

Remembering our purpose - Growing Disciples Matthew 28:18-20, Ephesians 3:14-21

Adapted from "A Prayer for a Graduate" by Alex Perednia @Sermon Central.Com

What would you ask for if you found a genie-in-a-bottle and were granted three wishes that were bound to come true? What would you ask for?

Did you hear about the young man who found a genie-in-a-bottle? This guy is just walking down the beach and comes across an old bottle. He picks it up, pulls out the cork and out pops a genie.

The genie says, "Thank you for freeing me from the bottle. In return I will grant you three wishes." The man says, "Great! I always dreamed of this and I know exactly what I want.

- First, I want one billion dollars in a Swiss bank account." Poof! There is a flash of light and a piece of paper with account numbers appears in his hand.
- He continues, "Next, I want a brand new red Ferrari right here." Poof! There is a flash of light and a bright red brand-new Ferrari appears right next to him.
- He continues, "Finally, I want to be irresistible to women." Poof! There is a flash of light and he turns into a box of chocolates.

As Christians, we know that there are no genies in a bottle. But, we have this awesome privilege of coming before our Heavenly Father in prayer to ask him for what we need. What will you ask for?

In our Gospel lesson today, we hear Jesus ordering his apostles out into the world, to baptize all people—that is bring them into the Christian faith—and then to teach these new converts to obey all that he originally taught. So that is what Jesus' apostles did. Then their followers did the same thing after them. The reason that we are now here as a Church, is because that process has continued, somewhat successfully, down to today. It has been an intentional chain effort from then until now.

It's kind of like those chain letters that were so popular a decade back. Here's my favorite:

Tired of your current pastor?

Just send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are tired of their ministers. Then, bundle up your minister and send him to the first church listed at the bottom of this page. In one week you will receive 16,436 ministers in return. One of them should be perfect for you. Have faith in this letter.

Warning: One church broke the chain and got their old minister back!

Christianity has always been an intentional chain of discipleship. **Learn, OBEY and then TEACH what you have learned to others who will also learn, obey and in their turn be able to teach.** That is the essence of discipleship as we understand it: faithful Christians replicating the next generation of disciples.

You can easily see this chain in the Apostle Paul's instructions to his former disciple Timothy:

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. (II Timothy 2:1-2)

So that is why "**GROWING DISCIPLES**" is part of our Church's purpose statement. It is now our turn, having inherited Christ's order, to continue this discipling chain trusting in Him, as He has promised to go with us in this process to the very end of age.

Unfortunately, the dire effects of breaking this discipling chain have become frightfully apparent here in the western world. The saying is true, that ***Christianity is just one generation away from extinction.*** When the chain of disciplined disciples breaks there the church dies, Christ's light dims, and a great darkness descends on the land.

How can we now keep the disciple chain unbroken in our Church, in this town? I would suggest that we need a lot of heartfelt serious prayer. And I know just the prayer we need be praying for ourselves and for our children.

In our second Scripture lesson we hear the Apostle Paul writing to one of those discipling churches that he had previously planted. He is assuring them that, while he has moved on, he continues to pray for their spiritual growth. And in this prayer he makes four prayerful requests of God in their behalf; requests which we should now be asking of God in our behalf:

1. To be strengthened in our Christian life, through the power of the Holy Spirit
2. To let Christ dwell in our hearts through faith
3. To come to the point where we know the heart of God
4. And thus to share the love of Christ wherever God takes us

Paul first prayed for his young disciples that "*you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His Spirit,*" (3:16) Have you ever wondered why God would put a part of Himself, the Holy Spirit, into our bodies? He did this because **the internal ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives is absolutely indispensable to Christian living.**

Jesus said in John 16:7-13: *"I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." ...and when he comes He will guide you into all truth. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

It is the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers that continues the ministry of Jesus on earth. Indeed it is the Holy Spirit first coming into our lives that awakened us to our sin, God's pending judgment and our need for His offered grace. Then having by faith accepted God's gift of salvation, it is the Holy Spirit who washes us, rebirths us, and by His presence in our lives seals us as members of God's family. Then the Holy Spirit also acts as our tutor in all things Christian and our energizer for the ministry God has given us.

But as Christians, strange as it sounds, it seems that we can ignore the gentle promptings of the Spirit in our lives. We each make choices: will we live in our own strength or will we *"live by the Spirit...and not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."* (Gal 5:16) But here's one incentive: one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22); so living in the Spirit is our only guarantee of true and lasting joy!

2. Paul then adds to his prayer that our growth in faith leads to: *Christ dwelling in your hearts...* (3:17a)

We first come to Christ by faith. Then the next step after being reborn by his indwelling Holy Spirit is to grow up in our faith to begin thinking like Christ. Our Bible urges us to *"have the mind of Christ;"* to respond to others as He would respond. But the only way we will be able to do this is by first learning His life and thoughts—studying scripture which tells us of Jesus—and then having those studies empowered and inspired by His indwelling Holy Spirit.

Notice also that Paul uses a word for **"dwell,"** which doesn't mean just dropping in for a visit, but rather Christ coming to live permanently with us as a full-time resident.

Robert Munger in the booklet, "My Heart- Christ's Home" writes, *"Without question one of the most remarkable Christian doctrines is that Jesus Christ Himself through the Holy Spirit will actually enter a heart, settle down and be at home there. Christ will live in any human heart that welcomes him."*

So imagine how you might react if you got a phone call tomorrow from Jesus asking if he could move in to your actual house? What rooms might you have to quickly clean up, remodel, maybe even shut and lock a few doors hoping he doesn't notice.

