

How Jesus Transforms: Jesus Calls
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Sermonspice Video: "Ignorable Calling" (www.sermonspice.com/sermon-illustrations/7605/ignorable-calling)

"If I can begin to understand my story, maybe I can begin to understand my calling."

The theme of our current series is Transformation... specifically, that the way that Jesus' earliest friends were transformed after the resurrection is the way He transforms us, too. So far, we have seen that Jesus Consoles... and Clarifies... and today we come to a part of the story that has been made so confusing over the centuries that many Christians have no clue what it is... Jesus' Calling.

The video was a good example of the angst Christians can go through trying to figure out their calling... the fear of making a mistake, of choosing the wrong path, of wasting their lives doing something that could actually displease God! And this anxiety and confusion can actually cause Jesus' followers to get stuck right here in the transformation process... going round and round in circles trying to figure out what they're supposed to do... all the while, doing nothing at all. Today we want to unpack this idea of calling a bit... and, perhaps, allow a few of us to exhale a sigh of relief...

To respond to that calling means to understand what it is. And there's been a lot of confusion about that. Some Christians believe God's calling is sort of like an escape room! Have you ever been to an escape room? A small group enter a room together that's decorated with a theme and with clues hidden throughout. You have a certain amount of time to find and figure out the clues, which lead to keys that open up other clues and, eventually, to your escape from the room. The clock is ticking, though, and your group is on your own to solve the puzzle you've been given. Well, that can be a lot of fun for an hour!... particularly if you're successful at locating and figuring out clues. But it can get stressful and frustrating if you don't. And some people believe that's what God does to us... our whole life long! That God has a hidden plan for us, and it's our job to figure out the clues. If we don't, we'll suffer the consequences of our disobedience. . And our lives will be unhappy, because we'll be out of God's will. Sound familiar to anyone?

Besides what this idea of calling does to people... as Tony just identified... it can also lead to some false ideas about God... that He is some kind of sadistic puppetmaster who enjoys watching His people get tied up in knots... so He can then punish them for their stupidity and disobedience. Is that the God Jesus revealed to us? Is that a God worthy of love and worship? Nope... Jesus shows us something much better!

What if God's calling for us is not a rigid plan... but a shared path? What if God's calling offers the healing we need in our brokenness... the meaning that we need in our fear... the companionship we need on the unfolding journey? What if God's calling provides us peace in our frustration... and hope in moments when we feel like utter failures? What if God's calling is grace? :)

What if?... well, all of that and more, is true about God's calling! And don't just take our word for it... scripture reveals this again and again... especially in the accounts of Jesus' post- resurrection appearances to His friends. We're going to look at yet another of those stories... but before we do... we need to back up to a story that happened just before Jesus began His public ministry.

He had been baptized by His cousin, John... and then was called by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness... a high, dry, hot, barren region... where he was tempted in all the ways that we are... so we could be transformed in all the ways he would be. The adversary met him there when he was famished and exhausted after 40 days of heat and hunger. The tempter came to Jesus as he does to all of us... when he was most vulnerable. Are any of you experiencing a bit more temptation in this wilderness we have been called to? Interesting timing with the story... Tony counted, and we just passed 40 days of isolation last week! Are we experiencing now any of the temptations Jesus experienced then? Let's see!

The first universal temptation Jesus experienced was a hard one. He hadn't eaten in 40 days; he's surrounded by dirt and stone. And the tempter said, *"You don't need to finish this fast. Just turn the stones into bread. You know you can do it... you're the only one who can."* So what's wrong with that? If I could turn this microphone into a pizza, I might just do it! :) No, the temptation was about stones and bread only on the surface. Henri Nouwen, a popular 20th century writer on spiritual formation, summarized this as the universal human temptation to be relevant, or needed, or useful... to feel the need to prove and demonstrate our worth, our value.

Jesus sees through this temptation, as we should. He knows that our value, our worth, is rooted in the image of God in us, and not in what we have to contribute. And so he responds with truth: ***"It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4 NIV).*** Yes, let's contribute! Yes, let's do good things out of our abilities... but we don't have to prove our relevance to God or anyone else. We are already worthy.

