

November 21, 2010

Philippians 2:1-11 / I Peter 2:4-12 / Mark 10:35-45

Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#10) - Implementing the Vision -- An All-Encompassing Ministry Focus as a Way of Life

Today we come to our **LAST MESSAGE** on the **7 Links in the Chain of Church Health!** And in wrapping it all up or in pulling it all together -- before we head into the Advent and Christmas season -- I thought the best way to do that would be to focus our gaze on Jesus who lived out in His own life everything we've been speaking of in these last 10 weeks!

In fact, that's what I'd like to speak on today - Pursuing and Embracing all these things as a way of following the example of Jesus. Or to borrow the title of an old Christian classic / written by Thomas A'Kempis around 1400 A.D. / I'd like to speak to you about ***"The Imitation of Christ."***

In I Cor. 11:1, Paul, after speaking of the need to do everything ***"for the glory of God,"*** and telling them that he always sought, ***"the good of many, and not his own good, so that others might be saved,"*** says this to the believers in Corinth: ***"Follow my example, AS I FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST."***

And that is what we are called to do! When it comes to knowing what to do and how to live and how to act as a Christian in all the various situations of life, our guidance should ultimately come by asking ourselves (to use the common expression) -- "What Would Jesus Do?" Better yet, "What DID Jesus Do?" -- and then seek to do the same!

And the same is true in relation to the implementation this vision of church health. Nothing could be more helpful for us than looking to Jesus Himself, who in His own life exemplified exactly what we are striving to embrace! That all-encompassing ministry focus as a way of life - ***a life which displayed in flawless fashion, the perfect balance all the 7 links we see in this chain of Church health.***

For when it comes right down to it, it was in Jesus' life and ministry that we first see this chain constructed!

- 1.) It was JESUS whose initial instruction involved teaching His disciples how to **PRAY**. An example He set by bathing His every move in prayer!
- 2.) It was JESUS who made it a point to teach His disciples how to **WORSHIP** in spirit and in truth and to hallow the name of God.
- 3.) It was JESUS who called them to follow Him in a life of shared **FELLOW-SHIP** with one another (becoming like a family as they traveled about the Judean countryside).
- 4.) It was JESUS who gathered this band of converts around Him with the express purpose of making them into **DISCIPLES** who would then go out and make more disciples!
- 5.) It was HIM who sent them out two by two to do **EVANGELISM**, telling them from the very moment He called them, that His purpose for their lives was to make them into "fishers of men"!
- 6.) It was JESUS Himself, who showed us by who He came to minister to, and how He went about ministering, that we also are to help the poor, the lame, the blind and the sick -- an outreach of **SOCIAL CONCERN**.
- 7.) And it was NONE OTHER THAN JESUS who emphasized on three different occasions, before ascending into heaven, that He wanted His gospel taken to every nation or people group on the face of this earth! He was the **MISSIONARY** of missionaries -- leaving His Father's side to come to earth and bring us the message of salvation!

Ultimately, that's where the 7 Links come from! From looking at the life and ministry and priorities of Jesus, who made an All-Encompassing Ministry Focus to be His Way of Life -- ***"leaving us an example, that we might follow in His footsteps"*** (I Pet. 2:21).

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And not just us as a Church. This chain will come to be lived out in the church, only to the extent that each one of us strives to live it our own individual lives! / For the culture of any given church (and each one is different in so many ways), is but a reflection of the commonly held beliefs and spiritual priorities of the individuals who make up that particular body.

And therefore, if we want this vision to be embraced by our CHURCH AS A WHOLE, it must first be embraced by all of us as INDIVIDUALS!

And since we've already looked at each of the particular links in some depth, what I'd like to do today is focus on our need to imitate Jesus, NOT in doing each of those things outwardly, but in cultivating the inward spiritual attitudes and beliefs and priorities which are needed if we are ever to do so!

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So, what are the essential foundational beliefs or attitudes we see in Jesus, that must also be replicated in us, if we are ever to live out in our lives the same all-encompassing ministry focus that He did?

And today I will focus on FOUR, the **FIRST** being this: That we must, like Him, be totally abandoned unto God. Jesus whole life was all wrapped up in doing the will of His Father. And if we are ever to even approach a ministry focus like His, ours must be as well.

For God does not want us to simply dabble in Christianity, or add it on as just one of the many things we fit into our lives. He wants us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ and service in His kingdom.

In fact, He calls us "deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him in a life of discipleship. Paul puts it this way in Gal. 2:19-20: ***"For through the law, I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ (that is, the old self that lived for sin and self) and (therefore) I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."***

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You see, you can't make an all-encompassing ministry focus to be your "way of life" until Christ becomes your life. Until living for Him (or rather, Him living in and through you) becomes your consciously lived out reality. And that can't happen until the old self, by faith, embraces the Gospel reality that it no longer lives, because it was crucified with Christ.

