

“Gifted!”

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 18, 27-31 ¹

Last week I suggested three things that are necessary if we're going to experience a turnaround, a rebirth, in our congregational life. Those three things were and are: (1) cultivated hearts; (2) a compelling vision; and (3), a commitment to victory. This morning I want to think with you further about “cultivated hearts.”

In Brian McLaren's recent book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, he noted that “There has been much talk of ‘born-again Christians’ in recent years, but the truth is, most of us who identify ourselves as born-again Christians could stand to be born again *again*. In fact, we need to be born again *again and again*, not simply as lost people born into foundness, [condemned] people born into forgiveness, the walking dead born into new life, or outsiders born into insider status, but as nondisciples (whether know-nothings or know-enoughs or know-it-all, it doesn't matter) born into a lifelong experiential learning adventure of discipleship.

“We might say that *Christians* are people who have entered a certain sedentary membership or arrived at a status validated by some group or institution, while *disciples* are learners (and unlearners) who have started on a rigorous and unending journey or quest in relation to Jesus Christ. It's worth noting in this regard that the word ‘Christian’ occurs in the New Testament exactly three times and the word ‘Christianity’ exactly zero. The word ‘disciple,’ however, is found 263 times.”²

My computer search came up with an even larger number than McLaren's, so “disciple” and “disciples” do indeed appear quite often in the New Testament. You'll remember that “disciple” is the word Jesus used to describe His followers when they were functioning as He intended for them to function. In what we call “the Great Commission,” Jesus told us to go to every corner of the world, making disciples and teaching them to obey His commands (Matthew 28:20).

Further, Jesus said that in order to be His disciples, it's necessary to love Him more than our own fathers and mothers, more than our own wives and children, even more than our own lives. What Jesus actually said was, “*No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me*” (Luke 14:33).

That actually sounds quite a lot like what I said last week: that victorious teams are composed of players who show up for every practice, on time, dressed out, warmed up, and willing to endure the pain of practice and scrimmage and battle. **No excuses. No whining. No schedule conflicts. No weather woes. No outcome but victory.**

We need to be clear about the fact that Jesus' commission to us is to make *disciples*, not merely *converts*. Members of His Team are expected to be committed to achieving victory on the field, not merely to watching or quarterbacking from the stands. And in an effort to help ourselves make a weekly check on whether or not our performance is up to par, our worship order routinely identifies five things that real disciples do every week of every month of every year:

1. **WORSHIP:** Disciples participate in at least one experience of corporate worship every week.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on July 18, 2010.

² Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2010), pp. 28-29.

2. **CONNECT**: Disciples participate in at least one face-to-face spiritual accountability and study group every week.
3. **GROW**: Disciples pursue the daily gladness of personal time in prayer and in the Word, as well as the equally glad discipline of tithing, every week.
4. **SERVE**: Disciples intentionally use their gifts and abilities to build up the Body of Christ in at least one way every week; and
5. **GO**: Disciples live in the world in such a way that they engage in some sort of Great Commission activity every week.

WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, GO: these five things are not optional. They're not "nice to think about." They're not goals to strive for. We don't get to pick and choose among them. These are responsibilities to be accomplished as we live according to Jesus' Great Commission and the Great Commandment. As you look at that list, you're either doing all five of those things, or else you're not. "Trying" to do them doesn't get it. Members of turnaround teams don't "try"—they DO.

When was the last time you "tried" to eat lunch? You either do, or else you don't. And if you aren't doing these five things every week, then the priorities of your life are out of kilter, and you don't qualify to be called a disciple of Jesus. You're just playing at faith, toying with obedience, and you're in danger of being numbered among those about whom Jesus said:

"Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

That's pretty sobering, but there's another side to this that's just as, if not even more important. And that is that we don't do The Five Things things out of fear of judgment. The Bible tells us that "*now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus!*" (Romans 8:1). How much condemnation? None. Fear is not our motive.

