

## Watch Your Step!

*I had to laugh when I heard about a little three-year-old boy who knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. Men, it might help you to take some notes on this one. Anyhow, the one thing this kid loved to eat was meatballs.*

*And one day, he happened to stop by to visit his grandparents just as they were finishing their meal of meatballs and gravy. The boy looked the table over, then said in a very serious voice, "Grandma, that meatball really wants me!"*

That kid knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. Family, I know what I want today, and I think I have learned how to get it. I know what I want today for you as a church. As I have prayed, not only has it become clear to me what I really want to see happen here at, God has shown me how to get it; or more correctly how he intends to bring it to pass. I know what I want for us. I believe withal that is within me that we need to constantly be reaching up toward God. I believe the Lord wants us to reach up to him and connect with him spiritually like we have never connected. So, this morning I want to talk about reaching up to Christ. I sincerely believe God wants you to reach up and connect with Him today like you never have before. God is calling us to reach up and connect with him like we have never connected before. So how do we do that? Well, I want to share with you this morning the stages which authentic Christians progress through as they connect with Christ. They are the stages of spiritual development in becoming an authentic Christian who is truly connected to Christ and every believer goes through the same stages. I find all of them in this interesting story out of the Bible that we read earlier. Let's dig in:

1) The first stage – where everybody begins is the stage of being an **uninterested spectator**.

We find these people mentioned in this story found in Acts 17. Scripture tells us, **"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there."** (Acts 17:16-17) Do you see them? They are the people standing around the marketplace. Paul was out there sharing the gospel, the truth about Jesus Christ, and these people were just walking right on by. He could have been speaking pig latin for all they knew. And look at vs. 21 for a good description of these people, **"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."** (Acts 17:21) Sounds like CNN to me. These people were cruising through life. They had seen Paul in marketplace. They had even heard about this Christianity movement, but they weren't interested.

Family, we are surrounded every day by the same uninterested spectators. To them, Christianity is just another religion. It is just another part of the landscape of America, and unfortunately, about the only time they ever notice it at all is when it shows up on CNN or the internet in the form of one more scandal, one more so called Christian who was just a crook. They have no clue what genuine Christianity is all about. Christian sociologists tell us that we are rapidly becoming what they call a steepleless society. We have more and more people who can drive by a building with a steeple and a cross on top and have no idea that it means a church of Christians meet in that place. I read the other day that 7 out of 10 American adults – when surveyed – said that they had no clue what the term "John 3:16" means. They have seen the sign at the football games, but they don't know what it means. At the same time, 88% of Americans label themselves as Christians. They don't know that John 3:16 refers to the passage in the bible that contains the truth about Jesus Christ in a single sentence; **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** (John 3:16) We are a steepleless society, filled with people who don't have a clue about the reality of Christianity. And they honestly don't care. They are no more interested in Jesus Christ than they are broccoli. These are your truly secular people, unchurched Harry and uninterested Mary. You have them working beside you in the factory and in your office. You see them at the mall in Altoona and in the grocery store in Bedford. And they are a growing segment in our society, they are uninterested spectators.

2) These are people that need to take the next step, which is to move from being an uninterested spectator to being an **unsettled seeker**.

This is when people stop just being indifferent observers on this planet and they take their first step towards God. They begin to seek Him. Do we see any of these seekers in this passage in Acts? It says, **"A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbling trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.'**" (Acts 17:18-20) It says there in the final words that, "we want to know what they mean." They were unsettled by what they had seen and heard, so they decided to check it out. They had moved from being merely uninterested spectators to being unsettled seekers. And I want to tell you the truth; that for some of you, this is where you are right now. We may have a few spectators in our midst today. They would be people who were drug here by somebody else, because they certainly wouldn't have come on their own. But we do have a number of people at this second stage. You are unsettled seekers, and I am so glad you are here. You would like to know more about this God-stuff. You are at least bright enough and interested enough to check it out. So you have started to look into the possibility of this God stuff.

Unfortunately, in our country this is all the farther that many people go. 98% of Americans say they believe in God. That's a boat load, but most of them simply stop at this stage of believing in God and then buy into the American folk religion. You know what the American folk religion is, don't you? It's the belief that if you just believe in God and if you make sure that the good things you do outweigh the bad things you do, then you will be alright in eternity. What is even more unsettling to me is that so many of these seekers will look just about anywhere to find God, because they have not only bought into the American folk religion, they have also bought into the American cultural more of pluralism. That is the belief that all religions are equally valid. That is the belief that all religions serve and believe in the same God, so it doesn't matter which one you choose. That's a false belief, but it leads people to seek God in Buddhism just as quickly as in Christianity. They will check out new age religions or Islam or Hinduism and so forth, because they are all the same, right?

The truth is that many of you in this room are truly at this stage of being a seeker. You don't understand much, but you are willing to check it out. I want you to know how privileged I feel that you have chosen to check it out, and I want to encourage you as strongly as I can, keep seeking. Take the next step in this journey. How? Make an appointment to speak with me. Read some good materials on just what the Christian faith is all about, books like Josh McDowell's, "Evidence that Demands A Verdict" or Lee Strobel's, "The Case For Christ" or Warren Werisbee's, "Ob Being a Servant of God". Open your heart up to Jesus Christ, because he really is the only way. Family, that is not being intolerant, that's being compassionate, because I want you to know the truth and not miss the one who is the true way.

3) Instead, I want you to take the next step on this journey. I want you to become an **unstained follower**.

