

Looking Back and Looking Forward

by Zac Poonen

This sermon reflects on the journey of a church over 44 years, emphasizing the importance of discipleship, obedience to Christ's commands, humility, submission to authority, and fervent love for Jesus. It warns against deception, backsliding, love growing cold, and the dangers of seeking personal interests over God's. The speaker encourages a spirit of repentance, building the church with God's interests at heart, and preparing for the future by following Jesus' example of humility and service.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:2, Matthew 28:19, Luke 14:26, Hebrews 6:1, Matthew 7:7, Acts 2:1, Luke 2:51, 2 Timothy 3:1, Matthew 16:18, Matthew 16:23

Topics: "Discipleship", "Humility in Service"

Description

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Transcript

Praise the Lord, brothers and sisters. It's so good to be able to meet with you like this as we celebrate God's goodness to us over the last 44 years in this church. Let's turn first of all to Deuteronomy and chapter 8 and verse 2. This is Moses speaking to the Israelites just as they came to the borders of the promised land and they were looking back over how God preserved them for 40 years in the wilderness.

And Moses says to them, you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God led you in the wilderness these 40 years. That's what I would also say. Remember all the way that the Lord led you since you came to this church.

Some of us 44 years, some of us much less, but look back with gratitude for what God did for you. There are so many hundreds of hundreds of churches in this world and we've often asked ourselves why did God start another church in Bangalore 44 years ago? There must be a reason. Why does God start different churches at different times? Why did God raise up different movements during the Reformation or the Methodist Church or the Salvation Army and different churches of the Brethren Assemblies, the Pentecostal churches in the early 20th century? God raised up these churches because the existing churches were not doing all, not preaching all that God wanted them to preach.

Something was being left out. God's full counsel was not being proclaimed. Particularly in the last 500 years, God's raised up different groups of people who recovered more and more of the truth that the apostles preached.

And if God raised up CFC 44 years ago, it's not that the other churches failed. So many of them have done a wonderful job bringing so many people to Christ. But maybe there was something of God's full counsel which was not proclaimed.

And that is the reason why God raised up CFC. So when we began CFC, there were a couple of things we emphasized. First of all, that Jesus told his apostles to go and make disciples, not just to preach the gospel and lead people to conversion, not just to show people the way to heaven, to have their sins forgiven.

He did tell them in Mark 16 to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. That's evangelism. But he also told them the second part of the Great Commission in Matthew 28 was to make disciples of all nations and not only make disciples, but to teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Matthew 28, verse 19 and 20. Make disciples, number one. Baptize them and then teach them to obey, observe all that I commanded.

So that's how we began our church too. 24 years ago, the first thing we preached was discipleship, how to be a disciple. And it's very important for us to remember that again because it's possible that some of us may have drifted away from those truths.

Luke chapter 14, and we read in verse 26 to 33, the conditions of discipleship. First of all, to love Jesus more than our parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, and even brothers and sisters in the church. Christ must be supreme in our lives.

So many people fall away. So many Christian leaders fall away because they have not seen that true repentance means I take self out of the throne of my heart and put Christ there. He is to be Lord.

And if I do not do that, I'm not really repentant. And that's the tragedy with so many people who have come to what we call an easy believism. And so we proclaim discipleship.

You have to love Jesus supremely more than everyone else on earth. And then the second condition in Luke 14, 27, that you have to take up your cross every day. To be a disciple means I decide to die to myself to please God every single day.

I choose the way of death to solve the way Jesus chose. And the third is in Luke 14, 33, to love Jesus Christ more than our own possessions. Now, these are not things we just decide once and then that's it.

Because it's very easy to backslide for people who come to this position and accepted these conditions and then to backslide from there and go back. And that's happened to a number of people. And that's why we need to examine ourselves at this time as we look back.