The second universal human temptation was the attempt to get Jesus to be spectacular. *"Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels rescue You in front of the adoring crowd,"* the tempter enticed. Nouwen said that this was the temptation to stand out from the crowd... to prove that you are more special, more gifted, more successful than anyone else... head and shoulders above the rest.

But Jesus refused to become the star of the circus: ***"Don't put the Lord your God to the test,"*** He said. The adversary was basing this temptation in scripture... ***Psalm 91:12 -- ...[the angels] will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*** But Jesus saw right through him... taking scripture out of context and using it to try to force God to do what you want is not faith... besides, Jesus did not come to prove how spectacular He was, how much God loved Him... Jesus came to reveal how much God loves all of us and that we don't have to be spectacular to receive God's love.

The tempter wasn't done yet!... and so he took Jesus someplace where he could see all the kingdoms of the earth in all their glory and splendor. And then he said, *"They're all mine. But I'll give them to you if you give me your worship."* Nouwen calls this the universal temptation to be powerful. Most of us would settle for a lot less power than this, wouldn't we? :) We'd be glad for the power to control our lives, or even to control the lives of other people. Wouldn't you like to have a bit more power over your money, your health, your family, your job, your future? We see how powerful this temptation of power truly is!

Jesus also sees the idolatry in it. He sees that power quickly becomes a false god, and that the one in front of him, tempting him, was the incarnation of that desire. So he not only said no to the temptation; he also said no to the tempter: ***"Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only' (Matthew 4:10 NIV).*** And then, in his own ministry, he demonstrated again and again that any power he had came from the Father, and him alone.

Jesus refused those three temptations, which is why the book of Hebrews says that **“He was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15 NIV)**. And there’s a bunch of good news here... first, temptation is not sin! Even Jesus was tempted... so we aren’t doing anything wrong when temptation shows up in our lives. Like Jesus, we might even be doing something right. :) More good news... because Jesus was tempted like us... He had a real, full human experience... He knows how strong the tempter’s pull can be... and He showed us that temptation loses its power when we refuse to listen to it. Jesus did not have a conversation with the tempter... did not try to reason with him or explain his misuse of the scriptures. Jesus didn’t even say NO to him... Rather, Jesus said YES to God... YES to the certainty of God’s love... YES to the goodness of God’s kingdom.

And when Jesus left the wilderness and returned home to Galilee, He went in the power of the Spirit... He was so fully identified with our humanness that He trusted in the same source of power that is available to all of us... the Holy Spirit. Jesus started teaching... and many people heard His “call” and chose to follow Him... some literally followed Him from place to place, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. Others followed Him by staying in their hometowns, like Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. All of these people were disciples... students of Jesus.

Some of them he called personally. Like Matthew the tax collector... “leave your taxes and **follow me.**” Peter and Andrew, the fishermen... “follow me and fish for people.” James and John with their father, “Follow me and be my family.” They did not fully understand what following Jesus meant, but most said yes. They thought perhaps they were following the next leader of Israel, and wanted to be in early on the revolution. Then Jesus died, and their hopes were crushed. Then he rose from the dead, and they were bewildered.

And so, in the weeks after his resurrection Jesus re-calls them. Do you know what a recall is? “Bring your car back in because there’s a problem with it. We’ll fix it and give it back to you, same as new.” :) It’s a similar thing going on here... “You didn’t quite understand who I was, who you were, or what our Father was doing in the world when you accepted my call the first time. But now you’ve seen death and resurrection. Come back to me and let’s do this again, and you’ll have everything you need to follow me in the new realities of the kingdom of God.”

Yes, all these disciples had originally experienced being called by Jesus... but they had no clue what it meant! So, after the resurrection... once his disciples’ hearts and heads are integrated and open... Jesus joins together their experience of being called with understanding of what it means to be called.

