

COMFORT ZONE
Romans 2:17-29

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The message came loud and clear on a church answering machine. Five simple words: “I don’t like Kyle’s sermons.”

That begs for some kind of explanation, so Pastor Kyle decided to call the person. He checked the name of the person and got the phone number. When the person answered, the pastor simply said, “Hey, this Kyle Idleman. I understand you’re leaving the church because you don’t like my sermons.”

There was a brief silence. Kyle remembers, “I caught him off guard just as I had planned. It was awkward for a moment, and then he started talking – rambling really – trying to express what he meant. Somewhere in the middle of his lengthy explanation he said something. What he said was not meant to be encouraging, but his words caused me to breathe such a sigh of relief that tears came to my eyes. I pulled over to the side of the road, grabbed a pen, and wrote down what he said.

Well...whenever I listen to one of the messages I feel like you are trying to interfere with my life.

“He’s saying – I believe in Jesus, I’m a big fan, but don’t ask me to follow. I don’t mind coming to church on the weekends. I’ll pray before meals. I’ll even slap a Jesus fish on my bumper. But I don’t want Jesus to interfere with my life.

When Jesus defines the relationship he wants with us, He makes it clear that being a fan who believes without making any real commitment to follow isn’t an option.” (Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan*, p. 35-36)

Following Jesus is risky business. This radical rabbi demands too much from those of us who want to play it safe.

Life truly lived is a risky business, and if one puts up too many fences against risk, one ends by shutting out life itself. (PE January 1989)

We love to live in the comfort zone. We want a steady income, a thermostat on 68 or 72 (husbands and wives always differ). We want to eat at the same restaurants with the same friends with the same waiter. We want a religion that is helpful, but not too bothersome or demanding – you know, just enough so that we can be considered in the camp of Christ. But we don’t really want to alter our lives.

There is a real way in which those of us born into the faith are greatly disadvantaged. Oh, of course I would have it no other way. But those of us who are born into Christian families become so comfortable with the love of God that we think His forgiveness is a birthright and heaven is the natural outcome of being a member of our “good family.”

Some of us have never walked on the other side of life. We don’t realize the emptiness that comes from being spiritually starved. We have a banquet set before us each Sunday – all you care to eat. Some of us have small appetites – most majoring in spiritual desserts.

Somewhere down the line, someone in our family proclaimed Jesus as Lord. They surrendered themselves radically to His Lordship. We, somehow, inherited our religion – but by the time it was passed down to us it was warmed over, having lost its original zest and freshness – like mashed potatoes left overnight in the pan. There is a pathetic familiarity about the faith.

We don’t really know what it feels like to be without a Savior. We can’t imagine ever living without the hope that comes from the long shadow cast by the cross. We don’t know life without the empty tomb, life without the promise of eternal existence. We, in some way, avoided the radical choice to surrender our lives to Christ because it was just the natural and expected thing to do. We eased into our faith, much like the cautious swimmer goes rung by rung on the pool ladder. (When they were small, my kids would beg me to jump into the frigid water at the Southwest Park pool. Somehow, I tried to swim without getting very wet. It didn’t work very well. Besides, they wanted me to plunge and wrestle – so I learned to just jump in and get the exhilarating chill behind me.)

Have you ever met someone who did not have the “advantage” of growing up in a “Christian home”? Have you ever seen the excitement of the faith for someone whose conversion causes him to have a radically different life?

They know what it feels like to think of death as the end. They know the terror of never being able to bask in the forgiveness of God. They know the pitiful results that come upon a family when Christ is rejected, when the church is ignored, when there is no family of faith to surround them. And they don’t want to ever go back to that. No! No! They run away, as fast as they can, from any hint of life without a Savior.

They have made a radical choice – they have made Jesus their Savior. They have come to realize that He died for them, in their place, and they will never forget that. Unlike some of us who have always considered ourselves “pretty good,” they know the depth and power of the grip of sin, and they will have nothing to do with it. They want to serve, to be active. Like an excited kid in a candy store, they volunteer for more positions of service in the church than any one person could ever do. But they don’t want to be left out. They want to be a part of everything good, everything that will spread the good news of God’s love through Christ. They are willing to risk, to do things that they would have never imagined themselves able to do because they have made themselves available to God and His service. They let go and let God.

Some of us are so accustomed to the gospel story that we have forgotten, or never really realized, its radical, risky message.

