

SERIES: THE PERSON OF CHRIST #6/7

THE CROSS IS MY COMPASS

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Text: Mark 11:1-19

The Reverend Dan Lupton of Wheaton, Illinois, recalls a trip he and his wife were once on: “Nancy and I were cutting cross-country in southern Michigan heading in the general direction that pointed to Jackson... We needed to go northeast, so this was a no-brainer trip. Except for the lakes and ponds and swamps. As the road swept around to the right, circumventing another watery basin, I asked, ‘Is this our third curve to the right after two to the left, or only our second curve to the right?’ Nancy queried, ‘Second or third from what starting point? A lot of these curves are really only partial turns.’ It was fully overcast as it usually is in Michigan, so no shadows could be discerned to help us find north. I longed for a compass. ‘Why would GM make a car without putting in a compass? They put in enough interior lights to flood an O’Hare runway, and enough switches to imitate a cockpit. But not one compass to help you get where you need to go.’”

Dan’s reflection on this trip prompted him to make this observation: “For many, life imitates cars without compasses. People travel fast and make a lot of turns, but do they know where they’re going? Jesus had a compass for his life. It should be your compass, too. On Palm Sunday, Jesus was using his compass to take him where he was committed to go. And he had the courage to follow his compass and complete his assignment. The assignment wasn’t fun, but there was the absolute promise of joy on the other side - the side of looking back at the job done. ‘For the joy set before him, [Jesus] endured the cross’ (Hebrews 12:2).” (Dan Lupton, *50-Day Spiritual Adventure Implementation Manual*, pp. C219-C220) The cross set before Jesus, which represented his Father’s divine will, was his compass, and it kept him on target.

One of the many attractive features of Jesus’ personality was his dedication to his mission, even when friends and foes alike tried to derail him. But he would not be sidetracked; the trip to and through Jerusalem was part of his singular focus. The *Pulpit Commentary* says, “Christ was a king, but his royalty was misunderstood during his ministry upon earth. The devil had offered him kingdoms of this world, and he had refused them. The people would have taken him by force and [would have] made him a king, but he had hidden himself from them. Yet it was right... that he should in some way assume a kingly state and accept royal honors. The triumphal entry interests us, because it was the acknowledgment and reception of Jesus with the joyful homage due

him as King of Israel and King of men.” (cited in *50-Day Spiritual Adventure Implementation Manual*, p. C220) So we celebrate Palm Sunday as the day of triumphant entry. It is fitting for Jesus to be so honored, but for Jesus, a crown of human making was not his compass. The cross was his compass. Jerusalem, triumphant entry or not, was a connecting point to the cross.

Earlier in the Gospels, when Jesus was talking about this trip to Jerusalem with his disciples, he never said, “I’m going to Jerusalem to be in a great parade to be received as the new king.” Instead, Jesus said that he would be betrayed, condemned, handed over, mocked, spit upon, beaten, and killed. This confounded his disciples, who reacted quite humanly about it. And why not? They were indeed very human, as are we. Their primary reaction was denial. Look up Matthew 16:21-22. “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’”

Jesus had a compass, and he followed it singularly and faithfully. There are many sources in our day that teach us steps to take for success. One such resource is a book titled *Make a Name for Yourself: The Eight Steps to Becoming an Unforgettable Brand in Your Business* by Robin Fisher Roffer. Two of the eight steps are: “(1) Specialists are better than generalists. Find your most important skill... (2) Establish a single-minded focus like Singer or Steinway. Focus on one singular skill. Steinway made pianos and Singer made sewing machines. Each created a brand around one product.” (*Investor’s Business Daily*, March 2000) Jesus beat this author and thousands of others to the punch. With the cross as his compass, he specialized in following his Father’s will to completion. His focus was to take upon himself the sins of all those who lived in this world before him, with him, and after him.

Have you ever been around someone who has such a strong sense of purpose? A goal so solid that he or she cannot be persuaded to deviate from it? A person who has such a vivid vision of what he or she is supposed to accomplish that no sacrifice is too great to accomplish it? If you have, then you know exactly how disconcerting and even frightening it can be when that purpose seems to go against conventional wisdom. We may even have been one of the many persons to try to convince another person to listen to reason; to see that this is the wrong goal; to consider some alternative ideas. Yet, for some reason, his or her eyes were set on that compass direction and would not be moved.

