

Have you ever installed an infant car seat? It is something I've done dozens and dozens of times and got the hang of pretty quickly. But the first time? Well, that was one of the most stressful moments of my life. I remember opening the box, pulling out the car seat, and then pulling out the instruction manual that was about the same size as the car seat. It talked of all these straps and hooks and told me to look for anchors in places I didn't even know existed in my car. You needed an engineering degree to understand it. The worst part, though, was the warning. It is seared into my brain. "Failure to follow these instructions exactly could result in serious injury or death." That warning wasn't just on the first page. It was on every page. That really calms a first-time parent! I was so scared driving Christian home from the hospital that it's the only time I've ever been honked at for driving too slow. But, even with all the angst, I was so thankful I had those instructions because they showed me how to make sure our car seat did what it was supposed to do.

Guidance, counsel, direction is good. Whether it's instructions for car seats, a recipe for a delicious meal, orders from doctors to get healthier, or how to get sick abs, we are blessed when someone who knows better tells us the way to go. And that is most true about the Word of God. In God's grace and providence, he has given us his "instruction manual" for how we are to live our lives. If we follow what it says, we're told it will go well for us. And Jesus would agree. Last week we saw Jesus visiting Mary and Martha. After that, as he taught the Lord's prayer, promised the Holy Spirit, and cast out a demon and spoke of spiritual warfare, Jesus found himself among a crowd and the following exchange occurred:

[Luke 11:27-28] ²⁷ As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" ²⁸ But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

Jesus' ministry is thriving and a woman in the crowd recognizes it and gives verbal praise. In that culture, a mother was praised for the accomplishments of her son. Jesus is worthy of it, so he doesn't shoot her down, but he also doesn't want it to stop there. Not only does he want praise, he wants responsive action. Jesus calls all of us to hear God's Word and keep it. It is a command to do what God says with the promise of blessing attached to it. Easy enough, right? You all in? So then why is it so daunting? Why is a series on the cost of discipleship including what sounds straightforward? Why do we struggle to follow?

Well, since the beginning we've been confused about, resisted, and doubted that idea. We've doubted the character of God and his intentions towards us, doubted the results of following him can be better than any alternatives (yes, FOMO has existed since the Garden), and resisted the idea that someone else gets to tell us what to do, because no one is the boss of me. So, we waver and far too often revert to our own way. In Jesus words is an implied warning: "Failure to follow these instructions will result in loss of blessing." And he doesn't want that for us.

So, this morning, as we continue counting the cost and declaring it's worth it, we have to get clarity and confidence in three things if we want to follow Jesus: the heart of God, the Christ-centered spirit of obedience, and the understanding of what the Bible means when it says "blessed". If we don't understand these things, we won't listen to the Word of God and keep it. But if we do, we won't be able to help ourselves. Like Mary last week, the greatest desire of our

heart will be to sit at Jesus' feet and devour his word, knowing they are the words of life. So let's start with the heart of God.

God knows best, loves us, and wants his best for us. To want to know and live out God's Word, we have to know the character of the one who gives it, the substance of what he gives, and the intent in which he gives it.

[Psalm 25:8-9] ⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

Psalm 25 is all about asking God to make his ways known to us, and vv. 8-9 are a beautiful summary. It starts by saying the Lord is good. That is a reflection of his character. By it, the writer is saying God is moral, kind, benevolent. There is no evil in him, and his good heart goes out to us. That means God is for you and on your side. We've got to start here, otherwise none of the rest matters. Some of you grew up with a different idea of God, that he's angry, displeased, waiting for you to mess up. Yes, he is holy and righteous and calls us to be holy, but if you have trusted in Christ, you and he are good. If he loves you so much he sent his Son to die for you, you can trust his heart for you when he tells you how to live.

We're also told God is upright. The word used there means straight, level. God knows best. His ways are the best ways. God is not just wise. He is wisdom. He is the source of all knowledge and knows how best to apply that knowledge to every aspect of life. If you were to take a Master's Class on any subject, you'd want God teaching it, because he is the expert on all he speaks of. Take a moment to marvel that the omniscient God of the universe pours out his wisdom for you.

So his love and wisdom combine to give us guidance for our lives. He gives us instruction through his Word and leads the way. He's not just giving us some rules and telling us "Good luck". He promises to walk with us as we imperfectly walk the way.

This past summer I had the incredible experience and blessing of going fly fishing. It was the trip of a lifetime, full of adventure, fun, outdoors, and trying to outsmart fish. It was so life-giving, and I will be forever grateful. But it was only those things because I had a ton of help. Each day we went out with three other fishermen and two guides. These guides' single purpose was to help us catch fish. They desired for us to thrive, knew how to do it, where to go, what rods and flies to use, how to use them, and when you followed their instructions really good things happened. But it all started with me saying "I don't know what I'm doing so I am in your hands. Tell me what to do."

