

A political ad has run recently that calls attention to the national debt. It begins with a picture of the White House and shows the color red spreading outward from there and covering everything from coast to coast. It closes with the size of the debt, \$15 trillion, and the name of the candidate making the dubious claim that he will do something decisive about it, if elected.

We know the debt is a problem. We know we don't want to be like Greece. We know we the people can't do much about it. In fact, our eyes glaze over at any number with twelve zeros after it. We can't relate. It's too theoretical. But you know what I can get worked up about? I'm paying 80 cents more per gallon of gas than I was two months ago. That's pain I can feel.

Today is Easter Sunday. The two men at Jesus' tomb said to the sorrowful women, **"Why do you look for the living among the dead He is not here; he has risen"** – Luke 24:5. Two and a half billion Christians confess, "I believe in Jesus Christ . . . The third day he rose again from the dead." Handel's *Messiah* says, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ will all be made alive."

We know that a man coming back from death to an indestructible life in the body could change everything. We know that believing that puts a person at odds with a secular world. But it happened so long ago, and in that sense it seems too theoretical. But you know what I can get worked up about? My faith in the risen Christ has given me strength to jettison the bad habits of a lifetime. That's power that I can feel.

The Apostle Paul put his finger on the issue: **I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection** – Philippians 3:10. Big things have to become personal in some way, if we are to take them seriously. I'd like to have a go at doing that today. Let's see if the big thing, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, can become personal.

To help that happen I have provided each of you with a personal guide. It's a kind of spiritual inventory that helps the resurrection be personal. Please open yours. It frames what we think about in two categories: searchers and followers. I believe one category or the other fits each of us. It breaks down those two categories into seven milestones on a person's spiritual journey. I want to say enough about each to help you identify where you are today, and to encourage you to go on to another milestone.

## Searchers

The first kind of searcher is "not interested." That sounds like a contradiction. How can a person be searching if he's not interested? That's easy. He's not searching for God, but he's searching for meaning in his life; and for many reasons he doesn't think that meaning can be found in God. The spiritual guide has six reasons why a person doesn't look to God for meaning in life. I'm sure there are others.

If you are "not interested," I'm glad you are here. You may have come as a favor to someone you care for, and when the last amen is said, you're out of here with no intention of coming back, unless you need to do someone another favor.

Of course, I hope you come back many times. However often that happens, you need to know that we don't coerce people here. We try to persuade but in a way that respects your freedom. It's a remarkably safe place for people who are "not interested."

I hope you will reach a new milestone in your spirituality today. I can't make that happen. But the power that brought Christ back to life is present and active, and it might move you from being "not interested" to "curiously seeking."

A second kind of searcher is “curiously seeking.” There’s a biblical event that illustrates this kind of searcher. The men who became the first leaders of the Church had to start somewhere. The Gospel of John tells how they got started. For example, Andrew went to his brother, Peter, and said, **“We have found the Messiah”** – John 1:41. Peter went with him and met Jesus for the first time.

Philip did the same thing with his friend, Nathaniel. He said, **“We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets spoke – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”** – John 1:45. It’s Nathaniel’s response that illustrates “curious seekers”. **“Nazareth! Can anything good from there?”** – John 1:46.

The “curiously seeking” have questions, and they can ask them with an edge in their voices. If you are “curiously seeking,” you may also have more curiosity about God than a sense of your need for God. That’s okay. You start somewhere.

You very likely have negative images of Christianity. I once shared a flight from Portland, OR down to San Francisco with an inquisitive guy, who wanted to know what I thought about being a pastor and how I was handling some flagrant sexual shenanigans of other pastors that the mass media reported at the time.

I finally said to him, “You must hate Jesus Christ.” He never broke stride. He said, “Jesus is great. It’s Christians I can’t stand.” Is that what you feel? Is that what makes you hesitate to go further, even though you are curious about Christ?

Well, how do you think I felt when that guy said that? It hurt. It frustrated me. I understood from the inside how he felt. I felt the same way. How could I make him understand that what he saw and reacted to was not the whole story? I can only say to you here, “It is not the whole story.”

But I also say to you, “It is part of the story, and I don’t deny it.” The Church is made up of terribly flawed people. That’s why we need Christ, His forgiveness, and His Church. We need someone patient enough to work with us for years to change our regrettable and offensive ways. God is patient like that. I am patient like that, as are many others in this congregation. Keep seeking, and moving toward the next milestone.

The third kind of searcher is “searching aggressively.” Another biblical event expresses what it means to be “searching aggressively”. A father brought his little boy to Jesus one time for healing. The child’s behavior could be self-destructive. He occasionally tried to throw himself into open fires or into the local river in what looked like suicide attempts. The father was desperate. You can feel his desperation when he said to Jesus, **“But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”** – Mark 9:22.

Jesus’ answer was a touch abrasive. **“If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes”** – Mark 9:23. That “searching aggressively” we are talking about shines in the father’s answer. **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief”** – Mark 9:24.