Yet what often prevents us from living wholeheartedly for Him, is that we have often been sold a false bill of goods. Because over the years, in the church's attempt to attract more people or make Christianity more appealing to the masses, it has often conveyed the message that all one needs to do to be "saved" or "happy" or "whole" or "fulfilled" is add a spiritual component (as the missing thing) into the mix of their lives.

That was actually the headline in a journal article not long ago: That people who have a religious component in their lives tend to be happier, healthier and live longer.

Therefore, to our social, professional, recreational, academic and family life, we add a spiritual component to balance things off, alongside all the other equally important components of life -- like filling in one little missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

But the problem is -- That idea is found nowhere in Scripture! For in Scripture, what we see is NOT a call to add Jesus or church or a spiritual component into our lives, but to live our whole lives with God at the center, and as the Source and Lord of everything we are, will become, and will ever do!

The Bible does not call us to live for us, with God merely helping us achieve our plans. It very clearly calls us to "live for Him" and in such a way that **"we no longer live, but Christ lives in us"** -- that is, that He might do his will on this earth through us! (Gal. 2:17-21)

It is to remember, as Paul says in I Cor. 6:19-20, that as Christians, we do not belong to us! God has purchased us at a price (the price of His own Son!) and therefore we belong to Him. And because we belong to Him, we are called to honor God our bodies and do everything we do for His glory! We are called to live for Him who died for us!

Yet to MANY (even within the Church) that sounds a bit extreme! In fact, I once shared that with a person at the Walpole Mall, in Massachusetts, and he simply looked at me, smiled, and said: **"Ahha, you're one of those religious fanatics, aren't you?"**

That's how the world views total and unreserved commitment to Christ or abandonment of our lives to God. As a sign of psychological imbalance. In fact, it scares many people because they not only see it as emotionally unhealthy, but dangerous to the social cohesion of our multi-cultural society.

Yet such wholehearted commitment to Christ is not radical! It's what Scripture would call Normal Christian Living!

We saw that so clearly when I preached on Lk.14:25-35 and heard Jesus say that: The love a disciple has for Him must be so great, that the best of all earthly loves / our love for our nearest and dearest -- for husband or wife / mother or father / siblings and even one's own children / must pale in comparison to the love we have for Him -- or else we cannot be His disciple.

C. S. Lewis was right when he wrote: ***"Christ says, 'Give me all.' 'I don't want so much of your time, and so much of your money, and so much of your work -- I want you! I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half measures... I don't want to cut off a branch here and there, I want the whole tree down... / Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked... I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself; My own will will become yours."***

Why? Because Christianity DOESN'T WORK for those who merely dabble in it half-heartedly. It DOESN'T REFRESH THE SOUL of the one who merely sticks their toes into its life-giving waters, like one sitting at the edge of a pool who never jumps in!

The call to follow Christ in a life of discipleship is a call to immerse yourself in the life of God! A call to dive in head first and stay in (or under!) until the old man drowns and the new man rises to life out of the seed of the old! ***"A seed,"*** says Jesus, ***"must fall into the ground and die,"*** if it is ever to sprout and bear fruit.

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It must be so! This vision (which Jesus left as an example for us to follow) calls for such total integration of our lives in the things of God that it can only be replicated in ours if our lives when we believe and recognize and internalize the truth, that *"when Jesus died, our old self died with Him."*

For until the old sinful self dies, says J. Penn-Lewis, ***"It may be safely affirmed that the self is still the dominating factor in our lives."*** And so long as it is, we will struggle intensely to implement this vision.

Only one who has "died to self and lives for God" will endure the growth pangs and weather the soul struggle and make the changes necessary to make an all-encompassing ministry focus to be their way of life!

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Then **SECONDLY**, we must, like our Lord, adopt the mindset of a Servant if we are ever to do (or even approach doing) all the things this vision calls us to do!

We must adopt the mindset Jesus had when He said, **"I did not come to be served, but to serve and to offer my life as a ransom for many."** Or again, as He says elsewhere, **"I am among you, as one who serves."** Because that servant mindset is absolutely indispensable if we are ever to replicate, in our day, the ministry focus of Jesus to the world around us. And it's not easy!

