

## God can use you...and it's more important than you think

- Here we are in week 4 of this series about God using us as ministers, even if we don't have a fancy title or a Bible college degree. We've spoken—well, I've spoken, you've all been a captive audience—about overcoming doubts and fears, overcoming your past or current failures and realizing that we don't need to know any special tricks of the trade to show people God's love; we just need to love them and lead them back to God's grace.
- And so this week I want to talk about why it matters at all. **I mean, isn't God big enough to reach people on his own?** Why does he need me to do anything?
- Well...**he doesn't need you. Sorry.** There's nothing you will do with your life that God can't simply do himself.
- **But that's not the point.**
- See I'm convinced that at least part of the reason God made...everything...was for **community; relationship**. I mean **God exists as a relationship**—that's what the trinity is. Three people in perfect unity.
- And I think he saw how **awesome** that was and decided to **not only make more people** to commune with, but he wanted them to **experience the love, joy and everything that is amazing about having a friendship and a family**.
- And that **thought** is **key** to this whole ministry thing because we live in a world where people are **desperately looking for true, deep, unconditional love**. And the best place to find that is in God. And the **best way to discover God is through other people**.
- But us Christians are **dropping the ball**. We've turned a religion founded on **including** people and made it **exclusive**. We've turned our **family into a clique**. We've been given everything in terms of love, and **we refuse to share it**.
- But this is nothing new. This is the same thing that happened to the Jewish people. God told them they were **chosen to be set apart and special** so that **all nations might see his glory**. The problem was that they missed the last part and **focused** on being chosen and set apart and special.
- Then they became **focused on themselves**. Not in a bad way per se: **they were just trying really hard to follow all of God's commandments and stay away from**

**sin.** But what do you think happens when you **focus** on staying **pure** and you **focus** on the fact that you're a **special, chosen people**?

- You begin to **avoid, alienate and eventually distance** yourself from anyone who isn't in your club—because **you're afraid of becoming tainted**.
- Then slowly that **fear** turns into **disgust** and **pity** and even **hatred**—this is the same **psychological slope that the Nazis** went down when they went from pity and disgust, to **outright hatred** of the Jewish people and is very prevalent in the **mindset of people who would rather see a homeless person arrested than help them**.
- **Distance + disgust + differences usually leads to hate and anger**.
- This is what led to the world Jesus entered. This is why he was **so frustrated** with the **Pharisees**. It was why he told them to learn the meaning of the scripture **“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”**
- The Jews were set apart for a task: **revealing God to the world**. But they simply set themselves apart. They **misunderstood** what being **set apart and holy** was. They were **made clean** so they could bring **cleanliness to a world filthy with sin**, but were so **afraid** of getting dirty that they just **let it fester rather than try to clean it**.
- They became like **doctors** who wash and scrub and sanitize their hands, then **refuse to operate** for fear of getting their gloves messy. **What's the point then?** Doctors who won't operate are **worthless** because they won't **fulfill their purpose**. Which brings us to our theme verse for this series:

John 15:15-17 15 I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. 16 You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

- So, as we've been discussing these past few weeks, you have a definite purpose—to reach out to the world with love.
- But who are you? Are you the one who **takes a cue from God** and **enters people's lives**, gets close to them—even in their pain and sin—so you can **love them and help them**? Or are you the **doctor who is worthless** because he's afraid to soil his **pretty Christian operating gloves**?

- That's why we were saved: **to fulfill the purpose Jesus gave to us and started himself**. He came to **heal the world** and we're to **continue** that process.
- People **aren't interested** in a religion that offers **life after death** only. They want to know if this **life before death is useful**. And luckily, Jesus talked about that.
- If you still think the **kingdom of God** is about **heaven**, you need to think again. **After all, how hard will it be to love our enemies in heaven or give to the poor or comfort the hurting?**
- I'm convinced that when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, **he means here on earth, right now**.
- **I also think something happens to us when we chase after our purpose as Christians...and I think something happens when we don't**. John 15 has been our theme verse in this series, but let's look at what precedes those verses about Jesus' command to love each other.

#### John 15:1-14

"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. 3 You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

5 "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. 7 But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! 8 When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

9 "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. 10 When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. 11 I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! 12 This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. 13 There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

- Lot's of stuff there. So let's look at what happens when we do and don't follow God's command to love each other.
- **Fruitless branches are cut off, wither, die and burn.**
- There's no way around this. And I don't know how much clearer I can make it:

