

Luke 12:35-48

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"FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS"

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Text: *"Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing."*

Over the years of my life my mother, my sister, and my wife have continually struggled with my ineptness at the English language. Indeed, much blood sweat and tears were shed on my behalf in order to propel me into being linguistically capable. I need to thank them all because to some degree I have arrived. Though I am far from perfect, people of responsibility allow me to speak in public, publish what I have written (sometimes), and trust me to be tactful with my language skills.

With this said, I offer my apologies to them who worked so hard with me and who are about to hear me state my theories on the two words **Christian** and **church**. The dictionary describes them both primarily as nouns and sometimes adjectives and adverbs. My theory is that they ought to be primarily verbs. Christians and the church are continually commissioned by God through the scriptures to be active and doing positive and promising things for the Kingdom of God. William E. Hordern, author of A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology writes, *"Christianity is to be lived; it is to issue action; as long as it remains merely thought it is unchristian and futile."* There we have it! The church and Christianity belong together in activity. Too often they are defined by the masses as quiet and passive entities when all the time they should be actively defining and reshaping humanity for the glory of God.

In many cases, however, the Christian and the church have settled comfortably into noundom; never to venture far from the status they represent. I believe, for many modern Christians, the church has become like a three ring circus. The Christian of today may be likely to attend church to enjoy the show put on by Christian Education, fellowship, and, in the center ring, the worship service. Maybe for many people and some of us here today, being a Christian and part of a church means little more than getting pumped up after

a tough week or diverting our worries for an hour while the weight of the world waits for us outside the door. In this sense, then, being entertained or having our personal needs met are all the requirements necessary to be a viable Christian and make a healthy church. But the Christian life and the church Jesus Christ began nearly 2000 years ago is not a place to be satisfied and demands we, who claim a Christian existence, step out of our cocoon and boldly present ourselves to the world.

My father, as many of you know, is a mechanical engineer. In fact, so is my brother and my uncle. Having this many engineers in the family sometimes makes it intolerable for the rest of us. One of the hard and fast rules in our household (passed on to us by the engineer himself) is that before we could proceed with any project, it was imperative we first read the instructions. Wise and wonderful words to live by. Unfortunately for dad, he would have to wait many years before someone would subscribe to his wisdom and she had to marry into the family. That person, of course, would have to be my wife Mary who, to my father's delight, will read every instruction pertaining to assembly, disassembly, side effects, and potential hazards. On this Father's Day I salute my dad for diligently teaching us to follow the instructions because it always makes life easier. Though, having worked closely with him for many years I have witnessed him ignore "step-by-step" manuals and proceed bravely into the creation at hand on a wing and a prayer. Professional privilege, so I've been told.

Congregationalists take privileges too. When it comes to religion and human instruction, commonly known as doctrine, we unceremoniously and often quite flatly reject the notion. When it comes to religious fervor, our desires are often made known and sometimes rather loudly. No one can make us say or do anything to express our faith in God. God alone instructs us in how to live our lives in faith and sometimes, to prove our independence, we don't even listen to him.

One thing we continually forget as Congregationalists is that freedom is not the head of the church. As that great Congregationalist Arthur Rouner so aptly stated at last summer's annual meeting, *"United Church leaders...saw Congregational distinctiveness as a vague love of the free spirit and willingness to fellowship with anyone...make accommodation wherever you can, make bridges to other great world religions, don't judge anyone or*

anything, even assuming that the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus...never really needed to have happened." Rouner then concludes with this truth we ought never forget. *"It is Christ among the two or three gathered in His Name that makes the gathered community to be the true church."* Our founders boldly proclaimed freedom from human tyrannies and fully subjected themselves to Jesus Christ who is at the head of the church. In so doing, we are subject to his instructions on life and are implored to follow them. In other words, we ought to do what he tells us to do and not find ourselves surprised when we might be led from comfortable surroundings to discomfort in order to fulfill his calling. In any case, God will not give us a burden too large to bear. A plaque on my office wall which I've carried with me since the time it was given me by my P.F. group back in 1977 reminds me daily, *"The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you."*

Jesus is very clear about claiming, as his own, only those persons who follow his instructions. In an earlier passage in Luke Jesus is told that his mother and his brothers, who were desiring to see him, could not get through the large crowd gathered around him. Jesus then said, *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."* His seemingly callous reply should send a strong message to those of us who claim friendship with him and, at the same time, disregard his instruction to do as we are told.

