

Defining Your Mission - Being Conformed to the Image of Christ

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Becoming a Person with a Plan

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Bible Text: Romans 8:28-29

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So after last week's message, how many of you went home and changed your alarm clock to be 15 minute earlier? How many of you, after you considered the testimony of the ant wanted to wake up a little bit earlier? Or how many of you found yourself thinking of ants just in general invading your home and tearing off little pieces of your personal improvement plan and carrying them away? Did you think about that? I just had that interesting image of ants walking away with small pieces of something. But their testimony and ultimately the challenge of Scripture, my hope challenge and encourage you to become a person that plans to grow this year. That is our annual theme, planning to grow. And we are going to emphasize this theme in three key areas. One, continue to discuss, refine and implement {?} process. We want to get better. We want to connect more with one another and we want to improve our discipleship process. We also want to plan to organize and launch our new cluster of ministries at Faith West. Are you excited about that? I mean that is going to be just an opportunity. We see the building go up. Just think about how many people drive by and see that building and how many ministries we can actually have there to impact the city and the neighbors. We also want to plant a work together as a church family to develop our next five year strategic ministry plan. It is a planning year. It is a time to think about what the Lord is going to do and how he is going to use us. We want to plan to grow. So that is the whole reason for our first series this year, planning to grow and becoming a person with a plan.

We want to, as a church, as individuals we want to plan. And I think of you put something on paper, it helps you. A simple plan will help you and your family grow this year. And I would recommend starting that document with a really clearly defined mission statement, because you can have all kinds of ideas, all kinds of thoughts. You can take notes. You can scribble like crazy, but if it doesn't go back to reinforce one core mission you really can get confused. A personal or a family mission statement is wise to have thought through so that you can move towards a specific goal.

You know, you might say, "I have no idea where to start. I have no idea how to have a mission statement or a PIP. I even forgot what that stands for even though you just said it a minute ago. I have no idea what that is."

If that is where you are, I have got good news for you. If you don't know what your goal should be, the good news is the mission, the goal, the purpose it has already been chosen for you. I mean, isn't that good news? It is like somebody did your homework already and you got 100 on it. It is someone chose your mission for you. So you don't have to fret. You don't have to get worried. The mission is there. It has already been selected by us, for us, by our creator and it points towards our Savior.

So this morning I want to talk to you about defining your mission, being conformed in the image of Christ. Aren't you thankful that God's Word is so robust, so complete that he has already explained the mission for us. And just as Scripture has explained that planning was important from Proverbs six and the ant, so it also explains that the end result of planning is conforming to the image of Christ. So let's read a key text that defines our mission.

So please turn with me, if you will, to Romans chapter eight. If you need a Bible there is one in the chair in front of you underneath and we will be on page 124 in the back section of the New Testament. We are going to be focused on Romans 8:28 and 29. But I want to start reading in Romans 8:18. So I got an ice cube. Hang on a second. Everything is ok now.

All right. Are we all focused now? So Romans eight starting in verse 18 and the core text is going to be 8:28 and 29, but I want to kind of get a running start up to that, a big running start.

Here we go, verse 18.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together

for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.¹

You see her on the screen and that is going to be our text today. And as we look at this text there are two truths in this text that helps us see that God's plan involves two certainties, two things we can really rest our hat on to plan for the upcoming year. The first is that God is always in every way working for the good of his people. Let me just read that again, because this is an amazing statement. God is always in every way working for the good of his people. Isn't that powerful? Isn't that amazing?

This is what it does, though. It forces you to think about something. It forces you to consider how you view God. How do you view God? Do you view him right in the middle of your circumstances? And do you view everything that is going as good? It forces you to wrestle with that in light of the suffering and the groanings of this world we all ready leading up to this point. In light of the suffering and the groaning, how am I going to view God?

Because of the comprehensive nature of this verse, as always, it is important to point out the limited aspects as well. This verse is very limited and if we miss that I think we are going to miss something very important. Another way of looking at it is the amazing comprehensive nature of the promise is only for his people. This is an amazingly comprehensive, powerful promise and it is controlled by who the promise is directed to, to God's people.

When I meet someone new who is a Christian, do you know what one of the most encouraging things or parts of the conversation is, one of the most encouraging parts of the conversation is when if someone asks me about my testimony, it is one of the most encouraging things. And because what happens is they are doing a couple of things. First they give me an opportunity to give glory to the grace of God that has worked in my life. It reminds me of that time when I recognized my need for a Savior and that God's provision of forgiveness was there in Christ. It reminds me of that and it really encourages me. But they also are doing something else. They are asking me if I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They are asking me if I am a part of God's people. They are also doing something else. They are setting the tone for the rest of the conversation.

