

The Biggest Loser-Radical Week 1

- I. Confession time. How many of us admit to watching some form of reality TV? Okay, what are your favorites? A couple of years ago I was gob smacked to discover my 80-year-old dad watched *Dancing With the Stars* religiously. My brother and I, being the mature middle-aged men that we are, have made fun of him incessantly since then. Meg and I used to watch *The Amazing Race* when it came on a decade or so ago. But how many times can you watch a husband and wife, or two siblings, about choke each other out while running through the back country of Borneo in their briefs looking for the next clue? And even though we never watched it, I always found recent reality TV show *The Biggest Loser* (**image**) very intriguing. If you are not familiar with it, it's the show where morbidly obese men and women compete to lose the most weight by the end of the season. They have the best trainers, nutritionists, and doctors at their beck and call to assist them in their journey. This is terrible, but we had a friend who is skinny as a rail that used to watch it while wolfing down mammoth bowls of chocolate ice cream. That seems so wrong, doesn't it? Twisted in a way I can't put into words. I bring all this up because today we begin our new series "Radical" based on the book of the same title by David Platte. David, a former missionary and pastor, is now the head of one of the largest mission organizations in the world. The whole point of his book, and what I hope we consider, is this: Platte argues that biblical Christianity which is indeed radical has been replaced by an insipid, powerless counterfeit here in the United States. And he challenges us to take it back. The first step in so doing is to realize if we are truly going to follow Jesus as He commands us in the gospels, we first must become losers. Not just any kind of loser but the biggest. As Jesus says in Mark 8:36, it is only in the losing that we can find true life. In this world and the world to come.
- II. I imagine at this point many of us are like "what you are talking about Willis!" I have to do what? Let me be clear. We are not talking about losing weight. We are blessed to have several people in our G3 community that can help us do this, but that is not what I am talking about. And I am also not talking about having poor fashion. Like wearing shorts with black socks, socks and sandals, mixing stripes with stripes and wearing a pocket protector especially if it is monogrammed anytime. Stuff I am sure I have all done at some point in my life. And I am not necessarily talking about becoming a social pariah either. Although it might come to that, depending on our society. But I am talking about, or really Jesus is talking about, losing or giving up our addiction to stuff and our obsession with success as defined by our culture, and giving up or pushing to the back every other obligation and commitment so we can make our loyalty to Jesus first in our lives. This includes losing or giving up the American Dream so we can live into God's dream or will for our lives.
- III. Here is the problem. I was reading a blog entitled *Does Being Christian Make Any Difference At All?* In the blog, the author made this rather painful point. Despite what the vast majority of Christians confess and supposedly believe, there is almost nil difference between how a Christian acts and operates in this world compared to a non-Christian. In fact, she quotes one study done in 2015 that children raised in Christian homes are actually less generous than non-religious people. In other words, they are less likely to give financially or of their time to charitable organizations. Now I am as skeptical as anyone when it comes to

studies as you can manipulate them in all sorts of ways but when you see enough studies that point to the same conclusion, especially if they are done by Christians, we need to listen. Especially when the Christian pollster George Barna has found repeatedly that Christians cheat, steal, lie, and talk with their mouth full as much as the non-religious. Essentially Christians engage in anything that would be deemed as immoral in the bible in equal measure as their non-Christian counterparts. In the same blog, she pointed out (and if you have been around G3 for long this should come as no surprise to you) that outsiders or those who don't consider themselves Christians view Jesus followers again and again as bigots, mean-spirited, judgmental and less likely to wash their hands after using the bathroom ☺. See the problem? It led the late Brennan Manning to say the following: **“The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians; who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”** Or better yet, Jesus Himself said **Luke 6:46** NIV .

- IV. It's kind of like this. How many people are familiar with REI-Recreation Equipment Incorporation? **(image)** It's like my fav store. It's my Sephora or, depending on your taste, my Home Depot. Barnes and Noble are close but REI wins out. I spent quite a bit of time there before my hiking/camping trip out West (as I mentioned last week) in preparation. I even got to visit the home REI flagship store in Seattle. I am still riding a little high from that. One thing that always makes me chuckle, at least inwardly, is when I see people there who look like the closest they will ever come to the outdoors is a “Save The Forest” Gala yet they dress the part. I think they like the idea of being outdoorsy, but they just don't necessarily want to be, well, outdoors...with the dirt, bugs, cold, wind or fresh air. I know this is being so judgmental like. But when you see someone pick up a hiking pole and they wave it around like it's an aluminum spear, it's hard not to judge. Or when they ask if any of the backpacks come along with a WiFi hotspot built in. They wear the clothing and even might know some of the lingo but they simply avoid the outdoors like an invitation to your niece or nephew's three-hour long tuba recital. And it appears that so many of us in the Christian community are the same way. We profess Jesus with our lips but deny Him with our action. We play the part of Christians, can even blend in, but too often we don't live it. So Houston there is a problem.
- V. And this gets us back to David Platte. Here is his story in a nut shell which led to him writing his book. Platte was a missionary overseas somewhere in Asia where Christianity is outlawed. He couldn't even say where he was in order to protect the underground church. He spent his time going from village to village listening to story after story about how Christ followers were arrested, beaten, tortured and sometimes executed for following Jesus. These Christians would risk anything and everything in order to get a bible into the hands of another church or to share their faith with their fellow countrymen and women. He tells one story of two girls who say farewell to their family and community because they feel called to go share Jesus with people far from where they live. And they don't expect they will ever come home again. Then David returned to the US. He was called to what is considered a megachurch. When he met the leaders, they were so proud to show how the church just finished a multimillion dollar renovation. The sanctuary had every possible

modern convenience like perfect acoustics, enormous monitors and mega-screens and ergonomic pews. Platte, instead of being impressed, became depressed. Listen here what he says in his book *Radical (image)* **“I could not help but think that somewhere along the way we had missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We are settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.” (page 7)**

