

THE COMPASS

Misfit

Untidy Christianity, Part 3

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It's a bad idea to start two sermons in a row with jokes, because then people always expect an opening joke.

But this one was clearly God's will, because as I was working on this message, I received this Internet spam:

An archaeologist was digging in Israel's Negev Desert and came upon a casket containing a mummy. After examining it, he called the archaeologist of a prestigious natural-history museum.

"I've just discovered a 3,000 year-old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!" the excited scientist exclaimed.

The curator replied, "Bring him in and we'll check it out."

A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. "You were right about the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know?"

"Easy. There was a piece of paper in his hand that said, '10,000 Shekels on Goliath.'" "See? We're finishing up the story of David and Goliath this evening. It's perfect.

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Have you met Patrick and Lisa Harvey? This house belonged to Lisa before they got married, and it's thanks to their generosity that The Compass has been meeting here free of charge since December.

I had the honor of officiating at their wedding, on South Padre Island in Texas.

Usually officiating at a wedding is pretty simple matter: you meet with the bride and groom in advance, you find out from them who's singing, who's doing a reading, "Will you be lighting a unity candle?", whatever.

But Patrick and Lisa's wedding wasn't quite that simple.

Lisa grew up in Moline, Illinois, where her family still attends the First Christian Church — part of the Disciples of Christ denomination. (Lisa's parents are here this evening.)

Patrick is from El Paso, Texas, where his family was strongly committed to the Anglican Church.

I don't know how familiar you are with these two styles of churches, but let me put it this way:

Disciples of Christ are from Mars, Anglicans are from Venus. (Or maybe it's the other way around.)

At the First Christian Church in Moline, the minister would typically wear a coat and tie, the congregation would sing songs written for the most part within the past century, and when someone leads in prayer, he typically makes it up as he goes. I think Lisa's parents would say he "prays from the heart."

In Patrick's Anglican church, the minister typically wears vestments, the prayers come out of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer — although I think Patrick would say

these prayers are “prayed from the heart” — and if a song is only 100 years old, it’s too modern; it hasn’t really been seasoned long enough. We’re talking the great classic hymns of the Church from centuries ago.

Now you try to design a wedding ceremony that will make both of these groups of people feel comfortable.

We just about had to call in a labor union mediator.

It’s not that the Christian Church has it right and the Anglicans have it wrong; nor the other way around.

These are simply two different means by which God has seen fit to connect with people down through the years ... two different styles by which people have felt comfortable connecting with God.

This is kind of what happened with David, after he talked Saul into letting him take on Goliath.

1 Samuel 17:38-53

38 Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. [in other words, he said, Dress the way I dress.] **He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head.** [He was saying, Arm yourself the way I arm myself.]

39 David fastened on his sword over the tunic [Saul was saying, Fight the way I fight] **and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.**

Let’s note here that this wasn’t an issue of right or wrong.

It was just an issue of what worked for David; what felt comfortable.

And David didn’t rationalize or make excuses; he was just honest with Saul:

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, [not because there’s anything wrong with wearing armor; not because you’re a bad guy and I’m a good guy, but rather, he said:] **“because I am not used to them.” So he took them off.**

40 Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

God had prepared Saul to do battle one way, and he had prepared David in another way.

Whose fight was this going to be?

If Saul was going to go out and face Goliath, he should definitely wear the armor.

But David was the guy going out to face Goliath. So he had to clothe himself and arm himself the way God had prepared him to be clothed and armed.

God equips every individual uniquely for the spiritual battles he or she will face.

I can’t dress for my battle in your spiritual garments.

I can’t arm for my battle with your spiritual weapons.

I can’t fight my battle the way you’re fighting yours.

Some of us in this room thrive spiritually on a strict daily routine of interaction with God: we have morning prayer and Scripture reading; prayer before bedtime;

whatever.

We've been doing this routine for years. It works. It's what we're used to. Something comes up in the middle of the day that we want to pray about, we say to ourselves, "Man, I'm going to talk with God about that this evening." That just-before-bedtime prayer slot is when we push out the junk of our lives and focus on communication with God.