Those who are “searching aggressively” have an openness to God that the “not interested” or the “curiously seeking” do not have. They already vaguely believe in God. They’re like a person with bad eyesight, who can’t find his glasses. They see something, but the image is fuzzy. They need glasses that bring God into focus. If that’s where you are, I have high hopes for your faith. By the way, Jesus healed that little boy.

## Followers

The first kind of follower has made a “faith commitment” to Christ. I like the way the third bullet point on the spiritual guide puts it. People who have made a “faith

commitment” to Christ have “made a decision to turn their lives and wills over to the care and control of Jesus.”

That’s not always easy for the person who believes. C. S. Lewis, the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, describes his conversion from being an atheist to being a believer this way: “That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” (*Surprised by Joy*, 228-229)

Some people, Lewis among them, make a “faith commitment,” because the truth compels them to do so against their inclinations and wishes. Looking back on the forces that brought him to faith Lewis wrote: “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.” (*Ibid*)

Of course, some people, I among them, embraced my “faith commitment” with instant enthusiasm. Others make their way to faith with a significant experience here, a significant experience there, here a little, there a little; and the outcome is a deep and peaceful faith in Christ.

Any of you who are searchers today could reach this “faith commitment” milestone right here, right now. It would not surprise me if some of you had already done it. I tell you: God is here with us. The start of faith can happen in a nano-second. Don’t resist it, and don’t worry what to say. The words you say are secondary. Doubting Thomas’s words in the Bible are as good as any, when he said to Jesus, “**My Lord and my God!**” – John 20:28.

A second kind of follower begins “experiencing a new life.” The first bullet point here marks a decisive characteristic of this new milestone. Believers who are “experiencing new life” in Christ have “entered into a mentoring relationship with another follower.”

Mentoring can be formal or informal, in large groups, small groups, or one on one. You are blessed past telling, if you can find a godly man or woman and learn from that person everything they have to pass along to you.

The college guy who mentored me when my faith in Christ came alive gave me books to read, taught me to memorize scripture, prayed with me, to me to Christian events, and answered every question I could ask. I bless his memory to this day. Followers only grow with help.

A third kind of follower “is growing in community.” Here’s how the Bible puts it: **Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching** – Hebrews 10:24-25. I said earlier: “The church is made up of terribly flawed people. That’s why we need Christ and His forgiveness.” That’s also why we need other believers, who are patient with us and work with us for years to change our regrettable and offensive ways.

“In community” mentoring begins to pay off. You learn to speak the language of the faith. Your faith grows in understanding. Your faith expresses itself in love. The Church, warts and all, becomes your home. You love it and want to make it better.

The fourth kind of follower is one who is “living missionally.” Such people “crave intimacy with God through spiritual disciplines” such as prayer and meditation on scripture. They “share their faith effectively, mentor others spiritually, give generously, serve their communities, and understand the centrality of the gospel in their

lives.”

Something like that is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote: **We proclaim him (Christ), admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me – Colossians 1:28-29.**

### **When It's All Been Said and Done**

If I were your spiritual director, I would ask you where you place yourself in the categories of this spiritual guide. I'd ask you what your next step is going to be. But I can't be a spiritual director to 1500 people. I can be your pastor, and so I ask you, “Where do you place yourself in the categories of this spiritual guide? What will your next step be? Being intentional about that step is the antidote to spiritual stagnation.”

If you are what the guide calls a searcher, I can go one better with you. Our church offers a way of exploring Christianity. It is called the Alpha Course. It is a mix of video and discussion in a setting that allows people to ask any question they want. The course will talk about Christ and being a Christian in a way that just makes sense, even if you are “not interested” in Christ but are interested in a deeper meaning for your life.

If you want to know more about an Alpha Course, use the Connection Card to tell me. There's a box you can check. We'll provide you with helpful information.

The Alpha Course, which is used around the world, might be good for something else. Let's say you are not hostile to the Church. You might even think of this church as your church home. You don't come much. When you leave, you don't think about faith much until the next time you decide to come. There's nothing compelling and personal about faith in Christ.

Taking the Alpha Course would give you a great opportunity to decide if faith deserves to be more central in your experience than it is. Guys, did you ever date a girl who was a “cold fish?” Women, did you ever date a guy who seemed distant and disengaged? Why would God like that kind of faith any more than we liked those dates? The Alpha Course will help you fish or cut bait. Check the Alpha Course box on the card.

Now, let's go back to the big picture. Friendship with God is “the fulfillment of the transcendent dignity and calling of every human person.” (*First Things*, “Pornography and Acedia, April, 2012, 45) Jesus Christ has reestablished friendship with God. **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son – Romans 5:10.** The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has created a new community of faith, the Church, which has been restored to friendship with God. Your faith in Christ and your participation in the Church give you a share in that friendship. Growing friendship with God is the work of a lifetime. Friendship with God is the big story in which our little stories find transcendent meaning. The spiritual guide we have used today brings friendship with God up close and personal.

My Easter prayer for you is that you situate the story of your unique life inside that big story, which will someday be the whole world's story.