

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: THE STORY OF JIM ELLIOT

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” – Jim Elliot

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Psalm 73:25-26

Introduction

Last week Brooks left you with three challenges: To show the meaning of your singleness (1) by never forgetting that you are not your calling, (2) by striving for contentment in God, and (3) by being actively involved in service to Christ and the Church. I want to tell you a story tonight about someone who can be for you a wonderful (yet imperfect) example in these three areas. The story of Jim Elliot definitely illustrates how finding your identity in Christ brings contentment and displays a unique and powerful message about Christ to the watching world no matter what ‘calling’ a person has. However, his life and death also show how finding your life in Christ provides the greatest of all purpose and direction for life. I want you to leave here tonight seeing, maybe for the first time, that God has a mission for you that transcends and even informs your various callings in life.

The Making of One Devoted

Ever since I was a teenager Jim Elliot has been one of my heroes. The brief sketch of Jim Elliot’s life is that he was an adventurous and winsome young man brought up by godly parents in the greatest part of this country: the Northwest. Raised in Oregon, Jim became a missionary in South America after finishing his undergraduate degree at Wheaton College here in Illinois. Jim is famous for his sacrificial death with four other American missionaries on what they called ‘Palm Beach’ at the hands of the once savage Auca Indians. Twenty-nine years old, by this time married with one child, Jim’s blood was spilt on the edge of a river thousands of miles from home. What has to take place in someone’s heart for them to gladly lay down their life in devotion to Christ? Do you see Christ as worthy enough to follow in this way? To this extreme?

Being saved as a boy, Jim felt early on that the command of Christ to go and make disciples of every nation without question did not exclude him. His heart broke at the thought of countless millions dying without ever hearing of God’s love for them in Christ. His journal was filled with mission statistics like: “1700 languages have not a word of the Bible translated. 90% of the people who volunteer for the mission field never get there. It takes more than a ‘Lord, I’m willing!’ 64% of the world have never heard of

Christ. 5,000 people die every hour.”¹ Jim spent years counting the cost of following Christ and was assured over and over again from Scripture and hymns that he recorded in his journal that following Christ to the ends of the earth was worth more than anything he could possibly lose on that path.

The Struggles of One Devoted

In the first sermon in this series, Pastor Tim talked about the common misconception that the single person’s lot of devotion to Christ is merely a consolation prize. Many think of their portion in Christ as ‘second best.’ Jim believed in a ‘second best.’ He feared, just like all of us, that he would live without all that God intended for him. The difference between Jim and our culture is what he defined as ‘second best.’ When he was 21, he wrote this journal entry,

*Prayed a strange prayer today. I covenanted with the Father that He would do either of two things: either glorify Himself to the utmost in me or slay me. By His grace I shall not have his second best. For He heard me, I believe, so that now I have nothing to look forward to but a life of sacrificial sonship. . . or heaven—soon. Perhaps tomorrow! What a prospect!*²

A life, single or married, that didn’t glorify God to the utmost wasn’t worth living for Jim—that was the consolation prize. Not treasuring Christ above all things was ‘second best’ for him. Unlike so many of us, Jim was concerned about missing out on God rather than all the flickering joys of this world.

With respect to women, Jim tended to be viewed as a woman-hater. This was not because he hated women but because he was so unashamedly, single-mindedly focused on following Christ that he didn’t want anything or anyone to get in his way. He wondered if Jesus’ words about some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven applied to him! In a biography written by his wife years after his death she describes Jim’s unique attitude towards women:

No ascetic, Jim enjoyed to the full all that he believed God had given to him to enjoy, but he felt it wisest to exclude from the sphere of activity anything which had the power to distract him from the pursuit of the Will. The precepts of 1 Corinthians 7 were inescapable to him, and it was not without reason that the Trainer of Souls set these lessons before him at this particular time. Whether God were actually giving him what he called the ‘gift of a single life’ (an expression that Jim took from 1 Corinthians 7:7): ‘each has his own special gift from God’—he did not yet know; neither did he try to rationalize himself out of the possibility. He

¹ Betty commented, “In view of the unequivocal command of Christ, coupled with these staggering facts, Jim believed that if he stayed in the United States the burden of proof would lie with him to show that he was justified in doing so,” Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1958), 54-54.

² Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 95-96.

believed Christ to be utterly sufficient for the entire fulfillment of the personality, and was ready to trust Him literally for this.”³

It’s not that Jim wasn’t ever lonely or didn’t long for the companionship and joy that accompanies marriage, he did. But at the height of those longings he saw, as it were, a shadow of their ultimate futility. He prayed in his journal, “*To that soul which has tasted of Christ, the jaunty laugh, the tempting music of mingled voices, the haunting appeal of smiling eyes—all these lack flavor. And I would drink deeply of Him. Fill me, O Spirit of Christ, with all the fullness of God.*”⁴

However, Jim eventually found himself fond of someone—closely knit in thought and purpose with a girl at Wheaton. Her name was Betty. Realizing his attachment for her, Jim was frightened. The trembling fear of living a ‘second best’ life by exchanging the glory of God for romance is seen in his first letter to Betty. He simply quoted a hymn by G.W. Frazer. Remember that this hymn was his first indication to her that he had feelings for her:

*Have I an object, Lord, below
Which would divide my heart with Thee?
Which would divert its even flow
In answer to Thy constancy?
O teach me quickly to return,
And cause my heart afresh to burn.*

*Have I a hope, however dear,
Which would defer Thy coming, Lord—
Which would detain my spirit here
Where naught can lasting joy afford?
From it, my Savior, set me free
To look and long and wait for Thee.*

*Be Thou the object bright and fair
To fill and satisfy the heart,
My hope to meet Thee in the air,
And nevermore from Thee to part;
That I may undistracted be
To follow, serve, and wait for Thee.*

Now that this was on the table, they could talk business. His interest in Betty was a shock to all, including him.

Like the rest of us, this was a struggle for Jim. Recognizing that marriage is a good gift from God and handling it in such a way that we don’t allow it to replace the Giver of all good gifts in our hearts is difficult. This is important to remember, lest we are tempted to hold Jim up so high that he becomes out of reach. What makes Jim Elliot

³ Ibid., 59.

⁴ Ibid.

so commendable and relatable is not that he didn't struggle with loneliness or lust or pride, but it is the way he struggled that sets him apart. His story is worth telling because he struggled *well*. After he graduated from Wheaton he was in a holding pattern at home in Oregon waiting on God. During this time his future with missions and with Betty was unclear. Sometimes finding contentment in Christ meant confessing and lamenting his lack of that very thing:

(January 16, 1950) Deserted all morning. Much time on my knees but no fervency or any desire for prayer. No heed or hearkening in study of the Word either. What good is Greek, commentaries, insight, gifts, and all the rest if there is no heart for Christ? Oh, what slackness I feel in me now. Wasted half a day. No school because of snow. Good thing. I had nothing to say to the kids anyhow.

Jim was all too aware at times of the hidden sin of lust in his heart and the shame that accompanied it,

I tremble, Lord, at what surprises she [Betty] shall know when all secret thoughts of men shall be manifest. Perhaps then she will believe that I am not worth her while. I felt just now as I suppose an animal would feel when it first discovered that it was an animal in a world of men. . . Oh, that mine eye might see Thee, that I might abhor as I ought.⁵

Have you felt this way before? How have you responded to the darkness of shame? How have you dealt with an utter lack of desire for God's word? How have you reacted when you realize how lightly you have taken sin and the holiness of God? Jim brought these struggles to God in prayer, in the study of the Bible, and in tears.

Jim really believed in Christ. His struggle wasn't a hopeless one because he fought to find his identity not in his calling to the mission field or in his marital status. Jim felt that he could endure anything, good or bad, because of the promise that he had in Christ. Listen to this journal entry,

Lord God and Father, I call upon Thee to enter all the avenues of my life today, and to share every detail of it with me even as Thou hast called me to share with Thee Thy life, and all the wonders of it. As I am to share the destiny, glory, and future affairs of Thy Son, so would I now have Him share this small destiny on earth which is mine, the joys of it, and all its small matters, that we should be one, Thou and I, even as we are in Christ.⁶

Jim is here saying that he wants to be one with God in every area of his life *precisely because* he is one with God in Christ. He wants to be devoted to Christ in all of life *precisely because* he has been devoted to God—made holy in Christ.

