

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Lick the Honey

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Well, welcome to National Community Church and welcome to 2020. Ready or not here we come, a new year, a new decade. Greater things are still to come. Greater things are yet to be done. Believe that for this church; believe that for your life.

A few weeks ago when skiing with my son Josiah, my son-in-law Austin. And we tried a trail that was a little past our pay grade; may have been my idea. And you get to the top and once you're up there, you're up there and the only way down is down. And so we went down that hill kind of base on our ski level. Austin got to the bottom first. I was about halfway down and I stopped because I wasn't sure where Josiah was, wanted to check on him. And the next thing I remember is waking up with my face buried in the snow someone asking me if I was okay. If I was okay, would I be lying with my face in the snow unconscious? I got knocked out. I don't know how long, I don't even know how it happened. The working theory is that someone skied into me full throttle. I spent three hours at urgent care to make sure nothing was broken, and honestly, two weeks later still feels like I was in a car accident. When I woke up after being knocked unconscious, I was a little dazed. I was a little delirious. I was a little disoriented, not a great feeling.

Well, this weekend we kick off a new series titled 'Disorientation'. Life has a way of throwing us Stephen Strasberg fast balls and Max Scherzer curve balls. Sometimes it's a skiing accident where something comes out of nowhere and you wake up with your face in the snow. I think more often it's a doctor's diagnosis that's really difficult to swallow. It's a dream that has died a painful death. It's a pink slip you did not see coming. It's the loss of a loved one that lingers. Lora and I had been there and done that. Live long enough and you will experience all of the above.

When I was a sophomore in college, last game of our basketball season, national tournament hurt my knee, went to the doctor, did an MRI, told me that I had torn my anterior cruciate ligament. I was like 19 years old, so I didn't even know I had an anterior I didn't know what it was. I asked them the obvious question, how long does it take to heal? He said, never. Those are the moments that the compass needle spins and I saw my basketball career flash before my eyes.

When I was in seminary, Lora and I tried to plant a church in Chicago. We had a 25 year plan for this church plant that church plant failed. It was our first attempt at ministry. It was incredibly embarrassing and it was disorienting. We didn't know where to go or what to do. It shook my confidence. Now that is how we got to Washington DC so I'm grateful.

I think one of the most disorienting moments in the life of this church was getting a phone call informing us that the movie theaters at Union Station were shutting down. We had been there for 13 years and we got one week's notice to get out. I thought that our best days were behind us. Just being honest. I was depressed. I didn't know where to go, what to do but I'm so grateful when the compass needle spins, you need to get a word from God. And I got a word from God,

Exodus 14:13 the Israelites are stuck between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, and you remember what God said to Moses, what God said to us? *"Do not panic. Stand still and you will see the deliverance of the Lord."* We didn't know where to go or what, but we knew what we weren't going to do. We weren't in a panic. We were going to stand still and we were going to see the deliverance of the Lord. Why? Because God's got this and look at where we are now. Listen, if God doesn't close that door, Miracle Theater does not happen. Capitol Turnaround does not happen.

Now, I think seasons of disorientation, they're scary, they're often lonely, they're painful. I think sometimes we lose a little bit of confidence. Sometimes we even lose a little bit of faith, but maybe God is birthing something new. Maybe God wants to do something even bigger and better, and that's not just a platitude, that's a promise.

Let me share one more. 22 years ago tomorrow, my father in-law died of a heart attack. It was a total shock to our family. It shook our family. Honestly, the compass needle is still spinning. I don't understand why God would take him in the prime of life at 55. But I want to footnote this one. I have something that I call a Deuteronomy 29:29 file created it right after this. Deuteronomy 29:29 says that the revealed things belong to us; the secret things belong to God. That file is full of things that don't make sense to Mark and that file is getting pretty full. There are questions that there just are not answers on this side of eternity and what I do is I put them in my Deuteronomy 29:29 file and I choose to trust God.

If you find yourself in one of those seasons of disorientation, it raises a lot of questions. Where do I go from here? What do I do now? If it's a divorce, will I ever find love again? If it's a difficult diagnosis, what is my new normal? If it's a dream that's died, will I get a second chance? Now I can't answer all of those questions, but I do have some good news. As painful as it is and as scary as it can be, I think you can come out the other side stronger and kinder and wiser and better. I think those are the things that often reorient our lives. That's what it takes to get us back to basics, back to bedrock, sometimes back to the foot of the cross. That's my prayer as we begin this series and that really I think is what the Sermon on the Mount is about.