If I am his, if I belong to him, if I have been purchased, if I truly understand the gospel and I have put my faith and trust in Jesus' finished work on the cross on my behalf, everything that happens to me is good. Everything that happens to me is good and that person can now direct me to that truth because they have heard my testimony. They know

¹ Romans 8:28-29.

who I am trusting and they can point me to a verse like this and recognize that I am his and I might need to be reminded of that.

That challenges me to see life as God sees it, to see my mission. So recognizing who the promise is for is really important.

When you ask someone their testimony with the backdrop of Romans eight in mind, you are really asking them: Is God working everything out in your life for good because you are his? We need to remind each other of that.

So how does the limited nature of this verse help us, though, help us in this service think about people in the community, people in the service, each other.

Well, I think one of the first things its does is it helps us recognize the importance of caring for the lost. Think about all the things that you go through on a daily basis. Think about your daily life and the difficulties, the challenges, the pain, the hardships.

Now think about that from the standpoint of God not working those things out for good. The resulting thought is despair. If these challenges in my life, the sufferings of this world, the groanings have no greater purpose than in and of themselves, the response is often despair.

So, as you consider the limited nature of the promise, I hope it helps you develop a burden for sharing the good news with the lost, rather than just saying that is really great. The burden isn't that we would help someone to think more positively. The burden isn't that we would want to help them cope better or just change their circumstances, the burden is that they would become his. That is what this verse points us towards, having a burden.

A great thing to add to your mission statement this year is a commitment to share the gospel and pray for those who are lost. That is something you can plan to do this year. And it will not be in vain. That might mean that as part of your personal improvement plan, that you lay out a plan to pray for the opportunity to share the gospel with a few specific people God has brought into your life in your circle of influence. Note that I didn't just say to pray for them, but to pray for an opportunity to share with them. The praying is the first step, to cultivate your heart, to bring them before God and then recognize that God might answer your prayer by using you to speak words of life and words of truth. Let your prayer connect to your action to share the gospel with them.

Becoming more like Christ means caring for those who don't know him yet because Christ cared about you before you knew him. That is our mission.

Another possible addition to your plan is to be intentional about connecting with people at church, and particularly in this service. We want this goal of becoming more like Christ, being conformed to the image of Christ to set the tone of our conversation. The people you sit around, the people you go to ABF with, are you willing to learn about their

story of grace? Do you want to hear how the gospel impacted them, to remind them and to remind yourself of what our mission truly is all about?

You know what the average church in America has less than 180 people attend? And that is skewed because of gigantic mega churches of 10,000, 20,000 people. But, you know, the average church is less than 180 people and this service is really larger than the average church. And we could say, well, you know, it is big. And I just... I can't get to know everyone's story. There is just too many.

Don't let that stop you from getting to know the people around you and their story. Don't let that reality stop you from connecting and learning the story of grace of those around you, because our story of grace, it puts everything else in perspective. And we need to remind each other to put things in the perspective of God's grace and that we are his.

Being his affects how we view all things. The text says all things. And all things includes all things. The all things includes both blessings and challenges. And we love it when God uses blessings to help us grow, right? We are just like sign me up for more growing. I am going to grow this year via blessing. I will write that down and that is my plan. I mean, don't you? We get excited about growing through blessing, don't we? If that was all it was, we would just be smiling all the time. But God does use blessing to help us grow.

Sometimes when we are blessed it is the opportunity to grow by handling the issue of pride. God uses sometimes blessings to reveal our pride. This is shown both at a personal level, a group level, when we do a good job at work or if your kids are behaving, God might use that to reveal the pride in your heart. It doesn't take us very long to turn a blessing from God into a personal accomplishment. Think about that as a church. We have been blessed in many ways. And there is a temptation to think that we really have it all together. The temptation is to plan to not grow because we don't think we need to or we think we have done such a good job that we worked so hard that we can just kind of take a break.

Sometimes the blessing causes you to see you pride. It helps you recognize the depth of your sinfulness that even when you are blessed you can recognize that there is still sinfulness inside of you and pride comes out.

And the good news about that is that even when you are blessed and you see pride and you thought and you didn't know was there and you said, "How can I respond in pride, in discontent when I am blessed? My sin is deeper than I thought and I am still in need of a Savior." That is growth recognizing that we are still in need of a Savior. And our repose to the blessing reveals that and causes us to grow.