Others of us in this room would find such a routine suffocating. We do binge-devotions — sitting down and reading a glob of Scripture whenever the urge strikes us. We don't think of prayer as something on a schedule; we pray throughout the day, whenever.

The idea of waiting till the end of the day to talk with God is outrageous to us.

Some of us feel odd praying out loud. Some of us can't focus when we're praying silently.

Some of us feel more comfortable kneeling when we pray. Some of us haven't knelt in years and don't intend to.

Some of us get more out of the musical worship parts of a church service than we do out of the teaching parts. (There are those of us who call this the "talking head segment"; you know who you are.)

Some of us could more or less do without all the touchy-feeling music stuff and just download the text of the sermon.

Is this bad? Is this good? It's how God wired you.

For years, God prepared David for the battle with Goliath.

When it finally came time for the shepherd boy to face the giant, David had certain grooves dug into his life.

He wasn't a sharp brass and heavy silver kind guy; he was a soft leathery shepherd's pouch kind of guy.

It wasn't a particular strength or a particular weakness. It just reflects how God had led him all those years.

I have to be careful about this personally, because I'm wired to GIVE ADVICE. I am a lecturer by temperament.

The most common phrase in my vocabulary is "What you need to do is...."

I listen to your problem, I give you my solution. Instant answers! Doug's will for your life!

And sure, we can get good advice from our friends and leaders.

But one person's experience may not necessarily set them up to offer wisdom on another person's situation.

I may have had a fabulous experience in a small group; I think small groups are wonderful and you ought to be in one.

Do you feel guilty if you're not in a small group?

(It's okay, really: Abraham was never part of a small group. Moses didn't do small groups. Jesus was in a small group but even he ultimately left it.)

Let's say a church emphasizes the importance and the value of adult Sunday school classes.

Anything wrong with that? Absolutely not.

But what if I can't get on board with that for some reason? My schedule, my temperament, my wife has a problem with the idea of it, whatever?

Either I squirm every time they talk about Sunday school at that church — or I go to a different church.

People who love adult Sunday school will collect in churches that push adult Sunday school.

People who abhor adult Sunday school will collect in churches that never even use the phrase *adult Sunday school*.

This is not about Sunday school or any other ministry strategy.

This is about how God is arming you for the fight.

I hear people saying, "Oh man, you need to come to this Bible study, this conference, this church..."

I had somebody say to me a few weeks ago, "You gotta come to this church; it will really help you. I've just been going about six weeks and it has really helped me."

So I went — a couple Sunday mornings ago. You know what? I'll never go back there. It wasn't for me. It wasn't the style of ministry I respond to.

(It scared me, actually.)

God is not going to equip me in THAT way for MY battles. I can't wear that kind of armor. I'm not used to it.

I appreciated my friend thinking of me, and hey, maybe this church is helping my friend. But it's a leap from "This has really helped me" to "This will really help YOU."

* * *

41 Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David.

42 He looked David over and saw that he was only a boy, ruddy and handsome, and he despised him.

43 He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

44 "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

45 David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

46 This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

47 All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

David understood another principle of battle preparation:

God arms me for the battle I will face, but the battle itself is his, not mine.

He controls the timing of my battles, the composition of my battles, the opponents in

my battles.

Goliath thinks HE's in control. He's fixated on David's armor, or lack thereof, and David's weapons, or lack thereof: "You come at me with sticks?" he says.

Goliath thinks that if he can properly assess the opponent, he can assure himself of the victory.

"I'll give your flesh to the animals." End of story. The Goliath Story. It's all about me, Goliath.

But David understands how out of control Goliath is, and in fact, how out of control he himself is.

He says to Goliath, "I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty."

"In the name of" means "in the authority of."

I make my living as a writer for a company owned by a man named Dale. Rebecca works for them too.

If I call Rebecca and I say, "Hey, Dale wants you to take the rest of the week off," Rebecca will say — well, actually, she'll know I'm pulling her leg.

But if she does it — if she actually takes the rest of the week off — and Dale needs Rebecca for some project and she's not available, what's going to happen?

Rebecca will rat on me, there is no question. She will say, "Doug said you wanted me to take the rest of the week off!"

And I will be in trouble.

I spoke in Dale's name. I spoke in Dale's authority.