- VI. Now some of us might hear this and be like “What?? Abandoning ourselves? Losing ourselves? Where are you and Platte getting all this?” Well, Jesus. Let’s read **Luke 9:57-62 NIV**. I don’t know about you but when I read that passage I’m like “Man, Jesus! Can’t you make this following thing a little bit easier?? What happened to simply raising your hand, saying a prayer and then you are ‘in’?” Depending on whether or not we grew up in church, and even what kind of church, this might have been our experience. But that doesn’t jive with the gospels. So what do we have here? We have three men who each initially intend to be Jesus’ disciple or follower. But with each one there is the caveat. Jesus provides the first one and the other guys add the second and third. Jesus says to the first, “Oh, you want to follow me? You should know that I am homeless.” And in the case of the second, “Oh, I want to follow you Jesus but let me go bury my father first. What? No, he is not dead yet (quoting Monty Python) but give him a few years and he will be. He is smoker.” And the third, “Oh, I want to follow you Jesus, but let me go kiss my mom goodbye and let the dogs out and grab my tooth brush.” To the second guy and third, Jesus is like “no and no.” He makes two statements that even thousands of years later are still hard to digest. “Let the dead bury their own dead” and “If you go back home to say goodbye to momma, it’s clear you’re not fit to be my disciple.”
- VII. Now there are several ways we can understand Jesus’ words here. For example, if the guy’s father just died he wouldn’t be standing there talking to Jesus but at the cemetery or funeral home picking out the casket. And some interpret the third guy’s request simply as a way to get out of it. An excuse like you might give a potential date that you want to avoid “Oh, Larry I would love to go to the movies with you but I am giving my cat a perm that day...” But as several commentators point out, whenever we try to soften Jesus’ words, we blunt what Luke, the writer of the gospel, was trying to do. And what was that? Make clear that nothing should come between a follower of Jesus and Jesus Himself. Not material goods such as a house, not our commitments to our parents or even to our entire family as a whole. Our first and foremost obligation needs to be to God. Just in case we think this is a fluke Scripture we can find about the same thing in the gospel of Matthew in chapter 8. And later on, Matthew quotes Jesus in **Matthew 16:24 NIV**. In fact, if we read the New Testament carefully, it is chock full of such demands. But we dulled the radical call of Jesus by injecting an unhealthy dose of the American Dream. It’s kind of like this.
- VIII. I remember when my kids were young and they began doing something new at the pharmacy and I was a bit shocked. I went to fill one of their prescriptions at Walgreens. I was so confused when the pharmacy tech asked me what flavor I wanted the medicine in. I was like “What?? Where am I? At Baskin Robbins where they have 33 flavors of ice cream?” They responded something like “Yes sir, now you can get children’s medicine in cherry,

orange, vanilla and piña colada flavored.” I discovered that day that sugar may or may not help the medicine go down, but orange blossom extract evidently does. In a way, that is what superimposing our American Dream and culture on the call of Jesus does as well. It can *seemingly* help discipleship go down if we think God wants us to live in the nice home with 2-3 car garages and the cars to match, 2.5 kids, high paying jobs, and able to go to the beach and/or the mountains for vacay. And that’s not all, folks...we get God thrown in and eternal paradise. That kind of Jesus we can follow, right? And if we are honest, that is the kind of discipleship the American Church, including us pastor types, has been selling or pushing for the last 50 years. The problem is it’s not true discipleship. Unlike the flavoring with the meds, adding the American Dream on Christianity turns it into something else. The result? So many of us American Christians proclaim one thing but for the most part live another.

- IX. Please understand that I don’t think there is anything wrong in and of itself to be living in suburbia in a nice house with a decent paying job with 2.5 kids. It just that Luke and Matthew and the rest of the gospel writers teach us that Jesus must come first. It can’t be that Jesus and church is one thing among many of my commitments; rather, it must be at the center, and everything else revolves around that. Every decision we make should be through that lens. That is what losing our lives looks like. We will be talking about the specifics in the weeks to come.
- X. As I as close this morning, when preparing this week, I came across an article in a scientific journal about the reality show *The Biggest Loser*. A researcher intrigued by the show actually did a study on the former contestants. He discovered a depressing trend. The vast majority of contestants either gained all the weight back they lost or even got heavier after the show. His theory backed by hard science is that our body after weight loss fights to regain the fat. So for the former contestants to remain “losers,” it’s a life-long battle. I share that because many of us have made that faith decision to follow Christ. You might even have prayed something along the lines “Jesus, my life is yours.” You gave up your desires and hopes to chase after God’s for your life. You lost everything to gain the best thing. Here is the thing. It too is a lifelong battle. You see our body and mind start fighting back. And our culture and world try to woo us, try to get us to think that it’s okay to serve, as Jesus puts it, “two masters.” Materialism and Jesus. Popularity and Jesus. Pleasure and Jesus. American Dream and Jesus. And so forth. This has been my story in my Christian journey many times. But as we see this morning, if we want to lose to win, to truly follow Christ, to keep the weight off you might say, there can’t be an “and.” Either Jesus is first in our lives or it’s really not Christianity but some watered-down imposter. Is this radical? Yeah, it is. But it was this kind of radical faith that changed the world and can continue to change the world if we will step up and live it out. Lose big to win even bigger. Life with God now and a greater life with God in the world to come.