Sometimes, though, the blessings are so undeserved and so beyond your expectations that you learn to trust God at a greater level. You did not trust him. And he exceeded your expectations. And you developed a deeper thankfulness than before because of the blessing. God can use blessings to help us grow. God can also uses challenges to help us

grow, challenges both personal and corporate. And this testifies to God's ability to bring about growth in the midst of a sin cursed world of suffering and groaning, that God can use us, use people, use this reality of this world to accomplish his mission even if it... he is even able to use the simplest of man to bring about this good plan.

Earlier in Romans eight in verse 18 Paul says:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”²

The glory that is going to be revealed. In other words there are challenges, suffering, hardships to go through before the glory, the groaning, if you will. These challenges help us to put our hope in him not everything going right around us, not in ourselves. These challenges are often the interpersonal relationships that get strained and reveal that we don't treat people the way that Jesus treats people. We don't respond to people even when they sin against us, the way that Jesus does. We don't connect with people the way that Jesus does.

We have also faced a number of challenges which has brought us together as a church. I mean just think of Faith West. It has had its challenges, has it not? I mean all sorts of challenges, but they have helped us grow and rely more on God. When challenges bring about real change in us and as a church and that change is to more accurately reflect our creator, our redeemer and that is a good thing.

We need to remember that word good. That word good is a small word, but it is a very important. The promise of God to his people is for good. This forces us, again, to ask the question. What is good? What is good? What do we define as good?

If you are going to make a plan this year to grow you probably want it to be a good plan. Nobody says, “You know, let me make the worst plan possible to make sure that I fail.” Nobody sets out to make a really bad plan.” But when I say good I am not talking about the font that you use on your mission statement being attractive or the logistical parts of your plan being smart and intelligent. I am talking about the outcome, the focus, the purpose, the mission of the plan, the result of the all things in my life being categorically good in the eyes of God.

Now note that we are not talking about everything that happens to you being intrinsically good, but that the result of what happens being good. That is why it is so important to define this from the viewpoint of God's people, to define your mission, given to you by your creator and your redeemer.

So take consideration that the good is connected to God's purpose. He works everything together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. If we define good as the successful outcome of our purposes, we are going to have a very, very skewed view of good. If we define good as people appreciating us or getting our

² Romans 8:18.

preferences met or being able to do what we want to do, any small thing that hinders our purpose can become the foundation for discontent. We cry out. This isn't good. I don't like this. This is the furthest thing from good that you can possibly define. And do you ever say that? Do you ever respond in life and say, "This is not good at all?"

Romans eight replies, "Yes, it is." It is good in line with God's purpose, not our purposes.

I want to challenge everyone here to think about and wrestle with a question. Do we trust that the creator of the universe has a better purpose for us than we do? Do we trust that? I want you to wrestle with that question. If his steps to bring about that purpose involves some hurt, pain, suffering, betrayal, hard work, humility, sacrifice, groaning, are we willing to view them as good in light of our true purpose that our creator and redeemer laid out for us? Do I trust him and his plan so that I can plan accordingly this year?

Our God has a good plan for his people and it involves blessings and challenges. For what is the good? And I have heard what you are saying. Good, you have to define it based on God. But what is the result? What should be the meat of my mission statement, the goal of my personal improvement plan? His plan is good, because God is always at work conforming us to the image of Christ. That is the good, that we become more like Christ.

Verse 29 says:

"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren."³

Just latch on to that. This was the plan from the very beginning. This was the mission. This was the goal and his plans are very good. Mankind's sin cannot stop God's very good plan. Everything in creation, as we read through Genesis, was created very good. And God is restoring his very good creation.

Becoming more like Christ is very good is good for many, many reasons, but here are at least two I want to focus on. As we become more like Christ we experience the fellowship of the Father that allows us to rejoice no matter what sufferings may come our way. In other words, we are more controlled based on the relationship with God who loves us and we can rejoice and trust that his will being done is more important than my will being done. That happens as we become more like Christ.

A second reason it is good is that as we become more like Christ we reflect God's glory more accurately. We are conformed to the image, the visible representation, the image of his Son. We look less like ourselves and more like Jesus.

In our adult Bible fellowships we have been studying and discussing that our original purpose in Genesis was to bear the image and likeness of our creator, to represent him and his glory throughout the world, to be the visible representation of the invisible God.

³ Romans 8:29.

