



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - May 18, 2008

Lord, I Want to Be a Christian

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Deuteronomy 11:18-23; 26-28

18 You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. 19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 20 Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21 so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. . . .26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.

I was flying home last week, killing time by flipping through the in-flight *Sky Mall* catalogue. There, on page 139 was an ad for one of those wonderfully preposterous *Sky Mall* products: the “Slendertone Flex Pro-7 Abdominal Toning System.” The Flex Pro-7 appears to be nothing more than a fancy belt with wires and batteries. You’ll be glad to learn that you can “Tone, firm and strengthen all your abdominal muscles easily and conveniently, using electro-muscle stimulation medical technology.” And best of all? Best of all is that it fits waist sizes 24 to 47. 24 inches! That was a relief. I was a little worried that when my waist got down under 25 inches the belt would no longer fit.

Now, you and I are never going to buy the Slendertone Flex Pro-7. We know we could muster the discipline to wear it, but we don’t really believe that it would do us any good. It’s too airy, too insubstantial, too incredible a prescription for real transformation.

Flip ahead to page 150 in this the *Sky Mall* catalogue, and you’ll have the opposite problem. There on page 150 is an ad for “Perfect Pushup Rotating Handles.” The handles look essentially like old steam irons,

except they’ll set you back \$59.95. Buy them and do work outs invented by a real live Navy Seal and you too can have perfect definition in your arms, shoulders, chest, back and abs. That’s right. All you have to do to get in shape like a Navy Seal is to do Navy Seal workouts.

Now you and I are never going to buy Navy Seal Perfect Pushup Rotating Handles either. Oh, we presume they’ll deliver the results they promise. We just know we’re not likely to muster the discipline necessary keep up a Navy Seal workout regimen.

So there I was, whipsawed between the “not enough” and the “too much.” The *Sky Mall* product I might actually be able to use seemed too insubstantial to bother with. The *Sky Mall* product that appeared credible seemed unrealistically demanding. I put the magazine back into the seat back and drifted off to sleep, not one bit closer to being fit than when I had begun.

I get a little of the same “whipsawed” feeling when I read this morning’s lesson from Deuteronomy. Here is Moses delivering his great valedictory to his people, his final prescription for their human and communal flourish. And what is his advice?

Well, at one level, like the Flex Pro-7, it just seems too superficial, too insubstantial. “Write my words on your doorpost, bind them to your wrist, dangle them from your forehead.”

I know I could do little spiritual tasks like these, but they seem too insignificant to make a difference. Patricia has a lovely saying from her convent days: “You can do a lot of religious things without ever being faithful.” A single prayer whispered. A single hymn sung. A single kind word offered. Mere gossamer strands. Airy, insubstantial cobwebs floating at the corner of the garage door on a still summer day.

There is no insurmountable demand of faith, or insight, or self-sacrifice required to pause before a dinner to say a grace, or to introduce yourself to a stranger at coffee hour. None of these simple tasks is beyond our reach, but neither do they seem very consequential. A wave of the hand, a sudden breeze, and the gossamer snaps, the cobweb breaks away without a trace. They seem like harmless, but almost pointless, prescriptions if you're seeking real transformation.

Follow Moses through to the end, however, and suddenly, I have the opposite problem. By the end of the passage Moses is laying down a blessing and a curse. The blessing is nothing less than life, and the curse is nothing less than death. And what does it require to gain the blessing of life and avoid the blessing of death – oh, just keeping all of God's commandments. As with the "Perfect Pushup Handles," I don't doubt that keeping *all* of God's commandments *all* of the time *would* lead to transformational spiritual fitness. I just know that I can't do it. As Luther observed sadly, he had never even gone one full day loving God and neighbor with all his heart.

I feel whipsawed again between the "not enough" and the "too much." The Biblical prescription I might actually be able to follow seems too insubstantial to make a difference. The Biblical prescription that appears transformative seems unrealistically demanding. The temptation is to put the Bible back onto the shelf and drift off to sleep, not one bit closer to being spiritually fit than when I had begun.

If you're a little stuck in your spiritual life between the "not enough" and the "too much," I want to suggest that the answer to our conundrum is in our final hymn. "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian." The answer lies in our *intending*, the answer lies in our *wanting* to be a Christian.

Now, I know that might strike you as just another example of "not enough," another Gossamer strand. We all know there's a big difference between "wanting" to be a Christian and "being" a Christian. As my mother used to say, "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

But pay attention to the lyrics as we sing the hymn, it's not just "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian." It's "Lord, I want to be a Christian *in my heart*." "Lord, I want to be more loving *in my heart*." "Lord, I want to be like Jesus *in my heart*."

