

# COMMITTING

## LIFT Series (Part 5) | Matthew 27:33-54

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Life can be heavy. You and I may not experience the crushing weight literally felt by thousands of people in Turkey and Syria this week. We may not be required to endure the weight of persecution and poverty felt by the Christians in Jerusalem or Macedonia I described last week, or of so many people suffering poverty and injustice around the world today. But we have our burdens. We feel the weight of family and work expectations or the pressure of finances. We deal daily with the heaviness of our political and cultural conflicts or the downward pull of mental illness or physical frailty.

It is hard not to become downcast over all this; which is why I am always in awe of people who somehow look *higher*. Over the past week or two, I've been able to spend time in conversation with people of our church who are dealing with a variety of serious illnesses and calamities that I might imagine crushing the hope of most people. I enter into conversation with these dear people, hoping to minister to them. Instead, they minister to me. They inspire me with a sometimes agonized but always awesome belief that ***there is a grace greater than the gravity of life***... that God is at work in them and for them... that He wants them – and all of us -- to lift our eyes to him, to let Him raise our standards for living and loving, and to keep working to lift others up... until the Day of Resurrection when there will be no more disasters or disease or despair or death and Christ makes everything new (Rev 21:1-5).

Over the past five weeks, we've been reflecting together on some of the basic ways that disciples of Jesus seek to align their lives with that movement of God's grace. I've invited you to think about FIVE FINGERS OF FAITH which, if you exercise them, will move you closer to Christ and help you join him in LIFTING others.

The first finger is the answer to the question Jesus asks of every potential disciple: "Will you **FOLLOW me** where I lead you?" (**Mat 4:19; 19:21; Luke 9:23; John 1:43; 10:27; 21:22**) My own life has been transformed for the better by answering that question. I wish I could say I've given Jesus the thumbs-up every time he's called me to confess a sin, or forgive someone, or take a serving role, or talk to a stranger, or give more than was comfortable. But I don't regret a single time I've said, "Yes, Jesus, I will follow where you are leading me." How's your followership going?

Let me be bold to say that to consistently follow Jesus, requires that we TRUST his promises and provision. There is no reason you and I should follow a leader who is not trustworthy. One of the major reasons Jesus has built a larger following over the centuries than any other leader who's ever lived is that, unlike many human leaders, Jesus makes good on his promises to provide for those who follow him. Whether it is his promise to be with us in affliction or to take care of us when we are generous or to redeem our lives from the pit, Jesus says, "**Trust in God. Trust also in me**" (Jhn

**14:1)** and those of us who have taken risks to do what he says, have found him trustworthy. As you move forward into this year, dare to say: "I will trust you."

Based on this trust and this desire to follow Jesus, Christians are people who PRIORITIZE Christ, his Church and the agenda of his kingdom. Jesus said: **Store up treasures in heaven** not on earth. **Seek first the kingdom of God. (Matt 6:19-20, 33)**. As you look back on this year so far, where do you feel like you've prioritized the things of God? What are some of the interactions you've had with people or decisions you've made about how you use your time, talent or treasure, or patterns you set with your children and family that God saw and smiled because you could have flipped him off; but you clearly put Him first?

And, then, as we explored last week, how's it going with the theme of SURRENDER in your life? We're constantly being prompted by the world to pursue our own personal SUCCESS. As we grow spiritually, we sometimes settle into thinking about our own SIGNIFICANCE – all the ways that our lives are gaining "meaning" or "virtue" – and we may think that this is the goal of the spiritual journey. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with success or significance, but the last stage of the most beautiful kind of life journey is all about SURRENDER to God – for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

The Way of Jesus is not a self-help or self-advancement strategy. Spiritual maturity is about dying to self and living for Jesus and his life-changing love. Strangely, this is actually HOW we find an even better and more enduring self (**Mat 10:39; 19:29**). It's what St. Paul meant toward the end of his life when he said: **It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)**. It's what Jesus meant when he said in the Garden of Gethsemane: **Not my but thy will be done, Father (Luke 22:42)**. Jesus will not be content to be your REsource. He is THE Source of all that you are and have. He is not our Consultant. He is our Lord. And your greatest joy and mine will be getting to the point where we have stopped being oriented toward our own advancement and instead aimed at his glory. You and I will be at the final stage of our spiritual evolution in this life when we are mainly a pipeline for the flow of his grace, truth and love in a way that lifts up others. Do you get this? Do I? I'm really trying to.