There’s a wonderful story among Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances about a life-changing conversation He had one morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with one of his dear friends... Simon Peter. In that conversation, Jesus ushers Peter into his next transformative moment... in the most gentle, loving way possible. It’s not a story of frustration or fear... It’s a story of hope and freedom... for Peter, and for us. Let’s read the conversation:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter (interesting, it doesn’t say that this was a private conversation. It appears the other disciples were there), “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all

things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” (John 21:15-19 NIV)

To understand why that curious conversation mattered so much to Peter... and why it is so encouraging to us as well... it's helpful to remember the backstory... who he was prior to this moment. Fortunately, the gospels record a lot about him! We can understand him fairly well, spiritually, and see some of ourselves in him. To help make sense of what's going on here between Jesus and Peter, let's look again at those three temptations...and see how Peter experienced them, how Jesus offered transformation in response to each of them...how he re-called Peter to himself... and in the process perhaps we'll see how Jesus re-calls each of us...

Peter definitely knew the temptation to be relevant... Peter was a doer, a skilled fisherman who knew how to take care of himself and his family. He was useful... he did things that made him feel significant. Then one day, Peter was washing his nets after a disappointing night of fishing, and “irrelevant” preacher Jesus gets into his boat and tells Peter to take Him out deep sea fishing.

Peter was more than annoyed... *“Ummm, we know what we're doing... we were out there all night and came back empty... and you who knows nothing about fishing wants me to waste time and look ridiculous by putting my clean nets back in the water at the wrong time of day just because you say so? But okay, you're a holy man, so I'll do it... but you're the one who's going to look ridiculous.”* Of course, they hauled in a great catch... and when they got back to shore, Peter fell on his knees before Jesus... because of what Jesus had DONE. Jesus was very useful, indeed. So Jesus called Peter just as he was... follow Me, I'll send you to fish for people.

And three years later, Jesus refocuses Peter's calling from him... but only after Peter's self-image has crumbled to pieces... after he reaches the end of what he can do... when he is afraid, useless... willing to say or do anything to stay alive, including betraying his irrelevant best Friend. Only when Peter is willing to be vulnerable and incompetent can the Risen Jesus reveal that Peter's true identity was never based in anything he could do... but in God's eternal love for him. So, Jesus refocuses Peter's calling from something he knew about to something he knew nothing about... from fishing to shepherding... from one who treats people as commodities to be counted and used to one who loves and cares for even the least of these. *“Your calling is to be like Me, Peter... to love and lay your life down for My sheep. Your calling, Peter, is to love God's people as tenderly as God loves you...”*

Peter certainly knew the temptation to be spectacular. He wanted to be the best, the brightest, the first, the hero... and perhaps even more than that he wanted to be SEEN to be those things. He really wanted to stand out, to win affirmation and applause, to be noticed. But that came crashing down when Jesus was crucified. It became obvious to everyone... including Peter himself... that he was not as spectacular as he claimed to be. In fact, in that night of denial, he turned out to be a pretty lousy human being, and an even worse friend. When he and Jesus have that conversation on the seashore, he's been broken open. Yay! There was so much grace in that for him! Because he could finally see himself for who he was, and find the healing that his soul needed most... which was not to be spectacular, after all, but simply to be in love.

And so Jesus restores Peter's relationship with him. He meets Peter's three denials with three affirmations of love. There's something else cool here in the original language, because Jesus and Peter are using different words for love. Jesus is talking about a passionate, all-out, burning,

committed kind of love... the kind of word that Peter USED to use when he was trying to be spectacular. But Peter responds now with a word that means brotherly love. I think what he's saying is, "Yes, I love you, but I've overstated that in the past, trying to show off. I don't want to do that anymore. I will love you with as much love as I can, and I'll always be honest about it." And Jesus seems to want that kind of authenticity...not only from Peter, but from each one of us.

And Peter also knew the third temptation to be powerful... Peter had a powerful personality. He was the kind of person most would identify as a "born leader" ... bold, decisive, in control... he knew how to clamp down on anyone who threatened or disagreed with him... making loud declarations, silencing other's voices and demanding that they listen to him and do what he said. And while that kind of top-down rule is seen as leadership in the world, Jesus said that kind of control was forbidden in the Kingdom of God. Interesting, isn't it, that when the tempter offered Jesus power over the entire world, Jesus said, "*Away from me, Satan.*" And when Peter rebuked Jesus for saying He would die for the world, Jesus said the same thing to Peter, "*Get behind me, Satan.*"

Jesus revealed what real power looks like in God's kingdom... not power over others, but power with and for others... not compulsion, but compassion. Jesus did not cling to His divine power, but let go and came to be one of us... trusting in the Father's and the Spirit's power, not His own. Nouwen describes why the temptation to power is so great... not only for Peter, but for all of us: "... power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems to be easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life."

