

“The Way of Jesus: Authority & Adventure”

Matthew 8:5-13; Colossians 1:15-17 ¹

I don't think I'll ever forget the morning of Friday, September 22, 1972, because it was on that morning that I raised my right hand and said the following words:

I, David C. Stancil, having been appointed an Ensign in the U.S. Navy . . . do accept such appointment and do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God.

While the Commissioning Oath was certainly memorable, what I remember most about that morning is not the commissioning ceremony itself. What I remember most distinctly is the breakfast that preceded the ceremony. At that breakfast, the senior officer who was the speaker basically said this: “Gentlemen, you are about to embark upon a great adventure in the service of your country, and there are some things you need to understand about this journey. The time may well come when you have just gotten married, and you want to be with your wife, but the Navy will need you somewhere else—and somewhere else is where you'll be (that did in fact happen to me). The time may come when your wife has just had a baby, and you want to be with her and with your child, but the Navy will need you somewhere else—and somewhere else is where you'll be (that happened, too).”

The speaker offered several other cheerful examples of this sort, and he succeeded in making his point: “The commitment you will make this morning is going to change your life significantly and forever.” I don't remember enjoying that breakfast very much.

After a bit more training, and at the ripe old age of twenty-two, the Navy gave me seventy men to lead and all of the propulsion equipment on a destroyer to operate, and said, “Have at it.” My responsibilities, though broad, could also be rather easily summarized. As the Captain memorably put it, “When I push a button on this ship, sir, something had better happen!”

Twelve years in the Navy taught me many things, and I'm grateful for most of them. One of those things was the experience of learning what it means to be under virtually absolute authority, and also what it means to exercise authority of that sort. That experience gives me a great appreciation for an encounter Jesus had with a military man. The encounter is described in Matthew 8:5-13. You may wish to turn there and follow as I read:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 20, 2013.

*Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would."
And his servant was healed at that moment.*

This Centurion understood authority, and he could see from watching Jesus that Jesus exercised a most unusual authority. Matthew noted in the previous chapter that *"the crowds were amazed at [Jesus'] teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law"* (Matthew 7:28-29). The Centurion also understood that Jesus' authority covered literally everything. He'd seen enough to believe that Jesus had authority over the physical world in ways never seen before: *"Just say the word, and my servant will be healed"* (Matthew 8:8).

As many persons did who saw and heard Jesus when He walked the earth, you and I sometimes make the mistake of misunderstanding the nature of Jesus' power. It's easy for us to think of Jesus simply in His human form, and in so doing to fail to see His cosmic authority; but as Paul wrote to the church in Colosse:

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together" (1:15-17, NLT)

When the High Priest said to Jesus, *"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"* Jesus answered, *"**I am**, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven"* (Mark 14:61-62).

It is this Jesus who said to the disciples in the Upper Room, *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am"* (John 13:13). It is this Jesus who said, *"You are my friends **if** you do what I **command**"* (John 15:14). And it is this Jesus who said, *"I and the Father are one"* (John 10:30). **Jesus has the right to command.**

When I was the Officer of the Deck at sea, one fairly frequent radio transmission went like this: "Roger. Wilco. Out." This transmission was a response to an order from someone who had the authority to command, and it meant, "I understand your instruction. I will comply with it. I am leaving to carry it out." This morning I'd like to suggest three things about obedience to Jesus: (1) *Obedience is Wise*; (2) *Obedience Requires Service*; and (3), *Obedience Leads to Adventure*.

Obedience is Wise. Jesus said, *"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"* (Matthew 7:24). Through the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus was a carpenter as well as the One holding all creation together, so when Jesus spoke about how to build a house, He knew what He was talking about.

Those who construct buildings are very much aware of the fact that the foundation is the most critical part of the structure. If the foundation of the building is not secure, it doesn't matter how well the remainder of the building is built, because as the ground beneath the building settles, the walls and the foundation will crack.

Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water" house in Pennsylvania is considered by many to be the most influential building ever built. Wright's use of concrete cantilever construction in open space redefined "impossible" and transformed architecture around the world. Still, the multiplied thousands of persons who visit the house each year cannot help noticing that the main cantilever droops, and that there are significant cracks in the concrete, indicating settling stress. What happened?

What happened was that the construction design was so radical that Mr. Kaufmann, the owner of the house, didn't trust Wright's design. Unknown to Mr. Wright, Mr. Kaufmann had his own engineers put in twice as much steel as the plans called for. This excess steel not only added enormous weight to the carefully calculated foundation slab, but was set so close together that the concrete did not properly fill in between the reinforcing bars, causing an actual loss of strength. Mr. Kaufmann didn't follow the designer's instructions, and he nearly destroyed his house.

Jesus, the designer of all that is, says to us, "If you want your life to survive the storms that will come upon you, build your life on the Rock of my salvation and my teaching. Any other foundation is really no more than sinking sand, and when the storms come, you're really going to regret not having obeyed me. Obeying me is far wiser—and safer—than you can understand at this point."

Second, **Obedience Requires Service**. Sometimes we refer to our economy as an "information economy"; sometimes we refer to it as a "service economy," but a trip down any major street reveals that hardly any of us want to be the "servants" in a service economy. "Help Wanted" signs are in the windows of many, many service businesses.

The disciples felt the same way about this that we do. Vying for first place next to Jesus, they weren't at all interested in serving, but rather in being served. Patiently, but forcefully, Jesus told them again, "*You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet*" (John 13:13-15). "*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all*" (Mark 9:35).

You and I don't like this command any more than those first disciples did. We much prefer to be in charge and to be served than to be servants. Many of us in this room have achieved fairly high standing in the community and even in the government, but, while we carry our positions graciously, we're not so sure about "The Servant Thing."

While "The Servant Thing" has unique characteristics for each of us, there is one characteristic that is common for us all. The Bible calls it "a broken spirit." While God intends—and indeed, requires—that we give ten percent of our income as a way of protecting us from idolatry, David understood that there is a deeper level to God's requirements of us: "*The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit,*" he wrote. "*A broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise*" (Psalm 51:17, NLT).

A "broken spirit" in the biblical sense is not a defeated or a discouraged spirit. We use the term that way today, often of persons who've experienced abuse of some sort, but that's not what the Bible is talking about.

We say that a horse has been "broken" when the horse's will has been made submissive to its master's will. That's the idea here. When you and I have "a broken spirit" before God, we've come to the place where we truly acknowledge God as Lord and sovereign of our lives. Having a broken spirit means that we choose to freely say to God, "Roger. Wilco. Out." "I understand. I will comply. And here I go to do it."

But there's a third thing about obedience to Jesus that's important to understand, and that is that **Obedience Leads to Adventure**. Last week Jill and I were finally able to see *The Hobbit*.² At the beginning of the film, a little Hobbit named Bilbo Baggins enjoys a comfortable and predictable life in his home in the Shire. On a particularly fine morning,

² *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, New Line Cinema, 2012, directed by Peter Jackson. Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's 1937 book, *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again*.

the wizard, Gandalf, drops in for a surprise visit, and after a brief and pleasant conversation, Gandalf turns to Bilbo and says, “I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.”

Bilbo, who does not yet realize that this is Gandalf, replies, “I should think so—in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them.”

Bilbo starts looking through his mail, hoping that the old man will leave. But Gandalf continues leaning on his staff, gazing at Bilbo until Bilbo angrily exclaims, “Good morning! We don’t want any adventures here, thank you! You might try over The Hill or across The Water,” by which he meant that the conversation was at an end.