Were you more of a disciple some years ago than you are today? Have you kept these conditions? Can you honestly say that Christ is supreme in your life, that no one on earth is more important to you than Jesus Christ? That self is not on the throne of your heart, but Christ is on the throne of your heart. Can you

honestly say that to the best of your knowledge, you're really seeking to die to yourself every day in your home, your office, everywhere. That's the second condition of discipleship to take up the cross every day.

And thirdly, can you honestly say that to the best of your knowledge, you're really trying to love Jesus more than your possessions. You can have your possessions, you can have your house, your car, your bank account, but Christ must be more important than all of them. None of them must take the place of Christ in your heart.

These are the conditions of discipleship. And we spent weeks and weeks teaching this in the early days. And we also preached from Hebrews chapter six, saying that we must not be satisfied with laying a foundation.

I'm trying to remind you of what we preached in the early days when we started. Hebrews 6.1, let us press on to perfection. That which we have in the front of our pulpit is what we preached from the beginning.

Let us not keep on laying the foundation of repentance and faith and baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit and the hope of Christ coming. All that is good, but on that we must build the superstructure and pressing on to perfection. And Jesus said, we must teach people to obey all that he commanded.

And that could be summed up in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 in the Sermon on the Mount. Most of what he commanded is right there. So we spent a number of weeks in those early days studying Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And we need to go back to that again and again and again and again, because it's very easy to backslide from the standards that Jesus laid down there.

He told his disciples in Matthew 5 in verse 20, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus taught his disciples that the quality of their righteousness is not quantity. It's not a number of times they pray or amount of work they do or how many souls they bring to Christ.

But the quality of their righteousness must be far superior to that of the Pharisees. In other words, it is not done for people to see, but for God to see, not external, but inward. So these are the things that we taught right from the beginning.

And as we look back over the past 44 years, we think of many, many brothers and sisters with whom it has gone exceptionally well, because they have taken these conditions of discipleship seriously. They've sought for the power of the Holy Spirit to obey the commands of Jesus. See, when we seek to obey the commands of Jesus, for example, if you read Matthew 5, 6, and 7, it's such a high standard.

And at the end of it all, it doesn't tell us, it looks as if it doesn't tell us, Jesus doesn't tell us how we can attain this standard, but he does. You read this very high standard of overcoming anger and not lusting after women and always speaking the truth and never praying or giving money to impress anyone and being free from anxiety and being free from the love of money in Matthew chapter 6, 24, etc. And then you come to the end of it and say, and never to judge or criticize others, but to judge yourself.

And we say, Lord, how can we live this life? And the Lord says in Matthew 7 and verse 7, ask and it'll be given to you. Ask for power, ask for the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the secret.

So this very high standard that he proclaims right up to Matthew chapter 7, verse 6, at the end of it, he says, ask and it'll be given to you. Do you see a need here? There are people who read Matthew 5, 6, and

7 and don't seem to have a sense of need. They read it and say, yeah, it's okay.

But a really sincere person will read it and say, Lord, I can't live up to this standard. How do I ever get to the standard? And the Lord says, ask and it'll be given to you. And he says, if you, being evil, Matthew 7, 11, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good things? Or in Luke 11, 13, it says the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

So through the years, it's by asking that people have received. And we used to have a lot of times of fasting and prayer in the early days, seeking God for guidance, seeking God for the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Lord met with many of us, and that's how our church went forward.

You know, the first church became what it became through the fullness of the Holy Spirit. They waited on God, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they moved on. And we can say the church was born on the day of Pentecost through the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And I can clearly say that CFC was born also through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. God met with Ian and me, and that's how CFC came to birth. And many others came into that experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit and strengthened to live this life and to have power to be witnesses for Christ.

And we also saw through the years the importance of following in Jesus' footsteps, that Jesus has given us an example to follow. He not only died on the cross to forgive our sins, we saw that his whole earthly life was given to us an example to follow. Much more than Jesus saying, believe in me, he said, follow me.

