

Title: Tangled Up

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Scripture: [Romans 12:9-13](#)

Text: [Mark 1:14-20](#)

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How many of you have troubled with things getting tangled up? It drives me nuts. I don't like it when ear buds or charging cords get tangled. Christmas lights are the worse. With the break in the weather, I finally took them down Saturday and put them carefully in the box. Next year, I know they will be tangled up. I've always thought they

move in the box and I found out it is true. A few years ago I discovered that graduate students in physics study this phenomenon and write papers like *The Biophysics of Knotting* and *Spontaneous knotting of agitated string*. People get doctorates studying things that frustrate me.

It's not just wires that get tangled up. Our lives are tangled up. Relationships are one of the big entanglements that we face in life and it starts early in childhood. "She likes me but I don't like her." "He's my best friend." "I don't play with him anymore." It is amazing how quickly this starts. It continues through teen years where we fall in and out of groups, some good some bad. There is a lot of energy and drama in those years.

None of that goes away in adult life, does it? We have a complex network of friends and family that are woven together. "My brother-in-law doesn't like my wife and she doesn't like him. But we've been entwined and have been for 25 years." "I've been best friends since college, like we are joined at the hip." "My mother won't let go; I'm fifty years old and I'm still tangled up with what my mother wants me to be." Just like wires, there people with advanced degrees, therapists and psychiatrists, who study how tangled up we get.

You have those entanglements of family and friends. But you've also got all those other relationships that are complex too. If you work, you're knotted up with your boss and other employees. There are a host of people networked around where you live, from your neighbors to the business that serve you. Add to this the social network of media that creates connections all over the world. If you were to do a graph of all of the strings that are

attached to you, you'd have to admit that your social network is a messy picture. You are all tangled up.

What would make you drop everything and pursue an entirely new life? A job offer? A marriage proposal? What would prompt you to take off from everything you know for something entirely different? Could you even do it? That's what Jesus asked his first disciples to do, the picture we have today about the demand to follow Jesus.

What is remarkable about the movement of Jesus and the character of his first followers is this. "They left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1: 18b) Artists throughout the ages have depicted this literally, as dropping the tools of their trade and moving forward. But life, even in the first century, wasn't that simple. While it wasn't as complex as our lives, they too had many relationships and responsibilities that entangled them. It might be better to think of them dropping networks, not just nets. Why do that? Why did they drop everything? Because of Jesus' offer.

Jesus says: "Listen up. Now's the time. "...the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1: 15) Jesus offers them the kingdom. Just what does that offer look like? Is it an event to come in some future time or something right now?

Most think the kingdom is an event in the future, an apocalyptic moment when Jesus returns and establishes his kingdom. But Jesus wasn't just talking about something in the future. He was speaking about something right now, something that we can and should participate in today, not tomorrow. This perspective makes the next part of the story come alive in a way that might help you answer that question posed early, "What would make you drop everything and pursue a new life?" Mark tells it in very simple way.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea. "And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1: 17-18) No questions asked. Jesus didn't say, "I'll give you a bigger salary." He didn't say, "I'll make you famous." He simply said, "Follow me." Then he went down the shoreline a little bit more and he saw two others who were brothers, James and John. They were in their boat mending their nets, and he said to them the same thing: "Follow me." And immediately, no questions asked, they left their nets and followed him.

Why would they do that? For centuries, people have puzzled about it. Many think that they must have encountered Jesus prior to his invitation to follow

me. If we take last week's story from the gospel of John, Andrew and Peter were first invited to "Come and See." Maybe that's why they just dropped everything. They were already sold on Jesus.

Whatever the reason, it's an amazing story and it becomes the paradigm for following. Jesus' invitation was so compelling that they dropped their nets, got rid of the things that had them tethered down and tangled up and followed. They understood that Jesus was asking for an "all in" commitment. And Jesus says there is a reward for this kind of following. They will be "given the secret of the kingdom of God..." (Mark 4: 11a)

And just what was that secret? It is the secret of God's redeeming love and grace. Jesus came to offer this and in following him, you get tangled up in a new way. Your heart is fettered. You are bound up with streams of mercies that never cease. That's the kingdom offer that Jesus makes but he wants full commitment. "Drop your nets and follow."

How did they do with following? We have a picture of this and it is pretty incredible. For most of three years, they followed. But there were times when those nets tripped them up, times when they stumbled and were tempted to grab hold of an old way of living. Sometimes it was struggling with Jesus teaching and their failure to understand. Sometimes, they wanted to write the future of Jesus life based upon their assumptions of his kingdom, rather than his mission. At the end, it was running away and denying Jesus, letting him die alone on the cross. Even after Jesus resurrection, they go back to the nets. They go fishing. They were prone to wander and leave the One they loved.

