

Former heavyweight boxer James (Quick) Tillis is a cowboy from Oklahoma. Tillis fought out of Chicago in the early 1980s. A deeply religious man, Tillis is remembered as the first boxer ever to make Mike Tyson go the distance in the heavyweight division.

Tillis had his disappointments as a boxer, but evidently they didn't rob him of his sense of humor. He still remembers his first day in the Windy City after his arrival from Tulsa. "I got off the bus," he says, "with two cardboard suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, 'I'm going to conquer Chicago.' When I looked down . . . the suitcases were gone." (1)

What a way to begin a boxing career. But Tillis did not quit. He didn't accomplish all he set out to accomplish, but he was no quitter.

Some of the people who followed Jesus were disappointed. As we've noted before, they were expecting one kind of Messiah, but Jesus introduced them to a different kind of Messiah altogether. Let's think for a moment about the background of today's text.

A few weeks ago we dealt with the feeding of the 5,000. Actually 5,000 was the number of men who were fed. There were children and women who were there as well, bringing the number of persons that Jesus fed upwards of 10,000 people.

But how did Jesus have that many people following him in the first place? Well, he had been healing people like Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood. And he had been sending his disciples out with power and authority and they were casting out demons and healing the sick (Luke 9:1-6). And consequently his ministry was going viral, if you can say that about a movement that is being spread person-to-person no twitter or internet..

People were following him because he was meeting their needs, including the need to be fed. This made him so popular with the people that they wanted to make him king. This was not what Jesus was sent to do. He wanted to be King of their lives, not king of their country. That would have been a mistake. We see time and time again what happens when people take over countries in the name of religion. They are more apt to fulfill Satan's goals than God's goals. Again, Jesus wants to be King of our lives, not king of our country.

And so we come to our lesson for the day. The writer of the Gospel of John explains the situation like this: "From this time, many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Notice that it does not say that many in the crowd turned back or many that he fed turned back. We would expect that. Like many people today, there will always be people who church hop. They will keep shopping until they find a church that gives them exactly what they want.

No, we could understand it if John said that many of the 10,000 turned back, but what he says is, "From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." This means some of the church's [Knights, Lectors, EMHC Sunday School teachers, choir members and ushers] turned their backs on him. The ship was taking on water and in danger of sinking. At least, that is how it would look to the casual observer.

What it was, though, was a right-sizing of Jesus' followers. Sometimes in order to have a body that is moving in the right direction, you have to run a few people off. It's true!

We don't often admit that in church. But some people are actually a detriment to the kingdom of God. It is impossible for any church to move forward if the highest principle it has as an organization is to keep everyone happy.

There are some who try to control the church because they are the big donors. Others have a long time history in the parish. Others know the bishop. Still others are on the parish council and forget they are an advisory group. If they don't get their way, they threaten to leave. A good pastor shows them the door. A more charitable pastor (not me) asks them to pray about it.

but their stranglehold over the church was broken. And sometimes that has to happen for a church to move forward. We don't like to see anyone leave the church. Every believer is precious to God. But even Jesus couldn't keep everyone happy. He didn't try to. He wanted only those who were committed to the cause for which he was sent. When he started talking about the cost involved, his broken body and shed blood, and calling them to take up a cross, his words fell on unreceptive ears. But those who stayed with him, those who were committed to the end are still celebrated to this day. Without them there would be no church 2,100 years later.

It hurt Jesus to see many who been with him for much of his ministry turn their back on him. They had been with him when he healed the lame, gave sight to the blind. They were there when he fed the 10,000. Could they not see that he was the One who was to come? Even if he did not meet their expectations of what a Messiah ought to be, could they not see that he was the Savior of the world? Could they not see that there never had been another like him? But I've got to ask us another question: Can't we see who he is, as well?