He did say, believe in me, but more frequently, he would say to people, follow me. And that's the word that is hardly proclaimed or taught in a lot of Christendom. And this is what we proclaim, that Jesus' life on earth was God's way of showing us how God wanted man to live.

And so we studied the life of Jesus right from the time he was a child, how for God allowed his son to come to earth and to be born in such poverty in a poor carpenter's home and to grow up there for 30 years in obedience to imperfect earthly parents. And God showed us how we are to follow in that way as well, to be subject to authorities that God places over us. God placed an authority over Jesus for 30 years.

He had lived for eternity in heaven. He didn't have to obey anyone. God brought him to a place where he had to submit to imperfect Joseph and Mary.

And at the end of 30 years of submission like that, you read this lovely verse in Luke chapter 2 that describes those, what the Christian world calls the hidden 30 years. What did he do in those 30 years? We read in Luke chapter 2 and Luke chapter 2 and verse 51, he went down to Nazareth. This is at the age of 12, coming back from the temple and was subject to Joseph and Mary for the next 18 years, all the way up to the age of 30.

So submission to authority is gladly accepted by a humble person. It required tremendous humility on Jesus' part to submit to imperfect Joseph and Mary. And the father said at the end of it, this is my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased.

And we saw this, and this is what we proclaimed, that sin came into the universe because an angel rebelled against authority and salvation came to us through Jesus Christ who submitted to authority. And I've seen through these years, and not only in CFC Bangalore, but in many, many other churches, our CFC churches in different parts of India and elsewhere, other countries too. Those who have understood

this principle of humbling yourself and submitting to authority, it has gone exceptionally well with them, exceptionally well with those brothers and sisters who have seen that this is the way Jesus went, submitted to authority and chosen to go that way themselves.

And those who have not been willing to do that, those who rebelled against authority or questioned and thought they were themselves very important and filled with pride, it has gone badly with them. So, as we look back over the last 44 years, we must look at the examples of people, not only here in Bangalore, but in many of the other CFC churches with whom it has gone exceptionally well, so well that they've grown up to become ministers of God's word, preaching God's word in the conferences, anointed, brought up their children in a godly way, and living under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, because they chose a way of humility and submission the way Jesus went. We need to look back and look around and see such examples with whom it has gone exceptionally well.

That's what we need to look back and see. So, when we look back, look back at such, to see such examples, and then also look back over the past years and see people who rebelled against authority and how they fell away from the church. There are a number of people through these 44 years who fell away, but I'm sure that they all regretted years later when they saw how it went with them and their families when they dropped out of CFC and decided to go in rebellion elsewhere.

The path of submission to authority is the pathway to glory, and those who've been gripped by that, it goes exceptionally well. That's why God has placed authority. The very first commandment he's given to children who don't know anything about God is to obey their parents.

That's how God teaches man to begin his life. Obey your parents and follow Jesus' example. As he grows up to submit to authorities in school and place of work and in the church, and those have chosen that way, it has gone exceptionally well with them, and those have not chosen that way, it has gone exceptionally badly.

Think of people who've been in this church and who become, you know, I think of many people in our church who came to this church very poor. In fact, all of us were poor when we started. I remember in the early days when we used to meet, nobody even had a scooter.

I had one because I had one in the Navy and I kept it with me, but all the others used to come to the meeting by bus or by cycle, believe it or not. That's absolutely true. That's how it was when we started, and we were in need financially, and we submitted to God's laws and word, and God prospered us.

Seek the kingdom of God first, and all these other earthly needs will be added to you, and we've seen poor people come into the church, and it has gone well with them spiritually, and then it went began to go well with them financially, and then what happened? With some, they continued to worship God and not worship money, and it has continued to go well with them. There are brothers who prospered financially with whom it's gone very well because they remained in humility, giving glory to God, but then there are others I think of who came from poverty and were blessed by coming to CLC, and they became wealthy. They got educated.

They went abroad, and they went astray from God. There are examples. You've got to learn lessons from.

