

For the last three Wednesdays, people have gathered in Fellowship Hall to watch a video series that tells the backstory of how Jesus “*chose*” each of His disciples. It is titled “The Chosen,” and gives great thought to the actual people we read about in the Bible - who they were, what they were like, and the histories they brought with them when they said “Yes” to Jesus. The first episode introduced Mary Magdalene. The second introduced Thaddaeus, James, and Nicodemus. In episode three Jesus Himself became the center of focus, and the producers painted a great picture of what His personality might have been like in real life. The way they did that was quite interesting: the supporting cast of characters in the episode were all children.

Jesus encountered the children when they found the camp He had set up for Himself outside of Capernaum at the beginning of His public ministry. And after they happened across Him that first day, they kept coming back - having wonderful conversations with Him each time. In one of them, a child (seeing that Jesus was living in a makeshift tent) asked “*Do you have a house?*” “*My Father provides what I need,*” Jesus answered. The children then asked other questions, including what He did for a living. Later, the subject of His seeming lack of housing came up again, with another child asking “*So why don’t you have a home?*” “*My home is many places,*” Jesus replied. “*Why?*” another child asked. “*Because I have a much larger job than being a craftsman.*” “*What other job?*” another child asked. Jesus paused to gather his thoughts, and then said “*Everyone has a much larger job than just their trade.*”

The thought that we all have a much larger job to do than just our trade is in many ways what the passage from Luke before us is about. For while what Jesus said to a man in reply to a question, and then to the crowd in a parable, may seem to be about money and possessions, Jesus is actually talking about the purpose of life itself, and not losing the purpose of life in the daily activities of living it. That is because it is easy to focus on the things we need to do each day to survive, but forget to seek to do more than just survive. It is easy to focus on achieving goals we have set for ourselves, but forget to ask God what goals He would have us set. And it is easy to focus on that which is temporary and miss out on achieving anything of eternal significance.

Which is also what chapter 3 of Thom Rainer’s book, The Post-Quarantine Church, is talking about when it invites us to “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level.” That is because prayer is about more than just asking God to heal someone from illness or help them get a job. Prayer is about more than just asking God to work through us so people join our church. And prayer is about more than just asking God to change the people around us into holy and righteous beings. For while prayer certainly includes asking God to do all those things, prayer begins with asking God to do things in US. Then prayer moves on to asking God to do things THROUGH us. And finally prayer moves into telling God we are willing to work WITH Him to accomplish what He wants to accomplish “*on earth as it is in heaven.*” To understand this, let’s turn to Luke.

Last week, we heard Luke say in chapter 11 that “*as the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*” We also heard how as Jesus made His way to Jerusalem, He encountered a problem in a Samaritan village when its residents refused to show hospitality, and how He had a problem with two of His disciples because they wanted to call down

“*fire from heaven*” to incinerate the Samaritans rather than show them God’s love in response. As chapter 12 begins, Luke then tells us Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, and - because His time was approaching “*to be taken up into heaven,*” began to speak to people about the purpose of life and how not to lose the purpose of life in the daily activities of living it.

But some people were not getting the memo! They were continuing to fuss over the daily activities of their lives. They were continuing to whine when they didn’t get their way in the daily activities of their lives. And they were not only losing sight of the purpose of life but were also losing sight of God’s presence in their daily activities. One day, this showed itself when a man called out from the crowd saying “*tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*” Jesus began his reply by saying that it was not his place to serve as a judge, and used the opportunity to say “*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; [for] life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*” And then used the opportunity to tell a parable about a man who only lived for the purpose of adding to his wealth, and how when he died he proved himself to be a fool because he wasn’t able to take that wealth with him into eternity.