Now, let me set this series up and then we're going to drill down over the next several weeks. If you have a Bible, you can meet me in the gospel of Matthew, There are three chapters, Matthew five, six and seven that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Most of Jesus' parables, about 250 words; Sermon on the Mount, maybe time's 10 bout 2000 words, longest continuous discourse of Jesus. I think its okay to call it his Magnum Opus. Now begins with eight blessings. We call them the beatitudes and they are incredibly counterintuitive and countercultural. It includes the Lord's Prayer. You've got the golden rule; do unto others as you would have others do unto you. It takes the three pillars of Judaism, alms giving, prayer and fasting, and it turns them upside down and inside out. There are these amazing one liners. Don't cast your pearls before pigs. Don't worry about tomorrow, let tomorrow worry about its self. Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

But I think that the main point, the high point is Matthew 6:33 *"seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."* Now we sequence this one a little bit different, don't we? We want all these things added on to us, then in only then will we seek God,

but you can't seek God's second or third or 10th. Listen, you have got to seek him first, and I would even say this at the beginning of a new year, don't seek opportunities, seek God and opportunity will seek you.

Now, that's the tip of the iceberg and over the next six weeks we'll drill down on some of the pieces of this, but what we're going to do is focus on what scholars would call the sixth anti thesis. I would call them the six disorientations. Now, I think half of spiritual growth is learning the other half is unlearning. You tell me which one's harder and which one is more important. I think that's what's happening here. Jesus does not do an orientation with his disciples. He does a disorientation and it's evidenced by these six statements. He says, you have heard that it was said, but I tell you what. What Jesus is doing is uninstalling old covenant paradigms like an eye for an eye and he is reinstalling new covenant principles like turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. It is a new O. S, a new M. O, a new O. G.

Now we'll drill down on those six disorientation starting next week. What I want to do is give us an on ramp, so here we go. If you lived in Judah in the first century, your formal education would have begun at the age of six. Jewish boys were enrolled in their local synagogue, Bet Sefer "the house of the book". And on the first day of class, according to rabbinic tradition, the rabbi would cover their slate with honey. The teacher would then instruct the students to lick the honey while reciting Psalm 119:103; *"How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"* It was their first lesson. The goal was for those students to acquire a taste, to fall in love with God's word, to taste and see that the Lord is good. And let me just say this, God's word is the promise land, right? God's word is the land flowing with milk and honey.

Now, by the time students graduated from Bet Sefer four years later, they would have memorized every jot and tittle of the Torah. Are you kidding? Pretty impressive, but pretty important in an oral culture like this where you don't have a personal copy of the scripture. And so they hid God's word in their heart, Psalm 119:11. And after graduating from Bet Sefer, the best and the brightest would then enroll in Bet Talmud, "the house of learning". And from the age of 10 to 14 students would memorize the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now, after Bet Talmud, a select few graduated to Bet Midrash and it was a "house of study". Those who didn't make the cut would typically apprentice in whatever occupation their family was in. This is probably the moment that Jesus became a craftsman.

Now, here's how the application process worked. Students would ask a local rabbi if they could be his ^{Talmidim}. It's a Hebrew word that means disciple. And if the rabbi chose them, he would extend a verbal invitation, Lech Acharai, the English translation, come follow me, which should sound familiar. Now, inherent in that invitation was an understanding that it meant total submission, total devotion to that rabbi.

There were four things a disciple would do when following a particular rabbi.

- One, they would memorize his words. How do you think we got the gospels, which were written decades later? Well, I mean they would have memorized his words the way that they would have memorize the Torah

- Two, they would adopt his unique interpretation of scripture. And this is key when we come back to the Sermon on the Mount
- Three, they would imitate his way of life and
- Four, they would disciple others the same way that they were discipled.

Now, it meant spending every waking moment with that rabbi. It meant following in his footsteps. In fact, there is a phrase 'covered in the dust of your rabbi'. It epitomized what was expected. It meant following your rabbi so closely that the dust that their sandals kicked up would get all over you.

And I'll add one more thing to the mix. It meant taking a rabbi's yoke upon you. Now, the word yoke it evokes imagery of oxen pulling a plow, but it has a more profound meaning to the first century Jew. It represented the sum total of the rabbi's teachings on the Torah. It was their unique interpretation, their unique application. So juxtapose that with this; in Matthew 11:28 Jesus says "*come to me*". It's this beautiful open invitation for all of us to be Talmidim, to be his disciples.

