

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive. -- Gil Bailie

People spend most of their lives trying to obtain the things they crave, pretending to be somebody else, and being afraid of who they are. Fear, greed, and pride join forces to attack the very identity and ability of every man and woman. And shame is the weapon.

God's word speaks directly into this battle, *"I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world."* Jeremiah 1:5 NLT

God puts a set of gifts, talents and strengths into every heart and they are designed to fulfill one specific destiny. Because of this our response has to be an effort to know who we are and use what God has given us to speak to the world.

In the last few decades many resources have been developed to help us understand who we are and how we were made. You can find out your personality profile, your love languages, your strengths, your spiritual gifts and even learning styles. So much of this is helpful and fascinating to know as we seek to develop ourselves.

Too many gifted Christians spend their abilities in honest pursuits but fall way short of their calling and destiny in Christ. I am made to wonder why this is. Could it be the expectation of others? Could it be the desire for material and social success? Could it be that sometimes we try to follow in someone else's footsteps and imitate their destiny instead of our own?

I think the biggest reason we often settle for less than God's will is a lack of courage to follow our hearts.

Today we are looking at a story from the early history of the Christian church. In this story we learn the importance of understanding our place within Christ's body.

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. 3 And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. 4 Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

5 Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). 6 These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

7 So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too. Acts 6:1-7 NLT

The disciples found themselves in the middle of the amazing and extraordinary chaos of the first century church. The church was exploding to life all around them. Literally thousands were coming to faith. Miracles were happening all around them including lives dramatically and radically changing.

As a result the disciples found themselves in the situation entrepreneurs in fast growing companies often face. The creative spark and expertise become bogged down in administrative details. Instead of casting vision and leading they became managers bogged down with putting out fires and consumed with human resource type problems. Somebody has to do that but in this case it was not them.

Growing churches go through the same thing even today.

How do our personal gifts and strengths play into the work of God on this earth? How can who we are help shape the lives of others and enable us to participate in the story of God?

Let's look at Acts 6.

1. We should not allow our circumstances to define us Conservation

If we are not careful things may happen in our lives that threaten to leave us in a rut that can last a lifetime. We must understand who we are and do the things that we are most capable of. Who we are should define us instead of our circumstances.

2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program."

The disciples realized that they had specific tasks to do but because of the circumstances they had allowed themselves to quit doing what they should be doing in order to do what had to be done. To be honest there will always be some of this in our lives but we should always try to conserve the best of our time and energy to do what we know we are good at instead of settling for doing lesser things.

Graham Cooke said, "God has not called us to do what seems possible, reasonable or normally attainable . . . We're supposed to be doing what is impossible and outrageous."

The idea is that we should be self-aware of who we are and who God made us to be and then do our best to live within those strengths offering ourselves to God for His service.

2. We are defined by our God-given design

Confirmation

3 And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility.

There are many forces that make up who you are – personality, gender, and history, as well as your spiritual and natural gifting. It's God who selects the forces and calls them to purpose but it is up to us to understand who we are and release them toward God's purpose and destiny for our lives.

Let me be quick to point out that while we all may share certain traits or similarities we are also designed very uniquely for a purpose. You should not assume that the disciple's role was more important than the role of waiting on tables.

If you question that, then pay attention to the qualifications for the selection process. The job description was not about their skill as table waiters. On the contrary it was three-fold and dealt with their spiritual lives.

- a. Well-respected
- b. Full of the Holy Spirit
- c. Full of wisdom

Sometimes I wish we would get back to that standard within the church instead of just looking for people to fill slots on a spread sheet. But that's another sermon.

In this story they were looking for specific qualifications. Whatever you are and however God has made you is what you have to work with. Whatever others have confirmed in you as your gifts and strengths is what you need to work on. These things are what you offer to God and His usefulness.

When you are doing things that are outside of your gifts and calling for a long period of time the grace of God may begin to fade. The joy fades. The work just becomes tedious and laborious and frustrating. These symptoms may be signs that you are working outside of your God-given design. You have to be careful with that because you also might just need a break.

3. We must be committed to personal development

Cultivation

The Gallup Strengthsfinder assessment teaches this. We have often been taught to work on our weaknesses but in reality it would be much more advantageous to work on cultivating our strengths. Think about that for a moment.

Leo Buscaglia said, "Our talents are the gift God gives to us. What we make of our talents is our gift back to God."

. 4 Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

The disciples knew who they were and what Jesus had left in their hands. Consequently you need to know that not all of the twelve fit this description. I think they did a variety of things as the church grew and developed. The ones doing the speaking in this story identified what they needed to be doing and who they were but I believe that as time went on some were leaders, some were managers, some were a bit of both, some served in other ways.