Since Luke tells us Jesus concluded the parable by saying “*this is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God,*” commentators typically say that this teaching is about not letting money become our God. Which is a good interpretation of the text. But if we stop at that point, we miss the larger lesson Jesus was teaching about the very purpose of life, and how not to lose the purpose of life in the daily activities of living it. That is because it is easy to focus on the things we need to do each day to survive, but forget to seek to do more than just survive. It is easy to focus on achieving the goals we have set for ourselves, but forget to ask God what goals He would have us set. And it is easy to focus on that which is temporary rather than eternal. We see this in how Jesus instructed us to pray.

That is because Jesus told us to do much more than just recite the Lord’s Prayer. For instance, Jesus told us that prayer is to be something between us and God, and not used to show off, saying to do it by “*going into your room and shutting the door and praying to your Father in secret.*” Jesus told us that in prayer it is not the number of our words that matter, but their content and sincerity, saying “*do not heap up empty phrases.*” And Jesus told us that our prayers should be directed toward achieving a larger purpose than just getting God to do what we want (as if He is nothing more than a divine vending machine), saying “*pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*” And that is only some of what Jesus said about prayer!

There are many other passages where Jesus speaks about the content of our prayers, the manner in which we should pray, and the overall purpose of prayer. When we boil it all down, however, and add that to what our Heavenly Father inspired to be said about prayer in other places in the Bible, what we are to do to “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level” can be summarized by looking at 3 words I have shared with you before to outline the PURPOSE OF OUR CHURCH. Those words are KNOW, GROW, and GO. Let’s look at each one individually.

To “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level” we need to pray to KNOW God. To do this, we need to do more than just talk TO God. We need to ask GOD to speak to us. To do this, we need to pick up our Bible each day, and read through it in a systematic way - rather than just jumping from place to place because a devotional book tells us what scripture passage to read. [Which is not to say that devotional books do not have value; just that if you really want to get to KNOW God, you need to read through the Bible at more length than just a few verses each day, hopping from place to place rather than reading through the Bible cover to cover.]

As you do so, you also need to ask God to show through what you read a full picture of who He is, and what He is like. If you are not doing that right now, I invite you to go to our church’s web page, click on the banner picture that says “Read the Bible in a Year,” and download the readings.

To “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level” we need to pray to GROW in our relationship with God. To do this, we need to do more than just talk with God about revealing who HE is. We need to talk with God about who He wants US to be. That is because the only way we can grow CLOSER to God is to become more LIKE God. And the only way we can become more like God is by not only knowing what HE is like, but what He desires US to be like, and then ask Him to help us make those qualities part of who we are and how we live. If you are not doing that right now, I invite you to do two things . First, come out Wednesday nights to our Chosen study, as growing in relationship with God is part of our discussion each night. Second, join Disciple 1 Bible study the next time we offer it.

To “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level” we also need to pray for the power to GO out into our community to offer people the love of Jesus through what we do, and the opportunity to also get to KNOW Him and GROW in relationship with Him. To do this, we need to do more than just talk with God about people somehow magically coming to our church. We need to do more than just talk with God about people in our church somehow magically going out to bring others into our church. And we need to do more than just talk with God about what it means for all those other people to be “rich” toward Him. We need to ask God what He would have US do, how He would have US reach out in His name, and what ministry He would have US join.

We see this spoken about by Theresa of Avila way back in the 16th century. She wrote that “*Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes by which He looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*”

So that we might continue to “coddiwomple” our way through this not quite “post-quarantine world” by vowing to “Take Prayer to a New and Powerful Level,” I invite you to not only begin to pray in such a way that you seek to KNOW, GROW, and GO, I invite you to begin doing so this very day by praying something another Christian from long ago wrote. For while it may not have been a direct commentary on the passage from Luke before us today, this prayer certainly sums up its call to us to be “rich” toward God. That is because it calls us to make sure that what we are talking to

God about in our prayers each day is - first and foremost - about the very purpose of life, and how not to lose the purpose of life in the daily activities of living it by seeking to become more Christ-like in everything we do. The prayer was written by Francis of Assisi. Pray it with me:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console.

To be understood, as to understand. To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive. And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.