And then he says, (Matthew 11):²⁸ "*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.* ²⁹ *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.* ³⁰ *For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*"

This is a double entendre. We think of the wooden bar that allows two animals to pull something and this is that. Listen that alleviates 50% of the weight. And my guess is that Jesus pulls more than his fair share of the weight, right? He does the heavy lifting. Jesus doesn't just live in us, Jesus lives as us. Now that takes the pressure off of us.

Take a deep breath this weekend, it puts the ball in Jesus court, puts the weight on Jesus' shoulders, which is wonderful, but then it's a double blessing. Again, a yoke was a Jewish rabbi's unique take on the Torah. It was their interpretation, their app, it was their school of thought, it was their way of life. And the way that you would discover someone's yoke is by asking this question; 'which commandment is the most important?' Now, sometimes we think that the Pharisees are asking him a trick question. No, this is a clarifying question. This would be pretty normal in that context, and by the way, how great this is how we got the great commandment. Jesus takes the 613 laws in the Torah, which is a pretty heavy load to lift, yes, and reduces them to one great commandment. "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.*" His yoke is love.

All of that to say this, we call it the Sermon on the Mount. Reality, this is really Jesus yoke. He didn't come to abolish the law he came to fulfill it. He came to be God with us, this unique interpretation in the flesh.

Now lots of ways to slice and dice this yoke, but let me give you a graph and we'll see how far we get this weekend. On the vertical axis, you'll see a temporal and eternal. Feel free to take a picture. On the horizontal axis you'll see external and internal. I think what Jesus was doing with this yoke is he is shifting the frame of reference from temporal to eternal and he is shifting the locus of control from external to internal.

Now the first shift is this, a shift from this temporal frame of reference to an eternal frame of reference. We are stuck in four dimensions of space time. God is not. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. He created time. The day will come that we cross this space time continuum. In the meantime, we have a tendency to think right here, right now. God is thinking nations and generations. We think in terms of what we can perceive with our five senses, but our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities in high places. There is more to reality than meets the eye. Our reality is eternity.

Blaise Pascal said, "Our imagination so magnifies the present, because we are continually thinking about it, and so reduces eternity, because we do not think about it, that we turn eternity into nothing and nothing into eternity."

I mean we live in a culture that celebrates 15 minutes of fame. Can we aim a little higher than that? Jesus, he flips the script with this yoke. He's talking about storing up treasures in heaven. Only one life will soon be past only what's done for Christ will last. That is the bottom line.

Now, let me switch gears. The second shift is from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control. Now, I think an external locus believes that success and failure are determined by factors that we cannot control, an internal locus, its mind over matter. It believes that our internal attitudes are more important than our external obstacles, that our explanations are more important than our experiences.

Not Martin Seligman, who I love his writings, would call this learned optimism. But I mean this is as old as King Solomon, as a man think is in his heart, so is he. We don't see the world as it is. Are you kidding me? We see the world as we are and we better make sure that that internal reality is right.

This yoke is not just a bunch of new rules and regulations. This is not about behavior modification. This would be second order change in cybernetic theory. The biblical word is repentance. The Greek word is metanoia. It means change of mind. This is a change that God does in us from the inside out and ironically, by changing that locus of control from the outside in. And when I say in what I mean is Christ in us.

Now, doctors, counselors, social workers, at NCC know that what I'm about to say is true. The presenting problem is rarely the real issue. The issue is not murder, its anger. That's the very first disorientation. Adultery may be the presenting problem, but there's a deeper issue. There's a root cause, its lust, its covetousness. If you don't deal with the root cause, you're treating symptoms your entire life. And that's why this is so important. Now, I don't want to pretend to have this all figured out.

Last week. Ah man, someone cut me off while I was driving. I wish I could tell you that I reacted calmly. You wouldn't have believed how boiled my blood was. I honked my horn, flashed my brights. I tailed them for a few blocks. If that was you, I'm sorry. Don't cut me off. I wish I could say I pulled a 'Frozen' and let it go. I did not. I got back to my office and I was shocked. Wow. How could something like that produce the kind of adrenaline in me? Wow. And what that does

is it makes me 'God what'? What is not fully sanctified? You know, I say this all..., as soon as I am sanctified, I will let you know, but I would not hold your breath.

But, the Sermon on the Mount it doesn't just reorient our thinking, it reconditions our reflexes. If someone slaps you on the face, the natural reaction is to slap them back. But if you have an internal locus of control, if your reflexes have been reconditioned by the grace of God, you turn the other cheek and you go the extra mile and you pray for those who persecute you. And if you're really good, you get to the sixth disorientation and you actually love your enemies. That's what we're aiming at. That's what happens when we get into the yoke with Jesus.