I want to close out my contribution to the LIFT series today by reflecting with you on the FIFTH Finger of Faith. It is the decision I have made and want to invite you into to commit to fulfilling God's vision and believing in his power *regardless* of the obstacles that scare us. Listen to the Word of God in Matthew 27 at verse 32...

**<sup>33</sup> They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). <sup>34</sup> There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.** In other words, Jesus was offered an opportunity to deaden the pain he was about to face in dying for our sins, but he refused the anaesthesia. He took on pain for our redemption. He was COMMITTED to it.

**35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.** Let me translate this. He who was rightly accustomed to wearing the robe of eternal majesty and glory, was willing to be stripped naked by idiots. He allowed them to mock him by derisively calling him “King of the Jews” when he was, in reality, Lord of the Universe. He dealt with all this, because he was COMMITTED to his calling.

**38 Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” 41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42 “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!... 44 In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.**

It is hard to do justice to the magnitude of what’s happening here. The people at the scene are treating Jesus like he is utterly powerless. They are mocking him as somebody who, IF he was who he said he was could spare himself this pain. Yet, ironically, it is because he IS who he said he was that he has COMMITTED himself to this cross. Jesus is suffering this horrible death in order to fully identify with the nature of sin. He is voluntarily pouring out his life to pay the full price for our salvation.

**45 From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. 46 About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)... 50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.** Another translation of this same part of the story declares that: **Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I COMMIT my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).**

In other words, though it meant the material loss of everything, even his clothing... though it meant enduring undeserved social insult and physical pain at a level it’s hard to imagine... though it meant feeling the gravity of sin and death in a way that made him feel utterly forsaken... Jesus kept his COMMITMENT to our salvation. All it would have taken was the flick of his all-powerful little finger to end this agony, dissolve the universe, and return to his rightful place of eternal bliss. Yet Jesus remained COMMITTED to you and me, regardless of the cost.

When I really think about that, it feels embarrassingly small to talk about OUR commitment to Jesus. But I do want to try. At its core, you see, the LIFT Initiative we’ve embarked upon as a church is our way of doing something substantive to imitate the generosity of Jesus. It’s something all of us can do to be part of Christ’s continuing

work to lift people in our time. As Amy and I have thought about the role we will play in this initiative, I'll confess that making a commitment has felt hard. Not even remotely as hard as going to a cross, but personally difficult, nonetheless. Why is that?

While our kids are finally done with college (PTL!), we paid out-of-state education costs for 17 years and that has left a dent in our finances. Though Amy still looks 40, we are in our sixties and still have a substantial remaining mortgage. Inflation has made life more expensive for us these days. Though our 401K's are higher than they were five years ago, they've taken a big hit in the last two years and that makes us anxious. We went ALL IN in for Take Root, our church's last game-changing initiative and still give substantially to the church each year. I also chair the Board of Fuller Seminary and that institution is in the midst of a major campaign to which we've made another serious pledge. Can you see why it has been tempting to say: *"We've done our part for Christ Church already. Now's the time to let others carry the church. We'll focus more on US."*

But Amy and I are NOT going to do that. Instead, we're going to divert spending from other areas in our life and, for the next two years, increase our COMMITMENT to Christ Church again. Why will we do that? Because God took care of us the last time we dared to be radically generous... Because the local church is the fount of the moral vision and values our country desperately needs... Because THIS church is the place that helped us raise our kids and where we've found the "family" that we want to do life with going forward... Because so many individuals, families and mission partners depend on the ministry and generosity of this rare congregation... Because we want to see thousands more people discover the grace that is greater than the gravity of life.

***And, for me, it's also because I can't get out of my head the image of that powerful PINKY finger of Jesus, against the wood of the cross.*** How easily could Jesus have flicked it and avoided further sacrifice? How quickly could he have withdrawn his outstretched arms? How rightfully could he have said: "Father, I've followed you, trusted you, prioritized you, surrendered to you. I've done enough"? But from his THUMB to his LITTLE FINGER Jesus went all-in to LIFT you and me toward our God-given potential. In fact, he made his commitment with both hands.