- like the man whose house is located beside the airport, who sleeps at night never hearing the jets as they shake the walls of his house with their sonic boom
- like the lady who lives next to the bakery, we live in the aroma – yet we are so accustomed to it that we hardly smell it until someone else makes mention of it
- like the laborer who mans the jackhammer, we are numbed by the persistent, pounding pulse.

It is a very dangerous state to be in. Especially when it is the call of Christ and His bride, the church, to which you have become so accustomed.

That is the way it was with the Jewish people in Romans 2. They had been chosen by God to have a special relationship with Him. They were to be His people and He their God. Abraham was a risky follower of God. This God was new to Abraham, the moon-worshipping Mesopotamian. God asked him to follow in faith, He asked Abraham to risk on numerous occasions. First, God asked him to leave a good life behind, a life filled with comfort, wealth, and family. God asked him to move from the known to the unknown. He asked him to find his reward in what he could not see – a great nation; in what he would impart – a blessing. Abraham’s decision to follow a God he did not really know was a radical decision!

Harold Lamb’s *Life of Alexander the Great* describes the consternation which came upon the Greek army as it followed Alexander across Asia Minor when they discovered they had marched clear off the map. The only maps they had showed only a portion of Asia Minor. The rest was a blank space, and they filled it in as they went along. Their maps told them where they had been and not where they were going. Our world has marched off many maps, and new ones must be drawn. (Rev. Ken Miller, SF January 1989)

So it was with Abraham. He was asked to risk it all. His very reward was to rest in the multitude of his descendants. That is to say that if God were going to keep His side of the bargain, Isaac, Abraham’s son, would have to bear the line of blessing. But now, even as things seemed for once as if they were going well, God asks Abraham to do the strangest, most incredible deed. God asked him to kill the very son that He had given to him and Sarah in their old age. Abraham responds in obedience. He binds his son as a sacrificial beast and is ready to do the foolishness of God. But instead of breaking Abraham, it brings him to the summit of his lifelong walk with God. It was a test. God needed to know, Abraham needed to know – would Abraham be willing to risk obedience? You remember the story. Abraham risked it all, and God spared Isaac.

God speaks. “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

God had to see if Abraham was willing to love Him with a risky love.

Abraham lived a life of risk-filled, faithful obedience. He made the radical choice. But what about his descendants? As the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Abraham began to multiply and fill the earth, they refused to take the risk of obedience. They wanted to live in the comfort zone. They took great pride in their ancestry. “We don’t have to live a life of risk. We are Abraham’s children. Hey, who do you think I am? I’m Abraham’s son.”

The most ironic thing happened. Instead of following in the steps of Abraham, instead of doing the risky things that God asked them to do, instead of being radically obedient to God as Abraham had been – leaving all behind and going from the known to the unknown – the children of Abraham simply refused to obey God, to do what He asked. They simply pointed to Abraham and said, “We are with him. We earn credit for the things that he has done!”

Their argument was clear:

1. God made a deal with Abraham.
2. We are in on the deal; we will be the people of God simply because we are born Jews.
3. We do not have to obey God. Our heritage is enough. God has given us His law and He has marked us as His people by the act of circumcision.
4. We don't have to make the radical choice of obedience. We'll just pick the fruit that comes from Abraham's obedience. We can live on the faith of our fathers.

In Romans 1:18, Paul has said the wrath of God is poured out on all ungodliness and wickedness. And then he sketches the sins of the Gentiles who deliberately reject the revelation of God they have received.

But now, in chapter 2, he draws a bead on the Jews. They are also, like the Gentiles, entrapped by sin's merciless power. And despite their posturing as God's unassailable elect, they will be subject to God's impartial scrutiny at the judgment. Paul, in this chapter, is getting rid of all the props that enable the Jews to imagine that they are righteous before God in any other way than faith in the Messiah Jesus. The message in Romans 2:1-29 is clear: God judges all humanity in accordance with truth, and God will disregard anyone's ancestry and judge each according to his or her obedience to the law, whether the written law or the law written on their hearts.

And, of course, this leads all men to declare that they can't do it, and they must turn to the Messiah who pays for their sin. (David Garland, forthcoming commentary on Romans)

Romans 2:17-29

“Hold it,” Paul says to those in the city of Rome. “Your covenant with God was not a substitute for obedience.”

Verses 17-24

You Jews think that just because God gave you His law that you are promised to miss the wrath of God. You are hypocritical, never risking being obedient to God. You go around judging others when you, yourself, are doing the very things you criticize in others. You sit back and conclude, “Oh, I'm a Jew and God will always overlook my half-hearted commitment to Him.” Paul charges, “You disgrace the name of God.” Your relaxed, noncommittal attitude toward God is blasphemy against His holy name.