⁵ Elisabeth Elliot, *Journals of Jim Elliot, The* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2002), 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

The Lessons of One Devoted

Jim really believed that Jesus died and rose again and that He is robed in glory and honor. He really believed that thousands perish without him every day and every hour. He desperately wanted his life to display a single-hearted devotion to his Savior.

It's important you know that substantial and ever-increasing satisfaction in Christ really can be had by those who have not been given their preferred calling. This is not just an ideal we are calling you to. God makes himself known in powerful ways to those look for life and meaning in Him alone, even when precious things are taken from them. After coming to grips with his great desire to marry Betty, he left for Ecuador and experienced a special kind of contentment even while knowing he may never see her again:

*The sheer joy of being in the will of God and the knowledge of His direction heretofore is my general experience now. God has been in our going to now, and if life were to end at this point, I feel I could say with Simeon, 'Now let Thy servant depart in peace.' Not that I feel in any way that my work has been done, but only that I am satisfied that God has been confirming His word to me. The evidence is before me of the veracity of the Lord, and with Jacob I can say, 'It is enough.'*⁷

A line written in Jim's journal he will forever be remembered by is, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Jim was convinced of the permanence of the the world to come. Because he was so confident in Jesus' words that at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, Jim wanted to live for what he knew would last forever, for what would be his forever—the glory of Christ! Whether single or married Jim had one all-encompassing passion: devotion to Christ. Jim believed that his citizenship was in heaven, where Christ is.

Elizabeth Elliot, (Betty), narrates the final days of Jim's life:

*[Jim's] diary ends on December 31, 1955. Two days later Jim and four other men, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian, went to a little sand spit on the Curraray River which they named 'Palm Beach.' They set up a camp in hopes of establishing contact with the Auca Indians. On January 6, 1956, their hopes were realized when two women and a man appeared out of the jungle and spent several hours with the missionaries. Verbal communication was not possible, but there was every indication that the Indians were friendly and trusted the missionaries. The Auca man demonstrated complete confidence by accepting a ride in Nate Saint's airplane. Two days later the five men were speared to death.*⁸

⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁸ Elliot, *Journals of Jim Elliot, The*, 477.

Preparing for what would be their last visit with the Auca Indians, the five missionaries gathered together and sang a hymn in prayer to God:

*We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.*

*Yes, in Thy Name, O Captain of salvation!
In Thy dear Name, all other names above;
Jesus our Righteousness, our sure Foundation,
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.*

*We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing,
“We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.”*

*We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise;
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.*

What can we learn from the life of Jim Elliot? Well, not only do we see a model of singleness (and marriage) that is devoted to Christ, but we see a guy who wanted to ‘live life to the hilt,’ as he put it. Jim didn’t want the consolation prize of an ordinary life of marriage or of independence, instead he pressed on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14).

Listen, his identity in Christ not only gave him a sense of meaning and significance and fulfillment but it also gave direction and purpose! His whole life was about living out New Testament Christianity, as he called it. This is an important lesson to learn from Jim Elliot. Finding your identity in Christ does not only produce contentment in life, but it also gives direction.

Whether you are majoring in the Greek New Testament or in environmental engineering, whether you work at Apple’s corporate offices or sell backpacks at REI (which is better by far), if you are united to Christ there is for you a great cause and purpose to live for that both transcends and under girds your vocation. Additionally, don’t be discouraged if you have not sensed your calling in life with respect to vocation. There is a purpose for your life that runs far deeper than your current employment does.

Just like God gave Adam and Eve the mandate to multiply and fill the earth, we likewise have been given the great mandate to fill the earth with the message of the gospel. God has called us to glorify him by advancing his kingdom, not primarily through physical birth, but by the multiplication that comes from the supernatural, spiritual new birth brought about by the gospel. The purpose you have in Christ to proclaim him in word and deed to the ends of the earth, far from minimizing the importance of your vocation, will actually infuse it with the richest of meaning. Folks, you are not your calling. There is intimacy and contentment in God to be had because of your identity in Christ. No matter what your calling is right now, single or married, student or employee, son or daughter, there is not only joy to be had in Christ but the greatest of all causes to live and die for.

