

Community 7-20-03

It always helps to review the ground we've covered before moving forward. We've been going through a series on finding God's purpose for our lives. We learned that it is not about me, and it's not about now, but it is all about the eternal glory of God. He is worthy of our worship, and when we worship Him with our all, we are living our key purpose.

We are not only called to believe but also to belong. As we enter into the purpose of glorifying God, we find that we must do so together with other believers. The Bible calls us a family, a flock, a body, and a bride. We are supposed to express together the very life of Jesus Christ in our love for one another. As people see the diverse group of people that have joined around the common belief in the salvation obtained for us by Christ on the cross, they have to acknowledge that it is something greater than us at work. We can even meet together with other churches as we did two weeks ago and in the diversity of style, ages, and even some differences in belief, yet we have a unity that makes the world marvel.

We are not always so spiritual, and we often fail in this particular purpose of God for our lives. When personal preferences are insisted on, the wonderful unity of the Spirit breaks down because we enter into our own spirit. One of our goals then is to stay focused on Christ and His desire for us to be one. We must live in His preferences.

"Dallas Willard has said, 'The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.'" Richard Foster follows that statement by saying, "Such a community would live under the immediate and total rulership of the Holy Spirit. They would be a people blinded to all other loyalties by the splendor of God, a compassionate community embodying the law of love seen in Jesus Christ. They would be an obedient army of the Lamb of God living under the spiritual disciplines, a community in the process of total transformation from the inside out, a people determined to live out the demands of the gospel in a secular world. They would be tenderly aggressive, meekly powerful, suffering and overcoming. Such a community, cast in a rare and apostolic mold, would constitute a new gathering of the people of God. May almighty God gather such a people in our day."¹

God has always been seeking a family like that. From Adam to Abraham, Jacob to the nation of Israel, from the remnant, to the early church, to today, God has been seeking a family. The miraculous work of Jesus on the cross made it possible for us to be sons and daughters of God, but how do we get to the place where we act like it, so that others can see Jesus?

Commented [notes1]: Celebration of Discipline, end of chapter 12 by Richard J. Foster

First and foremost Jesus must be the head of the body, the Father of the family, the husband of the bride, the Shepherd of the flock. ¹⁷*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* ¹⁸*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.* ¹⁹*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,* -Colossians 1:17-19 (NIV) He is the head of the body!

God's plan is for Jesus to be the head of the church. When man becomes supreme, the church has problems. When the hand tells the body that it will be giving directions, we get in trouble. The hand has then lost connection with the head. ¹⁸*Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.* ¹⁹*He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.* -Colossians 2:18-19 (NIV)

The head must be supreme to have real order and spiritual growth. That means we must all genuinely look to Jesus and seek His guidance. We can't just give Him lip service, asking Him to bless our plans and ideas. We need to let Him actually lead us. We all have a good idea now and then, but which way is the head directing us to go? To be a church in wonderful unity, we must all look to the head. When we all look to Jesus, we all will be led in the same direction. We will all have a wonderful sense of His leading, and that is much better than the leadership of any man. Instead of looking to men and being divided by which man to follow, we will all be following the same man, the man Christ Jesus, individually and corporately.

If we desire to be that kind of community then we need to be, as Dallas Willard so beautifully described, "...a people blinded to all other loyalties by the splendor of God..." I dare say that some here may be loyal to me. Only follow me as I follow Christ. That means your eyes must be beyond me to the Lord Jesus, the head. Some may be loyal to a tradition or a system. How much better to be loyal to the living Lord Jesus!

To be that family that God desires, we must have Jesus as the head of this body. To have Him as head means obeying the instruction He gives, individually and corporately. Jesus said, *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."* -John 15:10 (NIV) If each of us follows the leading of the Spirit in our individual lives and His leading for our church, we will not only see a supernatural unity, but God will make us effective in this community for the Kingdom of God.

I wrote a very practical sermon on communication that was to follow at this point, but I think the Lord has something else in mind for this morning. If Jesus is the head and that means we are to obey His commands, get our instruction from Him,

then what is His instruction? There is an overarching instruction that stands out in the New Testament. Jesus said, *"My command is this, love each other as I have loved you."* -John 15:12 (NIV) How did He love us? He loved us by serving us and laying down His life for us. Imagine a community in which everyone gave their life for one another.

Let me illustrate what I mean with a Jewish story that I am taking the liberty to slightly modify. There was a church in the countryside that was run by three friars. The church had a great attendance in the past, but the numbers had dwindled as people moved from the country to the city. The three friars debated about what to do. Friar John thought they should change their emphasis. Friar Peter wanted to try a different program. Friar Thomas thought it was inevitable, and they just needed to commit it to the Lord in prayer.

When they were down to just a handful of attendees, they realized that nothing they were doing was working. A Jewish rabbi had a cottage in the woods that he visited for retreats, near the church. Friar John had passed that way and seen smoke coming from the chimney. He suggested to the other friars that one of them go and ask the advice of the rabbi. What could it hurt? They were desperate to keep their church from closing.

