

“What Every Follower Ought To Know”

A number of years ago I was given a little book, titled, “What Every Church Leader Ought To Know.” Put together by a former pastor and his wife, it contains 276 one-line pieces of advice for anyone working in full-time ministry. Things you should know (up front), before starting out. Let me share a few.

The first one, (it says) “Early in your ministry, be sure to make time to attend grade school and high school band and chorus concerts. And go to some local ball games, also – but behave.” Here’s another: “If you’re new to a rural setting, make sure you discover what they mean by oysters before you eat.”

How about these: “Never use your last sermon to settle the score. It won’t.” “Never compromise on moral or theological issues; but be open for compromise on almost anything else.” “Never let people sin easily.” “Never send out your resume on Monday morning.” “Never invite back a singing group that says during their program, ‘We don’t know this song too well, so just listen to the words.’” (And here’s my favorite): “Never attend any youth event labeled with the word “lock-in”. Trust me!” What every church leader ought to know. Before you start, what you need to know up front.

Mark tells us that “Jesus called the crowds with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If anyone would come after, want to become one of my followers,’” and then he went on to tell them what they needed to know.

Today I want to talk about what you and I need to know, what’s important for us (to be aware of) up front. And I want to do so (today), not by talking about what we need to do as followers, but what we need to avoid; what we should never do. And I want to do that because I’m convinced that far too many people get themselves in discipleship trouble because they’ve never understood what it means to be (a follower), and as a result end up doing things they never should be doing.

Very simple today, but foundational for our faith: a number of basic lessons. (Here’s the first.) Number one: As a follower of Jesus I must never forget my name. I must never forget my name.

Raise your hand if you have a name. Alright, we all have names. (We all know that.) Everyone has a name. We have first names, middle names, last names. Names are important. They identify us as people. They tell the world who we are.

My name is Selbo. If someone mispronounces it, (a solicitation call), you know how that goes. May I speak to Mr. Saybo? When that happens, (they say my name), I know right away that person doesn’t know me, doesn’t have a clue.

Names are important. If my name were different, I would be different. When someone calls it out, I stop, look, listen, whether I want to or not. Names are our identity. They tell the world who we are.

Now, why are we talking about names when it comes to following Jesus? We’re talking about names, because when Jesus calls us to follow, he gives us a new name, a new identity. And when you know your identity, who you are, it’s a lot easier to figure out what you’re being called to do.

Now we’re not focusing on that story, but remember what happened (in our First Lesson) to Abram and Sarai? When God called them, he gave them new names. Abraham and Sarah, from that point on, their names were different, and because their names were different, so their lives were different.

A new land, a new home, a multitude of descendants; they’d been trying all their lives to have kids, but it wasn’t happening. Along comes God and it happens. God makes a promise and it comes true and (in the process) gives them a new name.

That’s what happens when Jesus calls us. Our names might not (literally change) like it did with them, but our identity does. Who we are, what we’re called to do, where we place our trust, it’s all different. And it’s different because of the promises God makes, because of the one who calls.

Think about what happens when a child is adopted. The (would-be) parents make a promise. They promise that that child will be theirs. They’ll provide for it. They’ll take care of it. They’ll be responsible for it. When it becomes final, when the promises are complete, a new name is given and a new life begins.

So it is with us. So it is with you. You're not the same, now that you've been called. You'll never be the same, now that you belong to Christ. Your name might sound the same as it did before, but your identity (who you are) will never be.

As followers of Jesus, we must never forget our names. We must never forget who we are. In other words, I can't walk out of here (this morning) and forget that I'm a child of God. My identity is tied to his promises. Your identity is (tied up) in what he has promised to you. And when you know who you are, what God has promised, that's when you also know what you're being called to do.

George Barna conducted a survey, looking at 66 different lifestyle categories. Out of 66 different lifestyle categories, do you know what he found? He found that in this country there was no demonstrable difference between believers and unbelievers. There was none.

Do you know what that's saying? It's saying that (in the church) there's an identity crisis. There are a lot of people claiming to be followers of Jesus who, once they step outside these walls, forget who they are.

Now, there are all kinds of books being written these days on how to find yourself, figure out your identity. (Maybe there's something there.) I won't make a judgment. But you and I should never wonder who we are, what we're called to do. God has called us in Christ to be his people. He's made promises. He's given us a new name, and (in that name), we find our identity. As a follower of Jesus I must never forget my name.

That's the first lesson. Here's another: as a follower of Jesus I must never abandon my faith. I must never abandon my faith.

Now, maybe that sounds obvious, maybe even foolish, because how many people get up in the morning and say, "Today I'm going to give up on my faith. Today I'm going to stop trusting in God"? Not many, if at all. But how many people get up in the morning and, through the course of the day, let something (besides their faith) guide their lives?