- There is your study, the things you let your mind take in...books, magazines, music, and movies. Would you have to take some things off the shelf?
- Would you be embarrassed to have Jesus settle down to watch television with you? Let's be honest with ourselves. How many programs would we no longer watch if we thought Jesus was sitting there watching them with us? He is you know!
- Next is the dining and living rooms, your activities of daily living. Would you have to change your routine if Jesus were living in your home? Would there be places you would no longer go into if Jesus were walking beside you?
- Then there is also your work place, the "rec room," and the bedrooms. What changes would be needed there?
- And finally, there is the hall Closet where you have shoved all your past indiscretions. What might Jesus find stuffed way back into the corner crevices of your life?

When we come to faith, God gives us the Spirit and urges us to grow into the mind of Christ. Paul's prayer is that Christ may comfortably dwell within our thinking, within our lives. You know another word for that? Its "**DISCIPLESHIP**," apprenticing our lives to Jesus, through His indwelling Holy Spirit to live with Him and learn from Him, until we become competent, unashamed, workmen rightly handling God's truth. That's God's goal for our life and like Paul that should become the prayer for both our lives and the lives of all our children (both the physical and spiritual kind).

Then the third part of Paul's prayer is that the indwelling Holy Spirit who is leading us to both know the mind of Christ and let Him guide our lives until we eventually come to understand the heart of God. Notice I did not say that we could know the mind of God. He has bluntly informed us that such is beyond our capabilities, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways above your ways says the Lord (Psalm 103:11).

But I do think we can come to understand God's heart, what has moved His plan for the ages, which He wrapped up in the person of Jesus. I believe this is what Paul means when he prays that we *have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth*. In other words, we should come to the point of getting God's big picture. Thinking with the mind of Christ, looking at the world through his eyes, we will begin to make sense of some of God's movement through time and space to bring about the salvation of His children and the restoration of His creation.

And lastly Paul gives us a hint of what that big picture is when he prays that we too become "*rooted and grounded in love. ...knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*"

People have found all kinds of crazy ways to express their love to their would be spouses. They have had brass bands march up in the middle of a sidewalk dinner, they have had mermaids, mimes, and chalk artists spell out their proposal at the local aquarium or on the side of an entire building. One man in Dayton, Ohio, hired an airplane to fly over the city towing a banner that read, "*Judy, I love you. Will you marry me?*" Judy's response was "*How can you say No to that?*"

When we look at God's love for us, especially as it is expressed in Christ and His cross "How can we say No to a love like that?"

That is precisely why Paul prays for us to have an intimate experience with the love of Christ...to "come to know *what is the breadth and length and height and depth*,...to be rooted and grounded Christ's love (3:18b-19a)

Look at some of the descriptions Paul uses for how much of God we should want in our lives:

- To be "rooted" means that like a plant we have our roots buried deep within God's love so that we can draw nourishment from it.
- To be "grounded" is like a building that is set upon the solid foundation of God's love: *ON Christ the solid rock we stand. All other ground is sinking sand.*
- Then, to be filled with ALL the fullness of God now has us resembling a bucket let down into God's well and pulled back up so full of God's love that it is splashing over the sides, so full we can't be filled any more.

What Paul has prayed is what God wants for all His children so that following the teaching and empowering of His indwelling Holy Spirit we might get to know Jesus so well that we begin to think and act like Him, that we gain some understanding God's big plan for the rescue of both His children and His world, that we become so filled with His love that it sloshes out of our lives onto those around us.

In short it is that we dedicate ourselves to being disciples of Christ, knowing and sharing his love with the world that God loves so deeply. That's why the final phrase in our purpose statement is that we be GROWING DISCIPLES; referring both to ourselves and then to the rest of our family.

In 1928 several of the world's most successful financiers gathered for a self-congratulatory dinner at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. This party included:

- The president of the largest steel company,
- The greatest wheat speculator,
- The president of the New York Stock Exchange,
- A member of the President's Cabinet,
- The greatest "bear" in Wall Street,
- The president of the Bank of International Settlements,
- The head of the world's greatest monopoly.

Collectively, these seven tycoons controlled more wealth than there was in the U.S. Treasury, and for years newspapers and magazines had been printing their success stories and urging the youth of the nation to follow their examples.

Twenty-five years later, this is what happened to each of these powerful and successful men.

- The president of the largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life and died broke.
- The greatest wheat speculator, Arthur Cutten, died overseas, insolvent.
- The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, served a term in Sing Sing Prison.
- The member of the President's Cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home.
- The greatest "bear" in Wall Street, Jesse Livermore, committed suicide.
- The president of the Bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, committed suicide.
- The head of the world's greatest monopoly, Ivar Drueger, committed suicide as well.

All of these men had learned how to make money, but not one of them had learned how to live." (Source: James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 340)

Here is the bottom line. **Far more important than WHAT we do with our lives, is WHO we become in our living.** "Is God interested in the career or the retirement that we have chosen?" Absolutely! But, no matter what it will be, the far more important question is WHO will I be. Will I let Christ rule my life? Will I be a person rooted and established in the love of Christ? Will I be one of Christ's discipling disciples?

Paul concludes his prayer with a benediction: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to*

*him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Friends that benediction still includes us. We are still in God's generation. The church is still preaching the Gospel, baptizing, and teaching the next generation to obey everything of Christ. Through the teachings of those who have gone before us, we are now to be teaching our children.

We are still called to live as Christ's disciples, and if we do so, look out! God will work through us to accomplish far more than we could ever have imagined. And that's a lot!

Let's pray about this.