

Brian Wilbur, November 8, 2009

Active Gospel Culture: Your Ministry – Part 3

1 Cor. 9:19-23, 10:23 – 11:1 (Scripture quotations from NIV unless otherwise noted.)

I. Introduction

As I said last week, this is where we are headed:

To be a Christ-centered community (Acts 2:41-47) seeking gospel growth in the greater Arlington area and around the world by faithfully, regularly, and prayerfully ministering the Word to other people, for the gathering in of the lost and the building up of the saints – that God may be glorified “in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever” (Ephesians 3:21 NIV)!

The encouragement to you in this sermon series is: lay hold of your ministry. Faithfully, regularly and prayerfully minister God’s Word to other people – those who know Christ, and those who don’t. The first two sermons focused primarily on your ministry of the Word to other Christians; in this sermon we begin to put more emphasis on your ministry of the Word to non-Christians.

II. The Biblical Foundations of Your Ministry to Non-Christians

- A. Firstly, it is implied in the Great and Second Commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).
- B. Secondly, it is woven into the very nature of discipleship (the Great Commission – Matthew 28:16-20).
- C. Thirdly, it is – as we shall see – what it means to follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38).
- D. Fourthly, the New Testament letters point us in this direction (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and 10:23-11:1; Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Peter 3:1-2).

Is it not a cause for great wonderment, then, when we who claim to follow the Lord Jesus and devote ourselves to the apostles’ teaching, give so little of our lives to actually proclaiming the gospel? Could it be that we have, over time, developed habits of heart and lifestyle that now make it difficult for us to share the gospel with other people? Could it be that we are ashamed of the gospel, and that we would much prefer to be known as respectable and nice rather than as evangelists and proselytizers? Could it be that we have actually forgotten that our calling is to make disciples – which, while it most certainly includes ministries to help Christians grow into maturity, also includes ministries to help bring non-Christians to the Savior?

What would it look like if we, as a church community, were transformed into persons who faithfully, regularly and prayerfully proclaimed the gospel to non-Christians? How would it affect our conversations with one another? How would it affect our attitudes in the workplace? How would it affect our prayer life? How would it affect our discipleship ministries? How would it affect our decisions in dozens of areas, including whom we invite over to the house for dinner, and why? And get this: if we are to follow Paul's example, then we actually ought to shape our entire lives around the interests of the gospel – not around the interests of family or career or money or recreation or retirement, but around the gospel. Putting the gospel first means not only that it comes before family; it means it should shape your family. Putting the gospel first means not only that it comes before your career; it means it should shape your career. Which means, by the way, that some of you may end up not even having a career in the typical sense of the word. But you will be so captivated by the interests of the gospel, that you will rejoice on the day that other more career-minded folk deride you for throwing your education and skills and earning potential away. I am not saying that none of you will have a career – even a successful one. What I am saying is that having a career or not having a career is really beside the point. Let the gospel shape your decisions about career. And then, putting the gospel first means that it should shape your finances and your concept of retirement. Some day you may retire from formal employment. But you will never retire from being a Christian, a vine worker, a disciple-maker. So even in retirement, the gospel will shape your decisions about hundreds of things.

III. Your Calling to Non-Christians

Now, is this all pie-in-the-sky? Am I just on a high-minded soapbox about evangelism and missions? Does God really call us to do all things for the sake of the gospel? The answer is: Yes. Jesus lost his life for the sake of the gospel. Jesus calls us to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel. Paul lost his life for the sake of the gospel. And Paul wrote to the Corinthians (and to us): "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul didn't say this to the leaders only; he said this to the whole church, and each member of it.

Your calling is to put your whole life out there for the interests of the gospel. Brothers and sisters, this evening I am not calling you to "full-time ministry" in the sense of being a vocational pastor or vocational evangelist or vocational missionary – although it would be cause for great joy if some of you gathered here pursue such paths. What I am calling you to – what the Lord is calling us to through this text – is full-time Christianity, such that our whole life is lived intentionally, strategically, and sacrificially for the sake of the gospel. Sadly, we are often not taught to think this way. Our Christian faith is in one compartment of life; marriage and family in

another; education and career in another; sports and leisure in still another. But we are not called to a compartmentalized faith. What is our faith? “Jesus is Lord.”

Is your life lived intentionally for the gospel?

Is your life lived strategically for the gospel?

Is your life lived sacrificially for the gospel?

