

Message: Comfort in Commitment

What does it mean to be really committed to a goal?

Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps is a good example. I did a little research on his training program in 2016. Here’s what I found:

“Michael Phelps swimming workout and 12,000 calorie daily diet are one of the most physically demanding around. His training routine and meal plan are astonishing for someone who is 6’4 and weighs 165 lbs.

Phelps swims a minimum 80,000 meters a week, which is nearly 50 miles during peak training. He practices twice a day, sometimes more if he’s training at altitude. Phelps trains for around five to six hours a day, six days a week. He does long swims to improve his endurance. Phelps also does other drills to improve his swimming speed and form.

In addition to water workouts, Phelps lifts weights 3 days a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. He prefers bodyweight exercises like pushups and weighted pull-ups for muscular strength and endurance. That’s so he doesn’t build too much bulk, which would slow him down in the water.”¹

One last fact: Michael Phelps has trained like that since he was 11 years old. Now that’s commitment! That’s the kind of commitment and drive that leads to more than 20 Olympic medals.

I don’t know Michael Phelps personally. But I can tell you one thing: he didn’t make that commitment because it was a duty or because of any rules. Phelps made that commitment because he wanted to!

Commitment is a word that’s fallen out of popularity. It has come to carry a negative meaning. We can be blindly committed to a cause or an institution. Or, we may be comfortable with some aspects of a situation, but not willing to commit because we disagree with other aspects. For example, we like the house and the land, but we don’t like the neighbors. So we aren’t ready to commit to buying.

Commitment also implies that we have to follow the “rules.”

And it seems like everywhere we turn, there are rules we have to follow.

¹ <https://www.muscleprodigy.com/michael-phelps-workout-and-diet/>

There are rules when we drive. There are rules for crossing the street. There are rules in school. There are rules at work. And there are rules at home. Anybody ever have to do chores as a child?

The word “promise” is a good, modern day synonym for commitment. It doesn't carry quite the same depth of meaning, but it works. Michael Phelps made a promise to his parents and coaches: to do his best. But Phelps made an even more important promise – to himself! He promised he wouldn't quit until he had reached his goals.

I think that's a great model for anyone who follows Jesus.

We make a promise to God, but we can't forget that we need to make the same promise to ourselves. Otherwise, it's too easy to turn that promise we made back to others. When we don't feel like it, we have a tendency to shift the blame - to them. But if we make the promise to ourselves, then we're the ones who have no course but to live up to it.

Colossians 3:9-11, *“Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.”* (NRSV)

What a promise! What a visual image.

There's a difference between a commitment and a transaction.

A transaction is an exchange for mutual benefit. You purchase an item at the store. You take it home for your use, to your benefit. The owner sells it to you for a price, for their use and benefit.

A promise is different. A promise isn't temporary. It isn't a transaction. There's no material exchange of goods or services with the intent to receive something in return. A promise is open-ended. When we make a promise, we intend to do all that we can to meet it.

Good promises don't have anything to do with stuff. That's because good promises are made between people. Promises are the fuel for great

relationships. We promise to be friends, and then best friends. We promise to keep secrets (*a pastoral note: the truth always comes out*). We promise to help each other, to be there when times get tough.

Important promises are family promises. You’ve heard the expression “blood is thicker than water.” That’s a good example of commitment, promises that are kept. No matter whether you like your brother or sister or not, you’re part of a family. There’s nothing you can do about it. Promises we make to family members are strong. That’s why promises we make to new family members are so powerful.

Promises that create new families are the best! That’s why they’re called vows. When we say them, we’re clearly making a promise we intend to keep. We’re passing on the promises made by our parents and their parents and their parents ... you get the idea. Out of these promises come children, new homes, family trips, many joys. These are the good times. When those promises are built on the love of Jesus, heaven rejoices.

These are the times in life when it’s easy to find comfort in commitment. But they aren’t the only times when we find comfort in the promises we make to God and to others. One of my favorite things to do is to talk with people who have been married for 50- or 60+ years. That’s called the “covenant” phase of marriage. Those couples can’t imagine what life would be like without their partner. They may sit quietly, enjoying one another’s company one moment, and then be finishing one another’s sentences in the next.