There are people also who prospered here and who went astray, and the other thing is when people become proud, they begin to find fault. It's very easy to find fault, to criticize this, criticize this, criticize that,

and we think of some brothers like that who are always finding fault with something, something or the other, with some brother or in the church, and such brothers have also dropped, fallen away, so that's what we need to learn when we look back to the past with whom it's gone well and with whom it's gone badly. Why did it go badly with them? Why has it gone well with some? I made it a policy in my life for many years, in all my Christian life almost, to look at examples of people who fall away, not to criticize them, but to ask myself, why did they fall away? Let me learn a lesson for myself.

Now I want to encourage you to look around and see, think of the people who fell away from the church in the last 44 years and ask yourself why they fell away and learn some lessons that will protect you, and then look also at the people with whom it's gone exceptionally well in these 44 years and ask yourself why it has gone well, and you always find it's because they chose the pathway of humility and of submission to authority. That's a lesson to learn. So then we can think about the future.

When we think about the future, Jesus said in Matthew 24 that the coming days are going to be difficult for his children. There'll be a lot of deception. Matthew 24, when they asked him, what is the sign of your coming? Jesus said, see to it that no one misleads you.

So as we look into the future, we have to be careful that we don't get deceived. There's so much of deception in Christendom today. It's very easy to backslide and to give up that first love.

Paul writing to the Corinthians says, I'm afraid that the devil will deceive you and lead you astray, just like he led Eve astray, 2nd Corinthians 11 3, from the tree of life. Just like 2nd Corinthians 11 3, the serpent deceived Eve and led her away from the tree of life. In the same way, he can lead you astray from what that tree of life symbolized, 2nd Corinthians 11 3, which is simple, pure devotion to Christ.

The tree of life is a life of fervent devotion to Jesus Christ, living by his life, not by rules and regulations and keeping all the things that others in the church will teach and be accepted by them. No, but to have an inner devotion to Christ. That's the tree of life.

And Paul says here, I'm afraid that the devil likely led Eve away from that into the tree of knowledge can lead you also astray into just being satisfied with knowledge of the truth and understanding and maybe even able to preach it well and be accepted because you can preach it well. And you've lost that inner devotion to Jesus Christ. One of the things the Lord's kept on emphasizing in my own heart is to preserve that devotion to Jesus Christ, that it should become more and more and more and more and more.

We must love Christ more and more and more. And I want to urge you, my brothers, as you look into the future, preserve yourself in this, because Jesus said in the last days, because there's going to be so much sin in the world, Matthew 24, he said in verse, Matthew 24 in verse 10, verse 12, sorry, because sin is increased, most people's love will grow cold. So when it says it will grow cold, it means they did have love.

It was fiery love once, it became cold. He's not talking about unbelievers. Unbelievers don't love Jesus at all.

He's talking here about believers who were once on fire for God, full of love for him, who gradually backslid and cooled off. Most people, that's an amazing statement. Most believers, their love will grow cold.

As you look towards the future, what you need to beware of, make sure that your love for Jesus remains fervent. Even if you look around in CFC, you'll find people whose love for Christ has cooled off. Look back

over your own life.

Did you love Jesus more fervently when you first came to this church? Has the love of money gripped you so much that your love for Christ is gone? You spend more time with on Facebook and things like that, and you don't have time for God's word. Your love for Christ is gone. Beware to your brothers and sisters, Jesus warned us, the love of many will grow cold.

If you love Christ, you'll want to hear him. Every day, you'll want to hear him. You long for fellowship with him.

You long never to displease him in anything. So not only deception, but the love of many will grow cold. And 2 Timothy 3 says, it's going to be difficult in the last days because men will have a form of godliness.

2 Timothy 3 verses 1 to 5. But even though they have this form of godliness, verse 5, they won't have the power of godliness, 2 Timothy 3, 5. And so they will still love self just like anybody in the world, verse 2. They love money just like anybody else in the world. They're talking about believers who apparently are good born-again believers, but inwardly, they love themselves. They love money.