Two Fridays ago, I had the joy of watching a core group of Christ Church's leaders honor Jesus by making an advance commitment to our LIFT Initiative. Some people were making a commitment like this for the first time in their life. Some people were weighing in at a higher level than ever before. Out of a group of about 130 households, we saw four, five, six, and seven-figure pledges. We witnessed people committing to daring changes in their spending priorities and sacrificial gifts out of their stored resources. We saw hands moving to lift others in the name and spirit of Jesus. They modeled a movement that all of us can be part of today. And before I invite you to do so, here's a glimpse of that amazing night. **[Advance Commitment Night Video]**  
**Introduction to Congregational Commitment Time**

**We have an opportunity now** to be part of this amazing movement of God through our church. Our prayer is that 100% of us who call Christ Church our spiritual home would participate in this life-changing moment.

It is not exaggeration to say that **what we do today MATTERS**. Through the commitment we make today, we CAN undergird the worship services, growth groups, pastoral care and mission partner support that is our church's core passion. We can lift kids and families by restarting our preschool, launching a special needs ministry, and renovating the facilities where we disciple more than 500 young people each week. We can Expand our missions impact through a LIFT Center that brings spiritual and material help to under-resourced children and families in our region. We can begin to address deferred maintenance and infrastructure needs across both of our campuses and lower our mortgage debt.

**As you ponder the role you will play in this and what you'll put down** on that Commitment Card, let me clarify a few of the practical mechanics. First, you don't have to fill out all the blanks. What you write on the bottom line is the main point. That number represents your total, sacrificial generosity... what you pray, by God's grace to provide during 2023-24... to support ALL of our church's life and impact. Let me say that differently. The number you write on that bottom line is your anticipated total giving for the two-year period ahead – all that you would normally give over a 24-month period plus the extra commitment you are making to advance the aims of our LIFT Initiative. Remember also that we're only seeking one card per household.

**I know that, for some of you, this is the first time you will be giving to Christ Church.** Bless you for that. It is so good to have you as a real stakeholder here. **For others of you, this is the first time you're giving in a way that truly changes you.** You've given to charity or the church before, but this may be the biggest commitment you've ever made to God's work. I so honor that step of faith and believe God will too.

**For a segment of us, the number we are putting down is the first time we have given to the local church in a way that expresses our actual capacity for generosity.** We've always known we COULD step up to a 4, 5, 6 or even 7 figure level, but we've not done it here -- not until now. And it will be a joy to do that. **For others still, this will be the first time you've shifted from giving God what's left** at the end of the year to investing the first and best to his work. I believe that pleases God.

**That word "COMMITMENT" on the card is a good one.** It's a statement that I'm not a mere spectator or consumer or dabbler here. I am an investor, an owner, a genuine steward of Christ Church and all the fabulous work God does in and through us. At the same time, please remember this is not a contract, but simply a faithful statement of intent. It is your way of saying, "I trust you, Lord, to enable me to fulfill

this." We often say to God: "You show me and I'll commit." But God says: "You commit and I'll show you."

Nearly sixty years ago now, our church's founders trusted in that promise and made sacrificial commitments to plant this ministry. In 2019, it happened again with the rebirth of a ministry on what we now call our Butterfield campus. Just think of all the blessings God has brought forth from these leaps of faith. Now, dare to imagine the thousands of other people who will be in heaven or rising to their God-given potential here on earth because of how YOU and I respond to his calling right now.

**We're going to play some music and give everyone an opportunity to think, pray, and write.** If you are married and need some time to talk things over with your spouse, please do that. In a few moments, we'll come back and share some final instructions. I invite you to use this time to come in prayer before God, as you offer yourself with this card. You can stay seated and I will come back up in a few minutes to supply further instructions.

### **Musical Interlude (3 minutes)**

### **Invitation To Come Forward**

As our worship leaders continue to make their gifts to us, we welcome you to come forward, when you are ready, and drop your card in one of these baskets -- in commitment to God. Upon returning to your seat, feel free to remain standing as we join in worship to God, or be seated, as you feel led. Take whatever time you need, then come to one of our commitment stations as God leads you.

### **Benediction**

Before departing today, I want to remind you... *[Ministry of Prayer | Christ Church in 5]*

Finally, you are especially invited to join us next Sunday and then on Sunday February 26 when we'll have the chance to hear stories of how God has been moving people to take leaps of faith and REVEAL the total response of generosity the Lord has inspired through our LIFT Initiative. There are wonderful days ahead!

And now... *[Benediction]*