

“DON’T GET IN GOD’S WAY!”
Revelation 21:1-8, John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18
May 14 & 15, 2022

“A man and his friends were playing golf one day, and one of the guys was getting ready to make his chip shot onto the green. As he prepared to stroke the ball onto the green, he saw a long funeral procession on the road next to the golf course. The man stopped mid swing, took off his golf cap, got on his knees, and bowed his head to pray.

“One of his friends said, ‘Wow! That is the most thoughtful and touching thing I have ever seen. I can’t believe how great it was for you to stop your golf swing because of a funeral procession passing by. What thoughtfulness!’

“The man replied, ‘Yeah, well, we were married for thirty-five years. I figured that was the least I could do.’

“Friends, sadly, that’s what a lot of us do when it comes to our faith. We give a nod to God as we continue on with business as usual,”¹ but He’s not our first love. We might recognize that God is there, but we fail to give Him the proper respect and honor with our life. Oh, we might claim to be Christians, but what are we really doing to prove that fact? **What is taking place in our life that shows that we really love God and desire Him to be in our lives?** Is nodding to God “the least we can do?”

We’re just a few weeks after the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and already many of us are back to business as usual. Oh, we fit God in when it’s convenient to us, but are we really showing God how much we love Him? Sadly, that’s exactly what we’re doing, because our lack of love for the Lord shows up every day as we leave Him here in this place we call Church and go out into the world to do our own thing without Him actively working in our lives. We make a show of being one of His people, but we really don’t live for Him. Our first love is showing, but it’s not for the Lord our God.

But that’s not the way that God desires our relationship to be with Him. He likes to stay in touch with those who are called by His name. He likes it for us to be connected with Him so much that we

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publications, 2009] pg. 198, #587)

show Him honor, respect and glory by living each day according to His Ways as given to us in the Bible. He desires that we not only obey His commandments, but to also follow everything in the Bible, letting those truths guide our lives every day. Whether it's "in vogue" with our society or not, God delights for us to follow His Will and His Way so that the whole world might know what it means to really be a follower of Jesus.

Our world today is very convincing that we have to put ourselves as our #1 of our lives.

The world calls us to please every desire, every craving, every aspiration, and every delight that our minds can come up with. The world calls us to live it up for ourselves with total disregard to those around us. The world tells us that there is no God, there is nothing beyond this life, so we have to take advantage of every opportunity presented to us to completely satisfy ourselves. And we have only to take a look into the pages of history to see where that kind of mindset gets us. It ruins lives, terminates relationships, decimates families, corrupts governments at all levels, and destroys nations. When the foolishness of the world is all we have to look forward to, our society comes to an end very quickly.

So God calls us to move beyond ourselves to put Him as #1 in our life. God has laid out for us all the guidelines we need to thrive as a person, as a family, as communities and states and nations. But it demands our obedience to Him in everything. It requires that we make God our first love so that out of everything else in our life, there is nothing greater than Him. And when we do that, God delights to bless us and recognize us as His people, those who love Him so much that nothing else takes precedence in our life.

Today we heard the words of Revelation 21:1-8. It is here that we see God's future plans for humanity. Verses 3 & 4 help us to become aware of God's plan for us, and they give us time to prepare for that future. The Apostle John writes, "*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'*"

Oh the joy of being face to face with God, standing blameless before Him because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, washed clean by the sacrifice He has already made for us when He died on the cross. Our sins will be no more and Jesus tells us, *“I am making everything new!”* (Rev. 21:5). All of the pain and sorrow and abuse and torment and neglect and oppression and persecution and war and hate will be gone, and we will be recreated once more into the glory of the Garden of Eden. There will be nothing left to make us cry, for even death will have been destroyed.

That’s what we have to look forward to when we give our lives over to Jesus Christ so that He can rule in our hearts and guide us as our first love. *“To [those] who are thirsty Jesus will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life”* (Rev. 21:6), so that we might be with Him forever. The one who *“overcomes [the things of this world] will inherit all this, and”* Jesus tells us, *“I will be their God and they will be My children”* (21:7).

That’s what gives us the hope to continue to live for Jesus. He will not abandon us to extermination in this world, but will take us to be with Him when this life is over. These few years that we have to live here on the earth are miniscule in comparison to eternity that we will have with Jesus when He returns for us.