David was armed on the basis of how God had prepared him, but David knew his role.

The slingshot and the pebbles weren't going to win this fight, any more than Saul's bronze helmet and sword would have won it.

God was going to win this fight, using David as his envoy, his representative.

Even though this is a high-tension confrontation, David is very careful about his wording:

He says "The LORD will hand you over."

And why? So the world will know there's a shepherd boy coming on strong, wowing the crowds?

Nope. So "the whole world will know that there is a God," he says in verse 46.

"HE will give all of you into our hands," he says in verse 47.

When I'm facing a difficult situation, if I'm really honest with you, I generally want God to help me so I don't look stupid. So I don't seem weak. So I don't come off as some flake.

In fact, in my heart of hearts, I would really like God to just make the difficult situation evaporate somehow, so I don't find myself talking about it with a non-Christian friend and get into a corner where I kind of have to say "I'm trusting God for this," and coming off like some religious fanatic.

In any case, what I really want is for the battle to be won for my sake. On my own terms. To put it in biblical terminology, I want the battle to be won for my own "glory."

But God doesn't share that priority. He knows the truth about me: I'm not really the

power player in this scenario. If a victory is scored and I get credit for it, that won't really be the truth. Because I will not have been the guy who scored it. David understood this. He wrote in **Psalm 18:32 It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.**

His son Solomon would understand it later. He wrote in **Psalm 127:1 Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain....**

Paul wrote to his friends at Corinth: **2 Corinthians 1:**

21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

He said to his friends at Philippi:

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

God doesn't really need me to give him the glory — but the fact is, giving him the glory is truthful.

He's the one who deserves the attention. He's the one who deserves the applause. Because the battle is his.

This is why we urge ourselves around here to talk about what God's doing in our lives. Get comfortable giving God credit. Does it feel weird? Haven't done it enough then! It's not just some kind of cliché to say "Praise God." It's good, practical advice. David had this habit.

"Congratulations!" they would say to him; but he would respond, "God did it."

"Thank you!" they would say to him; but he would respond, "Thank God."

He kept in focus whose battle it was. He might be the guy in the armor, but God was the guy doing the fighting — and the winning.

* * *

48 As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him.

This is the key for me.

When I am properly dressed, properly armed, properly prepared for the fight — and when I have an accurate perspective on whose battle it is — then I will have the peace and confidence to run TOWARD the conflict.

Now what does this really mean? Do I go looking for trouble? No, that's not what this means.

To me, personally, in my own actual day-to-day life, I've found it to mean that when trouble comes my way, I will deal with it. I won't agonize over it a long time. If somehow a conflict develops between me and another person — I can't imagine how in the world such a thing could happen, but occasionally it does — I will pursue dialogue, I will pursue the preservation of that relationship, I will take the risk and go there.

Not necessarily instantly, but pretty soon.

I may take a little time, pick up some smooth stones for my slingshot, whatever ... but pretty soon I'll be initiating contact:

"Hey, this feels uncomfortable. Can we talk about it? What's going on here? Let's have a conversation about this and get on the same page. Let's make sure this

doesn't get out of hand. I don't want to lose you."
 If I can't deal with the thought of that kind of confrontation, what's wrong? Is that other person just too mean, too impossible, too dangerous, too irrational? Goliath was all those things, and David still "ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him."

But a lot of times, I won't go there. I won't run quickly toward the battle line. I won't address a conflict with someone.

Why not?

Bunch of reasons. Maybe you've experienced something like this yourself.

Usually, when I won't address a conflict, the honest deep-down truth is, I don't trust God.

I don't really believe he told the truth when he promised to fully and properly equip me for exactly the battles I would encounter.

I don't really believe he's made me ready.

I don't believe in his power and provision.

OR, in a lot of cases, I am not really gunning for God to win the battle: I want to win myself.

I want to come out looking good.

I want to defend my own honor, my own reputation, my own position.

I want to come out of this with people saying "Doug was right" more than I want to come out of this with the kind of victory that God has in mind.

Because what if God doesn't have in mind the kind of victory that will make me look good?

Or what if, when I enter into that difficult dialogue, I'm confronted with the fact that I had a part in creating it? Horrors!