That was our purpose. That was our mission in Genesis 1:26 and Psalm eight. You look at the richness of our original purpose and that we have been given glory by our creator to reflect his glory. But because of sin we did not bear the image accurately. It was tarnished, it was corrupted. It was not visually accurate to God's glory. But God sent Christ to be the perfect image of the invisible God and to redeem us as new creations to bear God's image accurately according to our original purpose, his very good plan from the very beginning. God's good purpose is to restore his image bearers through his Son. God is always at work redeeming his creation to restore it. And as Romans chapter eight indicates we are all groaning for it. We have looked forward to it. And God is in the process of glorifying himself through the restoration of his creation and his image bearers. That this our mission.

So if God is at work, how can we plan this year to be active participants of God working? Think about it like this, that we are like a shiny piece of metal that has rusted, that has become tarnished, corrupted and we need to be polished. Things need to be knocked off and sanded off. We need to be restored so that when we are at {?} together we offer a good reflection of our creator and savior.

So as your service pastor, I want to talk to you a little bit about how we in this service can plan to be more like Jesus this year, to bear his image to each other better.

I mentioned earlier in this message that in many ways we are like a church. And I this service I would like to give you a few ways as a church, as a service we can plan to grow more like Christ this year.

This is what I want you to do. I want you to plan to connect with one another. I want you to lay that out as a plan this year to connect with one another. If God is at work conforming us to the image of his Son, then he is drawing us closer to him and ultimately he wants Christ to be the first born among many brethren. It means we are going to draw closer to Christ and if each of us, as we draw closer to Christ we also need to be drawing closer to each other, moving in the same direction.

Now drawing closer to each other, it doesn't mean that you just sit a little bit closer to each other, ok? It doesn't mean we just kind of, you know, squeeze together and be like, hi, I am drawing closer to Jesus and you as well. That is not what it means. It does mean that we get to know each other better.

I mentioned ultimately drawing closer to Christ. The question is: What does this look like? You know, give me some practical steps to write down on my plan what this really looks like.

It starts with getting to know people who sit around you. It starts with greeting them, talking not them, learning their story, their family background, their spiritual background. Find out if they go to an ABF. If they don't invite them to your ABF. If you don't have one, invite yourself to someone's ABF.

You know, going to an ABF is not a test of how spiritual you are. It is not meant to be a guilt trip. It is an honest effort to connect with one another so that we can be in a better position to grow. And I think that if we are humble we recognize that we need those smaller interactions to help each other to sand each other, to refine each other, to point each other towards Jesus how we need to grow.

Brethren, how about just the word brethren in the text? Brothers. Brothers know each other. Families know each other. They know the good and they know the good and the bad. They don't hide things from each other because they are brothers. They are family. And, you know, we are united together by Christ and that means that we can get to know someone because of the connection we have to each other because of Christ. This is an aspect of our discipleship process that needs to improve and it starts with each of us planning to connect.

It might mean that after you get to know someone maybe you invite them to join you for lunch. Say, "Let's just go grab a bite to eat at a restaurant." It is not going to be weird, ok? Because I have already talked about it, ok? So I have talked about it. So it is not going to be weird to say, "Hey, do you want to go to lunch?" I have talked about it so the weirdness is just out of the window now.

You know, but if you were in a church of a couple of hundred people and you met somebody new and they said, "Let's just go grab lunch," it wouldn't be weird at all. It would be a pretty normal thing.

We want to plan to take steps to connect. Maybe your plan is to visit an ABF. You know, one of the things you could do is you could walk out to the welcome center and grab one of those cards and you would look on the backside of it, all the different ABFs and just say, "You know what? I am just going not look at them, read them. That is going to be part of my plan this year." And just go visit them. Check them off and to see if it is a good fit, if I can connect and help the people in that ABF be conformed to Christ and trust that God is going to use people in that ABF to help me be conformed to Christ. That is something you can plan to do. Just grab a card today and put it on your refrigerator and build that into your plan.

Here is the other piece. As you get to know the people around you, a great secondary benefit of that is that you are going to be able to identify and welcome visitors better. If you know the people around you and someone new sits in your area it is like a red flag. And I am not talking about like a red flag like let me see your passport if you are allowed to sit in this area. That is not what I am talking about. It is the red flag of this somebody new. Maybe I can welcome them.

You know, it might be that you introduce yourself to someone who has been a member her for 20 years. I did that once. I said, "Is this your first time here?" And they said, "You know, I have been here longer than you have been alive."

And I was like, the Lord used that in my life to humble me a little bit. But, you know what? You are either going to meet a distant family member that you didn't know, or you are going not meet somebody new and welcome them. you can't really go wrong. And you have a good laugh in the... you know, even if they have been here a really long time.