But we must prepare our lives for His coming, for *“the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death”* (21:8). If we continue to live according to the ways of the world, neglecting to follow God’s ways, we have no hope beyond this life, for there will only be a living death. Without Jesus as Lord and Savior, anyone will wish that they are dead. Only Jesus gives life to us IF we follow His will and obey His commands.

So Jesus invites us to live differently than according to the ways of the world. He calls us to genuinely love one another, even as He loved us and gave Himself up for us. That means that we have to give up living for ourselves and begin living according to the ways of the Lord. We have to love as Jesus loved, and to see as Jesus saw, in order to reach out beyond our own selves to help others come to

the Lord as we live the love of Jesus before them. We need to get beyond the human standards that we are surrounded by and begin to live by the ways of the Lord, AND THEN people will see the difference and begin to want what we have - Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Jesus makes this clear to us, “*A new command I give you; Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*” (John 13:34-35).

Our New Testament Lesson of Acts 11:1-18 gives us a model example of how we can do this. Listen carefully to what God did through Peter. (READ Acts 11:1-18)

Last week we heard how Peter trusted God’s guidance and went to Joppa. There he, by the power of the Holy Spirit, raised Tabitha from the dead, restoring her to the work of helping the widows of Joppa. Afterward, “*Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon*” (John 9:43). And it was there that God opened up ministry to the Gentiles.

Now Jesus had instructed His followers to go into the whole world telling them about Him, thereby making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). This meant more than just to the Jewish people, but to everyone, starting in Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the remotest parts of the earth (Acts 1:8).

To that point in Peter’s life, he had only gone to the Jews in Judea and Samaria, having left Jerusalem because of the persecution of Jesus’ followers. All of that changed when God told Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment (Acts 10:1), to call for Simon Peter to come to him. These were people outside of the Jewish faith, even out of the Jewish nationality. But they were people of faith, God-fearing and faithful people.

God had prepared Peter, however, by giving him a vision to encourage him to follow God’s direction and call, rather than relying upon human rules and regulations. In that vision, **Peter came to understand that God brings forgiveness of sins to all people**, going beyond the Jewish people to everyone. Using clean and unclean animals as an example, God proclaims to Peter, “*Do not call*

anything impure that God has made clean” (11:9). This was to now include Gentiles into the family of God as they came to understand that Jesus came to the world to “seek and to save what was lost” (Lu. 19:10).

So when the men from Caesarea arrived at Simon the tanner’s house, Peter heard their request, invited them to stay overnight, and then the next day went to Caesarea with them, along with six other believers from Joppa. Imagine that, a devout Jew welcoming Gentiles to stay with them!

God was opening up the door of Salvation to the Gentiles in Caesarea. **The message of Salvation was now possible for all the people of the world**, but God had to get the apostles and other Jewish followers to get with the program and go beyond their rules and regulations, thinking that Salvation was only for the Jews. Since the Jewish leaders had refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah, those who did claim Him as their Savior were now to do the work of making Him known to the world.

So Peter went to Caesarea and inquired of Cornelius why he sent for him. Cornelius explains how God instructed him to call Peter, then says, *“Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (Acts 10:33).*

Talk about an open door! It finally made sense to Peter why he had received the vision, and he fully understood what God’s plan had become. He would be *“accepting people from every nation who fear [God] and do what is right” (10:35)* as a brother and sister in Christ. And as Peter was telling the household of Cornelius the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon all those who were there, just as He had done to the apostles on Pentecost. **Even Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit!**

BUT, when the other apostles and the followers of Jesus throughout Judea heard what Peter had done, they *“criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them’” (11:2).* Peter is now on the hot seat to explain why he would go outside of their Jewish tradition to go to the home of an “uncircumcised” family.

So he explains how God was calling him outside of his own personal interests to meet the interests of others for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:3-4). Peter was beginning to

see as Jesus saw, and desired to continue the work of bringing Jesus to all people, not just to his own people. He was actively living out Jesus' command to "*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:19-20). Peter was showing his first love by following Jesus, even to those outside of his culture, outside of his religion, and outside of his comfort zone.

Peter realized that Salvation from sin and death was now being extended to the rest of the people of the world, and that he was to be the one to bring the message of hope and life and love in Jesus Christ to them. He saw what happens when people of any nationality put their trust in Jesus Christ and commit their lives to following His commands. God is ready and willing to give them His Holy Spirit to guide and direct their lives so that they might also show love to even the least likely folks in order that they might experience the love of God for themselves.

