

REDISCOVERING GOD'S PURPOSE

By

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The world's most famous sermon begins with an emphasis on humility and purity of heart.¹ Why did Jesus emphasize such things, and why is such emphasis so different from the emphasis in modern Christianity?

I think it is because Jesus always had in mind the eternal purpose of God, but modern man has found that other purposes are more attractive and more acceptable to the public.

God's purpose was stated in the beginning. "Let us make man in our own image."² Obviously this did not mean that man was to possess the attributes of God — eternity, omnipotence and omniscience — but that he was to be a creature capable of thought, reason and will, so that he might reflect the Creator's character and think His thoughts and that the two might have a mind-to-mind fellowship.

The problem facing man is well stated by Paul. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."³ Jesus came into the world to redeem man from sin and make it possible once again for him to be conformed to God's image and have fellowship with Him.

Jesus continually emphasized character and spiritual qualities over the physical and material. He said that his meat was to do the will of God⁴ and that we should labor for that meat, rather than for that which perishes. Doing the Father's will was more important than life itself.

This is not to suggest that the material world is unimportant, but it was created to serve as man's habitation while he learned to serve God. Neither should we minimize our present lives. Even now God dwells in us through His spirit,⁵ and Jesus died that we might live again in the resurrection with powerful, glorious and spiritual bodies.⁶ But it is the set of the mind, the state of the heart, that determines the relationship a person has with God and whether or not he is in God's image.

With this in mind, we can make a few observations:

1. The primary purpose of God is almost lost to view in modern Christianity. While God's love and mercy are often noted, there is at the same time a great emphasis upon one finding satisfaction with his own self-image. The idea of seeing self as a sinner with the need to true to God in deep contrition, to repent and make restitution for wrongs, and to change one's life drastically in order to please God, all are seen as old-fashioned.

In Peal's "positive thinking" he shuns any mention of sin and repentance, and Robert Schuller of "possibility thinking" fame considers it to be sin to believe in sin.

But what of the mainline churches, the conservative churches? Letters from people all over the country complain that the main ingredient in their assemblies is entertainment. The idea of turning man around in order that he might fit into God's purpose — to be in His image — is hard to find in all the rush of activities and different directions people are going in these churches. Could this be one reason so many church bodies are now having to defend themselves against the power of the gay and lesbian forces in their midst?

2. Just what does the concept known as dispensationalism have to do with this primary purpose of God? They continually write and speak about “The Great Tribulation” and whether or not the saints will escape it by being “raptured” to heaven. Would zapping people away in a so-called rapture suddenly give them willing minds and pure hearts?

In 70 AD the people of Jerusalem went through the “great tribulation” which Jesus predicted.⁷ But since that time millions of Christians have died violent deaths at the hands of their persecutors. Others have suffered terribly from imprisonment, torture or war, even as Christian Kurds are enduring severe tribulation in the aftermath of our incursion into Iraq. The issue for all of these was NEVER a question of what might happen in the centuries ahead, what nations might go to war, how many antichrists might arise, and all that. The issue for every one of them was the same as it is for all of us today: Do we desire the will of God? Do we desire to fulfill His purpose?

John wrote, “Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him: for we shall see him even as he is. And everyone that has this hope set on him, purifies himself, even as he is pure.”⁸ John doesn’t tell us when Jesus is coming, but he does tell us that our object is to become as Christ-like as possible.

3. It is the chief aim of God’s enemies to keep man from fulfilling His purpose. This was the case in the first temptation when Adam and Eve were told, “You shall NOT surely die...but you will become as gods knowing good and evil.”⁹ They were persuaded that they could decide for themselves what is right and wrong and thus create their own image.

This is exactly the attitude of the world today. It is the basis of the “pro-choice” concept, that a woman has the right to do as she pleases with her unborn child. It is the doctrine of those who defend homosexuality, contending that every person has a right to his own preference of sex, regardless of the Creator’s purpose and design. It also underlies the problems in economics, as people think that any way they make a dollar is all right as long as it is legal. Pursue your own goal; do whatever it takes to gain wealth and success. It is a rare case for a person to turn down a promotion or refuse higher pay because it would hinder his pursuit of godliness. Yet this is exactly what Jesus taught us to do, to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...”¹⁰

The common argument is “But one has to live.” Is that what Jesus taught? No. Jesus said, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s shall save it.”¹¹

The constant clamor for security and benefits has blinded millions to the purpose of God. This is seen in the fact that the whole country admires Mother Teresa for giving up her comforts in order to minister to the homeless of India, and yet these same admirers give their lives in gaining those comforts, rather than concentrating on the purpose of God.

4. The honest, deep-seated desire to be conformed to the image of God is one of your best defenses against the wiles of the Devil. Think of the times when you fell into temptation and did something for which you were deeply sorry. Would this have happened had you been thinking of how you might conform to the image of God? The Bible’s advice is “run with patience the race that is before you, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith.”¹² Paul writes that as we look to the glory of the Lord, “we are transformed into the same image.”¹³

It is easy to fall into the trap of the “me generation”, to feed on our pride and self-love until, before we realize it, we are serving self and not Christ. This is the easy path to sin. What is needed is such a denial of the world’s way and ambitions that we can think clearly of the purpose of God and how we are progressing in that purpose to have us in His own image. It is the way of humility, the way of faith, and becomes a shield against temptation and sin.

5. God’s purpose to have us in His image has been replaced, to a large extent, by the popular desire of man to have a better place in which to live. Preachers ask, “Are you sure you will go to heaven?” I have heard it said, “Jesus died to purchase heaven for you.” In fact, He died to purchase for us life and immortality.¹⁴ Man has shifted the focus from the kind of persons we are **to be** to the kind of **place** where we may live!

Certainly the eternal home will be wonderful beyond description, as a place “wherein dwells righteousness.”¹⁵ But man was excluded from a perfect home because he rejected God’s image for his own,¹⁶ and no one will enter the new creation except those who desire to please God, who delight in His holiness and seek to be “like him.” God’s purpose is not merely to put us in a better place but to transform us to be like Himself.

Peter gives a graphic description of judgment and the final destruction of this world by fire and then adds, “Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy living and godliness....”¹⁷

As we view the dismantling of our civilization and the rising tide of violence and evil, Peter’s question becomes more relevant than ever. Our task in the world is to “cast down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”¹⁸

The first step is to start thinking the thoughts of God found in scripture, and there is nothing against your own will that can stop you from fulfilling His purpose.

REFEERENCES

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| 1. Matthew 5:1–8 | 10. Matthew 6:33 |
| 2. Genesis 1:26 | 11. Mark 8:35 |
| 3. Romans 3:23 | 12. Hebrews 12:1, 2 |
| 4. John 4:34 | 13. II Corinthians 3:18 |
| 5. I Corinthians 6:19, John 14:16 | 14. John 3:16, 36 |
| 6. I Corinthians 15:42–44 | 15. II Peter 3:13 |
| 7. Matthew 24:21 | 16. Genesis 3:22–24 |
| 8. I John 3:2, 3 | 17. II Peter 3:11 |
| 9. Genesis 3:4, 5 | 18. II Corinthians 10:5 |

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