

## **Meant for More Than Being Religious (Eph. 4:13)**

**Chris Altrock – February 14, 2010**

A few of summers ago I was driving one my kids to a devotional which was being held at the home of the Frizzells, long-time Highland members. Jordan and I got into my car at our Bartlett home, drove to Interstate 40 west, took the Perkins exit, drove south on Perkins to Park, turned west on Park, then south on Cherry Road. I pulled into the Frizzell's neighborhood off Cherry Road and parked right next to their house. Suddenly it hit me. This was not the Frizzell's house! It *used* to be. But they had recently moved to Cordova. I had driven to their old address. When I had entered my car in Bartlett, I had gone into a kind of "auto pilot" mode and without thinking I did what I had done dozens of times before: drove to the east Memphis address of the Frizzells. And because I did what I did without engaging my mind, I missed the goal. I didn't make it to the Frizzell's actual house.

This phenomenon is one of the great dangers we face regarding our spirituality. It is too easy to go into an "auto pilot" mode in our spiritual lives and do unthinkingly what we have done time and time again. It is too easy to go through religious motions without actually engaging our mind. And when we do this, we wind up missing the real goal. Think about it. Why are you here this morning? You woke up earlier than many in the Mid-South and drove, some of you many miles, to this building. Why? In a short while, many of you will walk to classrooms where your Sunday School classes meet. Why? Many of you are involved in ministry— you teach a children's class, you watch nursery, you facilitate discussion in a Huddle, or you work with one of our urban ministries. Why? During the week, many of you pray, or read your Bible. Why? These are things that many of us have done for months or years. And some of us wind up doing these things purely out of routine. We've long forgotten the actual goal and have just gone into auto pilot. *For some of us, our spirituality is driven by routine – by no real goals at all.* We just do these spiritual things because it's what we've always done. And we do them without really thinking where they may be leading us.

I recently read an article by a Christian professor in which he tried to help his students see this very thing.<sup>1</sup> He told of a female student who came to him for advice about her spiritual life. The student said this: *"I need to spend more time working on my relationship with God."* I responded, *"Why would you want to do that?"* Startled she says, *"What do you mean?"* *"Well, why would you want to spend any time at all on working on your relationship with God?"* *"Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"* *"Let me answer by asking you a question. Can you think of anyone, right now, to whom you need to apologize? Anyone you've wronged?"* She thinks and answers, *"Yes."* *"Well, why don't you give them a call today and ask for their forgiveness. That might be a better use of your time than working on your relationship with God."* Obviously, I was being a bit provocative with the student. And I did go on to clarify. But I was trying to push back on a strain of Christianity I see in both my students and the larger Christian culture. *Specifically, when the student said "I need to work on my relationship with God" I knew exactly what she meant. It meant praying more, getting up early to study the Bible, to start going back to church. Things along those lines...Of course...Personal acts of piety and devotion are vital to a vibrant spiritual life and continued spiritual formation. But all too often "working on my*

*relationship with God" has almost nothing to do with trying to become a more decent human being....Take, for example, how Christians tip and behave in restaurants. If you have ever worked in the restaurant industry you know the reputation of the Sunday morning lunch crowd. Millions of Christians go to lunch after church on Sundays and their behavior is abysmal... The Christian professor was pointing out that sometimes we do a lot of spiritual things but we do them without recognizing the real goal. We do our Sunday morning routine of dressing up and going to church services but it has no impact on how we treat the waiter. We practice our spiritual routine of prayer and Bible study but it doesn't seem to make us quicker to apologize to a person we've hurt. For some of us, our spiritual life is driven by routine and little thought as to the actual goal.*

*But while some of us are driven by routine and no goals, others of us are driven by the wrong goals. During my recent trip to visit Nathan and Karen Luther, our missionaries in the Philippines, Nathan told me of a difficult time in their past. It took place around the time the Luthers moved from Memphis to Bacolod, Philippines. There were some cruel people attending the Bacolod Church of Christ at the time. They were led by an even more cruel woman. And they began stirring up trouble for Nathan even before he arrived. These church members knew that Nathan was being trained at the Sunset International Bible Institute in Texas. And for various ill-informed reasons, they believed that Sunset did not adhere to Scriptural truth. Thus, they believed Nathan would come to Bacolod and spread false teaching. These same church members, for ill-informed reasons, believed Highland to be a liberal church that did things contrary to the Bible. They knew that Nathan and Karen had been members here. And they thus believed Nathan and Karen would try to turn the Bacolod church into a church like Highland. Finally, the woman who led this group went online and found some bulletins of the Highland church. One of the bulletins shared brief details about our Special Contribution for World and Urban Missions. This particular article mentioned that some of the Special Contribution helps children. Nathan's and Karen's ministry at the Shiloh Christian School was listed as an example. This woman took note of the total goal for the Special Contribution listed in that article. She divided it by the number of ministries listed (the article didn't list all the ministries we fund). And she arrived at a figure which she believed Highland would be sending to the Luthers from the Special Contribution. She believed that this large amount of money was going to be given to the children of the church. About this same time, Nathan and Karen purchased their first vehicle in the Philippines. The cost of the vehicle about close to the total figure the woman had calculated that Highland would be sending the Luthers. So, she started telling others in the church that money that was meant for their children had been spent by the Luthers on a new car. This woman created turmoil with all these lies. She was so misguided that she kept a little notebook in which she recorded the sins of church members. At one point, Nathan and Karen received a letter from her listing all their sins. The group led by that woman eventually split off the Bacolod Church of Christ. That group then split further into three groups. (Aren't we thankful that things like that don't happen in America?) This woman had very clear goals when it came to her spiritual life. She was not just going through the motions. She had an objective which she was passionate about. The problem is, her goal was the wrong goal. Some people pursue the wrong goals with their spiritual lives.*

