

February 10, 2019

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By now many of you have noticed that most of the time in church—except for *very* special occasions—I’m usually wearing hiking shoes under my robe. And it doesn’t actually have anything to do with the very real fact that I have *no* sense of style.

I’d like to tell you about the day I started wearing hiking shoes full-time.

Seven years ago, my friend Matt and I decided to spend our day off from work hiking Mount Washington, over in New Hampshire. But Matt and I didn’t want to hike just *any* trail up the mountain. Washington’s a really popular peak, and in the middle of summer—which it was at the time—a lot of people make it up there... and those who don’t *hike* it are either riding the Cog Railway or driving up the Auto Road to the Observatory at the summit. As someone who did a lot of hiking in New Hampshire in those days, I was still a little embarrassed that the only time I had visited the top of Washington was a birthday drive up the Auto Road years before. So this was my chance to do Washington right, and Matt suggested we tackle the Huntington Ravine trail.

That *particular* trail is widely considered the most challenging single trail in all of the White Mountains. I’m not saying this to *brag*... Matt and I were idiots. People get injured and stranded on that trail all the time, and there can be ice and melt covering the steepest stretches even in the middle of summer.

The journey *starts* at the Pinkham Notch Visitor’s center, a central point beside the highway with trailheads that lead all over the place, and there were plenty of other folks starting up the same

trail *we* were at first. See, in order to even *start* Huntington Ravine, you have to make the first leg up the more popular *Tuckerman* Ravine trail.

After about a mile trek winding uphill through the woods, there's a fork in the path. Where everyone else we could see ahead of us turned left, Matt and I instead turned right. Which is what we were supposed to do... but we didn't see a single other person from that point on, for the entire length of the ascent.

It's an incredible hike, and well worth the reputation. We clambered across a boulder field, squeezing through crevices and leaping from rock to rock, until finally we reached what they call in the biz the "headwall."

The "trail" disappeared at this point, and all we had to go on was the occasional arrow painted on the bare stone face. From the bottom of the ravine, it looked like pretty much a sheer vertical incline... and from halfway up it didn't look much different. We weaved back and forth across the rock face, often having to wedge our hands into cracks to get enough leverage to move forward. We were forced to put all our trust in the grip on our hiking shoes, and there were some moments where it was only two inches of rubber keeping me from a long fall and an equally long red smear on the side of the mountain.

With a good pair of hiking shoes planted on the rock, it almost feels like you're defying physics ... you throw your weight forward, both hands reaching into the empty air, hoping your momentum brings you *forward*... before gravity pulls your feet *downward*.

Meanwhile the sun was beating down, without a hint of breeze, and we were *cooking*. Backpack-strap armpit-chafing and everything.

About two-thirds of the way up we encountered the first bit of water, running down from the last of the melting ice leftover from winter. It wasn't like *rivers* or anything, but definitely distinct streams crossing over the arrows we were supposed to follow. A couple of the patches were *just* narrow enough to reach over and plant a foot on the other side, but I remember two stretches of slick rock that were just a *little* too wide for that.

Things got *real* Spider-Man at that point. Any little bit of purchase we could find we clung to with boot and finger and butt and forehead, *inching* our way across the slippery stone. We said a lot of *prayers* in a *very* short period of time that day.

And we didn't fall once. Nothing more than a couple of close calls, anyway. We were actually surprised with how much steady progress we were making... and finally we reached the home stretch. One last clamber and we were there, the open field that covers the area around the summit.

Immediately we realized what the sheer rock face above us had been hiding this whole time, as we entered into the sudden twilight of heavy cloud cover. We were hit in the face with sixty-mile an hour winds, and *all* our sweat froze. We quickly threw on the sweatshirts and jackets we had long since stuffed in our packs, and pushed our way up the ridge to the observatory in the distance.

At last we made it to the top. We cheered, we breathed, we took a picture at the sign that marked the peak of Mount Washington, and finally paused for a minute to rest and enjoy our surroundings.

And despite the weather, there were *so many people* there! People in shorts and t-shirts, people wearing sandals and walking little dogs... Kids with handheld video games and grandparents with canes. As we sat there, trying hard not to pass out from all the *breathing* we were doing, Matt and I could see all the people who had *driven* up Mount Washington on the Auto Road.

And oh did we *despise* them. I had *never* judged anyone as much as I did in that moment, full of the thrill of victory and the desperate need of something to eat. It felt so good to conquer something so difficult, such a test of effort... and then to see *all those* people who had *sat* in climate controlled cars for half an hour to see the same sights *we* had *earned*.

I can't speak for Matt, but *oh* the sense of *superiority* I had in that moment. These people didn't *deserve* the top of Mount Washington. *They* took the *lazy* way up, and they couldn't possibly be *appreciating* it the same way *we* were.