That's why Paul had to remind the early believers of this very truth! In writing to the Philippians to tell them how they could bear up under the struggles that would come their way as they tried to live out the Christian life, his counsel to them was this:

***"Let this attitude be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (something to cling to), but emptied Himself (or made Himself nothing as the NIV puts it) taking the very form of a servant, and being made in human likeness."***

And it's that same self-emptying attitude which Jesus had, says Paul, that God wants us to adopt as our own. The attitude of Him who could say: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first, must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many."

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Yet few (and I'm guilty here myself) adopt the mindset that makes a life of such Christ-like servanthood possible. The mindset Paul gives us just 2 verses earlier, where he says: ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility of mind consider others better than yourselves."***

Not equal to ourselves. / Not as good as we are. / But "better than ourselves!"

And LISTEN: It's NOT psychological suicide! / It's NOT an expression of self-loathing / or unhealthy self-devaluation / or a poor self-esteem (all of which I've heard suggested).

It's the foundational mindset of a SERVANT! Of one who stoops to wash the feet of another / or dress the wounds of another / or risks and even loses their life to save the life of another. If I'm convinced I'm better than others / or that my life is primarily to be lived for me / I won't do that!

It's the mindset of those who would kneel to clean the toilet of another / or spend on others the time and resources they'd rather be spending on themselves -- listening to another / or buying them groceries / or taking them in the middle of the night, to the local emergency room or hospital.

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You see, if we don't have that attitude of humility, and the liberation it brings to the task of serving, we will tend to get irritated by the intrusions upon our time / and the inconveniences we may have to endure / and the sacrifices we will have to make / and the way people may (or will on occasion) take advantage of us.

Which is why we need to return again and again to look at Jesus example! Because He never stopped serving sinners! In spite of people's constant interruptions and demands and ingratitude, He never turned back from His mission of serving.

People were always interrupting His times of instruction / and calling out to Him as He was headed somewhere else! / They found Him when He'd gone off by Himself alone to pray / and turned away from Him when the free meals stopped / and used Him to be healed of their leprosy, without so much as returning to say "thank you!" Yet in spite of it all He just kept on serving!

Why? Because this was His attitude: ***"Being in very nature GOD, He did not consider equality with God something to cling to / but emptied Himself / He made Himself nothing / He humbled Himself / and took on the posture of a servant."***

And THAT is the same mindset Paul calls us to have in ourselves so that we can become the servants He calls us to be.

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Then **THIRD**, I must rid myself of the unscriptural idea, common in some parts of Christianity, that says that life under God's heaven is somehow divided up into the two categories - that which is sacred or spiritual, and that which is secular or non-spiritual. And that spiritual duties (like prayer and Bible Study and evangelism) outweigh all secular duties.

Not so my friends! There is no such division of life in the Bible! All of life, when lived to the glory of God (as Scripture calls to do) becomes spiritual! How I parent / and how I act as an employee or boss / how I speak / and how I do business / and how I keep my house / or drive my car / or treat my neighbor / or express my sexuality / or pay my taxes -- all becomes an act of spiritual service when I understand I am to do it all to the glory of God!

There is no area of my life where I am not called to live out my faith! It doesn't exist. God is sovereign over all of life, and therefore all of life becomes a way for me to worship, honor and serve him -- even if it's doing something as menial as changing a tire for a person who has broken down by the side of the road.

It also comes into play in the 7 links. There is no link that is "more spiritual" than another. Helping the poor is not less spiritual than lifting my hands in worship / and loving my spouse or kids is not less spiritual than kneeling beside my bed to pray. / And giving a glass of water in Jesus name is not less spiritual than witnessing to an unbelieving friend.

Every act, no matter what it is, is an act of spiritual devotion if it is done "as unto the Lord," and "for His glory!"

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Then **LAST**, we must pursue a life that strives for obedience in all these areas and not just the one or two. Not just the areas we prefer. We are not called to be people of a singular ministry focus. For if there is anything the world can validly use against the church (and has done so time and again throughout history) it's a ministry or life that is terribly imbalanced or fanatical in one area of Christian discipleship and completely lacking in another. It's a life that that

goes to uncanny extremes in regard to some of the mandates and commands of God, and totally ignores other equally important mandates and commands.

I may have preferences or things I enjoy doing more than others. And that's ok. There's nothing wrong with that at all! But those preferences do not exempt me from striving to live a life of obedience to ALL that God calls His people to do.

We ARE called to a life of "balance." Not "balance" in the sense that we make a half-hearted attempt to do a little of everything / or the "balance" I spoke of before (where one adds a spiritual component into their lives to balance it off).

And definitely not "balance" in the sense of mediocrity.

***But "balance" in the sense that we earnestly strive to pursue a whole-hearted obedience to God in all these areas! A balance that comes from seeking to embrace each one with the utmost seriousness and zealously strives to integrate every one into our lives.***