The best marriage advice I ever got was from a couple married more than 60 years. When I asked their secret, they said, “Forgive the little things. And, after a while, bigger things become little things.”

How does this help? Our commitment to Jesus gives us comfort. We find comfort in Jesus when we:

- ... get older and grayer, with the physical, mental and emotional challenges age brings (let’s face it, our parts break!)
- ... gain weight or have physical challenges
- ... are unkind in what we say and do, and in our attitude
- ... struggle with addiction

... fail – at work, as a parent, as a friend or in life.

We find comfort in Jesus when we:

- ... go through divorce
- ... commit a crime
- ... lose a child
- ... have cancer or a major illness
- ... have an accident or suffer from a disability
- ... when a loved one dies.

How do we find comfort in commitment? Oddly enough, through a promise! Jesus wants us to promise that we want a relationship with him. Once we do, he’ll be at our side, through thick and thin. In the good times, Jesus is there, cheering us on. In the so-so times, Jesus is there, prompting and guiding us through the Holy Spirit. And in the times when things are really bad and we don’t know what to do or where to turn, Jesus is there, holding our hand from minute to minute. We aren’t asked to believe in the promises the Bible makes. We’re asked to trust Jesus. Jesus will help us with our doubts, fears and anxieties. All we have to do is trust him.

After all, Jesus kept his greatest promise: he rose from the dead.

I don’t know about you, but having the Lord of heaven on my side makes me feel better. Knowing that the One who defeated death has my back gives me an anchor to hold on to when things get rough. But I have a part in it.

James 2:14-16: *“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”* (The Message).

If we don’t live up to our promise, we aren’t breaking any rules.

We are breaking our word. We’re showing others they can’t trust us. We aren’t willing to do what it takes to be in a relationship. That may

not sound like much, but it’s a high price to pay. There are those here today who can testify to the pain of broken family relationships.

Here’s good news: Jesus never breaks his promises. Ever.

Even when he died on the cross and everyone stopped believing in him. Even when we’ve done terrible things. Even if we gave up on Jesus and our family. Go to Jesus when you want to come back.

Jesus always loves. He always forgives.

Jesus’ promise to us comes with a cost. It’s a price we can’t pay. Jesus promised to love and care for us, showing us a new way to live, free from the things that take away our freedom. That promise led him to a cross. Jesus died to set us free. That shows the depth of his love for us. He freely and willingly give up his life so we could receive the gift of a new, different way of life.

So yeah, Jesus wants to be in a relationship with you. All you have to do is freely and willingly promise to be in a relationship with him. That’s when those who are thinking ahead say, “Wait a minute ...”

What does it cost us to be in relationship with Jesus?

He tells us, *“All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them”* (Luke 9:23-24, CEB).

Being in a relationship with Jesus means your days of being a fan are over. It’s time to really, truly follow him, no matter where the path leads. When we do, we’ll change. We’ll learn and grow. We’ll find that putting others first makes us feel good. We’ll live a life that’s filled with passion and energy, because we’re filled with love. And love brings along two other friends, faith and hope. What a way to live!

Are you ready to follow Jesus?

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come to you as your children, made in your image. We need your grace and mercy, yet we struggle to get past our own doubts and desires. Fill us with a spirit of love and truth. Give us the confidence to make promises and to live up to them, freely and willingly, not out of compulsion. Give us the courage to turn away from self-destructive attitudes and behaviors, embracing the new way of life you give. Show us how to truly follow you, no matter what it may cost, so that we may fully live. Jesus, we pray this in your name. Amen.

[Watch “Thank You God” video]

James 2:14-16 (CEB)

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs?

James 2:14-16 (The Message)

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

Luke 9:23-24 (CEB)

Jesus said to everyone, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them."

Luke 9:23-24 (The Message)

Then he told them what they could expect for themselves: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat - I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self."