

Getting what you want: 3. Last Things First
Galatians 5:22-26
November 18, 2018
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As I have with each message in this series, I want to begin with the question. **What do you want?** It's a tricky question. It doesn't seem like it at first because a lot of things come to mind. We all want something. It's tricky because we all have had the experience of getting what we wanted only to discover later that it wasn't at all what we wanted. Some of you got a "who" only to realize later it wasn't who you really wanted. Some got a job only to realize it wasn't the job you really wanted. I was talking with someone who wanted a Ford F150 and he got more and more excited as he did the researched and went to the dealership to test drive. He really wanted an F150. A few months later, I asked about the new truck. His enthusiasm about the new truck was gone and I asked what that was about. And he said that once he started making the payments on the truck he realized a new truck wasn't what he wanted. He had hope a new truck would help him feel better about his life, but every time he thought about the \$30,000 he had spent he felt worse.

Last week, we learned that instead of what do you want, a better question is **What do you value?** Look behind what you want and you will find what you value. What do you value? It seems like it should be an easy question to answer – sit down, make a list – but it's more complicated, because as we saw last week what comes naturally is in conflict with what we value. And in the Bible, both Paul and James described the inner battle. But it is a battle we can win.

Some of you might remember a book that was published in 1989: *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It was written by Stephen Covey. More than 25 million copies have been sold. If you never read it, I think it is still a book worth reading. And in the book, he recommends taking time to complete the following exercise. He says: In your mind's eye, see yourself going to the funeral of a loved one. Picture yourself driving to the funeral home, parking the car, and getting out. You walk inside the building and make your way to the front of the room and look inside the casket, you suddenly come face to face with yourself. This is your funeral, three years from today. Everyone has come to honor you, to express feelings of love and appreciation for your life. As you take a seat and wait for the service to begin, you look at the program. There are to be four speakers. The first is from your family, the second speaker is one of your friends, the third is from your work or profession, and the fourth is from your church. Then Covey asks: What would you like each of these speakers to say about you? What character would you like them to have seen in you? What difference would you like to have made in their lives? And Covey says: **"If you carefully consider what you wanted to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success."** I want to change the end of that sentence and say, **"you will find what you really value."**

Last summer, I found myself in the middle of this exercise. I took a week by myself to look at my life and what I really wanted. If I live into my 90s, 2/3rds of my life is behind me – and though I've done a lot of things and achieved a lot of things and accumulated a lot of stuff – I began wondering if that's what I really wanted. What do I value? And at the end of my life, what do I want the people who knew me to say about me? And what I realized is that it had nothing to do with achievement and everything to do with how I treated people. I go to a lot of funerals, and I hear a lot eulogies and the ones that have the greatest impact are those people who used everything they had for others. So, what do you value? It wasn't a quick and easy question for

me. It took me a week of prayer and reflection to create my list of values and then I formed a plan for what I really want. A lot of people go through their entire lives and never know. Another way to ask this is: **What does God want for you?** Some people think the question is what does God want from you. But it's what does God want for you?

When Jesus was teaching his followers to pray, do you remember the first two words of Jesus' instruction? They said, "Jesus, teach us to pray." And he said, "Pray like this – OUR FATHER." Jesus invites us to address God as we would address a parent. And what does a good parent want from you? Good parents want NOTHING from their children. Good parents want FOR their children. God wants something for you and not from you. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us what this is. If God had his way – if God would override your free will – if God took control of your life, this is what God wants for you – these values. **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...** These three things would solve most of your problems. To love someone unconditionally, someone who is unlovable, and forgive even when they don't deserve it. Joy: to be able to step into difficult circumstances and have joy. Some of you have traveled to a third world country and met Christians who have absolutely nothing and they have more joy than you've ever had. What's that about? It is someone who has surrendered their life to God. Peace: some of you need medication for this. Your heavenly parent wants you to have something you know you want – peace, contentment. **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** When you discover what you really value, you are not as far from God as you may have imagined.

Then Paul says: **If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit.** Jesus' original invitation to his disciples was not obey me or submit to me but follow me. Jesus, where are you going? Just follow me. Where? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. **Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other.** What if everybody in your company got hold of this or with Thanksgiving around the corner, what if everybody in your family got hold of this. No longer do anything or say anything that provokes anger. No more taking sides. No more jealousy. It's what God wants for you.