What then, is the *right* goal? What *is* your goal as an individual Christian? Is it to get to heaven? Is it to have the resources to raise a good family? Is it to make your parents happy? What *is* your goal?

Just as importantly, what is *our* goal? Why do we do what we do as a congregation? What should *our* goal be for our corporate spiritual life? Is our goal to build a building? Is it to pay off a building? Is it to be well-thought of in Memphis? Is it to not be sectarian, to not be legalistic, or to not be judgmental? What is the *right* goal for the spiritual life we pursue as individuals and as a community?

In [Eph. 4:13](#) Paul answers these questions: *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13 ESV)*. This verse plays off of the previous verse. In the previous verse, Paul writes about the church being built up. That image of a church being built up ought to lead us to wonder: what will the church look like when it is completely built up?<sup>2</sup> As our own physical facility has been under construction, we've wondered what it will look like when it's finished. Similarly, Paul writes here about the church's spiritual construction. And it leads us to wonder: what will the church look like when it's spiritually finished? Verse 13 provides this answer.

Notice that Paul begins with these words: "*until we all attain.*" The word "attain" means "to accomplish," "to complete," "to arrive at a goal." Paul wants to engage us in a discussion about what we're trying to accomplish with all of this. He wants to prod our thinking regarding our goal. What *are* we trying to "attain?"

First, Paul says the goal looks like this: *unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God*. Scholars debate what "the faith" means here. Some suggest it means doctrine, the body of Christian beliefs. That *is* a possibility. But if that's what it means here, Paul is saying that what unites us in the church is a *thing*—a collection of beliefs. What we hold in common is our commitment to a non-living entity, a set of teachings. I think Paul probably has something else in mind with the words "the faith." It is just as likely that "the faith" refers to faith or trust in Jesus which all believers demonstrate when they enter into relationship with Jesus. "Faith" can refer to that initial response we have when we hear about Jesus and come to believe in Jesus. But if "the faith" refers to the *initial* response we have to Jesus, then "the knowledge of the Son of God" refers to a relationship with Jesus that grows over time.<sup>3</sup> That is, "faith" describes the relationship we have with Jesus when we start out as a Christian. And "knowledge of the Son of God" refers to a deeper relationship with Jesus that grows over time. Thus, Paul is saying is this: what unites us, what we have in common in the church, is that all of us experienced that initial faith response to Jesus. We share a common experience of coming to faith in Jesus. But, that's not our only shared experience. We also now share the experience of growing deeper in our knowledge of the Son of God. The church is not a group of people united around a thing—around a set of beliefs. The church is the group of people united around a person—Jesus Christ—and sharing a common journey of growing in our relationship with Jesus. What makes

us the church is that we are the people who are moving from our initial response of faith in Jesus to a deeper knowledge of the Son of God.

Here's how I'd boil all this down: *God's goal is for the entire church to share in common a pursuit of increasing intimacy with Jesus.* Above everything else, God wants the church and the individuals in it to have this as a primary goal: to grow increasingly intimate with Jesus Christ. What is to unite us, what is to bind us together, is that we are a group of people who share in a common pursuit of intimacy with Jesus. It goes way beyond doctrine, worship practices, and the name on the church building. What is to most unite us is that we have this goal: to grow increasingly intimate with Jesus.

And I guess the question is this: is that *your* goal? Is that *our* goal? When you do the religious things that you do, are you doing them to achieve this goal? When we as a congregation engage in services and ministries, are they driven by this goal? Are we striving to grow increasingly intimate with Jesus?

Valentine's Day reminds especially spouses that this "thing" we're in with that husband or wife is not just some institution. We're not committed simply to some vows or to an ideal called "marriage." This thing we're in is a relationship with a real person. It's all about love and growing in love with a person. The same is true when it comes to our spiritual lives. This is all about relationship with a real person, Jesus Christ, and growing in love with him.

But Paul continues. Let's read the text again: *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* ([Eph. 4:13](#) ESV). Not only does Paul speak of "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" as a primary spiritual goal. But he speaks of a second goal: *until we all attain...to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* ([Eph. 4:13](#) ESV). The words "mature manhood" literally mean, "fully grown man" or "fully grown person." Our goal is to grow up. To reach spiritual adulthood. To become mature.