That's when you become a genuine Christian because you have taken the step of becoming a true follower of Jesus Christ. Let me show you some of these people in our passage this morning, **"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.'**" (Acts 17:22-23) And Paul proceeds to explain to them the truth of the Christian faith. By the end of his teachings, **"Some men joined him and believed."** (Acts 17:34) What did they believe? They believed what Paul told them. They believe the truth that Paul laid out for them, the truth of the gospel message. And by accepting those facts and putting their trust in Jesus Christ, they became authentic followers, true Christians. They took this next step. And most of you here have taken that step as well. You see the step to becoming a true follower basically involves three critical factors.

1) **A follower is someone who has faced the undeniable facts of the Christian faith.** What are those facts? Well, Paul recited most of them right here in his message to the Athenians. Those facts are:

God is real – He is the creator and giver of life. **"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."** (Acts 17:24-25)

God is sovereign – and in control of everything. All of creation must answer to Him for their actions, for their wrongdoing, for living a life apart from him and in rebellion to His will. **"From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."** (Acts 17:26)

God is reaching – He takes the initiative to reach out to rebellious people like you and me. **"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."** (Acts 17:27)

God is revealed – He has come to earth in the flesh through Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our wrongdoing, our sinfulness, by going to the cross, and he secured eternal life – life that death cannot touch – by defeating death through the resurrection. God is revealed. **"For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."** (Acts 17:28-31)

God is calling – He asks us to repent of our wrongdoing, our sinfulness, and receive his free gift of forgiveness and eternal life. **"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."** (Acts 17:30-31)

2) **A follower is also someone who has reached the unavoidable conclusions of the Christian evidence.** They have examined the evidence of Christianity and reached several unavoidable conclusions. Among them are:

If Jesus is the Son of God, his teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights on which I can confidently build my life.

If Jesus sets the standards for morality, I can now have an unwavering foundation for my choices and decisions, rather than basing them on the ever-shifting sands of expediency and self-centeredness.

If Jesus did rise from the dead, he's still alive today and available for me to encounter on a personal basis.

If Jesus conquered death, he can open the door of eternal life for me, too.

If Jesus loves me as he says, he has my best interests at heart. That means I have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing myself to him and his purposes.

If Jesus is who he claims to be (and remarkably, no leader of any other major religion has even pretended to be God), as my Creator he rightfully deserves my allegiance, obedience, and worship.

The evidence really is unavoidable. *I read again recently how a university professor did the math on the likelihood of one person fulfilling just 8 prophecies, like those found in the OT written hundreds and even thousands of years before Jesus was born, prophecies about the Messiah, God come to earth to save people from their sins.*

*The probability of just eight prophecies being fulfilled is one chance in one hundred million billion. That number is millions of times greater than the total number of people who have ever walked this planet.*

*He further calculated that if you took this same number of silver dollars, they would cover the state of Texas to a depth of two feet. If you marked one silver dollar among them and then had a blindfolded person wander the whole state and bend down to pick up just one coin, what would be the odds that he would choose the one that had been marked?*

*The same odds that anybody in history could have fulfilled just eight of the prophecies found in the OT about the Messiah, the Christ; prophecies written hundreds and even thousands of years before Jesus was ever born.*

*One mathematician, Peter W. Stoner, computed the probability of one person fulfilling 48 prophecies (and by the way, there are even more prophecies than that which Jesus fulfilled); but he calculated the probability of one person fulfilling 48 prophecies. That probability is one chance in a trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion. Our minds cannot even comprehend a number that big. It is the same number as the number of miniscule atoms in a trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, billion universes the size of ours. In other words, it's impossible. But Jesus did it.*

And that makes the evidence unavoidable in its conclusions. True followers, genuine Christians, are people who have faced the undeniable facts of the Christian gospel, and reached the unavoidable conclusions of the Christian evidence.

3) Then they have made ***the unsurpassable decision of the Christian faith***. That decision can be described in the form of an equation; Believe + Receive = Become. John 1:12 puts it this way: ***“Yet to all who receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*** (John 1:12) It's a matter of believe + receive = become. First, believe Jesus is the son of God who died as your substitute to pay the penalty you deserve for all of your wrongdoing. Then receive the forgiveness Jesus has secured for you and offers to you; admit the reality of and the turn completely away from the wrongdoing of your life and receive the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ. That way you will become a true child of God, adopted into his family through the risen Christ; a follower of Jesus, open to his transforming truth and transformational power. *I remember very clearly the day I made that simple step a reality in my life. It was August 6<sup>th</sup> 1998. And God, who reaches out to each of us, reached out to me that night and basically said, “Stacy do you really want to live your life this way? Why not turn your life over to me and let me show you what I can do with it?” And that night, I believed, I received, and I became a true child of God. And I can tell you unashamedly and unabashedly, that was the most important decision I have ever made in my life.*

It's a wonderful step – becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, no longer stained by the sins and the wrongdoings of my life, adopted into the family of God. And most of you here – but by all means, not all of you here – have taken that step. I praise and thank God for those of you who have. I pray for those of you who have not.

That is enough for us to digest today, next week I will go a little bit deeper into 2 more steps that we take or make on this journey with Jesus. However, for today we need to answer the simple question; which step am I on? Either you are an uninterested spectator, or an unsettled seeker, or an unstained follower. Everyone of us is somewhere along this path. The question is this: What is your next step on this journey? What would it take for you to make that next step? What is stopping you from taking that step? Are you willing to take that step today?