

Being a disciple who is most useful

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Date: 05 May 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, everyone's heard the saying, no doubt, if you don't aim at anything, you'll hit it every time. It's important to have goals.

We have goals in career, we set ourselves goals in sporting achievements, in relationships, personal development. We need goals. Because without goals, we just wander. And there's no way of measuring growth or progress. Well, it's exactly the same when it comes to being Christians.

And so I asked this morning, what is your goal as a believer or a member of this church? Now, hopefully, you're not just wandering.

Hopefully, you do have a goal. And hopefully, you'd say to me, your goal is to be a faithful, mature servant of Jesus. Or in the terms of this sermon series, hopefully, you want to say, I want to be plugged in and switched on to Jesus.

[1 : 17] Now, jumping into the church at Corinth, it seems that there's no doubt at all that the believers there were keen to be spiritually mature.

The problem is they had wrong ideas of what spiritual maturity would look like on the ground. They understood that they were spiritually new.

In other words, they had been converted. They were plugged into Jesus. But they confused that with being spiritually mature. It seems like they thought, well, since I'm a believer, therefore, whatever I think and do as a believer is evidence of being mature in Christ.

And to that, Paul says, no, not so. Paul's saying to them right through these first three chapters, to be spiritually mature is not just to be plugged into Jesus when you're converted, but to be like Jesus in all your thinking and all your actions or to pick up the link from chapter 2 that we looked at last week to chapter 2, verse 16.

It's to have the mind of Christ and be able to apply the mind of Christ into every circumstance of life. In his letter to these believers at Corinth, Paul's been contrasting the spirit of the world and the spirit of God.

[3 : 07] And he's been helping these believers see that they've been more influenced and driven. They were still more influenced and driven by the spirit of the world.

That is, the spirit of the Corinthian culture that they had lived in for so many years and continued to live in even as believers. That they were more influenced by that than they were by the spirit of God, the wisdom of God, the mind of Christ.

And that takes us to Paul's confronting conclusion, which is where, in a sense, I want to leave my formal ministry among you with.

Chapter 3, verse 1. These believers at Corinth thought they were spiritually mature, but Paul calls them out as being spiritually immature and worldly.

Now, surely, friends, if anything would make you sit up and listen and engage this morning, then the frightening possibility of thinking that you're mature in Jesus, spiritually mature in Jesus, while being spiritually immature, should actually be that motivation.

[4 : 24] And Paul gives them some really helpful pointers towards being spiritually mature, which will also make them the most useful disciples they can be in that church in Corinth.

And, of course, the lessons are for us, too. The first one is, Paul says to these believers, don't be happily immature with a correct but limited understanding of the gospel.

And when you look at these verses that Linda's just read to us, there's no way you can sugarcoat Paul's challenge. It's really a very, very abrasive, abrupt challenge.

Essentially, he's saying, for goodness sake, grow up. Your thinking and your actions are more like unbelievers than believers.

Grow up. The evidence that would bring Paul to say that? Well, chapter 1, 2, and 3. Disunity. Jealousy.

[5 : 29] We've looked at it over the last few weeks. Competitive individualism. Factions. Obsession with personalities. Striving for dominance and preeminence.

Even if it meant going to war with each other. So, for Paul, growing up is simply to become skilled in the mind of Christ.

To express the mind of Christ. In all things. Not only understanding God's grace in their own personal salvation, but also in its wider implications of how they should live in this new community called the church.

A community of saved people. A community of Christ's people. So, Paul's really saying to them, as he summarizes these first three chapters, as he writes to them, that their aim, their aim should have been to be known for speaking the truth in love.

Loving generously those hardest to love. Carrying the cost of being wronged and forgiving those who wrong you.

[6 : 46] Being other person-centered and ministry-minded. Being concerned for God's glory. Being concerned for God's reputation. Not your own. Not your own position.

Being concerned for God's reputation. Being concerned for God's reputation. Being concerned for God's reputation. Being concerned for God's reputation. And as I've said over the last three weeks, those things can't exist.

Cannot coexist with self-promotion. Competitive individualism. And personality factions.

And so, I think we can say, these believers were happily immature.

That's a pretty strong statement, but these believers were happily immature because they were happy with a correct but limited understanding of the gospel and God's word.

[7 : 40] Yes, I'm wonderfully excited that I'm saved. But they haven't thought about the implications of that in a community. They were happy to enjoy all the blessings and security of being saved.

Equally happy to live with a dreadful contradiction of continuing to be self-centered. To be self-promoting. Dismissive of their brothers and sisters in Christ. And Paul said, grow up.

You can't do these two things together. And the application, I think, is fairly obvious. If you are happy knowing that you've been saved by Christ through grace but continue to think and act towards others using the world's attitudes, then you're actually making a commitment to be happily immature.

and therefore a commitment to not being useful in this church. Over my ministry years, it's been a real source of sadness to observe some people who seem to be the same today as what they were 20 years ago.

