

A Missionary Partner with God

Embrace Your Life Vision!

Matthew 6:33; Mark 10:10 -22

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Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

The other day I looked up the word *sermon* in a dictionary. I found two definitions:

- 1. A talk on a religious or moral subject given by a member of the clergy as part of a religious service*
- 2. A long and tedious talk, especially one telling somebody how or how not to behave*

I wasn't sure I liked those definitions. They sound boring. Often, people complain that what they get in church is religious rhetoric that disconnects with what they experience in life. I don't want to talk that way. I'm not sure that the subject today is strictly religious or moral. I certainly hope it is not tedious and long. Well, all that long! Call our conversation what you want, but today I want to help you see yourself. How do you see

your life? Who are you? Why are you here on earth? What purpose are you fulfilling? I'm not as concerned with any specific behavior of yours as I am with the vision that drives all your behavior.

In the Scriptures God has spoken to you and me and laid before us a vision. Your creator has a vision for your life. He has given you unique potential with a specific purpose in mind. Years ago, I thought that we would realize that potential and fulfill that purpose unknowingly. I had a puppet theology. I envisioned God pulling our strings like puppets so that we would unconsciously fulfill his will. It was a Forrest Gump notion. In that old movie, Forrest just kept ending up in the right place at the right time. His life was charmed. Although he pretty much was unaware of what was going on, he just ended up doing the right thing, and making a big impact. Well, there may be some truth to that, but it also can be misleading. My prayer was "Steer me Jesus." It was a mindless approach. I assumed that I would accomplish God's will by just showing up and doing whatever seemed good. The problem is that we were not created as puppets or pawns, but as creatures reflective of God himself. We were made in the image of God. We were made in the image of a thoughtful and purposeful God. We were not made to live as slaves or mindless robots, but as full companions, children of the living God. God created us to be his partners on earth. Do you see yourself as God's partner? You either have an accurate idea of what that means, or you error at the most basic level of living. This is so relevant. Your vision affects your parenting, your work, your marriage, your friendships, your hobbies, your time, your money management. Everything!

God's vision for your life is embodied in the person of Jesus. Jesus understood this. He said to his disciples, "As the father has sent me, so I'm sending you." God had essentially the same picture in mind for the disciples as he did for Jesus; and remember, Jesus commanded them to make disciples of all nations. To all humanity he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." How should you go? "I am the way," he said. What's the truth? "I am the truth," he insisted. How should I live? "I am the life," he declared. Where should you go? "Follow me," he called. What should I be? "Feed on me. I am the bread," he declared. Aren't we what we eat? "I am the light," Jesus declared. Jesus is not only Savior and Lord, he is a prototype. He reveals what our relationship with God is to be like. That is why Jesus said, not to just his disciples but to everyone: ***"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and God will provide whatever you need."*** Jesus was a partner with God, and he is calling us to that same partnership. It is an economic partnership, a ministry partnership and a missionary partnership.

One day a wealthy, young man asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Why do you suppose the man asked the question? He was sincere. There was no pretense. Jesus looked at the man and loved him. He honestly wanted to know what he must do to go to heaven. Do you know what motivated him? Nagging doubt! The man had nagging doubts that he would make it to heaven. He was sensitive. He felt estrangement from God. A lot of people aren't that sensitive. They cover that feeling of estrangement with anger, excuses, theories about God or self-righteous justification. This man felt estranged, and didn't cover it up. And Jesus loved him.

Jesus taught that people are estranged from God. He taught that there are powers that keep us estranged. No amount of religious activism overcomes that estrangement. It doesn't matter whether you prostrate yourself before Buddha, pray five times a day to Allah, wear prayer tassels for Jehovah, attend Sunday worship of Jesus, teach Sunday School or chair some church committee. Nothing we do overcomes that estrangement. Over the two-plus-decades that I've led congregations, I've seen so many of my people, good, honest, moral, religious people suffer that estrangement. They don't experience partnership with God. They miss the basic vision that God has for them. They feel pretty much alone. Sometimes they are angry, and often they are afraid. This young man that talked to Jesus observed the Jewish law. He tithed his income and obeyed the law of God as best he knew. He would be honored and respected in this congregation and anywhere he went. Still he felt estranged.

The Bible teaches that all of our problems, even death, flow out of this estrangement from our creator. It is not that we are unlovable. The problem is not that people are so bad, though we can be. The problem is that we are estranged from our heavenly father, the source of love, goodness and life. Through deception evil clouds our vision, captures our hearts and controls our destiny. We end up being driven by fear, anger, pride, lust or some combination of that. We hurt the people we love, including ourselves. That comes from deception and estrangement. It is a path to personal, social and global devastation. The Bible doesn't offer us steps for self-improvement. It calls us to believe a savior, who reconciles us to God, our father.

Jesus had no rebuke for this wealthy man. Instead, he directed the man to the only thing that would free him from the deception that was leading to his personal devastation. The man was wealthy. His possessions offered him security. His possessions made him attractive so that he had friends. His possessions brought him influence and gave him an aura of importance. They offered him comforts. They were his source of life and fulfillment. They shouted his success and worth; and they filled his vision and controlled his life. They were his trust and hope. He was their servant. Despite his confession otherwise, they were his god. Quietly, silently, they were destroying both him and those around him. Jesus told him that he lacked one thing: “Go, sell all your possessions. Give the proceeds to the poor; and come, follow me.” A poor man struggling to eat could have easily done that. The wealthy young man could not. His wealth offered him the illusion of power, security and respect. He would stay its servant. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through a tiny hole, the eye of a sewing needle, than for a rich man, who acquires wealth while estranged from God, to pass into heaven. The disciples, who admired the young man, were shocked. “We are hopeless then,” they exclaimed.

The disciples were learning about partnership with God as they followed Jesus, but they still felt estranged. They saw the light in Jesus, but the light was not in them. Intimacy with God did not come until they were overwhelmed by God’s Spirit of love. Then their hearts were at rest. Then they were witnesses not only of Christ’s power for others that they observed, but of liberation that they experienced themselves. They were more than believers. They were witnesses. As a result, they focused on helping others

come to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ, not just because they believed Jesus is savior, but because they experienced him as savior.

Many people believe that religious faith is a matter of personal preference and opinion. They suggest that the value of faith is *not that it uncovers the truth about our world*, but that it is helpful. It gives comfort, hope and morals. They argue that missionary efforts that convert people from one religion to another are arrogant and misguided. However, if you've been liberated from deception and personal destruction, that talk becomes nonsense. You know deception blinded you to the reality of your heavenly father. You know deception led you down a destructive path. You've seen the deception and the powers holding you broken. Your taste of compassion gives you compassion. Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th Century preacher, said:

Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself; be sure of that.

If you've been liberated, you'll understand what others face. You'll hunger for them to experience the intimacy with God you enjoy. You'll want them to know their loving father; and you'll want them spared from all the pain. You'll have passion to witness. It won't be hard for you to realize that God is calling you to be his missionary partner because now the light of Jesus is within you. You then are a priest who can help others. Embrace your priesthood for those who struggle with estrangement. Make it a priority.

If you still feel estranged, you don't need to be. Agree with God about what is wrong in your life. Ask forgiveness and embrace it in the cross. Guilt is the fear of judgment, and Jesus died to remove it. Acknowledge Christ as Lord. Let him teach you and lead you. His Spirit will fill you with love and counsel you; and you'll find yourself a missionary partner with God.