Application

So what if you're not headed for the mission field and martyrdom (not that Jim was planning to die) before you are 30? How does your identity in Christ breed purpose and a sense of mission at your school? During your summer break? At your job? Here are a couple ways you can follow Christ like Jim Elliot did in your own situation of life:

1. **Go!** Jesus' great commission to go and make disciples of every nation, teaching them to obey all that he has commanded is directed at you this summer. Allow this command to prioritize your life! Make disciples! Invest in people. Love your coworker enough to hear what they are going through over lunch. Aim to make other disciple-makers this summer.
2. **Watch!** Watch for opportunities to share the gospel with people. We so often miss seeing God at work around us because our eyes are on ourselves. Watch and dream of ways to not only enjoy God during your time at work, but also to handle your job as a weapon for the kingdom of God.
3. **Ask!** For many of you, this kind of a devotion to Christ is simply discouraging. You have tried and failed over and over to follow Christ the way know you ought. Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Beg that God show you all that he has accomplished for you in Christ. Plead with God that he would give you a greater understanding His steadfast love. Ask that God would show you the incomparable riches of his glory in Christ. Pray that God would help you see with the eyes of your heart the value of forgiven sin and a restored relationship with God.

Will you be the fool who clings to what he cannot keep to squander what remains forever? Or will you give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose, with Jim Elliot and the myriads of other men and women who have really followed Christ in ages past?

Questions for discussion:

1. How does the way Jim struggled to find his identity in Christ encourage and inform your pursuit of Christ? In which ways did he struggle ‘well’? In which ways will your struggle with sin and temptation be handled differently after hearing the story of Jim Elliot?

“Deserted all morning. Much time on my knees but no fervency or any desire for prayer. No heed or hearkening in study of the Word either. What good is Greek, commentaries, insight, gifts, and all the rest if there is no heart for Christ? Oh, what slackness I feel in me now. Wasted half a day. No school because of snow. Good thing. I had nothing to say to the kids anyhow.”

2. If your union with Christ is a more foundational part of who you are than your calling to this or that relationship, or this or that job, how should you spend your time differently with this season of singleness? How should you spend your time differently at work in light of this?
3. What challenged you most about Jim Elliot’s devotion to Christ in singleness? In marriage? How does the account of Jim’s literal belief in “Christ to be utterly sufficient for the entire fulfillment of the personality” impact you?
4. Read this journal entry of Jim’s and determine what was the deepest attraction and bond between Jim and Betty:

“I woke this morning with my left eye badly swollen and sore. Certainly gives me a curious squint with one eye closed. You’d have trouble loving me if you went by looks today. I’m certainly glad that we have not based our relationship on good looks. ‘Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain.’ Oh Betty, we owe praise to God for teaching us the worth of inner adornment. There are so many painted and well-dressed butterflies around here. They distract the eye but do not touch the spirit and it is good to know the God who looks within to the ‘hidden man of the heart’ and to enjoy that part of a person with Him.”⁹

5. The following excerpt from Jim’s journal shows his views on how to live as a single person. Describe his approach to singleness and finding a spouse. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

Writing to his parents from Wheaton, Jim was perplexed: *“no one warns young people to follow Adam’s example. He waited till God saw his need. Then God made Adam sleep, prepared for his mate, and brought her to him. We need more of this ‘being asleep’ in the will of God. Then we can receive what he brings us in His own time, if at all. Instead*

⁹ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 215-16.

we are set as bloodhounds after a partner, considering everyone we see until our minds are so concerned with the sex problem that we can talk of nothing else when the bull-session time comes around. It is true that a fellow cannot ignore women—but he can think of them as he ought—as sisters, not as sparring partners!”¹⁰

Prayer:

Father in Heaven, we thank you for sending your son to die that we might have life. Help us, O loving Father, to find all our worth and meaning in being found righteous in Christ alone. We confess Lord that we often look to relationships, or jobs, or money for the security, meaning and purpose that can only truly be found in you. Thank you Lord for loving us and providing forgiveness for these our sins. Help us to struggle well, before you, together, to repent of idolatry—putting our trust in you. Show us your great kindness toward us in Christ. Help us Lord to live devoted lives to you precisely because we have been set apart in Christ for you. Show yourself to us as all-satisfying as we look to you alone for satisfaction and meaning. And Lord, redirect the mission of our lives as we find our life in Christ and his kingdom. For the glory of Jesus Christ—Amen.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61-61.