

Jesus in the Imperative: Follow Me

H. Stephen Shoemaker

February 11, 2018

The theme of this Lenten season is “How Then Shall We Live: The Liberating Commands of Christ.”

The question, “How Then Shall We Live?” implies something that has gone before. God was in Christ: How Then Shall We Live? Jesus has come into our lives and called us to follow: How Then Shall Live?

The commands of Christ are liberating commands because there is an *indicative*—what God has done—behind every *imperative*—what we must do. The command “You must” becomes “You can” because of the liberating power of Christ.

Indulge me my inner grammar nerd for a moment. There are two major moods of speech: the indicative and the imperative. In the indicative mood the speaker is sure something is the case: “Spring is here.” In the imperative mood the speaker desires that something should happen: “Take off your winter coat.”

To move to the theological dimension, the indicative mood is what God has done or is doing. The imperative mood is what we must do in response.

So, to use Jesus' words "Your sins are forgiven" is the indicative. "Go and sin no more" is the imperative, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand" is the indicative. "Repent (turn) and believe the good news" is the imperative.

In the gospel of Christ the imperative always proceeds from the indicative, indeed flows from it. The indicative is the grace filled foundation of the imperative.

Thus endeth the grammar lesson. Now on to the point of it all.

I

I grew up in the religion of the South, Southern Baptist style, which is the religion of the South *squared*. This religion was primarily composed of imperatives, stated mostly in the negative: Don't do this, or don't do that. Don't smoke or drink or dance. Don't have sex before you're married and then, when married, don't enjoy it too much. And this one: "Don't do anything that might cause another to stumble" ... which is pretty paralyzing if you dwell on it too much. In sum, "Don't sin; be good", both "sin" and "good" defined more culturally than biblically.

Flanner O'Connor wrote:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic.¹

We're running around trying to save ourselves by our righteousness. As much as we sang Amazing Grace, we lived as though it was "Amazing Works", that is, my works, my goodness, my obedience to the rules.

When I went to Union Theological Seminary, N.Y. City, following college, I left the religion of the South. I vividly remember taking Holy Communion at St. John the Divine Episcopal Cathedral. As the priest placed the wafer on my tongue and offered the cup he said something like "Your sins are forgiven". *Are forgiven*. And I was rocked back by the glorious indicative: "Your sins are forgiven". No imperative: "You must". All indicative: God has done this for you. In short, what I felt was salvation by grace. As Paul put it:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But, it's funny, along the way I've re-learned the importance of the imperative and its stirring power, especially from the lips of Jesus. And this is, again, because behind every command of Christ lay the indicative: what God has done and is doing.

Think of it this way, to use terms of weaving. The *warp* of the fabric, the vertical threads, are the indicative threads. The *woof* of the fabric, the horizontal threads, are imperative threads. We need both. And without the imperative threads the sacred garment of our lives would ravel.

This Lent I will be focusing on the Commands of Christ: Jesus In the Imperative. I call them the liberating commands of Christ. Listen to this poem by Kathleen Norris entitled “Imperatives” and see how it feels to you.

Imperatives

Look at the birds

Consider the lilies

Drink ye all of it

Ask

Seek

Knock

Enter by the narrow gate

Do not be anxious

Judge not; do not give dogs what is holy

Go: be it done for you

Do not be afraid

Maiden, arise

Young man, I say, arise

Stretch out your hand

Stand up, be still

Rise, let us be going

Love

Forgive

Remember me²

When I read the poem, all composed from the words of Jesus, what I felt was exhilaration.

I will be preaching this Lenten season the Imperatives of Jesus, his Liberating Commands.

Tonight I offer this foundational, all-encompassing command: *Follow me*. Mark tells the story. Jesus was passing along the Sea of Galilee and he saw two brothers fishing, Simon (who would be called Peter) and Andrew. “Follow me”, he said, “and I will make you fishers of people”. And “immediately”, Mark records, they left their nets and followed him.

Notice Jesus came to them, took the initiative. This is the indicative of the gospel: Jesus has come to us. Normally at that time would-be disciples came to the master and asked to be a disciple. Here Jesus came to *them* and said, “Follow me”.

All Jesus commands follow this one. It is what being a Christian is all about, following the way of this man called Jesus.

Tonight as I place ashes on your foreheads let it be a mark of your human mortality: “From dust you have come and to dust you shall return.” That is part of the meaning of tonight.

But let it also be the sign of your following of Jesus, or best attempts to do so. The cross as a sign of your response to his words, Follow me. Remember these words of Jesus? “If anyone would come after me let them deny self, take up their cross and follow me.” We will learn more about this command on Palm

Sunday. For now, let the mark of the cross on your foreheads say, “This season I will follow him and listen for his words”.

1. Flannery O’Conner, *The Habit of Being* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Girox, 1979),

p.350

2. Kathleen Norris, “*Imperatives*,” *Little Girls in Church* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), p.62