Jesus closed out that famous Sermon on the Mount He put it like this:

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the

streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

“But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

By the way, when He ended His sermon like that, that was the other time the Bible tells us that ...

*... the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. Matthew
7:28-29 (NIV)*

So, today as we close ... I want to give you the opportunity to get in the yoke with Jesus and to take a step towards building your life on rock instead of sand.

Here is your assignment (should you dare to accept it).

- This week, read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)
- Identify two areas of Jesus' teaching where doing what He says would make a noticeable difference in your life.
- Then put it into practice as much as you can.

Now, before we can do that it's going to require us to surrender our will (if it's just a little bit). Our band is going to do a song that expresses that desire and in the middle we're going to give everyone the opportunity to join in if that's the desire of your heart.

So, here we go.

Feature / Worship – I Surrender

CLOSING COMMENTS

Next week – we're going to talk about how God

uses the things we do behind the scenes (“Private Disciplines”) to grow us and our faith.

And I really need to emphasize that you don’t want to miss the beginning of the service because the way we’re going to start it is going to set up the whole thing. And even “the whole thing” is going to be pretty different from what we normally. We’re actually going to walk through some of the things we’re talking about so that you can learn how to do it at home on your own.

It’s going to be a great day and I hope you’ll be here or watching online.

Ok, let’s stand for our closing blessing.

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make His face to shine upon you;

And may you be transformed in every way:
From the way you think
To the way you live

To the impact you have on the world
As you take the yoke of Jesus' practical
teaching
And apply it to your life

Amen.

See you next week!

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/31/if-you-put-1000-dollars-in-amazon-in-1997-heres-how-much-you-d-have-now.html>

ⁱⁱ Ray Vanderlaan @ <https://www.thattheworldmayknow.com/rabbi-and-talmidim>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://acts242study.com/jesus-a-jewish-rabbi-part-4/>

^{iv} See Vanderlaan

^v This next section is my adaptation of Andy Stanley's explanation to his church, from his message Practical Teaching.

^{vi} John 8

^{vii} Luke 4