Nor do we do The Five Things in order to pass some test that evaluates our righteousness. No, indeed! We do these things because we love Jesus! We do them because He told us to do them. After all, Jesus told us, "*If you love me, obey my commandments. . . . Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me*" (John 14:15, 21).

What Jesus wants to do in your life and in mine is first of all to redeem us from our sin, our brokenness, and our shame, such that we are ready, willing, and eager to spend eternity with Him. He wants to build His own character into our character, so that we think like He thinks, hate what He hates, and love what He loves. And then He wants us to join our lives together in a fabric of relationships so extraordinary that only He can weave it. He wants us to join our lives together on His Turnaround Team, a team the New Testament calls "The Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 4:12).

This is not *our* Turnaround Team, after all. It's His. He is our Leader. He is our Coach. It's in His power that we live, and only by His power that we experience victory. Being a disciple of Jesus is an adventure without comparison, with wonderful outcomes both in time and in eternity. And our Lord gives us what we need to get the job done. Did He not tell us, "*I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it?*" (Matthew 16:18).

Can you see this sign? It says "**WiLTS**." I've got WiLTS on my desk, and you'll see it here and there around our staff offices. "WiLTS" stands for "We Love This Stuff!" (the "i" is just for pronunciation), and I really do love it.

I get out of bed every day grateful to be your Pastor. Even on the long days, on the hard days, on the crummy days, on the way to the hospital or the emergency room at odd hours, *I love what I do*. I'm grateful to God for the privilege of walking with you in the glad moments, the painful moments, the ordinary moments, and the transforming moments of your lives.

Now while God may not have called you to be a Pastor (though God may be working on some of you about that), God has called you to a life that is energized and energizing, filled with the adventure of pushing back the Darkness in His Name and through His Power, helping to bring in the glad Kingdom of Light. The truth is that every one of us is called to "full-time Christian service," though we pay our bills by doing different things.

Look again at 1 Corinthians 12:4-7: "*Now there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service in the church, but it is the same Lord we are serving. There are different ways God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work through all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church.*"

You and I have different gifts, but the **same Spirit** gives them. We have different kinds of service, but we all serve the **same Lord**. God works differently in each of our lives, but it is the **same Father** who is at work. *And all of this is intended to build up the Church, God's Turnaround Team.*

You know, I'm sure, that each player on an athletic team has specific responsibilities, and each is essential if the team is to be successful. In football, the halfback doesn't do what the fullback does, and the fullback doesn't do what the quarterback does. Each is uniquely needed. So it is that God has given you specific abilities for His Turnaround Team, and you have both the opportunity and the responsibility to discover what these are and to deploy them on the field of life in a way that will gain God's approval.

You've seen these S.H.A.P.E. inventories before (see example), but I'm afraid they've been misunderstood. These are not available to you as some sort of trick to recruit you for some obscure and meaningless committee. These are available to you as tools to help you discover how your own **spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and experiences** have prepared you to play on God's Turnaround Team.

Here's the real deal about spiritual gifts. God isn't going to ask me or our MINISTRY Team about what percentage of our members turned in S.H.A.P.E. inventories. That's not the point. The point is that we're trying to help **you** fulfill **your** responsibility to discover **your** spiritual gifts and to help you deploy them on the field of life in a way that will gain God's approval.

In the School of Jesus, the text has already been assigned; and if you don't have a *Life Application Bible* in the New International Version or the New Living Translation, or the English Standard Version Study Bible, you probably need to get one. Further, God's approach to life's textbook is like the approach I took to the class I taught at VIC last spring. I told my students that they were responsible for everything in the texts, whether I had talked about everything in class or not.

That's how the Bible works. You're responsible for everything in it, whether I or your Bible Study Class have talked about it or not. Now your teachers and I take that labor very seriously—indeed, joyfully—and we work hard to expose you to "the full counsel of God's Word." But when all is said and done, and you're standing before the Master, He'll ask you what I asked my students last May: "How much of the text did you read? And how much of your assignment did you do?" And God will add to those questions two more: "Did you live out of the S.H.A.P.E. I gave you? And did you use what I gave you to build your own kingdom or mine?"

