

“Open Doors: Getting in Great ‘S.H.A.P.E.’”
Mt. 20:25-28, Eph. 2:10, 1 Peter 4:10-11, 1 Cor. 15:58

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March 15, 2020

Last month when I was considering the direction to go for this week’s sermon... which is, of course, based on the “Time to Dream” Bible study by Pastor Rick Warren... I was drawn to the acronym for this week’s Session: **“S.H.A.P.E.”** As we will discuss in further detail shortly, this stands for **“Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experiences.”** These are all elements of our own personal makeup that shape the manner in which we **serve** God...by serving God’s people. As I thought about the ways we are to grow ‘stronger’ in our walk with the Lord... of the state of our spiritual ‘conditioning’ ... I was struck by the analogy to our *physical* ‘strength’ and ‘conditioning.’ That as concerned as we can be about our physical health, we should be just as concerned about our *spiritual* health. While the truth of the matter is that the average American spends about 2-3X as much on health/fitness per year as they do for their ‘religious pursuits.’

Since that time of sermon planning, CLEARLY my focus has changed. A LOT has happened in the last month... heck, in the last WEEK! Yes, we are all quite concerned about our nation’s health... but it is a WHOLE lot more serious than whether or not we have 6 pack abs or have shaved time off of our ‘P.R.’ for a 5K. With the advent of COVID-19... alias “Coronavirus”... our physical health concerns are of utmost urgency. For many in our country, it is, quite literally, a matter of life and death...

And that is exactly why this discussion of what it means to be a servant of the Living God is so much more important today than it was a few weeks ago. Before my focus was to be on how much of our income we spend on health clubs and food supplements. Today it’s about trying to find sanitizer and toilet paper. Before it was to be as superficial as to how we looked in the mirror or on the scale. Today it’s about the fears of whether or not some of our older, more infirm citizens will still be able to LOOK into a mirror by summertime. Now, more than ever, we need to be mindful of how God would have us use our **Spiritual gifts**, our **heart**, our **abilities**, our **personality**, and our **experiences**, to better **SERVE** one another. As we seek to be a *stronger* Christian, in order to care for those who may be feeling pretty *weak*, how do we go about **“Getting in Great ‘S.H.A.P.E.’?”**

For one, each one of us, as a follower of Jesus Christ, must always remember that to be His servant is what we were **CALLED** to be and do. We ALL are an important part of God's **purpose** and **plan**... each one of us with useful and unique gifts all our own. In Paul's words to the Ephesians, he declared that "*We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*" (Eph. 2:10)

I love that first phrase: "***We are what he has made us.***" I am reminded of that insightful statement of the 'ancient philosopher' and 'lover of spinach, Popeye: "*I yam what I yam.*" We all are different creatures, with different abilities and gifts, spiritual and otherwise. Remember that old, usually derogatory assessment of someone who was *quite* unique: 'God really broke the mold when He made him/her'? Well guess what... NO two 'molds' are alike! And yet, in spite of their differences, we all share a very important trait in common: "***We were created in Christ Jesus for good works.***"

And those good works that we were created for are ones that God has already designed JUST FOR US. Those good works are not merely to be done every once in while, when we feel good and say, 'Hey, it's a great day. I think I'll go out and do something good for someone else.' Paul says that those beneficial, 'random acts of kindness' that we do 'in Christ' are "***to be our way of life.***"

This past week, Joan Lunden appeared on the Today Show to promote her new book, "Why Did I Come Into this Room?" Can most of us not relate to THAT title? (I can't tell you how many books I've purchased because I got hooked on the title...) In the interview she talks about the best 3 indicators of aging well are in the ways one continues to "Reach out"... by "Staying engaged in life, maintaining social connections, and to have a sense of purpose." "Do a good deed." The kind of 'good works' that you and I were created in Christ Jesus to do... to 'BE our way of life.' And in our current circumstances, we *especially* need to be more mindful of how to keep people 'engaged in life' and 'maintaining social connections'...

Of course, doing such 'good deeds' is not always easy to do... particularly when we ourselves may be struggling with our own 'issues.' That is why we need to be diligent in praying to God for strength, for inspiration of the Spirit... to be **CONFIDENT** that God will indeed support us in our efforts to support others. Though they are Paul's words, I believe that God

could just as well be speaking those words of 1 Corinthians: *“My beloved, **be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.**”* (1 Cor. 15:58)

In speaking earlier of that ‘purpose,’ that ‘CALLING’ that we have from God, we must always be looking at what we do to discern our ‘motivation.’ Are we *“**excelling in the work of the LORD?**”* Or is what we do merely a ‘job,’ a means to an end. WHATEVER we do, no matter how menial it may sometimes seem, can and must be done *“**to the glory of God.**”* And if we can see how whatever we do can bring glory to our Heavenly Father, then we can, indeed and in truth, *“**know that in the Lord our labor is not in vain.**”* We can be ‘confident.’ Which reminds >> me of another Scripture: *“**I am confident of this: the he who began a good work in you WILL be faithful to complete it until the day when Christ returns.**”* (Phil. 1:3)