People put their trust in all kinds of things. In a relationship, in the balance of their bank account, in the stock market, in the way things are going at work, in their kids, in their school, in their health. When things are going well, it's all good. When it stops being good, it all falls apart.

How come? Because their faith isn't in God, but in things of this life. Instead of trusting in God, they're trusting in the world. And I don't know if you've figured it out or not, but it's only a matter of time, and the world's going to let you down.

Paul talks about how our faith, just as with our new identity, is rooted in God's promises. Again, remember Abraham? He couldn't see the future, but he trusted in the promises of God. Paul says, "He didn't weaken in faith even when he looked at his own body, which was already as good as dead."

Now, that's quite a description: 100 years old – who could blame him? But he didn't stop trusting, not even when he looked at his wife and at "the barrenness of her womb." "He became strong in his faith," Paul says, "as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

What's the Bible telling us? It's telling us to never give up on our faith, to never stop trusting in the promises of God. Because when God makes a promise he keeps it. Even when you and I can't figure out how it's going to happen.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for," the Bible says, "the conviction of things not yet seen." Just because you can't see your way through, doesn't mean there's not a way through. God can see better than you. (That's the point.) Don't ever give up on your faith.

Remember the conversation between Jesus and Peter? Jesus had just predicted his suffering and death, how he would be rejected and killed, and how (three days later) he'd be raised. Peter didn't like it. He couldn't see how it would work. Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things." In other words, stop looking to the world, and start placing your trust in God!

"My thoughts are not your thoughts," declares the Lord, "neither are your ways my ways." As soon as we begin approaching life based only upon what we can see, we've abandoned our faith. God is so much bigger, able to do so much more.

It's like the story of the young pilot on one of his first flights. All of a sudden he came into a heavy fog, and at the same time the panels on his screen went dead. When the tower told him to do exactly as he was told, he shouted back, "You're not dealing with a seasoned pro up here!" The controller on the other end calmly replied, "We know we're not, but you are, down here."

That's what it's like in life. At any moment the control panel can go dead and as far as we can tell, we're gonna crash. If our faith is in Jesus and in God's promises, we'll make it. But if our faith is in the world, or in how it might be going from one day to the next, we're in trouble.

The point is simple. Jesus doesn't want his followers to be in trouble. He wants them to know they'll be OK. Don't give up the ship. Don't stop trusting. Put your faith in God and in his promises. He sees so much better than we do. I must never abandon my faith.

And (one final lesson), number three, as a follower of Jesus I must never lose sight of the cross. I must never lose sight of the cross.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the gospel, will save it."

For the Christian, security in this life is somewhat of a paradox. It's the old, "finders keepers, losers weepers," only backwards. If you seek to keep your life, you'll lose it. If you let go of it (and give it to Christ), you'll find what you need.

Now, maybe this isn't a fair question, but it's worth asking. How many of you would make an investment, if you knew (going in) you were going to lose? How many would put your money in a bank if you knew that bank was going under? You wouldn't do it. Neither would I. And yet, people do it all the time with their lives.

It's the old, "How come you never see a trailer on the back of a hearse?" It's simple. You can't take it with you, so stop living like you can! If you seek to hang onto your life, you're going to lose it. If you let it go and trust it to God, he'll make it secure.

"What does it profit a man (Jesus asked) to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" There's no profit in something that's going down. Make sure you're investing in the right things. That's what Jesus says.

As followers of Jesus, we must never lose sight of the cross, in our own lives and in his. As followers, we carry our crosses each day, as we live by faith, as we take risks for God, as we seek to serve those around us. In the same way, we look to the cross, we hang onto the cross, we know that it's (in the cross) that we find our hope.

Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be. We're a cross-bearing people, for the sake of Jesus and as a witness to the world. We live the cross as followers of Christ, and we look to the cross as a people in need. That's the Christian life. That's what it means to follow.

My friends, today's lesson is simple. I can't convince you to follow Jesus, any more than I can convince you there's a man in the moon. But I can tell you there are only two ways to come at life, and only one's going to last. Which one do you want? (That's the question.) An eternal return on your investment, or a life in which finally there's no return?

Before it started, Jesus wanted his followers to know what was coming; not only in this life, but also in the next, and to not be surprised when he went to the cross and died for the sins of the world, nor to be surprised when (in following him) they might be asked to carry their crosses as well.

The truth is that apart from the cross there is no life. Apart from the cross there is no hope. Apart from the cross all of the promises of God come up short. That's why Jesus called his followers to himself long ago, just as he calls us to listen to his words today.

"If any want to become my followers," here's what you need to know up front. What every follower of Jesus ought to know: I must never forget my name. I must never abandon my faith. I must never lose sight of the cross.

May those three simple reminders keep us focused on Jesus, as we walk each day, carrying our own and trusting in his cross. Amen.