The parable read this morning reminds me of the time, years ago, when my brother and I were trusted by my parents to stay home alone on Saturday evenings. When the masters left the house, the unwise servants went to town - so to speak. We abused, ever so slightly, our privilege of freedom. We partied down. We ate all the hotdogs; some cooked and some raw. (The raw ones we pretended to be chewing tobacco and put a wad between our cheek and gums.) We watched late night westerns that we weren't supposed to watch. Drank too much soda and ate our fill of ice cream and belched loud now and then and didn't even say "excuse me." With great irresponsibility we took advantage of the master's absence not knowing when they might return. We tried to cover up all the evidence, but too many hotdogs were missing, the ice cream was half gone, the T.V. was warm when they came home, and the soda bottle didn't quite make it under the bed.

The unfaithful servant in the parable was a little worse than my brother and I were. He beat the other servants, he ate and got drunk, and when the master finds him he receives a severe beating for his disobedience. Whether we like it or not, Jesus is issuing a warning to us his followers and servants. We do not know the day nor the hour which he will come to us and when he does we had better be found deeply involved in the Christian activity he has ordained for us. We ought to be doing what he has told us to do. We should never detour from following his instructions.

All the time our society and culture are pulling and tugging us in the attempt to pry us away from the deep roots Jesus has established for us in Christianity. Everywhere we turn we bump into unfaithful and unwise servants who are making every attempt to cloud the issues of morality or destroy the fiber of good and sound ethics. A few years ago newsman Ted Koppel of ABC's Nightline very pointedly displayed the reality of moral certainty in his commencement address at Duke University. Here is what he had to say. *"We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but wear protection. No! The answer is no. Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in an AIDS ward, but no because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings, trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval age by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In its purist form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions."*

For those of us who are so concerned about the world we live in and the world our children are growing up in, we need to get back on track with the truth of Jesus' instructions for our lives and in the process we might discover that we love our enemy. We need to be doing what he has told us to do and find in the end result that we love our neighbor as ourselves. We need to be active in his ministry of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. In this way and more, we are making the Christian person and the church become alive and active for the Kingdom of God.

John Vannorsdall, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, describes the active Christian as one who boldly enters into what he calls "Good Friday's Land" and becomes the catalyst for healing and resurrection known as "Easter's Garden." His

imagery comes to life with this; his story. *"On an evening walk last summer-a lazy walk through back alleys near the railroad track-my wife and I came across a surprising garden and talked as best we could with an elderly man who spoke mostly Italian. The railroad embankment was a disaster of broken bottles and empty cans, weed trees and brambles. Good Friday's land. But twenty-five feet wide from alley to tracks it was terraced and neatly rowed with beans, leaf lettuce, tomatoes, and other growing things. Good Friday's land, wounded and scarred, became Easter's garden where the trains still rattled, but evening strollers paused before evidence of reversal and healing. God is now beheld in all the old familiar places."*

The obedient, active, doing, following instructions Christian will often, if not always, make a positive difference and bring the soothing presence of Easter's garden into the uncertain anxieties of Good Friday's land. We do this not because there are dire consequences promised for us if we don't, but for reasons that bring peace and healing and the glories of God's Kingdom to the furthest corners of an often shattered world. We do this because by following the instructions of Christ we truly can claim Christianity and the church and the active role which his ministry of love can continue for humanity.

Through Christ, God has set the stage for his Kingdom and has put his earthly ministry in motion. We who claim Christianity and the church for our lives are given the choice to participate or stand back and watch. It is up to us to follow the instructions and become doers and shakers in the great scheme of God's plan or be left out. It is not enough to merely say, *"I am a Christian and a member of the church."* We are called to be involved in it's ministry. Every day we are called to renew our covenant with God and pledge our energies to the commission given us to be the good and faithful servant.

And when our time has come to depart from this earthly ministry and existence may it be said of us that we were living in the guidelines of moral truth, spiritual happiness, peaceful living, and loving power of our Lord Jesus Christ. *"Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing."* May we all find the blessings of our Lord in our obedient performance of service for him in all that we do.

Amen.