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Lessons in Luke: No More Escalator Theology

Luke 6:17-19

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I have a confession to make. And I think this is a good time and a good place to do this. There's this ancient saying that says that "confession is good for the soul." Confession is also a sign of courage and strength. So, I want to start with my confession, if you're ready for it. You ready? Ever since I was a kid, I've been absolutely fascinated with going up the down escalator. There it's out. I already feel better. Honestly, I don't know where this desire to scramble up the down escalator came from, but it's in me. I'm not generally wired to be a rule breaker and while I do love a challenge and an adventure, I don't particularly have a hankering to do things that are dangerous. And from every possible angle, going up the down escalator is dangerous. It's also time consuming. It's what "going nowhere in a hurry" looks like. It just doesn't really get you anywhere other than on someone else's phone and then onto the internet so that people can have a really good laugh. Kind of like the good laugh that at least 1.8 million people have had at the expense of a couple of older gentlemen who were just trying to get free hamburgers at a new restaurant at the grand opening of a new mall.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PT4fATKBkRI>
[00:18 – 01:00].

Seriously. I'm not sure any hamburger is worth that! Even with special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a toasted brioche bun.

But what's really fascinating about this whole idea of trying to get up the down escalator is that that's exactly how so many people understand religion and spirituality in the 21st century. Looking for God, trying to get close enough to hear, see, or even touch Jesus – however we might want to understand that – is for so many people like trying to get up the down escalator. It can be frustrating, tiring, even humiliating, and for some, impossible. That has been my experience.

As much as I appreciate the faith formation that I

received growing up, that's exactly how I was taught to think about God. I was taught from the get-go that God is "up there" and that we are "down here." So, from the very beginning, the starting point is a gap, a divide, a disconnect from God that needs to be fixed. I was taught, and maybe you were too, that nearness to God was up to us, no pun intended. The daily task at hand, the ongoing spiritual journey was about figuring out how to bridge that gap, how to cross that divide, how to "get up there" to find God. But, friends, when we do that, the result is that we spend so much time trying to get ourselves to God, to find God "up there," that we miss the really important memo that God's "Big Leap" in Jesus was to come to us! The Good News of God's "Big Leap" in Jesus shows us that God is constantly finding us, constantly coming after us. If there's a gap, God is bridging it. If there's a divide, God is crossing it. If there's an "up there," God is already down here. So the spiritual journey is not about us climbing and performing, it's not about working hard, always wondering if we've gotten it right or done enough to get to God. I mean, how would you ever really know? The spiritual journey is about discovering that following Jesus – knowing, hearing, seeing Jesus – is really about hearing God say to us, "Be still, I am here with you, right here, right now."

Our worship series is taking us through the gospel of Luke which gives us a beautiful picture of Jesus as the one who embraces the "least" and actively seeks out those who are drifting, wandering, lost and trying to make it up the down escalator. We know from history that Luke was a doctor which explains why he included over a dozen healing stories in his narrative of Jesus' life. In Luke 6:17-19 we have a vivid picture of Jesus' response to what I call "escalator theology." In this story Jesus walks right into a vast crowd of people who simply want to see him, hear him, and experience the power of his healing touch in their lives. We can probably relate to that. As I read this passage, I'd like to ask you to close your eyes and let your imagination bring you into this story. As you'll see in a moment, you're far more a part of it than you may know.

¹⁷ When [Jesus and his disciples] came down from the mountain, the disciples stood with Jesus on a large, level area, surrounded by many of his followers and by the crowds. There were people from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and from as far north as the seacoasts of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear [Jesus]

and to be healed of their diseases; and those troubled by evil spirits were healed. ¹⁹ *Everyone tried to touch him, because healing power went out from him, and he healed everyone.*

This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Friends, this is a story about the nearness of God. It's a story about Jesus meeting people right where they are; people who want to hear him, touch him, to be healed by him. And while it certainly is a 2,000 year old story, it's also a story that's powerfully familiar to us today. How often have you gone to some great lengths to get closer to God? How many times have you just wished you could see Jesus? How often have you or someone you know cried out for healing and thought, "You know, if I could just touch him, I'd be okay"? How often does all of this seem like we're trying to get up the down escalator?

This story is about the nearness of Jesus. It's a story about Jesus finding us, coming to us. As I read the passage, how did you see the place where they were gathered? In your imagination what did that place look like? Luke described it as a "large, level area," like a big, wide open field. This may seem like an insignificant geographical detail. But it isn't. Luke wants us to know that far from being removed, remote and inaccessible, somewhere high up on a mountain someplace, Jesus wants to be on the level with these people. There are so many places in the Bible where a hill or a mountain – some elevated spot – is the place where significant events take place that reveal the kingdom of God. But not here. Here, in Luke's Gospel, the point where heaven and earth come together, the place where the Kingdom of God is revealed for those who are searching for something more, is a large, level area. Jesus is on the level with them. Jesus wants to speak plainly to them. He wants to be very clear that the spiritual life isn't about climbing, trying to get up a cosmic escalator. So, for every one of us who's ever struggled spiritually, feeling like the search for peace and contentment, trying to feel closer to God or trying to understand Jesus is like trying to get up the down escalator, this is a story for us.