Researchers tell us that, nationally, every week over 53,000 people leave the church never to return. (3) But even among those who remain, only about twenty per cent are really committed to their faith. Why is that? Is it that there are many casual worshippers who come a few times a year out of mere tradition and not because they really believe that Christ is the Savior of the world? Is that why there are so few who are willing to serve him?

Christ said, "For even the Son of Man, came not to be served but to serve others, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

An unknown writer quoted on the Internet tells of visiting a fast-growing church in Minnesota to learn from their staff. It was a privilege, he reports, to witness their passion for doing high quality ministry in Jesus' name. He left with some new insights and a renewed passion for the Gospel.

One of the phrases that he heard while he was there at that fast-growing church was, "We want our members to wear aprons, not bibs." That's an interesting phrase "aprons, not bibs." Here's what they meant: Bibs are for people who only want to be fed. Bibs are for those who are not yet ready or willing to feed themselves. Bibs are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. Bibs are for those who insist that the church exists for them and their needs. Bibs are for babes in the faith, those who haven't caught God's vision for the church, or those who are not yet of the faith. On the other hand, aprons are for those who have a heart to serve others in

Jesus' name. Aprons are for those who know that they are the church. Aprons are for those who don't mind getting their hands dirty. Aprons are for those who take the time daily to feed their spiritual hunger. Aprons are for those who are growing in faith, and hunger to help others grow.

Church growth consultant, Win Arn, interviewed thousands of Christians in America several years ago and asked them what they thought the church existed for. Eighty-eight percent said, "The church exists to serve my needs and the needs of my family." In other words, 88% of Christians in America are still wearing bibs. They believe that the church exists to serve them . . . not so they can serve the world.

On the night when he was betrayed, just hours before he was crucified, the very Son of God took off his outer garments, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples' feet. When he was done he said, "I have just given you an example to follow." In other words, Jesus called his disciples to wear aprons, not bibs. In Matthew, Jesus is recorded as saying, "For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many." He also said, "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it." (4)

Jesus calls us to wear aprons, not bibs. The people came to Jesus to be fed, but when he challenged them to feed others, they weren't interested.

It hurt Jesus to see many who been with him for much of his ministry turn their back on him. He turned to the twelve who were left and said rather sadly, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

And, of course, it was Simon Peter who answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." And that is why we linger here too. That is why so many of you have exchanged your bib for an apron; why you have decided that a casual involvement in the life of the church is not enough.

You are part of that inner circle who has come to believe and to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. There is no way to be casual about such knowledge. If Jesus is the Savior of the world, how can we possibly give anything but our best? If he is the Son of God, how can we not give him our all?

In the preface to her book, *Amazing Grace*, writer Kathleen Norris tells of an evening when she was making a presentation concerning her book. A woman in the audience asked her a painful question. "I don't mean to be offensive," she said, "but I just don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm."

Taken aback momentarily, Norris struggled to respond. She understood the question all too well, for she had, herself, been distanced from faith for many years. She knew what it was to struggle with the traditional language of faith. Suddenly she realized the troublesome word in the woman's question was the word "comfort." The questioner had asked her how she had found "such comfort in her religion."

Kathleen Norris answered that she didn't think it was comfort she was seeking or comfort she'd found. "Look," she said, as a rush of words came to her, "As far as I'm concerned, this religion has saved my life, my husband's life, and our marriage. So it's not comfort that I'm talking about, but salvation." (5)

I suspect that there are some of us who have grown all too comfortable in our faith. Even some of us who have been around the church for many years are still wearing bibs rather than aprons. Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Have you come to that knowledge? Do you know what Kathleen Norris meant when she said her faith had saved her life, her husband’s life, and their marriage? Is it that important in your life? Many who followed Jesus turned back. Only his most committed disciples remained. Are you part of that group?

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1. Today in the Word, September 10, 1992.
2. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1990), pp. 38-40.
3. Servant, Sum 1995. Cited in Current Thoughts & Trends, September 1995, p. 19.
4. Unknown author Cited at <http://www.mountainwings.com/past/11066.htm>.
5. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).