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Book 9

"THE 'IF ONLY' CLUB" Luke 9:57-62

Most of us have some regrets about the past. In addition many of us have doubts about ourselves and our abilities. Furthermore we like to believe that we are unlucky most of the time while others have all the luck. "Some people seem to get all the good breaks," is a comment often voiced by many of us. These are but a few of the ways that we begin to become members of the "if only club." It's a club that seems to be growing in membership.

"If only I had Bill's leadership ability, then I would be way ahead in life." "If only I had inherited all the money that she did, then I too would be happy." "If only I could sing like Mary." "If only I had the good looks and personality of Patricia." "If only I had the sales ability of Henry." "If only I had kept those shares of stock a little longer, and then sold them, I would be wealthy." "If only I had listened to the advice of my parents." "If only I had taken that job when it was offered to me." "If only I had said no instead of saying yes." "If only I had given more of my time to my children when they were young." "If only I hadn't gotten married when I did." "If only I had gone on to school." "If only I hadn't gotten in with the wrong crowd."

Members of the "if only club" spend a lot of time regretting what they did or did not do in the past, or regretting that they do not have the same talent or looks or ability or luck as someone else. They spend too much time looking backward, instead of living in the present and planning for the future. At the same time, members of the "if only club" are usually afraid to take any risk or try any change. They are like the 92 year old man who had lived in the same town all his life. One day a visitor said to him, "I'll bet you've seen a lot of changes around here." And he replied, "Yes, sir, and I've been dead set against every one of them."

At the same time, members of the "if only club," stand around waiting for that big break that will automatically give them instant fame, fortune, happiness and all the things they want from life. They are always dreaming and wishing for someone elses' success, achievement, ability, position or talent. They are people standing around waiting

for their ship to come in. The problem is they haven't sent one out. Their ship has never left port. It is still anchored, motionless, going nowhere.

Jesus Christ was aware that what hinders many of us from fulfilling our full potential is our membership in the "If only club." Thus he said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." It's difficult to be a follower of Christ and a member of the if only club at the same time.

So if you believe yourself to be a member of the "if only club" it's time to cancel your membership. To help you do that, here are several suggestions.

1. First, do not be afraid of taking a chance, of trying something new that will help you grow and stretch your potential. All things in life that are worthwhile involve an element of risk and sacrifice and trust. We cannot know the outcome of every new venture we undertake.

But to be able to venture forth and to take risks means also not being afraid to fail and to make mistakes. No one bats one thousand. Thus Jesus said to one of the men who seemed eager to follow him--"remember foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus was reminding his would-be disciple that following him was to take a risk--it was no simple guarantee of an easy life with all things provided.

In following Christ as in other worthwhile endeavors, there is no promise that life will now be free of all mistakes, failures and problems.

So to cancel your membership in the "if only club" means to not be afraid of failing from time. It's a part of life and it doesn't help to say, "If only." Living life to its fullest involves taking risks. We all know the old saying, "nothing ventured, nothing gained." Furthermore a person is never really a failure until he or she begins to blame others.

2. A second suggestion for helping you cancel your membership in the "if only club" follows from the first and is a continuation of it. Not only should one not be afraid to take risks and not be afraid of failure, but in addition, instead of dwelling on our mistakes, regrets and failures

and moaning, "if only," remember that we can learn more from our failures than from anything else. Mere regret and feeling sorry for oneself is a waste of energy and time. We have to go beyond that.

One of the things that continually fascinates me about the game of golf is how much that sport reveals about life itself. In golf, one not only plays against opponents, but also one always plays against one's self. Thus a golfer can easily become his or her own worst enemy. Many golfers are charter members of the "If only club." A golfer will say to himself after a bad shot, "If only I hadn't bungled that last shot," and then will go on to berate himself, calling himself all kinds of bad names--stupid, dumb, and worse. Probably more self-anger and even self-hate can be seen on the golf course than in almost any other endeavor.

