

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus Sermon Series
“The World Behind Me”
Romans 12:1-2, 9-21
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I heard a Christian comedian say once that people have the perception that the Bible is a big book of “don’ts,” but he said actually the Bible has a lot of “dos,” and if you focus on doing all the dos you won’t have time to do the don’ts. It’s similar to what Jesus said when he was asked which commandment was the greatest. The greatest commandment isn’t a don’t. It’s a do. Love the Lord God with everything you have – and next in line is love your neighbor as yourself. If we really do those things, Jesus said, we’ll get the rest of it right whether that means doing more dos or avoiding don’ts.

I thought about this because in our Scripture passage from Romans, Paul is talking about how Christians (a.k.a people who have decided to follow Jesus) ought to conduct themselves, and he provides a long list that is mostly a long list of dos. Even when he does include a do not, it’s accompanied by a do that takes care of the do not. We’ve actually included an insert in the bulletin with a summary of that list that you can take with you and stick on your mirror, or tape to your steering wheel, or put on your refrigerator. You may be someone who likes to make “to do” lists, and this is a daily “to do” list for all of us who follow Jesus.

When you look through that list, you might make some observations. Here are a couple that I made. The first is that this list represents a way of life that is very different from what we often see when we observe the way people live in this world. I’m not trying to pick on anyone when I say that. My point is just that if everyone was doing all the things on this list all the time, the world would be the beautiful, peaceful, equitable place that we all want it to be, but it isn’t that way because not everyone chooses to consistently embrace this way of life, and the evil, or Evil One, who is bent on leading us to destruction likes it that way. There is a way of life that humankind perpetuates that puts me at the center, that is willing to trample on others if it’s to my benefit, that holds on to anger and resentments as if holding on to them will somehow punish the person who hurt me and set me free. It’s a way of life that thrives on and is fueled by fear and anxiety, and when you hear it described that way it’s hard to imagine why anyone would want to live like that, and yet humans choose it again and again and again. As followers of Jesus, even though we agree that his way is better, we can get sucked back in to that way of thinking and living as much as anyone, so Paul gives us this list which gets our attention and says, “wait, remember? You don’t have to live that old way anymore. Jesus showed us a different way- a better way. This is it!”

Now this leads me to my second observation about the list which is that as great as it sounds, it also sounds kind of hard, or maybe even a little too idealistic, doesn’t it? Who can do all of those things all the time? We read through them all, and the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts saying these things are all good even if they are hard to do sometimes, and we agree. Jesus’s way is better. We’re going to leave the world and its ways behind because we agree that it doesn’t lead us anywhere good. You might even think, “I’m going to take that bulletin insert and read it every morning as my to-do list for the day, and I’m really going to do these things!” But then what happens is the day gets going and challenging situations and challenging people come up and those things that Jesus wants us to do start to feel more and more difficult to actually do. This is what we saw in the drama – the kids in those moments we come to when we feel the pull of the old way of life; when we feel tempted to do what we’ve always done or what we think will feel most gratifying in the moment. We feel ourselves caught between the voice of our better angel on one shoulder and the voice of Intrusive Thought Man on the other saying, “Listen to me. With me, your world revolves around just you! Wonderful you! You’re the center of the universe. You don’t think about other people. And besides, my ideas are fun!”

The thing about Intrusive Thought Man is that he wants to convince us to keep doing the same things that we’ve always done. Keep choosing the anxiety. Keep holding on to the resentment. Keep lashing out in anger. Keep putting yourself first. And he wants us to keep doing the same old things again and again because that is the way to ensure that we never change, or improve, or become more like Jesus. If we just keep doing the same old stuff, we’ll never become different than we are because doing the same thing over and over produces the same results. If you walk down the path that leads to a pond, it’s going to take you to that same pond every time you walk down that path. If you don’t want to end up at that pond anymore, you’ve got to take a different way.

When you look at Paul's list of dos that promise to lead us to new and wonderful places if we do them, it can feel like it's too hard to really do all of those things. *I can never stop being critical of people when I think they're wrong. I'll never be able to forgive that person for doing that to me.* It can feel like we'll never really be able to change. It's tempting to say "there's no use trying because I'm just going to mess up anyway," but this is where the gospel helps us. The gospel tells us that we actually *can* do the things that Jesus leads us to do, and we actually can make a break with the past. We actually can stop conforming to the old patterns of the world and we can learn and practice new patterns that lead to our own transformation.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation- the old has gone, the new has come! Becoming a new creation does not mean that we instantly shed all our old habits and behaviors never to be troubled by them again, and it doesn't mean that we'll never feel the pull of the environment and ideas that surround us, but it *does* mean that we gain new freedom and new power to say yes to Jesus and to change in ways that might have thought were impossible.

Paul talks about this freedom to follow, and obey, and imitate Jesus in Romans 6. He uses the image of slavery saying that before we are joined to Christ through faith, it's like we were slaves to sin. We had no choice but to give in to our sinful impulses and desires. When intrusive thought man suggested something, we went along with it every time, but Jesus sets us free from that bondage. It's like he came in and broke the chain that had us bound to that guy, and now we are free to say, "I don't have to do what you say, and I'm not going to!" Jesus sets us free to make different choices about how we will live, and when we do different things, we get different results. It's true that we won't get it right every time (and that's why God lavishes grace on us through Christ), but every time that we do get it right, there's a little change that takes place within us, and over time, all those little changes begin to add up into a bigger more noticeable change. Over time, we do begin to look more and more like Jesus. This is what Paul is talking about when he says in Romans 6:22. **²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.** That's the traditional Bible language, but I love how Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message. It says, "**But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is *real life*, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.**"

So back to that to-do list that Paul gave us in Romans 12 and the drama. God is speaking to us today to remind us that every day, from moment to moment, we do have a choice about how we are going to live. We do have a choice about whether we are going to leave the world and its ways behind so that we can follow Jesus and be transformed as we do. Real power and real help are available to us in the moments of temptation making us truly able to overcome evil with good. Thanks be to God!