Placing yourself under the authority and rule of another is not an easy thing. It leaves us exposed, vulnerable. But under God's rule and guidance, there is no better place to be. God is so for you. He wants you to thrive. He has an incredible purpose for your life and has given us the way to live that out. **You can trust his perfect heart because it's full of love for you, and you can trust his perfect counsel because it's full of wisdom for you.**

If you want to live out what he is calling you to, you must start by listening to his Word. A few ideas: First, if you are not a believer in Jesus, God would invite you to start there. You are a sinner, separated from him and from the life he has for you, and there is nothing you can do about it. But

God can and did. He sent his Son Jesus to live the life you can't live and die the death you deserve. Three days later he rose again, defeating sin and death, and making this life available. You receive that gift by placing your faith in Christ. Start there. For the rest of us, God's Word is there for the taking. Do a reading plan through a Bible app, read the Gospel of Luke three times, or if you are new to the faith, Bible, or have a bunch of questions, take our Basics of the Faith class. I showed up at Fellowship in 1999 full of questions and doubts and started in a class called Christianity 101. Start there...and one day you may be the lead pastor of Fellowship! Or go to Repurposed and let his Word and Spirit speak to you about your unique purpose. Whatever you do, trust his love and his Word. He has given it to us as a gift.

So, it starts with hearing God's Word, but hearing is useless unless we keep it. There's another word for that: obedience. What comes to mind when you hear that? It is much maligned, but I think it's that way because we don't understand it, we've had some painful experiences with it, our flesh raises up because we don't want to be told what to do, or we know it comes at a cost. So what does it mean?

Obedience is the expression of our love for God, demonstration of our faith in God, and our walking in the ways of God.

Obedience is one of the primary ways we acknowledge God is God and live out our relationship with him. It is not the cry of the legalist. **Obedience is not the requirement for righteousness, but the fruit of righteousness given to us by Christ.** Because Christ lived perfectly and defeated sin in our lives, we can live obediently to what God tells us. You are free to do the things God lovingly and expertly told us to do.

Obedience is also not the cry of the oppressed. **[1 John 5:3] For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.** If God loves us and gives us commands for our best, they are not burdens for us or the way a cruel, controlling, and capricious God keeps us under his thumb. Some of you grew up with that view of God, that obedience was the way to stay in his good graces, to keep his anger at bay. "Be good, or else!" constantly hung over your head. Jesus was perfectly good for you and you get credit for that. God gives us these commands to glorify himself and as the pathway to life. As we are obedient, we show we trust him, honor our relationship with the Lord, and express our love for him.

I expect my boys to do what I ask of them because I'm their dad, and sometimes, that's the way it is. But truthfully, I want them to do those things because they love me and want to show their love for me by honoring what I've asked of them. It's the same with God. We express our love for him when we are obedient to him. **It's not to earn his favor, but to live for his pleasure.** How much would your walk with Jesus change if you understood obedience correctly? How much closer could you get because you feel safer around Jesus? What could you let go of? What would you be able to step into? Jesus has a word for all of that: blessed

"Blessed" is a very popular word these days. People use it in conversation, marketing, print it on pillows, and hashtag it to death. "Got the last roll of toilet paper in the grocery store. #blessed"

What do you think of when you hear “blessed”? We can look at that word with our Western, affluent lenses and think blessed must mean stuff, abundance, ease, comfort. Now, all those are blessings from God because every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord. The problem is that we read the words of Jesus and equate obeying God’s commands with those results.

Blessed is not a heavenly bribe because the blessing is found in the obeying. It’s not “Clean your room and you’ll get a cookie.” It’s “Clean your room and live in the blessedness of a clean room.” That’s why the prosperity gospel is so deceptive and dangerous. I found something online from someone who calls himself a pastor. “Dear Lord. Today, I declare that October is super blessed. It is accompanied with abundance, good health, healthy skin, clarity, love, steady credit, spiritual nourishment, peace of mind, protection and restoration. I speak ease into the money-making process. In Jesus’ name. Amen.” That is name it and claim it. Have enough faith, pray hard enough, do enough good things, and all this will be yours. That’s called heresy. You know where Jesus says the blessed life is? In the place where you pick up your cross and die to yourself. #blessed? The other one sounds better! So, what does Jesus mean when he says “blessed are those...”

Blessed means happy, happy are those who... According to God’s Word, it’s where the good life is found, as defined by God. **[Psalm 92:12-13]** ¹² **The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.** ¹³ **They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God.**

God’s promise is that, when we hear and keep his ways, we will flourish. Would you say you are flourishing right now? How is your obedience? That flourishing is in living out the life he has for us, our place in the Kingdom that our obedience allows us to step into fully. It is there where we find intimacy with God and one another, where we are transformed to become more and more like our Savior and sin has less and less influence in our lives, and where we fulfill the purpose for which we have been called. But it comes at a cost.

Like Jesus said, we must deny ourselves. In every premarriage class, Martha and I teach God’s design for sex and marriage. Sex is a gift from God so significant that he reserves it for a husband and wife. Invariably, God grabs some couple’s heart who haven’t been living obediently and they, in faith, start obeying. Within a couple of weeks that couple comes to us and says “We were not keeping God’s Word, but we have started to. And we are now closer to God, closer to each other, more at peace, and our relationship is flourishing.” That’s the testimony of blessed.

Flourishing doesn’t necessarily mean freedom from pain. Obeying comes at a cost. It comes with loss. But what we get from it is the glory and pleasure of our Lord and the life he has written for us in his love and wisdom. And if we get that, it’s worth it.

Count your blessings. Take time to see where you have heard and kept God’s Word and how you were blessed because of it. It will remind you of God’s goodness and faithfulness and inspire you to continue to obey. The Lord is good and upright. His love for you and his ways for you are perfect. Let us trust and obey and live the blessed life he gives through it.