

"WE KNOW THE WAY, SO LET'S NOT GET LOST"**Luke 5:12-26****THEME: After calling his disciples Jesus showed what it means to follow him.****DATE: 04/29/07**

Dr. John Crocker, First Evangelical Free Church, Rockford, IL

If you don't care about where you're going it's extremely easy to get there.

If you have nothing as your target, you'll hit the bull's eye with amazing accuracy.

It's sad to say, but that's the norm for millions of people and a lot of organizations. They claim to have a purpose, but you'd never know it. They're busy doing things that don't really matter.

The English novelist named George Eliot (actually a pen name for a woman, Mary Ann Evans) wrote in her 19th century novel, *Mill On the Floss*, "I flutter all ways, and fly in none."

People and organizations—even churches—are busy, going nowhere.

Ships and planes have to make constant course corrections. If they don't they'll never reach their intended destination.

- Before our Lord Jesus Christ ascended to heaven he made it clear what kind of people his followers were to be, and what they were to do in his name. Those are still the guide for his people and for his church.

But there are unremitting forces to move a church off-course. Some are bold and some are subtle—and they're the most dangerous.

Tragically, many churches have been shipwrecked because they drifted and didn't make the necessary course corrections.

They once knew the way, but they didn't stay on track and they got lost.

This morning we'll take a good look at Luke's Gospel, chapter five. It begins with a description of the calling of Jesus' first disciples. We'll pick up the text right after that, where Jesus heals a leprous man and a paralytic.

- Let me tell you why this is so important.

When Christ appeared to his disciples after his resurrection he said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21)

As a church we are a community of Christ's followers, sent into the world by our Lord. Let us be certain that we follow in his footsteps and not get lost.

- It's not easy to stay the course that our Lord has given us. It's easy to go with the flow of society's trends. Just add some religious flavoring to social mores, throw in a little bit of Bible, make people feel good about themselves and don't try to make them change—and you can have a popular "church."

But that is not the community of Christ's followers—those who follow in his steps.

According to Jesus Christ, a lot of people will hear him say at the judgment, "I never knew you. Away from me . . ." (Matthew 7:23)

I'd like to think that most of you are here because you believe this church is basically on track—on course with the purpose Christ has given us in the world. So I hope you also want to make sure we stay the course.

Our Bible text today gives us some crucial **guidelines** for staying the course and relating to people Christ's way.

I. RESPOND TO URGENT NEEDS (5:12-16)

Our church is smack in the middle of a culture in which oodles of people are in crisis.

Some have brought a crisis on themselves, and they know it. Others don't know why bad things have happened to them. But they're desperate.

Christ's followers are supposed to be in touch with people like that. But some Christians and churches are completely out of touch with a hurting world.

- Jesus was always in touch with messed-up people. And he was deeply moved with compassion for them (Matthew 9:36)

The disciples who followed Jesus around saw this over and over. That's who Jesus was. He got involved with needy people.

And that is exactly how Christ's followers, his Church must fit into society. That's our role. We get involved with hurting people.

If we only get involved with each other we go off-course and get lost.

- It's inconvenient and unpleasant to get involved with people whose lives are in turmoil.

Let me share with you what I think a church should look like. In a healthy church you'll find a lot of people who still struggling with various crises and many who are in the process of recovery.

That's not because masses of these people just happen to turn into the church parking lot some Sunday morning.

No, it's because Christ's followers who comprise the church were in touch and got involved with people whose lives are messy. Then, when they felt the time was right they said, "I want you to come to church with me and meet some great people whose lives have also been changed, and you should get to know them."

When this happens, a church has people in it who are fighting the good fight against cancer; it has people whose marriage has fallen apart because one of the partners had an affair; it has people struggling with alcoholism or substance abuse or gambling—and they don't have to pretend that they're squeaky-clean.

Last Sunday Liz and I went to church in another town. I don't often get to hear a good sermon (you can take that any way you want to), so I love to hear other pastors preach. Well, this particular preacher's kids are grown up now. His youngest is in college. Recently he told his wife that he wanted a dog—a kind of dog that sheds. She told him if he got the dog he'd have to do all the vacuuming. He figured it was worth it. For the first time in his life he noticed if people dirtied his carpets that he had vacuumed. His son came home and brought a bunch of buddies. They were messing up his clean carpets! He didn't like the mess, but he was glad they were home. Still, he wished they'd leave their dirty shoes at the door.

He said that's the way it is with church. God wants us to come as we are with our messed up lives, our guilts, our struggles. He's so glad we're here. But he wishes we'd leave our dirty shoes at the door. Come as we are, but realize we're in a place of spiritual purity. Don't flaunt sin and trample arrogantly on God's grace. And he said if you leave your dirty shoes at the door, when you go out you'll find that the Holy Spirit has cleaned them up for you.

Isn't that a powerful description of Christ's church?

- Let's take a good look at how Jesus was there for people in crisis.

¹² *While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."*

¹³ *Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.*

¹⁴ *Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."*

¹⁵ *Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.*

¹⁶ *But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*

People were dead-scared of lepers. They took every precaution to avoid contamination.

Instead of having compassion toward lepers, most people had become callused toward them. They resented any lepers who came near.

Fear about your own health can bring out the worst in people. It can block the flow of compassion.

- The account of this event in Mark's Gospel (1:40) says the leprous man came up to Jesus.

There was a lot of social pressure on Jesus to turn away from the man. People would expect Jesus to tell the man to back away.

Jesus had every right, by law and tradition, to have nothing to do with the fellow.