How does that happen? Unless people are happily immature. Second thing then is be a team player.

[9 : 15] Happy with the position God plays you verses 5 through to 9. The problem for the Corinthian believers was that they had put people on a pedestal. And that pedestal was God's pedestal and God should have been on the pedestal.

Not people. Not personalities. And Paul uses a farming metaphor to make his point clear. And the metaphor is, as Dave's already referred to, it's crop production.

And of course we know that they grow a crop. There's different inputs, different human inputs at different points. Each input is critical in its own stage. But none of it amounts to anything unless the Lord causes the growth to harvest time.

And Paul's point is very simple. In the same way, God puts individuals in a church family to do a job that he has gifted them to do at that particular time, that particular season.

Each individual will contribute in different ways, in critical ways. But all of it is God's process of growing his new community to maturity.

[10 : 37] And ultimately, the end of the process is that God is glorified as he deserves to be. Now, again, practically, Paul is not saying here that we should never and that he would never have a deep sense of indebtedness and fondness for a particular individual that's been formative in our Christian walk.

That's not what Paul's saying here. Or a Christian leader who have been particularly helpful in our lives. What he is saying is that we need to be team players.

Team players never think the team is carried by one person. No matter how helpful that person has been, he's only one person in a team.

Team players never sort of parade their own gifts or abilities. Whether that person is themselves a leader or just an ordinary person in the church.

Team players value every contribution and know that each is essential for the team to be successful. And so my friends I say to you this morning you will be most useful in this church whether it's up front in some sort of formal role or behind the scenes not heard of during the week. [12:13] You'll be most useful if your aim is consistently and happily to contribute to the growth and maturing of this family as God gives you opportunity to do so.

The future needs team players. Now speaking very personally for a moment individuals take me at this particular moment in time individuals will come and go.

And when the Lord brings an individual perhaps me into your life it's for your benefit for your spiritual maturing. And equally true when the Lord takes an individual perhaps me out of your life then it's because that individual perhaps me has served their purpose.

And the Lord's got a new stage of growth for you to enter into under his hand and under his grace and perhaps with a new personality or a new group of personalities.

And here's the point and this is so crucial in times of change. The team will always be changing, changing. We might wish it to be static but we can't get it like that.

[13:43] The team will always be changing but the Lord will always be the coach for preparing the team of the moment for heaven through maturity.

Churches don't get that and that's why transitions like this are so notoriously bad. Third thing is be a team leader a team builder rather using you be a team leader self-promotion Freudian slip there. Be a team builder using the best mind of Christ building materials. Picking up the thoughts of 10 to 17 and you know I'm just going to skate over the top of this.

I'm not going to dig into all the details that could be lifted out here. Paul essentially changes the metaphor to a building site and he's really saying look the church at Corinth you guys are God's special building project.

Paul his fellow workers and all the believers in Corinth says Paul well you're the subcontractors you're engaged to actually do the work on the ground.

[15:04] God is the owner builder or project manager constantly monitoring the quality of the build. In verses 10 and 11 Paul says well look I started I put down the foundations as a skilled master builder.

He calls himself a skilled master builder I think because he's saying I used the right tools for a solid foundation. It really told us what those tools are in chapter 2.

The message of Jesus crucified who is God's righteousness wisdom power redemption sanctification he's the one who can renew people from the inside out.

So Paul uses the gospel message in conjunction with carefully applied practical gospel wisdom and power. In other words the gospel message in conjunction with the mind of Christ.

That's what makes Paul a skilled master builder. And that's why the foundation is so solid. Verse 12 through 15 Paul says well that's only stage one of God's build.

[16:26] Others will follow and build upon what I've done. Doing the framing the roofing the external cladding internal fit out all of that needs to be done and will be done as part of God's build in Corinth.

And says Paul you also are called to be skilled master builders. And then he sets up a bit of a contrast. Well there's an option there's a choice here.

You can be skilled master builders using top shelf building materials. Or which is gold and silver and precious stones in there.

That's the metaphor. Or you can be a shunky builder using stuff that's sort of cheap and nasty but looks alright when you first use it.

It just doesn't stand the test of time. Wood and hay and stones. That's the picture in there. I think. Things that look good now but will cause the build to fail in the long term.

[17:37] And again Paul's point is simple but again very confronting. Either your ministry contribution to this church will be worthwhile and lasting or and this is very confronting or it is building weakness and failure into the church family even though it might look good now in the short term.

There's a huge challenge in that I think. And all of this is put in the context of knowing that the Lord who's the owner builder and building inspector says Paul well the Lord himself will expose the master builders and the shonky builders.

And that's not a threat. I think that Paul uses that as an encouragement to use quality materials that the Lord himself as the project manager and the chief builder and the owner builder use the materials the Lord has actually provided to ensure that the build is good and materials that will bring God's approval for a job well done.