A past episode of the television show *Seventh Heaven* illustrates this concept. This episode focused on a janitor at a public school who was being encouraged by school officials to retire. He was, after all, old enough to retire; not quite as able to get the jobs done as he used to; and, besides, he was acting a bit weird. He was doing some things and buying some things because he was directed to do so by God. He claimed he heard the voice of God telling him to do these strange things and make

these unusual purchases - such as gallons of shellac. He didn't know why, but he was compelled to do them. He also heard the voice of God telling him that he could not retire yet. After meeting with him, school officials gave the janitor their ultimatum: accept retirement or be fired and lose all retirement benefits. That was a major decision, because he could not afford to lose those benefits. But the voice of God said, "Do not retire." One of Pastor Camden's sons, Simon, was fond of this janitor, discovered what was going to happen to his friend, and pleaded with his father to intervene. Pastor Camden met with the janitor and discovered that he, too, could not talk the janitor into "listening to reason." But he did discern something genuine about the man's passion, even though no one could answer the question of what God had in mind. Pastor Camden managed to persuade the school officials to allow their employee to think about it over a weekend, so at least the decision could be delayed. That Friday evening, long after everyone else was gone, the janitor "knew" that he needed to put a coat of shellac on the benches in the football stadium. Responding to a call about an emergency at the school stadium, Pastor Camden and Simon arrived to find the stadium benches collapsed and the janitor receiving first aid treatment. Shocked, but otherwise OK, the janitor told how he was putting shellac on them, when the whole thing collapsed. Some support brace failed, causing the whole thing to go down. The next day, Saturday, was a band contest at the school, and the stadium benches would have been filled with the bands from this school and visiting schools. A support failure and collapse of the benches that day would have undoubtedly caused serious injuries to numerous unsuspecting students. As they got ready to leave, the janitor was finally able to tell Pastor Camden, Simon, and school officials, "Now, I can retire."

Seventh Heaven, of course, was a fictional series. However, look again at Matthew 16:23. "Jesus turned to Peter, 'Out of my sight, satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" Jesus knew what he needed to accomplish, and he would not be pushed off track. So Jesus came to Jerusalem, amid the shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" It was not the shouts that drew him on; Jesus came because he was following the compass of the Father's will.

Turn back to Mark 11. Jesus came to fulfill his Father's will, and nothing was going to deter him. The incident concerning the fig tree has often confused me, but Dan Lupton provided an observation that helps me: "Jesus was angry over a lazy fig tree. He might have even been angry over people who don't do what they're supposed to do. If so, he abused no person, yet demonstrated how he felt. He taught a lesson while educating the disciples. And I find Jesus attractive in this. A nice guy, righteously, indignantly angry, while making his point while hurting no one, is attractive. What is the task of a fig tree? What is its assignment? To occupy space in this world? To produce leaves? A man going to a cross can't be too happy with a fruit tree that won't even bear a fig. A husband or wife sacrificially working two jobs can't be too happy with a family member piling up a weekly shoe collection. A parent struggling to put a son or daughter through college can't be too happy with lackadaisical study habits. A soldier putting his or her life on the line in battle can't be too happy with a soldier going AWOL. Jesus was

angry with unfinished tasks, incomplete assignments, and lack of commitment. He was angry when Peter told him to get lazy and avoid the cross. I'm so glad Jesus took his anger and frustration out on a simple incomplete tree." (Dan Lupton, *50-Day Spiritual Adventure Implementation Manual*, 2000, p. C223)

When he came into the temple, he saw much the same thing. Just as the fig tree was not producing its fruit, so those in the temple were not producing God's fruit. Instead of inviting the wanderer and foreigner into closer relationship with God, there were those who kept them away from such a closer relationship by creating overly complex rules for worship and seeking to profit from the need for the right type of coins and animals for sacrifice. Jesus chased them out and overturned their tables. "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?' But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

Making the cross our compass is a tough thing to do. But it is the right thing to do. Satan says, "Fight for your selfish self-interest and forget your vows and responsibilities." God says, "Yield your self-interests and keep your vows and responsibilities." Satan says, "The cross is a foolish scandal for those who want to live." Jesus says, "Come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me, and find life." In bold fashion, Jesus refused to be deterred from his vision by friends or enemies; he expressed anger with incomplete work and unfinished goals; and he challenged those who were contrary to his vision. We celebrate Jesus when we follow his example of courageously completing his assigned mission.

What is your calling? What is your assignment in life right now? What does God want you to accomplish? Are you ready to give yourself to His goal and assignment for you? Even when it involves taking up a daily cross, when life seems difficult and unfair? The janitor in *Seventh Heaven* could have ignored God's voice and dropped his assignment and taken the safety of a certain retirement. But even though he did not know the purpose of hearing God's voice and doing God's will, he refused to wander off the course of the compass that was given to him. And numerous school children were saved from injury or worse because a "crazy" janitor stayed on course.

Jesus could have rightfully claimed the glory and honor of a human monarchy. He could have at any time called down "twelve legions" of angels who would have annihilated any and all opposition. He could have avoided the pain and agony of the cross altogether. But Jesus refused to wander off course. And all of us, instead of being damned in death to eternal hell, have the opportunity to see our Father's face in heaven because a "crazy" Messiah stayed on course.

How about you? Do you have Jesus' cross and calling as your spiritual compass, or are you just wandering about, not knowing how to get back on track? In 2,000-plus years of changing world situations, Jesus' assignment has not changed. His love for you has not changed. His sacrifice for you has not changed. Jesus came into Jerusalem knowing that he would be welcomed as a king. Jesus came into Jerusalem

knowing that he would be unjustly treated as a vile criminal. Jesus came into Jerusalem knowing that that he would suffer an agonizing, cruel death, "...even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:8) "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The cross is my compass.

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