Last week, I downloaded an app for my phone. It's called We Croak and five times a day I receive this notification on my phone. **Don't forget, you are going to die.** Maybe it sounds a little morbid or five times a day sounds excessive, but what I've found is that I need more than an occasional reminder of what life is really about. I can put off what's really important and settle for the immediate – the low hanging fruit, what I want, only to never get what I value. Don't forget, you are going to die... I don't know how much longer I'll keep the app on my phone, it keeps interrupting me. Five times a day, begin with the end in mind. Your heavenly father wants for you and when you follow where he is leading, that's how you get what you really want.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 18, 2018

Weekly Prayer: God, we come here in gratitude for your generosity that overflows in our lives. It is encouraging to know that you want what is best for us. Help us to pursue a definition of success that will bring you glory and lead us to a life of purpose. Amen.

Monday, November 19

Scripture: Matthew 12:14-23

The Pharisees went out and met in order to find a way to destroy Jesus. Jesus knew what they intended to do, so he went away from there. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them all. But he ordered them not to spread the word about him, so that what

was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: Look, my Servant whom I chose, the one I love, in whom I find great pleasure. I'll put my Spirit upon him, and he'll announce judgment to the Gentiles. He won't argue or shout, and nobody will hear his voice in the streets. He won't break a bent stalk, and he won't snuff out a smoldering wick, until he makes justice win. And the Gentiles will put their hope in his name. They brought to Jesus a demon-possessed man who was blind and unable to speak. Jesus healed him so that he could both speak and see. All the crowds were amazed and said, "This man couldn't be the Son of David, could he?"

Observation: Jesus' enemies were plotting to destroy him. Jesus just moved elsewhere, and continued to serve and heal. Matthew quoted Isaiah 42:1-4 to describe Jesus' approach: "He won't argue or shout, and nobody will hear his voice in the streets. He won't break a bent stalk, and he won't snuff out a smoldering wick, until he makes justice win." We might think that's no way to make justice win. But people respected Jesus, even asking if he might be "the Son of David," a title for the Messiah.

Application: Just before today's reading, Matthew showed the Pharisees criticizing Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, which they saw as work. How did Jesus' way of dealing with his foes live out the attitude Isaiah said God's servant would have? Have you ever seen a situation where it was more effective to withdraw or speak gently rather than trying to loudly prove a contentious point?

Prayer: O Jesus, you walked this earth, not as an arrogant, demanding ruler, but as a gentle, healing servant. Guide me as I seek to live into your kind of greatness. Amen.

Tuesday, November 20

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus along with her sons. Bowing before him, she asked a favor of him. "What do you want?" he asked. She responded, "Say that these two sons of mine will sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, in your kingdom." Jesus replied, "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink from the cup that I'm about to drink from?" They said to him, "We can." He said to them, "You will drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left hand isn't mine to give. It belongs to those for whom my Father prepared it." Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them over and said, "You know that those who rule the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave—just as the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people."

Observation: James and John (and probably their mom, though Mark left her out in his version of the story in Mark 10:35-45) thought they'd get their bid for power in before the other disciples. Jesus kept talking about his kingdom. Well, weren't "kingdoms" about seeking places of power? "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. In the Kingdom of Heaven, there is no status seeking. In my Kingdom, we serve.

Application: We have a good idea (as James and John did) what power, privilege and importance look like. Down deep, most of us wish for some of the perks that go with power. But Jesus' view was succinct and direct: "that's not the way it will be with you." Jesus said he didn't

come to be served, but to serve, and even give his life. In what specific ways does living like Jesus change your approach to life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you that your love's transforming power can motivate me to live a servant life. Teach me how to treat others as you treat me. Amen.

Wednesday, November 21

Scripture: Matthew 23:5-12

Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others. They make extra-wide prayer bands for their arms and long tassels for their clothes. They love to sit in places of honor at banquets. They love to be greeted with honor in the markets and to be addressed as 'Rabbi.' "But you shouldn't be called Rabbi, because you have one teacher, and all of you are brothers and sisters. Don't call anybody on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is heavenly. Don't be called teacher, because Christ is your one teacher. But the one who is greatest among you will be your servant. All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.

Observation: In Jesus' day (and still today), many leaders (even religious ones) sought exalted, lofty titles. In William Barclay's commentary on these verses: "The Pharisees liked to be addressed as Rabbi and to be treated with the greatest respect. They even claimed ... greater respect than that given to parents, for, they said, a man's parents give him ordinary, physical life, but a man's teacher gives him eternal life." By contrast, Jesus said his Kingdom was not about high-status titles, but about greatness in serving others.