When I am more concerned with my own glory than I am with God's glory, I'm not acknowledging his sovereignty, his kingship. He's not really my king.

In **2 Corinthians 3:5**, the apostle Paul says: **Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.**

* * *

There's another way this manifests itself in my life; maybe you'll recognize it from your own life too.

When David rushed toward Goliath, he was making himself vulnerable.

He was exposing himself to the possibility of injury.

But he trusted that God had fully and properly equipped him up to this point for the battle he was about to encounter, and he trusted that it wasn't really his battle, it was God's.

In the same way, ***if I truly trust God*** in these ways, then I will be able to say to you, "I am struggling with such-and-such an aspect of my walk with God."

I can make myself vulnerable; I can be strong in revealing my weakness.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

- 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.**
- 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are,**
- 29 so that no one may boast before him.**
- 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.**
- 31 Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”**

I don't have to hide my failures — because I believe God has perfectly prepared me for this moment, and I am just his guy anyway; it's not my fight, I'm just doing my best to represent him.

Trusting God isn't just a warm, fuzzy religious phrase; it's an actual way of thinking, and it actually changes the way I talk. The way I interact with you. The way I reveal myself.

In fact, this represents the greatest single difference in my marriage today, after 16 years, from the way it was in the first 10 years.

For years I thought the way to succeed in a relationship was to act like everything was okay, to pretend that everything was okay.

And finally, after about 10 years of that, inevitably my frustration boiled over — and Kristina's response, when I finally told her about the stuff I was struggling with, was very loving and supportive.

I realized that I could have told the truth, I could have revealed myself, for 10 years — God had a support system in place for me all that time, but I didn't really trust him — so all that time, I had failed to experience the benefits of vulnerability.

* * *

Well, let's see what happens to David and Goliath:

- 49 Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.**
- 50 So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.**
- 51 David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the scabbard. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran.**

Here's another reason to trust God:

The opposition I thought I was going to encounter may evaporate!

If I don't trust God — if I equip myself — I'll put on armor for the fight I THINK I'm going to have.

But here's the way life goes: the problem I thought I was going to have, by the time I get there, doesn't materialize.

Goliath and the Philistines, David's enemies, expected a different scenario. Saul and the Israelites, David's friends, expected a different scenario.

I am going to have different challenges than either my friends OR my enemies expect me to have.

Only God knows the challenges I will actually encounter, and he will prepare me for THOSE challenges, not the imagined ones.

God prepared David in the fields, in the junk job. If he had made David a soldier, the way Saul or Goliath would have engineered his life, David would have gone out there with a sword and a shield and gotten hacked to pieces by the giant!

52 Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron.

53 When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp.

When I am properly dressed, armed, and engaged in the fight, I will be able to help the people around me to advance in their own journeys.

Trusting God to equip me is going to help me love others, one of the two most important things that Jesus calls us to spend our lives doing.

Now it's important to note that David didn't help them by saying "Throw down your swords!"

He didn't say "Arm yourself the way I armed myself! Dress like I dress!"

It's a natural instinct, after a big victory, to say "Look everybody! I've got the killer combination here! Do what I did!"

Years ago, a group of people got together and sang some worship songs and prayed some prayers, and God moved powerfully in their lives — so those people kept getting together and singing the same kinds of worship songs and praying the same prayers, and promoting their approach.

"Look everybody! We've got the killer combination here! Do what we do!"

Another group of people got together and had a totally different kind of routine, and God moved powerfully in their lives — so they kept getting together and doing their routine, and promoting their approach.

"Look everybody! We've got the killer combination here! Do what we do!"

But God didn't move in these people's lives because they had somehow hit upon the perfect method of connecting with God or the perfect routine of worship, the perfect schedule of Bible reading or the perfect position for prayer or the perfect way of taking communion.

God moved in these people's lives because they genuinely longed to connect with God, and boldly pursued him, and God LOVES that.

The means of connecting with God is just a matter of what you're used to. What you're comfortable with. What works for you.

But longing to love God better — longing to love people more — that's what God responds to.

However we pursue God, let's do it boldly. Passionately. Believing God to open the door.