As Peter explained to his fellow Jews what God had done in and through him to the household of Cornelius, God opens up their minds to comprehend the full scope of God's love for the whole world. They really begin to see that God's desire was to reach the world for Jesus, so that He will draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). It is no longer determined by nationality, or race, or color, or language. It goes beyond male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian or any other dividing factor among the human race. The Salvation of Jesus Christ is for everyone, if they will realize their sinfulness, repent of their sinful ways, and believe and trust in Jesus as the only One who can forgive their sins. We cannot claim Jesus Christ and then remain the same worldly people; we must be transformed from the ways of the world to the ways of God, and then receive Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

Many of us today lose that fact as we consider the work that Jesus is calling us to do. We tend to reach out to folks just like us, keeping to our own nationality, our own economic position in life, our own likeness, and our own language. Folks who are different than we are scare us, and we hesitate to interact with them, thereby refusing to share the best news of Jesus Christ with them in the meantime.

We deem them not worthy of receiving the life changing news of Jesus' great love for us, and we fail to follow Jesus' command to go to the whole world with His message of Salvation.

But "those people" we consider the worst of humanity need to hear about Jesus, too. We all need to hear about Jesus' love for us. **Jesus told us, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"** (**Matthew 9:13**). Yes, even the drug addict, the idolater, the sexually immoral, the morally corrupt, the murderer, the unbeliever, the liars and thieves, the militant, the persecutor and oppressor. Paul states it best when he says, "*And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*" (I Corinthians 6:11).

If God can transform our old lives of wickedness and sin into brand new people full of love and respect and honor and hope, why can't we share that news with those around us so that they, too, can be transformed into new people as well?

The other apostles and Jewish believers thought Jesus was just for them. But when Peter explained what God was doing for everyone in the world, he tells them, "***So if God gave them the same gift as He gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God***" (**Acts 11:17**)? God was reaching out to the Gentiles in Caesarea, and He freely gave them the Holy Spirit when they put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. All Peter had to do was to faithfully follow God's call to go to them, tell them about Jesus, get out of God's way, and let the Holy Spirit transform their lives into faithful followers of Jesus.

It's like this. Charles Chu shares a disappointing event. He says, "A few years ago I had a chance to become a hero, but it turned out to be an embarrassing moment. I was in China on a tour group. Our tour bus was on the way to a scenic spot with another tour bus in front of us. It was snowing, and the road was muddy.

"Suddenly the bus ahead of us skidded off the road and tipped over on its side in a rice field. I quickly jumped off my tour bus, ran to the overturned bus, and jumped on top. Windows were shattered, and people inside were obviously hurt. The emergency door was facing upward, so I grabbed the handle

of the emergency door and pulled. The door did not open. I kept pulling hard, but it wouldn't budge.

“By this time, others had come and were pulling people out through the windows, so I gave up on the door and joined them. After I moved away from the door, another man went over to the door. He turned the door handle, and the door opened easily.

“I suddenly realized why the door did not open for me: I had been standing on the door as I tried to open it. With good intentions to save lives, I had become the biggest obstacle blocking the door of rescue.

“Sometimes those who want to lead others to Christ likewise become the biggest obstacle to their salvation.” (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 79)

God wants to use us to reach those around us, but we need to first become willing to love God enough to have Him active in our lives. Then we need to be faithful to allow God to use us to reach out to even those we deem unworthy to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Then **we, too, need to get out of the way so that God can work in the lives of the people to bring the transformation He brings through His Holy Spirit.** It all starts with getting beyond ourselves to reach out to others. Let's pray.

Father, thank You for the life You have given to each one of us. Thank You for calling us to be Your disciples as we put our trust and faith in Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray today that you would fill each one of us with Your Holy Spirit so that we might find His power in us to go even to the least of these in the world, so that they might hear the great Good News of Jesus Christ. Help us to see, like Peter did, that it is not for us to determine who is and who is not worthy of receiving Salvation through Jesus. Rather it is for us to be faithful witnesses of what Jesus has done in our life to draw others to Him through that testimony of faith. Help us to get out of the way, to overcome our preconceived notions of who can hear the Gospel, and to be faithful to Your call in our life to live for Jesus before everyone, so that they might see the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord of their life, too. Empower each of us to live for You. Guide our hearts and minds to be Your people so that the whole world might be saved, in Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. AMEN.