(I... seemed to have... completely *forgotten* at that point that *I* had been one of those "lazy" Auto Roaders just a couple years *earlier*.)

What I was doing in that moment is exactly what Jesus Christ warned us *not* to do, in one of his greatest speeches, the Sermon on the Mount. We heard it read a few minutes ago from Matthew 7: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

The ancient word we translate in English as "judge" originally came packaged with a negative connotation. It was closer to "condemn" than anything else. Because Christ doesn't ask *unreasonable* things of us. He asks difficult things sure, even impossible things, but they're never unreasonable. Every time we *look* at a person, we judge them. We form opinions about them. We make qualitative judgments. It would be unwise *not* to. Is this person *safe* to be around? Should I *follow* this person's example? ...Does this person play a *fine* organ?

The kind of judgments Christ *warns* us against are the ones we have no *business* making. The ones only God can make. *Condemning* someone... whether it's for something we see, something

they've done, something they *haven't* done... or if we're doing the kind of thing *I* was on the top of Mount Washington that day: thinking someone is *undeserving*... that they don't *belong*. The kind of judgment that says "you don't *deserve* God's blessing. I mean look at you. Look at what you've done. Look at what you *think*."

It's not our business to judge someone in that way. We don't know them, not really, and we don't know the mind of *God*. And when we condemn someone, God judges *us* for the judgments we've made.

Now it's not *easy* to avoid doing that. Even when we know it's wrong. We see people on the street, we deal with people on the phone and at work... we turn on the *news* for more than a few seconds... we judge people negatively, without even thinking about it.

But that's what this whole section of the Sermon of the Mount is about: the way God wants us to live our lives, even though it's hard! That's what ties each of the things we heard in our Scripture reading today together.

They say nothing worth doing ever comes easy. Matt and I certainly believed that, or we would have taken a much *safer* trail up Washington. And I think that's the through-line that Jesus had running under each of those statements we heard in the Sermon on the Mount.

God's blessing comes easy, but being a Christian should be hard.

I'm gonna say that again. "God's blessing comes easy... but being a Christian should be *hard*."

We hear it first at the beginning of chapter seven: don't judge others negatively; it is not for you to condemn another. No matter how strong that instinct is, we are called to *fight* that instinct, to exercise and *exorcise* it, so that when we look *at* someone—anyone—we don't look *down* on them.

Jesus then mentions an instinct that comes from a *good* place: the instinct to *fix* someone's flaws. Jesus says we that can't try to immediately *fix* what we think is someone else's *problem* until we've fixed our *own* issues. Why do you see the speck of wood caught in your neighbor's eye and try right away to pluck it out, all the while ignoring the whole *block* of wood jammed in your own eye?

We can't solve the failings of the world until we've gotten a handle on the failings of ourselves. And *that's* hard, too, right? It's so much easier to see and deal with other people's faults than it is to take a good long look in the mirror and deal with our own.

Then, even when mentioning something *easy* to do—prayer—God makes even *that* difficult. It's not *just* "Ask, and it will be given you;" it would be too easy if the sentence ended there. "*Search*, and you will find; *knock*, and the door will be opened for you." A relationship with God isn't just *asking* for what's needed, though that's a big part of it. We have to search, we have to *seek out* what God has in store for us. And even when we find that door, we still have to bruise our knuckles rapping away. God's blessing is for you, I say it all the time—God's blessings are for *all* of us... but like I said: "God's blessing comes easy, but being a Christian should be hard."

No single teaching of Jesus makes this more obvious than the next line. The one that boils down all that it means to live a holy life, refining it to its core teaching: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."

He didn't just say, "*Don't* do things to others that you wouldn't want them to do to you," like many other spiritual leaders had said before Him. That would be too easy. It's so easy *not* to harm someone. All you have to do is *not* do *anything* to them. But Jesus calls us to hike the harder trail. The trail fewer people take. The trail that's steeper, more dangerous, more grueling. To do things

for others that we *wish* would be done for *us*. To share the blessings of God with others, not just sometimes, but “in *everything*.”

Impossible? Maybe. Unreasonable? No.

Jesus marked the trail with all the signage we *need* to be able to follow Him. Don't condemn others. Don't try to *fix* others until you've fixed yourself. Trust God even when you don't have what it *takes* to reach someone else. Ask for God's blessing and then actively seek it out... and in *all* things do to others what you would have them do to you.

From the bottom that path looks really steep, full of twists and turns that don't seem to fit together quite right. Full of slippery rocks and long scary drops. But nothing worth doing ever comes easy. Find a friend, tie on a pair of your best hiking shoes, and trust that God will hold you up... because there is *no* feeling like making it over the top of that mountain.

God's blessing comes easy, but being a Christian should be hard.

May it be so. Amen.