Application: The Pharisees were not just religious, but also political and social leaders. What are today's equivalents? Some might be the leaders, elected or unelected, in our wider societies, who rejoice in their status, make grand pronouncements about public values while using their position to gain influence for their families and friends, and allow their private interests secretly to determine the public policy of their country. What matters is the humbling principle of verse 12. (*All who lift themselves up will be brought low, but all who make themselves low will be lifted up.*) How easy or hard do you find it to lay aside what you want in favor of what God wants for you? Isn't that the path to greatness?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep purifying my motivations as I serve. May my meaning and sense of worth come more from you each day until my service is about you, not me. Amen.

Thursday, November 22 (Thanksgiving Day)

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good. God's faithful love lasts forever! Give thanks to the God of all gods— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the Lord of all lords— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the only one who makes great wonders— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the one who made the skies with skill— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the one who shaped the earth on the water— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the one who made the great lights— God's faithful love lasts forever. The sun to rule the day— God's faithful love lasts forever. The moon and the stars to rule the night— God's faithful love lasts forever!

Have a joyous Thanksgiving Day! In whatever way you mark the day, and with whomever, consider reading this psalm, or singing a favorite thanksgiving song, as a way of deepening your sense of gratitude on this day.

Observation: The psalmist located the center of our gratitude to God in the refrain he repeated over and over in this psalm: *God's faithful love lasts forever!* Above all else, the grand story of the Bible is the story of a God who loves us with a tireless, durable, embracing, never-ending love. What a promise! "Give thanks to the Lord" indeed!

Application: The New Bible Commentary says God's "status would by itself inspire awe; his creative works, marvel; his power evident in history, submission; his goodness, gratitude. But when we see that all these greatnesses spring from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision, then the Lord is truly acknowledged with wonder, love and praise." Savor those words, and how they apply to your walk with God: awe, marvel, submission, gratitude, wonder, love and praise. What moments, events or relationships have made God's unchanging, faithful love most real for you?

Prayer: Lord God, in "wonder, love and praise" I thank you that all you do in my life springs "from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision." Amen.

Friday, November 23

Scripture: Galatians 5:13-16

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other! I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires.

Observation: The Apostle Paul started new churches in Galatia (modern day Turkey), but they had fallen into disagreement and struggle. False teachers came to the churches and began convincing them they still had to follow certain rules and laws in order for God to accept them. Paul's letter resisted the false teachers. He urged his readers to claim their freedom in Christ, but to use that freedom to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Application: In verse 13 Paul bluntly stated a truth that can be painful to admit. (*You were called to freedom; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love.*) We all have selfish impulses, especially when given the ability to choose freely. He pointed his readers to the one who can give us the ability to live out the Golden Rule: the Holy Spirit. Paul said, "*Be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires*" (verse 16). In what areas of your life do you want to invite the Spirit to empower you to deny your selfish desires and love your neighbor as yourself more fully?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to set me free. I like being free from other people's demands, and from bad things. Help me also value the times when you set me free from my own self-centeredness. Amen.

Saturday, November 24

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

“Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left. “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’ “Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. I was hungry and you didn't give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me. I was naked and you didn't give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.’ “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?’ Then he will answer, ‘I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

Observation: After talking about the Temple's destruction and the end of the world (in sometimes puzzling terms), Jesus gave a word picture of the final judgment. His story about the judgment clearly conveyed his Kingdom's priorities. Kingdom people, he said, care for the hungry and thirsty, the poorly-clothed and strangers, the prisoners and the sick—the people whom Jesus called “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.”

Application: There's a Christian song that begins, *“I met Jesus today, and I really must tell you, he didn't look at all like the pictures ... He was a hungry child, a sick friend of mine, a stranger who needed a coat.”* In Jesus' story, both those accepted and the ones who were turned away were surprised. They expected to meet Jesus in religious places, not in the streets among the needy and poor. But Jesus' story said we should notice all people in need of help, and treat them as if it were Jesus himself in need. In what ways can you sense God reshaping your attitudes toward “the least of these” in your community and the wider world?

Prayer: King Jesus, show me the “least of these” in my financially-secure neighbor who struggles emotionally or spiritually, my poor friend who suffers financially, my sick friend who needs your comfort while dying—and in myself, who needs more of you in my life. Amen.