Rather than continually chastising and rebuking one's self--which tends to make us members of the "if only club," it is far better to simply recognize that we all make mistakes and then as rationally as possible try to analyze and learn from our mistakes and failures so that we can correct them. In this way our mistakes and failures can become fascinating curriculum for improving our lives.

We can also learn from other people's mistakes and failures. A person who doesn't read a book is no better or different from one who can't read. School is never out for those who want to continue to grow and mature. Learning is a continuing process. The road to success is always under construction. Members of the "if only club" however, rarely grow, but instead spend their time bemoaning the past, "If only I had done this or that."

3. A third suggestion for helping one cancel his or her membership in the "if only club," is to thank God for your problems. Now that may sound strange, but it's the key to getting out of the "if only" habit. Every successful man or woman has faced many problems and setbacks. In fact many times problems and adversities are the very factors that help people become successful. We've all heard the proverb--"Problems are opportunities in disguise."

One person put it this way, "You don't drown by falling in the water, you only drown if you stay there."

Thank God for your problems. Many times our adversities can be turned into achievements of the best kind. Some of most inspirational biographies testify to this.

There was a young musician who played in one of the finest symphony orchestras in Europe. Times were difficult and jobs were hard to come by and a job with an orchestra was a valuable possession. This young man was on his way up when suddenly disaster seemed to strike. He began to lose his eyesight. He was afraid it might be discovered and he would lose his fine job, so secretly he began to take his music home and memorize it note for note. Soon he started in on the music belonging to other members of the orchestra and after a while he not only knew his music by heart, but also that of every other member of the orchestra.

He became one of the truly outstanding members of the orchestra and still no one was completely aware of the condition of his eyes. He had prepared himself for the future when he would not be able to see.

One night the conductor became ill and the young man was asked to conduct the great orchestra. He approached the podium, grasped the baton, reached over and closed the conductors score. That night he conducted the symphony without have to look at a single note. He had been a success because his adversity had helped him prepare for it, rather than hinder him. He went on to become one of the noted conductors of symphonies throughout the world. His name--Arturo Toscanini.

There was a young bride from the East who during the last war followed her husband to an Army Camp on the edge of the desert in California. Living conditions were primitive at best and he had advised against it, but she wanted to be with him.

The only housing they could find was a run-down shack near an Indian village. The heat was unbearable in the daytime, 115 degrees in the shade. The wind blew constantly, spreading dust and sand all over everything. The days were long and boring. Her only neighbors were Indians and none of them spoke English.

When her husband was ordered farther into the desert for two weeks of maneuvers, loneliness and the wretched living

conditions got the best of her. She wrote to her mother, complaining, "If only I had not come out here." She just couldn't take it any more. In a short time she received a reply which included these two lines: "Two men looked out from prison bars, one saw mud, the other saw the stars." She read the lines over and over again and began to feel ashamed of herself. She didn't really want to leave her husband. All right, she'd look for the stars.

On the following day she set out to make -friends with the Indians. She asked them to teach her weaving and pottery. At first they were distant, but as soon as they sensed her interest was genuine, they returned her friendship. She became fascinated with their culture, history and everything about them.

She began to study the desert as well, and soon it too changed from a desolate forbidding place to a marvelous thing of beauty. She had her mother send her books. She studied the forms of the cacti, the yuccas and the Joshua trees. She collected seashells that had been left there millions of years ago when the sands had been an ocean floor. Later she became such an expert on the area that she wrote a book about it.

What had changed? Not the desert, not the Indians. Simply by seeing her problems as opportunities in disguise, she began to cancel her membership in the "if only club."

Jesus Christ teaches us that when we begin to look beyond ourselves and our own problems and to give our lives away, then we also begin to find a new and deep meaning in life. On the other hand, when we are afraid to venture forth in anything new, afraid to try something for fear of failure, when we become members of the "if only club," then life closes in on us and we begin to shrink back and shrivel up.

That's why Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. [redacted]

Happy are those who dream dreams and are ready to pay the price to make them come true.

Amen.