IV. 1 Corinthians 9 – 11

A. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Paul’s life is governed by the gospel. Earlier he had written, “We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12). To be governed by the gospel means, practically speaking, to let your life be shaped by the highest good of other people. Why? Because the gospel isn’t an abstract set of priorities and values. God intends the gospel to be communicated to people, to be received by people, and to transform people. So if you say that you want your life to be governed by the gospel, understand what you are saying. What you are saying is that you want your life to be governed by the highest good of other people: your neighbors, your coworkers, your roommates, your friends, your family, and your Christian brothers and sisters. In other words, what you are saying is that you actually want to follow Jesus. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). Now before we lose our bearings, let’s go back to the first pole: the gospel. God’s call upon you, to let your life be governed by the highest good of other people, is a call to do whatever you can to minister the gospel to other people, because the gospel is the highest good of human beings. The gospel is a treasure of infinite value; getting this treasure into other people’s hearts and lives is the aim of love. Not that we don’t love people holistically, we do. But love is deficient when it doesn’t seek their highest good, which means that love is deficient when the gospel is absent.

I am saying the word “gospel” over and over again. Let’s be clear on what the gospel is. Think 1 Peter 3:18, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” And think 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Paul's life is an example to us: let your whole life be governed by the gospel, which means letting your whole life be shaped by the highest good of other people. So how does Paul live?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

How does Paul live? He lives as a servant of other people – and different kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, the weak. Notice the connection between Mark 10:44 (“whoever wants to be first must be slave of all”) and 1 Corinthians 9:23 (“I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible”).

Without compromising his message and without compromising his personal walk with the Lord, he identifies with different kinds of people; he builds bridges with them; he finds common ground with them; he uses their language and metaphors; he seeks to understand their spiritual background and influences. He does all of this, not to make a lot of friends, but to “win as many as possible,” to win them to the Lord. Paul's priorities and decisions are ordered according to the highest good of other people. Paul does this “for the sake of the gospel.” He treasures the gospel, loves the gospel, and lives for the gospel. Notice what he says: “I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

Paul wants to share in the blessings of the gospel. How do you share in the blessings of the gospel? By spreading the gospel. By letting your life be shaped by the highest good of other people, and ministering the gospel to them. I am reminded of a two-word contrast I heard from John Piper. We are not created to be cul-de-sacs of God's grace (who keep it only for ourselves), but conduits of God's grace to others. If you keep the message of God's grace only for yourself, you will not share in its blessings. But if you share the message of God's grace with others, you will share in the blessings of the gospel.

None of what I am about to say should be taken to imply that you shouldn't enjoy the goodness of creation and the positive features of human culture. By all means, receive the good of creation and culture, and give thanks to God for such good. But, as a Christian, even your receiving the good gifts of creation and culture must be shaped and modified by the priority of the gospel. What would it look like to have

gospel-shaped eyes as you live life? Suppose you viewed movies and read books, not only for personal enjoyment, but also as a means of building bridges into other people's lives – people who also watch movies and read books. And if you did this, then wouldn't even your choice of movies and books be modified by the aim of love, that is, the task of taking the gospel to other people? In other words, you would read movies and books most conducive to your gospel service to other people. And, suppose you viewed your hangout places from the vantage point of the gospel. Maybe the structure and setting of one establishment (say, a coffee shop), would better lend itself to building relationships and having meaningful conversations with those who work there. So you choose one place over another, not because of the quality of the coffee, but because one shows more promise for gospel advancement. And, suppose you viewed your hobbies not only as a means of connecting with long-standing friends and fellow Christians, but also (and especially) as a means of expanding your network of relationships for the sake of the gospel. All of this is to say: are we really serious about taking the treasure of the gospel to those who haven't yet received it?

B. 1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1

Now as we come to 1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1, I want you to see the lifestyle values that flow out of the gospel.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake – the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

1. Firstly, seek the good of others (10:24).

Your goal, as a Christian, is not to live life according to what is permissible. Hundreds of things are permissible that may not be constructive to other people. We need to learn to ask ourselves, in the decisions of life, whether a course of action

is merely permissible or whether it is constructive. This means that our calling as Christians is to learn to say “No” to permissible things, not because of some legalistic code of rules, but because we are seeking the highest good of other people, because we are seeking the advance of the gospel, because we are resolved to do nothing that would hinder the gospel of Christ.

In verses 25-30, Paul provides an example of seeking the good of others, of doing all things for the sake of the gospel and for the glory of God. He says, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”” The context is: in ancient times, meat was offered as a sacrifice to idols. The concern, therefore, is this: if you eat meat that was offered as a sacrifice to idols, are you worshiping the idol to which the meat was sacrificed? Or, to put it another way, can you partake of meat sacrificed to idols with a clear conscience, without being guilty of idol worship?