Verses 28-29

Your descendancy does not make you a Jew, a member of God's people. Your radical obedience of the heart is what makes you part of the people of God.

We read the book of Romans and wonder, “How could the Jewish people become so accustomed to the promises of God that they depended on the fierce faith of their forefathers rather than seeking a vital, sacrificial relationship to God for themselves?”

What about you? What about me? Have you made a personal choice to risk a radical call of Christ? Have you counted the cost of following a Savior who demands so much?

Both Samuel Chase of Maryland and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts were among the original signers of the Declaration of Independence. Chase, a huge man of 250 pounds, was asked by Gerry why he was willing to risk his significant property holdings to sign the Declaration. Chase turned to the frail Gerry and replied, “It’s you who will have the far more difficult time. With your slight build, you’re likely to keep dangling on the gallows while I will only but suffer for a moment.” We are each called to count the cost of commitment. (*Preaching*, Vol. 3, No. 5)

Or have you, like the Jews, simply sat and pointed to the obedience of your parents and grandparents and declared, “I’m with them.” You have casually accepted the God of your family without ever really having a personal relationship to Him. Simply put, you’ve never answered the call of Christ for yourself, the call of the cross.

Sometimes churches like ours, churches with a great history of faithful forefathers, can act just like these Jews. We, too, can exhibit a spirit of entitlement, pointing to our past, being hopeful because of our heritage. But that’s not the way we do business at First Baptist Church of Amarillo. Every generation must and will start new by accepting the radical call to discipleship.

The story we’re called to tell and live and die by is one of risk confronted, death embraced. What’s more, Jesus calls us to walk the narrow way, take up a cross with him daily. It’s terribly risky business. Ask that bright company of martyrs that quite recklessly parted with goods, security, and life itself, preferring to be faithful in death rather than safe in life. (*Leadership*. Vol. 12, No. 1)

The relation of Christ, the meaning of our atonement, the risk one runs to have God at his elbow, the inevitable concomitant of our salvation means that at this cross there is no place for observers. There is no detached ground; there are no uninvolved ones. We are caught here. Cross means nailed here. There are no spectators.... We are all “on stage.” You are in it: the drama of the redemption of the world. But not alone – there are no single crosses anywhere, anymore. All our crosses participate in His. (*Preaching*, Vol. 3, No. 5)

Some here have never really taken the risk for themselves.

Some of you here need to answer the call of Christ for the first time – no longer depending upon your family for your salvation. Others of you are ready to risk to give God more control of your life, to develop your relationship to Him.

From time to time, lobsters leave their shells. Apparently it is a necessary part of their growth process. While they are growing, they need their shell to protect them from being torn apart. And yet, as a result of having grown on the inside, their old shell must be abandoned. If they did not abandon it, the old shell would soon become their prison – finally their casket.

The tricky part for the lobster is the brief period of time between when the old shell is discarded and the new one is formed. During that terribly vulnerable period, the transition must be scary to the lobster. Currents gleefully cartwheel you from coral to kelp. Hungry schools of fish are ready to make you a part of their food chain. For a while, at least, that old shell must look pretty good – even if it had begun to feel like your kid sister’s girdle. Sometimes lobsters die between shells. That’s life and death in the ocean blue. Though sad, perhaps it’s not as sad as the possibility of slowly suffocating in a shell that no longer fits. We are not so different from lobsters. If we did not have a shell – a structure, a framework – within which to grow, then I doubt any of us would have made it this far. Even so, change and growth are necessary for survival. Discipleship means being so committed to Christ that when He bids us to follow, to change, to risk, to grow, to leave our “shells” behind, we do what He asks. (*Leadership*, Vol. 13, No. 4)

For you, perhaps it is time to trust God, to follow Him as Abraham followed Him – even when you are not sure where He is leading.

The little girl was saying her prayers at bedtime, so Dad stood outside the door and listened in. She was reciting the alphabet. After she finished, he went into the room and said, “Why were you saying the alphabet to God?” “I really didn’t know what to pray for tonight,” she answered him. “So I said, ‘God, I’m going to give you all the letters of the alphabet and you put them together the way you want to.’” Ken Chafin observes: “If I’m not mistaken, that is what commitment is all about – the kind of risky faith that opens up every letter of the alphabet of my life and says, ‘God, you take me and put me together the way you want to.’” (*Preaching*, Vol. 7, No. 3)

Risk – a radical obedience.