- The disease had taken hold of this man. It wasn't a mild case of leprosy. The text says he was covered with leprosy. He was a hideous human spectacle. We don't see anything these days that is anywhere near as grotesque as what this man looked like.

What did Jesus do? He reached out and touched the man.

This man had probably not been touched for many years.

Jesus made physical contact because he knew that words were not enough. The man was used to words—mostly nasty words.

The man needed compassion. Then Jesus healed him.

- No one would have thought less of Jesus if he had turned away from the man. As a righteous man, Jesus would be keeping himself from defilement. He had a right to turn away.

But, as the saying goes, the right to do something doesn't always mean it's right to do it.

No one has ever been more outgoing than Jesus. He left the glory of heaven to come to save us.

In his earthly ministry Jesus was in constant touch with people who were not like him. They had messed up lives.

I infer from this that we must be careful that we don't separate ourselves from people who are not like us.

- Outreach is usually a very strong feature of a new church or a young church. But with time church members tend to focus more on themselves than on people out in the world. They care more and more about their own preferences and their traditions.

That's what happens if churches don't do regular course corrections.

The church doesn't do much to reach out to others any more.

- Some Christians think new people will come in if they change the style of music and make the services more appealing to un-churched people. That's not the answer

Let me put it this way: If you want to see these empty seats filled, you have to do it. You have to be convinced that people need what happens here. We have to go out and get our shoes dirty because we care for people, and bring them here when they're ready.

If you're worried about the filth of the world sticking to you, let me tell you something I've learned. Being exclusively with church people won't keep you clean and pure.

It may even hurt you spiritually because you're only with people who are not doing what Christ said we should be doing.

We're in a world under the control of evil. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I pray this urgently every day.

- Each of us has a responsibility to make certain our church provides the kind of loving, caring, unshockable community where people in all kinds of crises can be brought, and find love and begin to live.

Jesus Christ has called us to follow him. If we do that, our feet will get dirty.

- As a follower of Jesus Christ you won't feel completely at ease in close contact with people whose language and lifestyles are cesspools of moral filth. But you must be willing to get close to people like that without feeling you have to show them how strongly you disapprove.

Jesus was constantly in close contact with people who were considered society's scum. And they wanted to be with him.

To be like Jesus, to follow in his steps, means to be close enough to respond to people in all kinds of crises—people with urgent needs.

[2nd guideline for dealing with people Christ's way]

II. FOCUS ON ESSENTIAL NEEDS (5:17-26)

The things in other people that break our hearts and turn on our little faucets of compassion are things we can see—things we want to fix.

We want to see bodies mended, marriages healed, we want people to be freed from their destructive addictions. And that's good. Christ our Lord had that kind of compassion.

- But the most essential need people have is a right relationship with God. A healthy body and a happy home are not our most basic needs.

Jesus upset the religious establishment, not so much because he healed people and performed other miracles, but because he dealt with sin and with the forgiveness of sinners.

- A delegation of religious heavyweights from all over Israel had come to investigate Jesus.

But Jesus wasn't intimidated at all. You're going to love this; listen.

¹⁷ *One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.*

¹⁸ *Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.*

¹⁹ *When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

²⁰ *When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."*

²¹ *The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

²² *Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?"*

²³ *Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?*

²⁴ *But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."*

²⁵ *Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.*

²⁶ *Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."*

I don't think those stuffed bags of religious propriety would have been too perturbed if Jesus had only healed the man's legs. They probably would have enjoyed it. Some of them had traveled a long way to see Jesus do a miracle.

But Jesus blatantly forgave the man's sins, and then healed him to boot!

Jesus knew they were furious. It was blasphemy for anyone except God to forgive sins. They had that straight.

That's why Jesus could forgive.

Jesus made the point loud and clear that his power to heal was proof of his authority to forgive sins.

That why he had come into the world—to deal with mankind's most essential need, sin. Just a short while after this

Jesus explained that he had come to call sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32)

- The most essential, most serious problem all people have is the sin problem.

What people need most is forgiveness of their sins. The only way of forgiveness is by turning away from sin by faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

That's what the world must hear; that's what people need—much, much more than anything else.

- We call it the gospel. It's the good news for messed up people everywhere—and most people don't know how messed up their lives are in God's sight.

But there are lots of people all around us who do know that. And if they see that you truly care about what they're struggling with, many of them with their messy lives will let you into their lives. And by God's grace, many of them will come to have a relationship with Christ.

- The wonderful truth is that you and I can give the same assurance to people that Jesus gave to that man: "Friend, your sins are forgiven." If people will renounce their sin and pray to Christ for forgiveness and put their faith in him as the only one who can save them, they will be completely forgiven by God, no matter how messed up and filthy their lives have been.

That's what we call "amazing grace."

That's the course Christ set for his followers.

As a church, a community of Christ's followers, are we on course or have we lost our way?

I want to be part of a company of Christ's true followers who are wholeheartedly committed to what our Lord said.

I am calling you today to make the same commitment.

What course corrections do you need to make to day to follow in our Lord's footsteps?

How do you relate to people who are not Christians? Do you go out of your way just to be friendly and kind and show them that you care? Do you ask them how they're doing and listen to them?

How about starting today when you go to the restaurant for lunch? Try to do more than just give your order. Smile and ask the server how he or she is doing. Don't be surprised if the server makes a comment about your kindness. And leave a good tip. Christians should be the best tippers. (That's in the gospel according to John—Crocker).

What about your neighbors? You don't have to go over there with a tract or preach to them. Just show love to them. Let the Holy Spirit open up the opportunity for you to give them what they need.