They are boastful and arrogant and gossips, verse 3. Malicious gossips. They'll have no self-control. I've seen here in CFC, brothers, gossips.

Constantly talking about others. Sisters, gossips. Beware of such things in the last days.

As you look towards the future, read 2 Timothy 3 verses 1 to 5 and see the dangers we face as we look towards the future. It's going to be difficult to be wholehearted. We want to remain fervent for the Lord till the end.

We want to preserve this church as a pure testimony for Christ till the end. The Lord gave up on the Jewish people because they kept the laws, but they didn't live in devotion to him. And it's possible for the church also to be so taken up with the form of godliness and doing all the right things and coming to the meetings and doing everything well, but losing that inner devotion to Christ.

You have to be extremely careful. Preserve yourself in humility, brothers, as you look towards the future. Follow the example of Jesus who, on the last day of his life, we read, he sat at the feet of his disciples and watched them.

As I've said for many, many years, determine to be a person who washes the feet of your fellow believers all your life. And so the Lord showed me many years ago that when Jesus came to the end of his life, he was not chairman or director of any organization. He was a washer of feet.

He was at the disciples' feet on the last day of his earthly life. So to follow Jesus means to always seek to wash people's feet. That means to serve them, to do dirty jobs for them, to be willing to do anything.

If you come to the CFC to volunteer to clean the toilets, have you ever done that? Any of you? Some of you would never think of doing it. Why is that? Why are we unwilling to do dirty jobs? Do you only like to sing in the choir and play musical instruments and be in charge of the media and organize the computer and the audio and the video, but never think of cleaning the floor or cleaning the toilets? Examine yourself. Ask yourself why.

I think if Jesus was here, he'd clean the floor and wash the toilets. I've done it myself in the old building. I'm ready to do it today as well.

I say that's the way my Savior went. Dear brothers and sisters, I want to urge you, look at the example of Jesus. Don't be satisfied that you're a member of CFC.

Say, Lord, I want to become more and more like Christ. I want to go down. As you've often heard me say, the way the devil became the devil was because he wanted to go up and up and up and up and up.

And to save us, Jesus came down and down and down and down all the way to the death on the cross. So there are two spirits operating in the world. And it's going to be more and more evident as we approach the end.

One spirit seeking to go up and become exalted and the other seeking to go down. So I want to encourage all of you as you look towards the future, seek to go down, down, down, down, down. Don't compare yourself with others.

Never compare yourself with others. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 10 and verse 12, those who compare themselves with others are without understanding. They are foolish.

Anytime you compare yourself with somebody else and think you're better than them in some way, you're a fool. You're a hindrance to the body of Christ. So let's keep these warnings that Jesus has given us, the apostles have given us, as we look towards the future.

And we want the church to be a pure testimony right until the end. We want Christ to be exalted at every single meeting in this church. And the other thing we have sought to do, not only here, but in all the churches, is to encourage younger people to come up.

The older brothers are getting older and older. And there's a need for younger people to come and take over that ministry, like in a relay race. A person has completed the first leg of the race and hands over the baton to the next runner.

And I believe the time has come, as we look towards the future, for younger people to take the baton from the older brothers and run the race, faithfully. Very, very important. And if God can find young people like that in their 40s, 30s, and 40s, and 50s here, then this church can go on from string to string.

Otherwise, as we look over church history, we find so many churches that started so well that sank into corruption because they were not good leaders. In the mark of a good church, we read in Jeremiah, is that there are shepherds after God's own heart. When God gives us shepherds after his own heart, then we are in Zion.

That's what we read in Jeremiah. We've come to see that verse many, many times. And I believe that we need shepherds after God's own heart in our church, many of them among the younger people.

Jeremiah chapter 3, and verse 14 and 15, I will take you one from a city and two from a family, and I'll bring you to Zion, the New Covenant Church. And there I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding. Shepherds who are not interested in your money, that's one of the things we have sought to preserve ourselves from the beginning, to have a radical attitude towards money, to not be in debt, not to buy things beyond what we can afford.