It's not superficial wishing that's invoked; it's heartfelt intention. And now it reminds us of how Moses introduced his superficial little practices: "*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul*."

The fundamental question is not whether we take on spiritual practices that are "not enough" or "too much." The fundamental question is do we really "want to be a Christian, in our hearts."

Before you presume you know the answer to this question, let me ask you to go through a little thought experiment proposed by USC theologian and philosopher, Dallas Willard. Imagine turning to your companion in the pew this morning and telling him that you have decided to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, to ceaselessly serve the poor and despised and to turn away forever from your self-centered, materialistic, sinful ways. At best you'll get a look of polite bemusement as your neighbor silently calculates how long it will take for you to return to reality. You will have broken the quiet understanding that, deep in our hearts, we don't usually intend our Christian vows quite that literally.

But now imagine turning to your companion in the pew and telling her that you have decided *not* to live as Jesus lived, *not* to love as Jesus loved, *not* to serve the poor and despised and *never* to turn away from your self-centered, materialistic, sinful ways. Now your neighbor might be even more uncomfortable. For now you will have broken the quiet understanding that we must not openly disavow our Christian intentions.

And there's the trap. We feel *hypocritical* saying we literally intend to be like Jesus; and we feel *unfaithful* saying we intend not to be like Jesus. And while we try to paper over the gap between the two, the promises of the gospel slip through the crack.

Is there a way out of this trap? Out of this awkward tension? My friends, the Bible, the first disciples, the early Church, the Saints all point a way forward – they all proclaim that by God's grace we *can* follow Jesus,

that we needn't settle for hypocritical compromise and half-hearted vows. And the answer for most of us lies in matching a sincere intention to follow Jesus with those gossamer strands – in combining a desire to be like Jesus in our hearts with those seemingly inconsequential little spiritual disciplines of prayer and song and gestures of kindness.

These spiritual disciplines *are* within everyone's reach, and, if we combine them with a heartfelt intention to be disciples, they will be anything but inconsequential. Moses called for a steady life of spiritual discipline, a life in which we are called back to God when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise. Gossamer strand, after gossamer strand, after gossamer strand, slowly braiding an unbreakable cable, slowly writing Moses' teaching on our hearts and our souls.

As a long line of philosophers from Aristotle to Emerson have observed, "Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny."

We all know this is true from our own experiences and observations. Jim Ellingwood, the trainer for my college soccer team, had been a great All-American athlete, so one day I asked Jim the difference between good athletes and great athletes. Without missing a beat, Jim said the great athlete has been in so many practices, and scrimmages, and game situations, that whenever the ball comes to him his mind and body respond gracefully, consistently, automatically. Ellingwood had combined heartfelt intention with habit forming practice. Gossamer strands of practice braided into an unbreakable cable of athletic performance.

Dr. William DeVries, a pioneer heart transplant surgeon was asked why he spent thousands of hours practicing transplants on animals, he responded that before he got to a human patient he wanted his actions and reactions to be well-established habits. DeVries had combined heartfelt intention with habit-forming practice. Gossamer strands of practice braided together into a flawless cable of surgical precision.

As St. Paul put it, "Train yourself into godliness. For while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:7-8). To paraphrase Emerson, "Sow a Christ-like thought and you reap a Christ-like action; sow a Christ-like act and you reap a Christ-like habit; sow a Christ-like habit and you reap a Christ-like character; sow a Christ-like character and you reap a Christ-like destiny." Gossamer strand, after gossamer strand, after gossamer strand.

Finally, perhaps you are saying to yourself, "Okay, that's all well and good, I'm just not sure that even my intention is strong enough, that even my desire to be faithful is deep enough. I'm not sure I really do 'want to be a Christian in my heart.'"

My friends, do not despair. All God asks this morning is that you take whatever little splinter of intention you have and use it to ask for more. Take whatever little fragment of desire you have to follow Jesus and ask God to strengthen it.

I'm convinced that this is one of God's favorite prayers, for it delivers us right into the kingdom of the mustard seed, right into the realm of "Seek and you shall find; ask and it shall be answered; knock and it shall be opened too you."

My friends, St. Paul challenges us: "Be ye not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds." This demand is neither too little nor not enough. Offer up to God whatever intention and whatever practice you can muster and God's grace will supply the rest. Sing our final hymn with whatever sincerity you can summon, for when we truly want to be Christians in our hearts, we will be.
Amen.