So, as it concerns you as an individual, eating meat sacrificed to idols is permissible. But Paul says: your reasoning process mustn’t stop at this point. You must ask yourselves another question: Is it constructive to others? Is it helpful to the advance of the gospel in people’s lives? Paul addresses this general issue in both 1 Corinthians 8 and here in 1 Corinthians 10:25-30.

2. Secondly, do everything you do for the glory of God (10:31).
3. Thirdly, doing everything for the glory of God means:

Seek the highest good of other people (10:32-33). And the highest good of other people is connected to the gospel. So Paul says, “I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.” Doing everything for the glory of God means letting your entire life being shaped by the interests of the gospel.

Don’t miss the connection between “the glory of God” and “the good of others.” The “glory of God” is our chief value and has hundreds of implications for life. But don’t miss the one implication that Paul puts before us here. The point of this text is not: Glorify God by excelling in your profession. It is very true that in your profession, you ought to glorify God by doing excellent work. But that’s not the point of this text. The point of this text is: **Glorify God by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the hearts and lives of other people.**

Seek the good of others (10:24). Live for the glory of God (10:31). Do not cause anyone to stumble (10:32). Seeking the good of others means seeking their salvation (10:33). And to whom does this apply? Everyone. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (11:1).

Everyone's life is unique. We are not looking for carbon copy Christians. Do not be preoccupied with how someone else is pursuing faithful discipleship. See John 21:19-23. For one person, faithful discipleship may mean walking away from a career or turning down a promotion. For another person, faithful discipleship may mean having a successful career. Your aim is to make it your aim to live intentionally, strategically and sacrificially for the sake of the gospel.

But every one of us is called to follow Christ's example. Christ glorified God by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the lives of other people. He laid his life down for this purpose. Paul glorified God by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the lives of other people. He gave his life for this purpose; and he suffered dearly. God's call on your life is: Glorify God by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the lives of other people.

This ought to be your aim in life, in whatever you do.

Are you pondering a move or house purchase? Are you looking for a job? Or are you looking for a new job? Or are you considering a possible promotion in your workplace? Are you considering additional education or graduate school? Are you wondering what direction to pursue in life or what next step to take?

Don't let the devil trip you up by ensnaring you with perpetual doubt about what God's will is for your life. Some people spend far too much time pondering what God's will is for the specific circumstances for their lives and far too little time putting into practice God's revealed will in Scripture for the overall shape and structure of their life. God's will for your life is to glorify Him by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the lives of other people. Live intentionally, strategically and sacrificially in this divine purpose.

In other words, let the gospel shape your decision about if to move, where to move, and how much to spend. Ask yourself: what living arrangement, what living location, will be best for the gospel. Let the gospel shape your decisions about education and employment. I have been reading a book on fatherhood. Good book. In this book, Tony Payne makes the point that the natural inclination of parents is to care too much about secondary things in the lives of their children, and too little about the primary thing. So parents say: we want our children to grow up, be well-educated, successful, and financially secure. We care very deeply that those things are in place, and we celebrate their achievement. But these are all secondary things. From the standpoint of the gospel, it matters very little whether one has a graduate degree, an established career, or financial stability. What should weigh most heavily on the heart of a parent: that your son or daughter is living as a disciple of the Lord Jesus and actively involved in making disciples of others. That's the primary thing. Put the interests of the gospel first, so that they shape what you do with your

education and employment. If you're not sure what to do next, do this: take a look at the vine, and get to work.

What are we after here at BridgeWay242? Faithful discipleship, and this includes faithful disciple-making. What would a faithful discipleship culture look like at BridgeWay242? It would include this: discipling other people would be normal for everyone. Teaching God's Word to unbelievers. Teaching God's Word to new believers and younger believers. Training other people to be faithful disciple-makers. Older men taking younger men under their wings: showing them an example, and teaching them to live faithfully in response to the gospel. Older women taking younger women under their wings: showing them an example, and teaching them to live faithfully in response to the gospel. Praying for individuals by name; praying for God's gospel purposes to be realized in their lives. Praying for open doors into people's hearts and lives. Having our conversations filled with this question: What is best for the gospel in this particular situation? How can I maximize my life, my singleness, my marriage, my family, my house, my money, and my skills, for the sake of the gospel? It would mean that none of us are content to put all of our energy and time into the trellis, but that the desire of our hearts is to attend to the vine, to glorify God by serving the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the lives of other people, by faithfully, regularly, and prayerfully speaking God's Word to non-Christians.

Do you need to repent? Do you need to experience change, at the level of your heart and mind, in order to be a faithful vine worker? Yes you do. And so do I.

Brothers and sisters, the point of this sermon is to encourage you to make changes in your life, in your lifestyle, and in your perspectives and priorities in dozens of areas.

Glorify God by seeking the interests of the gospel as the highest good in the hearts and lives of other people.