My friend, God has shaped you and prepared you for particular tasks—joyful, adventuresome, world-and-eternity-changing tasks (Ephesians 2:10). Using your spiritual gifts glorifies God and helps you to grow as a disciple of Jesus. When you stand before God, soon or late, God isn't going to ask you why you weren't Billy Graham, or Beth Moore, or Chuck Swindoll, or Mother Theresa. God is going to ask you about how well you did at being YOU!

If you're using your spiritual gifts, you'll experience joy. You'll be effective. Do you want to experience more joy and more effectiveness in your life? Discovering and deploying your spiritual gifts will go a long way toward the achievement of that goal.

Now in the family of God, just as in our own families, there are times when we need to do things that are not really in the areas of our strength, just because they need doing. But for the most part, we do well to focus in our areas of giftedness, because "*God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be*" (1 Corinthians 12:18). "*Under [God's] direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love*" (Ephesians 4:16).

Are you beginning to get the idea? Don't get hung up on what you *think* you should be good at doing. Don't get sidetracked by someone else's purposes for your life. Let yourself "know what you know" about your abilities, and then follow your heart. Follow your passion! Follow your joy!

If you're doing what God intends you to be doing, you'll have energy, you'll be effective, and you'll experience joy. As the famous Olympic runner, Eric Liddell, put it, "**God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.**" That sense of God's pleasure and blessing is one of the many benefits of being on God's Turnaround Team.

Here's another way to think about this. Have you ever looked closely at a golf ball? One would think that a perfectly smooth ball would be the way to go. It would be so elegant!

But golf balls aren't smooth. They've got little pock-marks all over them. The little dimples aren't even uniform. They're different sizes, and while there may be some pattern to them, it's not easy to see. But these apparent imperfections actually minimize wind resistance and allow the ball to travel as much as four times as far as a smooth ball can go.

This particular golf ball is also kind of bunged up. It's not good for much except for its intended use, but it's very good at being a golf ball. This one is even marked with the words, "high trajectory."

You and I are a lot like this ball. We've got pock-marks all over us. We're kind of bunged up. We're not good for much except that for which God made us. But God has made you, and God has made me, with a particular S.H.A.P.E., and that shape is intended for a "high trajectory" . . . actually, it's a heavenly trajectory!

When considering the trajectory of his own life, C. S. Lewis once wrote, "This is my endlessly recurrent temptation: to go down to that Sea (I think St. John of the Cross called God a sea) and there neither dive nor swim nor float, but only dabble and splash, careful not to get out of my depth and holding on to the lifeline which connects me with my things temporal."³ But "swimming lessons are better than a lifeline to the shore," Lewis wrote. "For of course that lifeline is really

³ C. S. Lewis, "A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1949, 1980), p. 187.

a death line.”⁴ “What matters,” he said, “what Heaven desires and Hell fears, is precisely that further step, out of our depth, out of our own control.”⁵

Jesus made that same point by talking about planting rather than swimming: *“The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But like young plants in such soil, their roots don’t go very deep. At first they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word. The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things, so no crop is produced”* (Mark 4:16-19).

And that brings us back again to the idea of having “cultivated hearts.” Remember, Jesus promised to build His church, to give victory to His Turnaround Team. And the first thing that has to happen in order for that to begin to take place among us is for us to give ourselves completely to Him so that His priorities become our priorities, so that our hearts beat with His heart.

If the Kingdom of God is going to win the hearts and souls of folks in Bristol, if America is going to be a righteous nation, if God’s Kingdom is going to come on earth as it is in heaven, then you and I are going to have to be players, not spectators, and we’re going to have to play hard.

The way to joy, my friend, the way to purpose, the way to a life that matters, is to lean into the S.H.A.P.E. God has given you and to use that S.H.A.P.E. intentionally every week for His glory. Let me know when you’re ready for your very own “WiLTS” sign!



⁴ Lewis, p. 189.

⁵ Lewis, p. 191.