- If you are not willing to **obey Jesus command** to minister to others, **you will be cut off from him**. And when that happens, your **relationship with God will wither and die**.
- And this isn't a threat. **I'm not going to try and scare** you into it—because I don't think **Jesus** was trying to scare people into it; **that was never his way**. I think he was just showing them **reality**.
- And the **reality** is that **your faith and my faith is meaningless** and dead if doing Jesus' commands isn't an integral part of it. I mean, just in this snippet alone **he says twice**: "This is my command, love each other."
- So if your **faith seems dead and dry and lifeless**, maybe you've been **cut off**. But it's not too late to come back.
- And the **problem** isn't even always that **we don't want to** do ministry, it's the things we've been discussing: **fear, doubt, not being sure what you're doing and being trapped by the American dream**—which tells us that **growing rich** enough to be **lazy and do nothing** are the highest achievements in life.
- And then we grow **bored, apathetic and comfortable**...and our walk with God suffers because **we lose touch** with the **hurting** and the **people who are in need**... just like the Nazis lost touch with the **humanity of the Jews** and the Pharisees lost touch with the **humanity of sinners**.
- **Complacency, apathy and comfort kills our souls—and the only fix is risk-taking ministry**
- **Jesus took risks in his ministry**. He touched lepers, ate with the criminals, gathered a bunch of **uneducated rejects** to be his **closest friends**, **challenged the religious hypocrisy** of his day, **loved the un-loveable** and did the **right thing, no matter the consequences**.
- *"These are extreme times. The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be? Will we be extremists for hate or for love?"* – Martin Luther King Jr.

- There are lots of Christian **extremists for hate** out there; people who bomb abortion clinics or protest at the funerals of soldiers. **But where are the Christian extremists for love?**
- And don't give me the lame **excuse** that they're out there but the **media doesn't cover them**. That's a **cop-out** and just another example of **being complacent and wanting comfort and safety** more than you want to obey God and love people.
- Maybe there are **love extremists** and maybe **they're not getting** any air-time but as Jesus said to Peter, "**What is that to you? As for you, follow me.**" Whether or not others are doing **extreme things for love** and whether or not they're being recognized **has absolutely nothing to do with your obligation to do so**.
- **But it's not all obligation**. Notice what happens in those verses when we **do** follow Jesus' commands.
- **We find our faith and walk with God growing stronger**
- As you minister to others, you will **find your faith stronger**. You'll see **miraculous** things happen. You'll see the **freedom and happiness** God brings to **dark** lives. You'll see people **kick addictions that have plagued them** and find a new **sense of purpose** for **their life**, and **your own**.
- Not only that, **you'll see why love needs action to be real**. **Love is a verb, as they say**.
- *"Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality, as with the ordinary churchgoer. Courage without love and wisdom is foolhardiness, as with the ordinary soldier. Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice, as with the ordinary intellectual. But the one who has love, courage and wisdom moves the world."*  
--Ammon Hennacy
- You can't do this **with just love**. **You need to act**. Do **something**. Find your **purpose...and find some other things, as well**.
- **We find Joy**
- I touched on this last week but it's worth repeating: when you **fulfill your purpose, you find joy: deep, lasting joy**.
- Why else do you think **missionaries** living in 3<sup>rd</sup> world, poverty famished countries keep going back? **There's joy in fulfilling your purpose**.

- We've been **duped** into thinking **our purpose** is to take care of **ourselves and our family, make money and retire**. And how is that working here in America? Are the **happiest** people those with **no financial concerns** and a **huge retirement fund**? Or are they the people with friends, family and a community of people that they can pour their lives into and have others pour their lives back?
- **We weren't meant to do life alone**. We were meant for **relationships**. And when we do what we're meant to do, we find joy...and we find God.
- **We find Jesus in their faces**
- I touched on this recently, too. And I'll quote Henri Nouwen, again because he says it far better than I can.
- "Radical servanthood—we could substitute "Risk-taking ministry here—does not make sense unless we introduce a new way of understanding **and see it as a way to encounter God**...The poor are not called blessed because poverty is good, but because the **Kingdom of Heaven is theirs**; the mourners are not called blessed because mourning is good, but **because they will be comforted**...Here we are touching on a profound spiritual truth that **service is not just about helping others and changing things, but is in fact an expression of the search for God.**" --Henri Nouwen
- Remember when we talked about **God expressing his divinity through servanthood**? Well if our goal is to be like Jesus, then we could do worse than ministering and serving others.
- In fact, Jesus even **calls himself a servant** when referring to his **purpose** on earth. As Kermit likes to say, "**You're never closer to Jesus than when you serve.**"
- And this makes **even more sense** when you look at it in light of this entire passage.
- When you **don't produce fruit—don't serve and love others**—you're **cut off** from Jesus because **he was a servant** and because **he is found in the faces of those we serve**.
- Your **faith withers** because you're not **connected to the vine**, and you **dry up and die spiritually** until you **become worthless**...because you aren't **fulfilling your purpose**.

- And when you **do** obey Jesus' command and **love, serve, minister, give—fulfill your purpose?**
- **You find your faith growing**—because you're becoming like our **humble, servant king**.
- **You find joy**—because you're **built for relationships** and your **purpose is to help and love others**. And when you **fulfill your purpose** and do what you're made for, **joy is the natural result**.
- **And you find Jesus**. Because as much as we **want to put him in the clouds**, he's more often **found in the trenches, helping people out**. And if you find **that you're missing God**, that you're **faith is dry or God seems vacant** in your spiritual life...
- **Maybe you're looking for God in the wrong places**. He's not found in comfort, complacency and looking out for number 1. **He's found in loving serving and looking out for others...even above yourself**.
- God can use you...and it's far, far more important than you think.