I'm sorry to say there are a number of brothers in CFC who got into huge debts because they spent more than they could afford. And that's an absolute disgrace to the name of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, owe no man anything.

We can borrow if there's an emergency, but when you have enough money and you want to spend more than that because you're covetous, the grace of God will depart from you. And it has departed from different brothers who went into borrowing and getting into debt and not able to repay it. Beware of that.

Be content with what you have. The Bible says, godliness with frugality, with contentment, happiness with what God has given you is the way to have great gain. So, that's another warning I want to give to everyone here in C. Most of you have prospered financially and I fear for you because that prosperity can lead you astray from God.

You can be so taken up with your wealth and the things you can get with it and move into a different lifestyle where you don't have time for God. Be very, very careful. People who never watched filthy movies have started watching them.

Why is that? Money. You wouldn't do that if you didn't have money. Young people who are blessed by God get a good job and get a laptop and then watch pornography.

Be careful. Don't glory that you sit in the CFC. Hang your head in shame and go before God and say, Lord, I want to repent.

I hope that there will be a spirit of repentance in all who have backslidden in this past year and these past years since you came. Think of the days when you first came, how zealous you were. Where were you then and where are you today? Let's repent as we look towards the future and say, Lord, I want to be a strength to this church.

I want to help build this church. If you were living in Noah's time, don't you think you'd spend all your time building the ark? I would. I spent all my energy and I would invest in building the ark and doing it exactly like God said it should be done.

Today, Jesus says, I'm building my church. And when Jesus said in Matthew 16 about building the church, here's something that we can pay heed to. Matthew 16 and verse 18, he said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overpower it.

And he wanted Peter to cooperate in that building of the church. But Peter didn't understand that you've got to go the way of the cross in order to build it. And so when Jesus spoke about his having to go to the cross, Peter couldn't understand it.

He said in verse 22, Lord, don't, that's never going to happen to you. God forbid that'll never happen to you. And Jesus turned around and said to him, get behind me.

He said, you are a stumbling block to me. Who's a stumbling block? To CFC and to the Lord. Listen to this.

Your mind is set on man's interests and not God's. Luke's Matthew 16, 23. If your mind is set on your interests and not God's in building the church, I want to say to you in Jesus' name, you're a stumbling block and you can become an agent of Satan without even realizing it.

Read Matthew 16, 23 carefully. Get behind me, Satan. You're a stumbling block to me because your mind is set not on God's interests, but man's interests.

So think of that as we look towards the future. As I said, let's learn lessons from the past, from those who have fallen away, lessons from those with whom it has gone well. As you look towards the future, beware of having a form of godliness and of backsliding from where you were when you first came to the church.

And today, having your mind set on your interests and not on God's. God wants us to be living examples of people who do our earthly work, earn our living, and live a comfortable living. But God's interests are uppermost, building the church.

So may God help us as we face the future and pray that we will be ready for the coming of Christ. Satan is going to do a lot of work, but we are overcomers. We've seen throughout the years, Satan's always been confounded in CFC.

He's never been able to penetrate into this church because of the leadership of this church has preserved him in Jesus' footsteps. And we want it to continue like that until Christ comes. We want Jesus to be able to look at us and say, well done, good and faithful servant.

I wish that for every one of you, dear brothers and sisters, as we look towards the future. So I want to urge you, walk the way of humility. Look at Jesus and humble yourself always.

Avoid gossiping, avoid backbiting, fear having a form of godliness. Don't seek the honor of men. Be free from seeking your own interests.

Don't be thankful for the money you receive and use it wisely. Don't live beyond your means and don't be taken up with that. Put God's interests first and God will provide all that you need and your family needs if you put him first.

I pray that it'll go very well with all of us. May the Lord bless you all. Amen.

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