They aren't the only ones. In many ways, it is the picture that we have of the early church. At times their commitment is remarkable and leads to incredible growth. At other times, they were so tied down and tangled up with an old way of living that the quality and character of their life was just a messy picture. Almost every letter in the New Testament addresses conflicts with the commitment that Jesus asks us to make and their willingness to be all in. Paul even warns against it when describing discipleship in the book of Romans. He says, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." (Then he adds,) "Do not lag in zeal." (Romans 12: 9-11a) The word lag in Greek is "Kathystérisi" and it could be translated, lazy. Don't get lazy in following Jesus. Why add this to the description of being a follower? Clearly there was a problem with commitment. Some were prone to wander, to be pulled back and get tangled up with old ways of living, to wander away from God.

Here's my hunch. You know those feelings too because, you are prone to wander, to get tangled up in relationships, to lag in zeal and get lazy in following Jesus. I know it because I know those feelings. And I know it because I know what it looks like around here and around the church in America. Maybe you know the research that is out about following Jesus in America. It not encouraging. On any given weekend, only 20% of Christians in America are in worship. You may know this because you know some of your neighbors who are Christian and aren't in worship. You may know it because well, you aren't in worship as much as you once were. The average Joe or Jane Attender give an average give of 1.7 hours a month to their church community, not just in worship but everything. Attendance and participation in bible study and service projects has been on a 40-year decline but 1.7 hours a month is the lowest of the low. There have been lots of studies on what is causing this.¹

One is a shift in our thinking. We've moved from the age of duty -- where you do things because you know you're supposed to -- to the age of discretion -- where we are nearly overwhelmed with choices about how to spend your time. To boil it down to just one sentence: participating in church isn't a cultural given anymore and there are a whole lot more options which we've got ourselves all tangled up in. So less and less of the 168 hours we each have to spend during a week is set aside for kingdom work. It's led to this huge discrepancy between what we see in the gospel and how we live out our lives. Dropping their nets, getting rid of things that entangled them and following Jesus full-time is dramatically different than investing only 1.7 hours a month.

Of course, worship attendance and participation at church isn't the sole criteria for faithful following. But without the one, it is hard to shape the other. Without consistent participation with a group of fellow Christians, in worship, in study, in prayer and service, the flavor and character of your Christian life will slowly change. It doesn't happen overnight. It happens a little bit at a time, as we lag in zeal, as get lazy in following Jesus. We are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love.

You know those feelings, don't you? I feel it. Maybe you even know where that lines comes from. It is from a beautiful hymn that you may know. *Come though Fount of Every Blessings*. Do you know it?

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

You know it, don't you? Then you will recall that in the last stanza of the hymn, there are two lines which read. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love." They are powerful lines about our nature but even more powerful if you know the back story to this hymn.

It was written by Robert Robinson during the 18th century. He had a tough childhood with the death of a father and no one to guide him in his teen years. He fell in with a gang and got tangled up in vandalism, violence and alcohol. One day he and his gang went to heckle the famous Methodist pastor George Whitfield who was preaching a revival. But instead, the Spirit of God convicted him and right then and there. He dropped his entangled life with the gang, accepted Jesus and became a minister. Several years later, at the age of 22, Robinson wrote *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessings*.

He was successful for a while but unfortunately, the words that he wrote in that hymn weren't just beautiful, they were prophetic. As he grew older, he became lazy about his relationship with God and eventually found himself living out those lines. He wandered completely away and left the God he loved.

But there is a famous story about how his life ended. After many years of living with his back turned to God, he found himself traveling in a stage coach to a destination across England. There was one other passenger, a woman who Robinson didn't know, and who, didn't know Robinson.

During this journey, she was reading a hymnal for devotional purposes, something people did back then, and she came to "Come thou Fount of Every Blessing", the very hymn that Robinson wrote years earlier. When she got through reading it, she turns the hymnal around and offered it to Robinson saying, "I absolutely love this hymn and you need to read it because I know you would love it too."

Not knowing what she was reading, he reluctantly took the hymnal and read the hymn that he had written years earlier. With tears in his eyes, he turned the hymnal back around it and gives it back to her saying, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who composed that hymn, many years ago. And I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I then had!" The woman allows his words to sink in and then, in response, she gently replied, "Sir, the 'streams of mercy' are still flowing."²

In the power of that moment, Robinson lived out fully that last stanza, letting his heart get tangled up with God again.

Let that goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love

Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above

Out of that story and the story of the disciple's invitation to follow Jesus, there is a question. It is your question, my question, our question. What does following Jesus look like for me? Am I truly invested in living for Jesus, in participate in his kingdom today and tomorrow? If not, what's got me tangled up? What are the nets in my life that are holding me back?

Truly committed followers of Jesus drop some of the nets that entangled them so that they can follow Jesus in kingdom living. When you do, God will bind your wandering heart with streams of mercies that never cease.

¹ <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>

² <https://wordwisehymns.com/2010/06/09/today-in-1790-robert-robinson-died/>