And what is maturity? This: *the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.* Here's one way to picture this. Think of any character trait: being compassionate to people who are different from you, being patient with others, being long-tempered, being pure, keeping promises, trusting God, being joyful, rarely being stressed out. Think of any character trait. Then, mark a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10 for that trait. For example, take compassion. A 1 on the compassion scale would be someone who rarely thinks of others. At 10 would be someone who dies for others. That 10 in every character trait is Jesus. No matter what character trait you think of, the 10 is Jesus. Every time. That's the "fullness of Christ". That's the "stature of Christ." If you could measure Christ, all of those 10's is what you would find. Now, take any of those character traits with their scale of 1 to 10 and put a mark where you are. On a scale of 1 to 10 in compassion, Jesus is 10, where are you? A 3? A 7? On a scale of 1 to 10 in keeping your promises, Jesus is 10. But where are you? A 4? A 6? Think about us as a congregation. On a scale of 1 to 10 in trusting God, Jesus is a 10. But what are we? A 2? An 8? Now, here's the

goal: keep growing up, by God's help, until there's no longer a gap between where you are, where we are, and where Jesus is.

Here's how I'd boil all this down: *God's goal is for the entire church to share in common a pursuit of increasing imitation of Jesus.* What is to characterize us, what is to unite us is this: we are individuals, we are a congregation, devoted to a common pursuit of increased imitation of Jesus.

In his book 1776 David McCullough writes of the British attack of Brooklyn in the days of George Washington.<sup>4</sup> It was a fierce battle and many American soldiers were captured by the British. One British Lieutenant wrote in his journal about the American soldiers who were captured and how his men beat them and mistreated them. He put it poignantly: his fellow officers "*shed their ideas of being heroes. The prisoners who knelt and sought to surrender were beaten.*" That's a thought-provoking line: *they shed their ideas of being heroes.* I think too often that line describes us as individuals and as congregations. We have given up our idea of being heroes. We've grown content with just being religious. We've grown content with just being slightly above the culture when it comes to character. But Paul calls us back to this enormous dream, the dream of being heroes, the dream of attaining to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

And I guess the question is this: is that *your* goal? Is that *our* goal? When you do the religious things that you do, are you doing them to achieve this goal? When we as a congregation engage in services and ministries, are they driven by this goal? Are we striving to grow in our imitation of Jesus?

It's one thing to understand this goal. It's another to "attain" to it. Paul calls us to not simply know the right goal. He calls us to attain to it, to strive towards it, to work towards it.

Dallas Willard writes this:<sup>5</sup> "*The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy.* Willard is saying that it is no great success to know the right goal. That's only part of the battle. Generally, humans want what is right. We want the right goal. But we rarely commit to the kind of life that will make that goal a reality.

In order to grow in increasing *intimacy* with Jesus, we've got to commit to a certain way of life. Specifically, we've got to commit to certain practices which will enable us to grow deeper in our knowledge of Jesus. Just as a married couple commits to practices like long walks after dinner, regular dates during the month, and listening to each other, so we too must commit to similar spiritual practices. Increasing intimacy with Jesus will not just happen. It must be nurtured.

The same is true with growing in *imitation* of Jesus. Such growth will not miraculously happen. It must be developed over time.

Recent events in the sports world have reminded us of this. Baseball player Mark McGuire was voted the American League Rookie of the Year in 1987, given the American League Gold Glove at first base in 1990, and voted the 1999 ESPY: Male Athlete of the Year. The same year he was named to the All-Century Team. In 1998 he broke baseball's homerun record. But last January, McGuire admitted that he had used steroids for a decade, including the time he broke the homerun record. There is a temptation in professional sports to use illegal drugs to bypass what normally only comes through discipline and practice. But there is no performance enhancing drug in the spiritual life. There is no pill to swallow or liquid to ingest that will quickly make you closer to Jesus and make you more like Jesus. It will only come through disciplined habits and practices.

You may be interested in exploring this in-depth. If so, I want to recommend a book and offer an opportunity to discuss the book. The book is John Ortberg's The Me I Want to Be. It just came out last month and features practical help in creating a spiritual growth plan. You can order a copy at Gary Willoughby's bookstore table. And I'll host a discussion of the book on Wednesday night, March 31<sup>st</sup>, at a classroom here at Harding.

What's the goal? To grow in intimacy with Jesus. And to grow in our imitation of Jesus. If you're struggling with that goal, this is a good time to share that. Let us pray with you about that. And, if you're not in a relationship with Jesus, this is a good time to take care of that.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Beck, <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2009/08/bait-and-switch-of-contemporary.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Walter L. Liefeld Ephesians IVP New Testament Commentary Series (IVP, 1997), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Inspired by but not necessarily supported by F. F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians (Eerdmans, 1984), 350.

<sup>4</sup> David McCullough, 1776 (Simon & Schuster, 2005), 182.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. "Dr. Willard's Diagnosis," Christianity Today (Sept. 2006): 45-51.