Hesitantly Friar Peter approached the door. He had been appointed to put the question to the rabbi. The rabbi answered the door, "Come in, come in! Please join me for a cup of tea." Friar Peter politely declined and asked in an ever so humble tone if he could ask for some advice. "Certainly, I would be glad to be of service if I have anything to offer," the rabbi said. "Our church has been declining in numbers and we fear it will have to close if things do not turn around," the friar said. "Perhaps you have some advice that could help us." "Oh, I'm afraid I'm not of much help to you there," the rabbi said, "my specialty is rabbinical law." "Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you," the friar said. "Oh no, I'm so glad you stopped by. I just wish I had some sage advice," the rabbi responded. After saying their goodbyes, the friar was just heading into the woods when he heard the rabbi call out to him. "I'm surprised your attendance is down. I had heard the Messiah was among you. God's speed."

The friar thought to himself, "The Messiah, Jesus, there in our midst? What could that mean? Perhaps it was friar John. He was always so compassionate and gentle." The more friar Peter thought of it, the more he was sure it must be John. Then he began to be excited. "The Lord has visited us. He is testing my faithfulness in time of trouble." By the time friar Peter had returned to the church, he had determined in his heart that he was going to treat friar John with the respect he deserved. He examined the things he had said and the way he had acted in the past, and began to be ashamed that he had not been more respectful. That would surely change now that he knew who he was.

When he arrived at the church the other friars were anxiously waiting to hear the rabbi's advice. "What did he say? Did he give you a suggestion?" they asked. "No. He had no advice. But he did say something strange. He said that the Messiah was among us," friar Peter said as he bowed to friar John. Each of the friars went off to their rooms to contemplate what was said. Friar John was certain it was friar Thomas. That must be why he was so knowledgeable about the Scriptures. Friar Thomas thought it had to be friar Peter. He knew his humility was such that he would not tell them outright that he was the One. He was sure it was him. Friar Peter was increasingly convinced it was John.

Secretly, each of the friars determined to treat the other as the Lord Jesus, to listen to His words more carefully, to act more kindly, to render acts of love and service. Each was delighted to think that Jesus had made a special visit to them. The atmosphere in the church immediately changed. Instead of doom and gloom, there was whistling and joy, even expectant excitement. Each noticed the behavior of the other and were more convinced than ever that the other was Christ. The rabbi's remark had transformed the friars and thus the church also.

Soon the word made its way around the countryside and even to the nearby city. "The church has a new atmosphere." Before long, the services were nearly full and lives were touched and changed by the three friars who were now noted for their kindness and love toward one another.

The moral that the Jewish writer intended was that we should treat everyone as a special person to be respected and honored because we are all made in the image of God. But there is a message for Christians that the author probably never realized. Since we believers are the body of Christ, Jesus actually is among us! It is not just an attitude; it is reality! I'm not saying the person next to you is Jesus, but I am saying that he or she is actually a part of His body.

If we begin to treat one another as the body of Christ, what a church we will be! What a wonderful place of genuine community! If we are willing to look to Christ as head of the body, and treat one another with the love He commands us to express, the only other need is for each person to find their specific calling and function within the body and a willingness to function. That is the kind of church we read about in the New Testament. It was world changing. It changed their own lives first, then it challenged the world around them. It has happened at various times throughout history.

We tend to focus on revivals. Revivals happen when people repent and become a part of the kind of church we are talking about. That church in turn affects everyone that comes in contact with every member until entire communities are changed.

Allow me to illustrate with a story from my own life. When Jesus made this lesson plain to me, I was at a retreat for leaders of a church. We were taking some individual quiet time when I was really impressed to show the Lord my love for Him. I was reading through the Gospel of John and in chapter 12 I read how Mary anointed Jesus with a costly perfume, wiping His feet with her hair. What a picture of worship and what an expression of love! I felt I wanted to do something like that, but what? The Spirit directed me on to John 13 where Jesus washed the disciples' feet. I said, "Lord, I would love to wash your beautiful feet, the feet with the nail prints. It would be a higher honor than I could hope." The answer came as a Scripture. *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* - Matthew 25:40 (NIV) I could wash Jesus' feet by washing my brothers' feet. I found a bucket and a towel and I had the privilege of washing Jesus' feet.

Do you need some more Scriptures? ¹⁵*If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.* ¹⁶*Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.* ¹⁷*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,* ¹⁸*because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.* -Romans 14:15-18 (NIV) The Apostle Paul is saying that we serve Christ by giving up our freedoms and rights to not offend our brother. Did you ever think of serving Christ in that way? That is an act of love.

Now go to Colossians 3:22-24 (NIV) ²²*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.* ²³*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,* ²⁴*since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* You can serve Christ in serving your employer or in your work when you serve as unto the LORD, when you do things for God's glory and not your own. That is loving the LORD by serving another. *It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

When that attitude is in each of our hearts, what a loving place this will be. Like that church in the countryside, we'll have a sense of expectant excitement of Jesus working through one another and serving Christ by serving one another. We will be allowing Him to be the head of the body as we obey His command. The word will get around that there is a whole new atmosphere here. Why? Because we are obeying the command of Jesus, and He said, *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you."* -John 15:10-12 *...serve one another in love.* -Gal. 5:13b (NIV)