As we grow in confidence that we are indeed working to complete the good work begun in us by God, we will grow in our Christian **CHARACTER**. God gave us all that unique personality to showcase a deeper identity founded up on the Rock of our Salvation, Jesus Christ. Paul says to *“**Serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.**”* (1 Peter 4:10-11) No matter how quirky, how trivial, how small those gifts may seem to be. But that service is NOT to call attention to what a greatly strange creation WE are, but rather, to point to the One who made us that way. Get this: *“**Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.**”* (1 Peter 4:11) Pretty daunting, eh? That when we speak, we are to be speaking the very words of God! That must serve with the very strength of God! Not for our own recognition... but that God may be glorified. All that we do or say is not by our own power, but ‘God-powered’...

This past week I went to call on Cissie McLeod, whom most of you know quite well. While I was there, a friend/hospital staff nurse came to visit her. (One of MANY who passed through the ‘revolving door’ of her hospital room. As her friend started to leave, Cissie insisted that she stayed long enough to ‘hear her pastor pray.’ NO PRESSURE, right? Because I so such a great job? Hey, there are many of you reading this whom I KNOW can pray just as well as I can. We ALL have that same ‘line’ on which to ‘make a call.’ As for me, I’m just the simple son

of a West Texas pharmacist and his Okie bride... whom God, in His infinite humor, chose to lead into ordained ministry. ANYTHING I DO is not me, but the One who speaks through me. ***“So that GOD may be glorified in all things...”*** Yes, through our Personality. Our Character. Given to us by God.

The **Calling** that we have from God to fulfill His purpose and plan... the **confidence** that we are to have that whatever we do in HIS name will not be in vain... the **character** that allows us to speak and serve for God’s glory, not our own... ALL of this is done in the example of our Lord and Savior... the **CHRIST**. The one who, in the words of Philippians 2, even though He WAS God Incarnate, did not consider that identity one to be exploited, to be used for his own benefit. Rather, he raised up this standard for His followers: ***“...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man came NOT to be served BUT to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*** (Mt. 20:26-28)

One of the greatest examples of one who exhibited greatness in being a servant was an Albanian-Indian lady named Anjeze Gonxhe Bojaxhiu... whom we all would know as **Mother Teresa**. A Roman Catholic nun and missionary, she is most well-known for her work in the most impoverished areas of India, where she founded a the Missionaries of Charity, which at one point had over 4500 nuns serving in 133 countries. Mother Teresa and her fellow laborers managed homes for those dying from HIV/AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis, as well as running soup kitchens, health clinics, orphanages and schools. Her ministry touched countless lives, both directly and indirectly, as she showed the love of Christ to those who felt most UN-lovable.

This ‘tiny giant’ of selfless service, however, also struggled mightily in her own faith. At different times in her life she would complain of periods of spiritual dryness, long darkness, that strange suffering. As 16th C. mystic St. John of the Cross called it, a “Dark Night of the Soul.” And yet, in the midst of her own suffering, would yet make a difference in the lives of many... fulfilling that command of Jesus, ***““Whenever you have done for the least of these, my brethren, you have done for me.”*** (Matthew 25:40)

Mother Teresa wasn’t just concerned about people’s physical needs...
"Around the world, not only in the poor countries, but I found the poverty of the West so much more difficult to remove. When I pick up a person from the street, hungry, I give him a plate of

rice, a piece of bread, I have satisfied. I have removed that hunger. But a person that is shut out, that feels unwanted, unloved, terrified, the person that has been thrown out from society – that poverty is so hurtful [\[sic\]](#) and so much, and I find that very difficult."

We look at a life like hers and think, 'Well, we could never be like that.' Yes, perhaps not on that magnitude. Yet we can, in our own unique way, reach others with the same love that she displayed. We too can recognize that in the midst of our own struggles, we can yet make a difference in the lives of others... one soul at a time. That in these uncertain times we live in, there will be those we encounter whom might also feel 'unwanted, unloved, terrified, thrown out from society'... and that we should find that 'very difficult' to take. But, as we remain faithful to our CALLING... as we remain CONFIDENT that our labors will not be in vain as we rely on God... as we demonstrate the CHARACTER placed in us by a faithful Lord... as we seek to live by the example of CHRIST... we will be strong, healthy, 'great' in the way that matters most: in the eyes of God.

As you and I seek to serve others, walking alongside one another, may we never forget that in so doing, Jesus... Savior, Shepherd, and Servant... also walks with US! And walking with Jesus is the only way to truly 'stay in great 'shape'...

CHARGE

**"Viruses are contagious. So is pain...fear... hysteria...
calm... love... enthusiasm... Kindness... joy. Choose wisely."**