And for Paul his ultimate concern was not to win the approval of people in Corinth or to impress people in Corinth but to win the approval of the owner builder himself.

Now just one little thing to note carefully in passing. These verses are not suggesting for a moment that a believer might lose their salvation if their ministry is not gospel shaped as it should be.

[19 : 29] That's taken a metaphor and making it absolute. It's taken a metaphor way way too far. What he is saying here I think is that we should be focused on maximizing our usefulness in this church family.

In this church family build by making sure we use top gospel materials in our ministry contribution. One of the reasons I get a tradesman to do my work at home is because I've learned the pain of trying to do it myself.

Only to have to redo it six months later. Because this particular builder when it comes to those projects is your ultimate chunky builder. It's expensive and it's a pain.

Brothers and sisters let's build with the right materials top shelf materials and then build once knowing that it's going to stand the test of time.

verses 16 and 17 Paul's encouragement then is if only you could see your church family there in Corinth.

[20 : 44] If only you can see your church family here as to use the terms of modern TV shows as God's dream build. Paul says if only you can get that into your mind then you will no longer be concerned about yourselves or your own reputation or your own preeminence.

You'll be concerned to build carefully for God's approval. So what are quality building materials which will make you a skilled master builder in this church family?

Well same as what Paul had. The gospel message of Jesus crucified. God's righteousness, wisdom, power to renew people from the inside out and carefully applied practically with the mind of Christ.

It's not rocket science. It's building on the unity we already share because we are defined and blessed equally in Jesus.

It's producing discipleship that's marked by allegiance to Jesus not a personality. It's valuing the whole team with all the different and varied contributions rather than competitive individualism.

[22 : 12] I'm more important than you. I know more than you. I've been here longer than you. It's building self-sacrificial commitment to this church family.

That's increasingly a rare commodity in our selfish world, isn't it? Self-sacrificing commitment to this church family. That is intentionally choosing to use your time, to use your energy to volunteer and get involved in the jobs which need doing to make this church operate on a week-to-week basis.

I have to say, it's getting harder and harder to do that in a congregation that's getting bigger and bigger. How does that work? It's being intentional and generous with your money, if I might say this. Choosing to use your money sacrificially to make sure that this church family has the money to pay the staff that are required to do the work that's existing and then to grow and expand into new ministry that hasn't even been thought of yet.

The mind of Christ is saying that money is to be used for kingdom purposes. So the question is very simple.

[23 : 52] Are you giving sacrificially? Is that a goal or a sub-goal? Because if you don't have a goal and if you're not intentional, then I can guarantee you'll be controlled and driven by our culture.

What does our culture say to us? You're the most important person. Giving your money away is stupid. gather, hoard, accumulate all the things you desire because you're worth it.

Or, accumulate all those things because in the end, you know, your identity and your security is in the amount of things you have around you. Well, you hear the contrast again.

You're worth it. Paul would say, is Jesus worth it? We're going to sing a song along asking that very question. Is he worth it?

Surely, my friends, the mind of Christ would say, I will sacrifice my own comfort, my own rights, for the sake of God's kingdom.

[25 : 14] fourth point, and very briefly then, don't compete for blessing already yours from our generous God, verses 18 through to 23.

I think Paul is both doing two things. He's anticipating an objection to what he's been saying, but he's also starting to move towards a conclusion. He's anticipating an objection to his notion about being spiritually mature and useful in ministry.

And I think it comes back again, circles around, like each of his points have been in these first three chapters. See, being spiritually mature ultimately doesn't fit with the world's understanding of what being mature is.

The world's understanding of being mature is about being flashy, about being outstanding. Put simply, the world thinks it's stupid to put the needs and concerns of others before ourselves. The world says protect yourself, promote yourself, get what you can for yourself, because nobody else will. The world says being quietly useful in a church family rather than seeking personal popularity and reputation is wasted effort.

[26 : 56] Paul's response? Christ, you have it all in Christ. How could we possibly think that having the mind of Christ, being ministry minded, how could we possibly think that that is stupid?

Quite the opposite in God's eyes. Being ministry minded, team player, committed to building spiritual maturity in this church family is simply the expression of who we are in Christ.

the outworking of the mind of Christ in us. So my friends, I finish where I start with in chapter 1, verses 1 to 9, four weeks ago.

You don't have to compete for recognition, for approval, for security, for love, because in Christ you already have all of that and more besides.

flip the coin, disunity, competition, jealousy, resentment in a church family always arises from thinking that others have an advantage that you don't have.

[28 : 12] That's the source of it. but that tells me that you've forgotten that you have it all in Christ. I'll just finish with this opening sentence.

if you don't aim for this, spiritual maturity, usefulness in this church family, then my friend, you'll hit it every time.

And there ends 24 years of formal ministry, for better or for worse. Thank you for the last time for listening. Sarah. do you you you