And this is a story for me. I can tell you the exact moment when I just had to stop struggling and let Jesus meet me on the level place. Many of you know that the Fall of 2016 was a significant time of change and transition in my life. At the end of August I had just finished hiking 150 miles of the Superior Hiking Trail. That was amazing. A week later, on September

7th, Nancy Lee and I celebrated our son's birthday in downtown Minneapolis. That was fabulous. But then on the drive home that night, (Nancy Lee and I had driven separately) I was hit by a drunk driver. The impact was so forceful that it knocked my truck over onto the driver's side, sending it skidding along the freeway at about 50 mph. I was physically unhurt and able to walk away from that. But that's when things started to get a little fuzzy around the edges. Then, one month later, on October 7th, my dad came to the end of his long and amazing life. And that's when I was done. I finally got to the point where I was unable to string a sentence together and, if you know me at all, that's pretty serious. I had come to the end of my ability to function normally. Nothing that I was doing to get all those pieces back in the right places was working. That's when I walked into Pastor Jeff's office and told him I didn't think he was getting his money's worth from me. I didn't quite know what I was doing or where I was going. It felt a lot like taking one step forward, then two steps backward. I felt like I was trying to get up the down escalator; I was going nowhere in a hurry. That's when Jeff put his hands on my shoulders, looked me right in the eyes and said, "You are right where you need to be," which, in that moment seemed rather counter-intuitive. But, friends, that's the way God works. We don't go looking for God. God comes looking for us. So a couple of days later I did the most courageous thing I've ever done. I asked for some help. I called a counselor, I made an appointment, I kept the appointment and I showed up. And it was in that experience that I rediscovered Jesus saying to me, "Welcome to level ground. No more escalator. This is where you discover that when you come to the end of yourself, you've come to the beginning of me," Jesus said. It was in that moment when I got off the escalator and stopped striving to figure it all out that I found a large, level area for me to be vulnerable and honest. I began to hear and see Jesus more plainly and find healing for my broken spirit.

My guess is that you've got your own version of that story. Maybe your life has gone sideways, you felt like you're in a skid and you've been trying your hardest to figure it all out, but you can't. Maybe something, or someone important to you no longer exists the way it once did and you're searching for closure or meaning, or both, but nothing is working. Maybe you're one of the many, many people who was taught that your spiritual life is kind of a like a cosmic hide-and-seek looking for God game that begins with you trying to

scramble up the down escalator, but it feels like you're going nowhere in a hurry. I'm here today to help you get off that escalator and on to the "large, level area" where together we can hear Jesus, and can see Jesus, and experience the healing of Jesus like we've never experienced before. And one of the most effective tools that I've discovered to help us do that is by using Lectio 365.

Lectio 365 is a free online resource and digital app that's designed to help us connect with scripture in a way that will shape our lives and inspire prayer. Whether you've been reading the Bible and praying since you were two, or you can't find the Gospel of Luke without looking at the Table of Contents, Lectio 365 is a powerful way to get off the escalator and have Jesus meet us on level ground.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=502188610383625>

Lectio 365 is based on the acronym P.R.A.Y. and each brief (10 minute) daily meditation will coach you through four movements: PAUSING to be still, REJOICING with a Psalm and REFLECTING on scripture, ASKING God to help us, and YIELDING to God's direction in our lives each day, no matter what happens. Each week focuses on one of six practices that help us live like Jesus - prayer, mission, justice, creativity, hospitality, and learning.

With Lectio 365, you have the option of either reading it on your phone, tablet or computer at your own pace, or listening to the meditation being beautifully narrated for you as you close your eyes, lean back, and just let it wash over you. You can listen in your car, or while sitting on the couch, or in your favorite chair with a cup of coffee. You can listen on your own or with your small group and then talk through it, hearing from others what they experienced. Often times Nancy Lee and I will get to the end of the day and settle in together for this relevant, beautiful devotional.

How ever you use this resource, one thing is for sure: it will help you get off the spiritual escalator and on to the large, level area where you can see Jesus, hear Jesus, and find rest for your souls. So friends, I want to pray with you, and as I do I want to use some of the language of Lectio 365.

As we enter prayer now, we pause to be still; to breathe slowly; to re-center our scattered senses upon the presence of God. Father, help us to live this day to the full, being true to You, in every way. Thank you for calling us off the escalator onto the large, level

area where we can see you, hear you, and know you better, a place where you see us, hear us, and know us deeply. Jesus, help us to give ourselves away to others, being kind to everyone we meet. Give us grace to meet one another wherever we are on the journey of faith knowing that you meet us where we are. Spirit, breathe Your holy breath into us once again. Revive us, fill us with Your life and help us to reach out to others who long to hear You, and see You, and be healed by You. Help us to proclaim Christ in all that we do and all that we say. We pray all of this in the strong name of the risen Christ. And to that, all God's people say, Amen.