Our calling is to take our raw talents – intelligence, artistic ability, athletic strength, relational skills, interest and passions – and cultivate them through practice and learning.

Why should we do this? Because there is a purpose we would put on this earth and it is more than making money and trying to survive. We have to do that to live but within our daily existence there is a greater purpose that God calls us to. It goes back to the destiny we talked about week.

Listen there are times in this life when you have to do certain things just because they are obligations, not because of your gifts. That is a reality that will always be with us. But it is so important to know when you have a choice and then shift to activities that are a true expression of your calling in both career and ministry.

Shakespeare wrote the following words:

There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Sometimes I think we settle for lesser things because we don't really want to know what God wants us to do with our lives. Soren Kierkegaard wrote this philosophical lines:

"There is nothing with which every person is so afraid as getting to know how enormously much they are capable of doing and becoming."

Let's not be afraid but let pursue cultivate who God made us to be.

So much of what Jesus teaches is just nuts according to the world... he taught THAT...

- The way up is down
- The way in is out
- The way first is last
- The way of success is service
- The way of attainment is relinquishment
- The way of strength is weakness
- The way of security is vulnerability
- The way of protection is forgiveness (even to 7 x 70)
- The way of life is death – death to self, society, family

- Know your strengths. Why? Because that's the only way that you can lay them down.
- God's power is made perfect...where? In our weakness.
- Want to get the most? Go to where the least is.
- Want to be free? Give complete control to God.
- Want to become great? Become least.
- Want to find yourself? Forget yourself.
- Want honor? Honor yourself with humility
- Want to 'get even' with your enemies? Bless, love and pray for them

Nietzsche was right. To a people clawing their way to reach the top of the the dung heap, this is nuts. The gospel presents crazy ways of thinking about power, crazy definitions of success, crazy ideas and images about the meaning and purpose of life, crazy story-lines that no author would plot.

“It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God.” Rick Warren

Here is the reason why:

4. Our dedication will lead to the discipleship of others Commission

Everything we do as Christians should be an effort to ultimately lead others to Jesus Christ. That is Jesus' commission to the church and to individuals. Remember the title of this series is, “So you want to be a Christian?” Christians are all about God's story and will on this earth. His story has always been about radically changing lives from the inside out.

We may do all kinds of things to connect with people, minister to people, love people and connect with people but we should never forget that the ultimate goal is see them believe in Jesus Christ and become followers. Anything else is just social services.

7 So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too

When we do what we are supposed to be doing within the will of God His commission and purpose will be fulfilled.

Scriptures:

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function,⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

⁶ In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. ⁷ If

your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. Romans 12:4-8 NLT

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles,^[e] some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.^[f]

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. 1 Corinthians 12:12-18 NLT

And the same is true for you. Since you are so eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives, seek those that will strengthen the whole church. 1 Corinthians 14:12 NLT

George Muller was born in Prussia on September 27, 1805. His father was a collector of taxes and George seemed to inherit his father's ability with figures.

When Muller was converted to Christ he was impressed by the many recurring statements of Jesus for us "to ask." At this point in Muller's life he and his wife launched into a daring experiment. First, they gave away all of their household goods. The next step was even more daring, he refused all regular salary from the small mission he had been serving. He then set out to establish an orphan home to care for the homeless children of England.

The first home was dedicated in a rented building on April 21, 1836. Within a matter of days, 43 orphans were being cared for. Muller and his co-workers decided their experiment would be set up with the following guidelines:

- 1- No funds would ever be solicited.
- 2- No debts were ever to be incurred.
- 3- No money contributed for a specific purpose would ever be used for any other purpose.
- 4- All accounts would be audited annually.
- 5- No ego-pandering by the publication of donor's names.
- 6- No "names" of prominent people would be sought for the board or to advertise the institution.
- 7- The success of the orphanage would be measured not by the numbers served or by the amount of money taken in, but by God's blessing on the work, which Muller expected to be in direct proportion to the time spent in prayer.

When the first building was constructed, Muller and his friends remained true to their convictions. The public was amazed when a second building was opened six months after the first. They kept concentrating on prayer and eventually there were five new buildings, 110 workers, and 2,050 orphans being cared for.

George Muller not only counted on God to provide, but he believed that God would provide abundantly. For over 60 years Muller recorded every specific prayer request and the results. Muller was responsible for the care of 9,500 orphans during his life. These children never went without a meal. Muller never asked for help from anyone but God. \$7,500,000 came to him over the course of his life and he vows it was all in answer to believing prayer.

There are three things you can do to help yourself develop what God has given you.

- a. Humble yourself to realize you don't need spectacular abilities to be significant in God's world.
- b. Trust God enough to believe that He has already given you the gifts and abilities you need.
- c. Choose love instead of fear! When God's perfect love is in us it drives out fear.