So, Jesus reframes Peter's relationship with power... Peter was called from power to powerlessness... from control to trust. In order to lead God's people, Peter needed to learn how to be led by God... but that couldn't happen until everything fell apart and he recognized what was true all along... his, and our, control is very limited. Our next breath, our next heartbeat, is not in our control. Circumstances change suddenly... as we are experiencing right now... and often there is little we can do to fix it. But, for Peter, this moment of powerlessness was a moment of transformation... instead of rushing to put it back together, he let it fall apart... he followed His Shepherd Jesus... was finally able to receive his role as a shepherd of Christ's flock... and got to experience himself inexplicably sustained by the real power that sustains us all in our own powerlessness... amazing grace! May it be so for us, as well!

Peter had been trying to convince himself and others that he was something he was not, but that old story had let him down. And there, on the seashore, he was given the opportunity to write a new story... the story of a heart that has come alive in love. Peter's main agenda is no longer looking for something to do. He just wants to be with Jesus. And we get the sense that he spends the rest of his life hanging out with his Friend... loving his friend, fully, joyfully, *undeniably*.

Maybe you are ready for a new story as well? Maybe your old story about yourself has become a bit frayed and frazzled during the past 7 weeks. Maybe there's an opportunity for you to follow Peter's example and allow Jesus to write a new story with a fresh calling from God... and, as the opening video suggested, with a fresh understanding of what it means to be called. If so, then let's not go back to the escape room... let's go forward into God's calling upon our lives. Here's a few principles that we can see in Scripture about how God calls and re-calls us...

Calling is identity...the calling of every Christian is to live our new identity in Christ... which comes directly out of our spiritual union with Him. In Christ, we live in the new creation NOW... the old has passed away, and we are new creatures NOW! So, our calling is to be who we already are... and to live more and more fully into who we are becoming in Him... day by day.

Second, calling is being before it is doing. When we know who we are in Christ, yes, we act... but out of who we are, rather than because we've figured out a secret code. When we act out of doing, we are not following a set plan but an unfolding path. And that, over time, as we come to know Christ more deeply and the ways he communicates/nudges more clearly, we are better able to discern what it is He wants us to do moment-by-moment.

Calling is shared... It's important to notice that all Christians share the same big picture calling, but also that the ways that calling is outworked into the world are specific... God works through particular individuals and congregations... in distinct locations and cultures. We share the calling to bring God's transformational, reconciling love to everyone... but God does not do this in cookie-cutter fashion. He loves us in all of our God-given uniqueness... and invites us to celebrate and share in the countless different ways, large and small, that His love is given hands, feet, and heart in the world.

Finally, calling is following. In the video we started with, the very last thing on the glass wall in the video was a heart. What if the beginning and end of our story... and every step in between... is love? Jesus said "Follow me." And who is He? Love. And who are we in Him? Love. And who are we becoming in Him? Love. If my calling is who I am and am becoming... then it seems clear that my calling, your calling, and our calling together is to follow the invitations of God's love...whatever that looks like from person to person or moment to moment.

Takes a lot of the pressure off, doesn't it? What a relief! We get to BE this... we get to DO this! What better calling... what better life... could anyone imagine?

We're going to close with a song that brings the heart of our calling into very clear focus. It's called "Banner of Love" from Song of Solomon... and we invite you to go back to the webpage for the video link. As you listen... hear God calling you... calling us... to be and become our transformed selves in Christ... and to live out our calling to raise high the Banner of Love that is Jesus... One hope for all the world to see....

Today, say Yes to God's call... and every day from now on... live it!

Response: "Banner of Love" (<https://youtu.be/z4xk0dcc6gY>)