When Gandalf reveals his true identity, Bilbo gasps, “Gandalf, Gandalf! Good gracious me! Not the wandering wizard who used to tell such wonderful tales at parties, about dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses? Not the Gandalf who was responsible for so many quiet lads and lasses going off into the Blue for mad adventures? Bless me . . . you used to upset things badly in these parts once upon a time. I beg your pardon, but I had no idea you were still in business.”

Gandalf replies, “It is I, and I will give you what you asked for.”

Bilbo objects, “I beg your pardon, I haven’t asked for anything!”

Gandalf says, “Yes, you have! Twice now. My pardon. I give it you. In fact I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it.”

That encounter reminds me of some other familiar ones:

- *The LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).*
- The very next day after Rebekah first met Abraham’s servant who had come from hundreds of miles away, her family called her and asked, “*Will you go with this man?*” And she responded, “*I will go*” (Genesis 24:58).
- After Isaiah’s overwhelming vision of God in the Temple, God asked, “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” And Isaiah answered, “*Here am I. Send me!*” (Isaiah 6:8).
- *The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:1-2).*
- When Paul encountered the radiant glory of the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus, he asked, “*Who are you, Lord?*” And the answer came, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do*” (Acts 9:5-6).

Now while you and I may not receive such commissions as these, there’s no guarantee that we won’t, either. And so long as we follow Bilbo’s idea of insisting on staying close to home and on being home for supper, we’ll not have many adventures.

My friend, Nik, who was with us in worship a few weeks ago, has had more adventures in the service of God’s Kingdom than anybody else I know . . . or any person in our time that I’ve ever heard about. As a new Christian during our college years, Nik had never heard of the huge missionary enterprises that we do together as Baptists, and after hearing a missionary speaker for the first time, he asked, “Let me get this straight: you’re telling me that I can go anywhere in the world to tell people about Jesus and that I can get paid to do that?”

“The missionary looked at me in a funny way,” Nik remembers, “smiled slightly, and then nodded. ‘I’ve never been asked the question quite like that before. But, yes, that is what I’m saying.’

“Where do I sign up?” Nik asked. “I was thrilled to know that there was some way to make that ‘*Go ye into all the world*’ commandment doable. I was ready to go right then.”³

You have a handout in your order of worship that begins with a summary of the Basic Commands of the Sermon on the Mount. If you’ve been born again by placing your faith in Jesus both for time and eternity, you’re already a person “under orders.” The fifteen statements that you see before you are one way to summarize those orders.

We’ve seen this morning that Jesus has the authority to command obedience, that obedience is wise, that obedience requires service, and that obedience leads to adventure! Are you a soldier of the King? Do you want to be? I invite you this morning to take your commitment to a deeper level.

Our invitation hymn is #598, “Wherever He Leads, I’ll Go.” Wherever He Leads, I’ll Go. The words of this hymn are one way to say “Roger. Wilco. Out.” I’m not going to ask you to raise your right hand and repeat the Commissioning Oath, but I am going to ask you to seriously consider making a Commitment to Radical Obedience. The Commitment to which I invite you appears on the insert in your worship order, and it goes like this:

*Lord, I will do anything that your Kingdom requires of me.
Wherever you want me to be, I’ll go.
Whatever I know to be your will, I will do.
If you want to meet a need through my life, I am your servant.
I will do whatever you ask of me.
Whatever the cost and regardless of the adjustment, as best I know my heart,
I commit myself to follow your will today, ahead of time,
Because you are my Lord, and I will follow you.*

If you’re ready to follow Jesus in this way, I invite you to come forward as we sing and sign your name below mine on this piece of paper. This is not an attempt to get lots of people down the aisle. I don’t expect—I don’t even *want*—many people to come.

Don’t come unless you know in your heart that God calls you here. Don’t come unless you’re willing to engage the world as God’s servant. Don’t come unless you come with a broken and repentant heart. Don’t come unless you’re ready for new orders. But if you’re ready, orders will come soon. **Adventure awaits you!**

³ Nick Ripken, with Gregg Lewis, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*, foreword by David Platt (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), p. 35.