Let me do one last thing. Let me remove the words from the graph. I think what's left is a cross and I think this is where change happens. This is where we make our confession, which is a amazing song that our team wrote that we're going to sing in just a few moments. I think the cross is where the locus of control shifts from an external to internal and by internal, again, Christ in us and where it shifts from temporal to eternal.

Listen, I don't even know how to say it, but I think that this is where heaven invades earth. This is where God does miracles. This is the place at the foot of the cross where God has his will and his way in our lives, and so this weekend I can't think of a better way to begin the year than by celebrating communion. It's a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. The cup represents the blood of Christ shed for us. The bread represents the body of Christ broken for us. This is where God makes us whole and I want to make sure we understand the significance. Again, buried in this yoke is this idea that Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. How did he do that? Well, he was the Lamb without blemish. He fulfilled all of these Old Testament sacrifices. He was the Lamb of God. He fulfilled everything on the cross, and if you are in Christ, that means the requirements of the law are met in you because you are in Christ and that's a wonderful place to be.

In fact, this weekend, I wonder if you'd want to get into the yoke with Jesus. Maybe take a step of faith. Communion would be a wonderful way to do that. Well, I want to invite our worship teams to come at all of our campuses and I want to close with a challenge. And what do we do with all of this? You know, at the beginning of a series, I think what I'd like to do is just challenge you with one thing. Do you remember Bet Sefer? Remember, these kids memorizing Torah? I'm not going to ask you to memorize the entire Bible, but I'm going to challenge you to read through it this year. I don't know that there's anything that you could do to catalyze spiritual growth or reorient your life that would be more significant than licking the honey and getting into God's word and letting God's word get into you. And so here's the challenge. Pretty simple, download a Bible reading plan. And I know some of you are thinking like seriously a plan? Yes, failing to plan is planning to fail. I know from personal experience, if I don't have a plan, I get a little lost. I get a little disoriented, I get a little off track. And so download the YouVersion app. You can go to the Apple store; it's free, dozens of different Bible reading plans. You can do the Bible from cover to cover. You can do the New Testament. Pick a plan, any plan.

Got an email from an NCCR couple of weeks ago, said last year about this time you diverted just a bit from your message to gently challenge us to read the Bible in a year. I grew up in a family that taught me to have daily devotional time. I knew the stories inside and out, yet I felt

intimidated, afraid to fail, perhaps a little arrogant, maybe. 2019 has been a year of reconnecting with God through this process. I've been getting to know the simplicity and consistency of God's love in a way I didn't see before. Some of it was a struggle. The minor prophets wore me down, but reading chapter to chapter in context re-taught me my memory verses that I'd grown numb to. Thanks so much for the challenge. Wanted to tell you how life changing it has been. It has empowered me to lead my family. I don't want to leave that growth mindset.

Then he ends with this, I remember you saying that you switch versions each year. I would love to know how you determine what version to read. Is there a particular version that is impacted you? Well, thanks for asking. I grew up on the NIV. That was kind of my Bible of choice as aid. I think in the early years of pastoring, I had one of those little metal Bibles that only came in the New Living Translation, the NLT, but I thought it was so cool and I fell in love with that translation, loved the NLT. A couple of years ago, decided to go old school, fell in love with the King James Version all over again. It just, it did something in me. The Bible I'm reading this year is the Amplified Version and it's a little different. It's got some colored commentary, it adds a few footnotes. And then I chose a reading plan that some Old Testament, New Testament and a daily dose of Proverbs and Psalms.

Now let me tell you why I think this is so important. I think one reason why I change versions is just simply the law of requisite variety. If you do the same thing the same way every time, it loses effectiveness. I don't care if you're working out at the gym or reading your Bible. Different versions make your synapses fire in slightly different ways. The key to spiritual growth is routine, but if the routine becomes routine you have to change the routine. And so changing versions is just one way that then I reengage with God's word.

I think the second reason is pretty personal. One of my prized possessions is a 1934 Chain Thompson Reference Bible that belonged to my grandfather. It is precious to me, all of his notes in the margin, all the verses that he loved pages that are literally taped together because he read it so much. I want to leave the same kind of legacy to my kids and grand-kids and what that means is I have to read through and mark up a lot of Bibles.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but would you take the challenge and would you download a plan this weekend? If you wait one day, the likelihood goes way down that you're going to do this. And so I would challenge you, download a plan, start reading and see what God does.

Lord, would you help us in this journey that we're on. I pray especially for those who are in one of those seasons of disorientation. God, would you take us right back to the foot of the cross and would you reorient us around your love and grace and goodness. In Jesus name. Amen.