You know, you might introduce yourself to someone who has been here 20 years because they have moved to a new part of the auditorium because they want to meet some new people and make sure that they are connected. This would be just something that I think would bless us, bless visitors. And it would really ultimately help us connect, but in order to do this there might be some challenges that we have to overcome. Do you think that might be true of our culture?

I think we get really comfortable not connecting. It is routine to find our spot and sit down and it is going to take a little bit of effort to connect. Consider the ant, though. Is there anything to be more diligent about, to plan to do than to connect with one another and help each other be conformed to the image of Christ? That is our mission. Are we going not plan to accomplish that mission first and foremost right here?

That would be great to put on your mission statement or improvement plan to be sure to get to church early to get to know those around me and come prepared to welcome visitors.

You know, I would love to see in the foyer just an opportunity to be a great place to connect with each other. I would love it if we said, "You know what? I don't want anybody in the service to sit alone." I want to be aware of if someone is brand new and welcome them. That would be great.

Do you know what else would be fun? If we could jam Titus up. If we were so engaged and connected to one another Titus is up here trying to call us to worship and he has to work really hard to get our attention. That would just be, I think, in general, a great thing to jam Titus up. So as part of your goals this year, jamming Titus up should be somewhere on there in my personal opinion.

So the challenge of getting to church early is one thing. How about the challenge of just not wanting to connect? If we are honest, that is the real challenge. Getting here early is one thing, but having the heart to connect is the real challenge. You know there is all kinds of excuses. I don't have the time. What do I say. What if they think I am weird. What if they don't want to talk to anyone? Consider verse 31 in Romans eight. After all these things that we read it says:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?⁴

⁴ Romans 8:31-32.

God gave us all things in Christ. He didn't withhold anything from us. If we have everything that we need here is a really big logical transition, we don't need anything. If we have everything that we need, we don't need anything. Correspondingly, we can freely give to others. We can freely give of ourselves to others.

In other words, our excuses often revolve around what we think we need and don't have. We are free to connect with each other because we don't need anything from each other. We don't need each other's approval. We don't need to protect ourselves from each other. We don't need to worry about being received well, because God is for us. He has received us. We have been received by him. We are free to pursue our mission of being conformed to Christ and encouraging others to become conformed to Christ as well.

I think we need to grow in that area in this service. Part of your plan to grow this year should include what you are going to do to connect with people and welcome visitors in this service. You know, get your family on board with the mission. At breakfast time just say, "Hey, we are heading to church to connect with people because they need to become more conformed to Christ and so do we."

You know, once we become like the ant, once we become like the ant and we are actually physically hauling people upstairs to ABFs, then we will actually know that we have grown in this area. If we are carrying people out to our cars saying, "Come to lunch with me," we will know that there is a step of growth. And I kid, but consider the ant and what we should be diligent in, our mission, being conformed to the image of Christ. And we need each other to help remind us of God's grace, the truth of the Bible and ultimately how everything good has a purpose of becoming conformed to Christ. We need each other because we are so forgetful. Help each other not forget in this service. And it starts by coming here early, connecting with each other and really having a heart saying, "I need this and they need it as well."

Well, so take always to think about if this is God's mission for me to become more like Christ, will I pursue it with the same commitment to the NFL players are pursuing the Superbowl? Am I really going to focus on it with that kind of passion? Am I willing to consider adding to my personal improvement plan, first a commitment to view God's work in my life the grid of conforming me to Christ. And, secondly, a willingness to see his guarantees on my life, his love for me, his promises, so significantly that I am now freed to minister to others.

You know, it is a joy to be in this service. It is a joy to get to know you, to pray with you and to partner in the gospel with you. And I look forward to the ways that God is going to use each other to help us individually and together grow and become conformed to the image of Christ.

Pray with me now and let's ask God to help us carry out the mission he has given us.

Lord, you are so good. And, Lord, that word goodness only comes because of who you are and, Lord, we are just amazed and floored and humbled and honored that you would

be yours, that you would purchase us and redeem us and rescue us and make us your own, Lord. We have an identity because of you and that affects everything else about us and everything that happens to us, Lord. Help us develop that wisdom, that grid of truth to view everything that happens to us through the Lord. Help us do that because we are so easily forgetful and focused on our own plans. Lord, thank you that all things you can use to bring about Christ likeness in our lives. Lord, help our plan really be your plan. Help us change our plan to become more like yours. Lord, we groan at times in our relationships, in this world, in our bodies. Lord, help the groaning, help the suffering. Help us just refocus our attention on you and ultimately how we can learn to become more like you and how one day we are going to see you and reign with you forever and ever and ever. Help us plan now for that day. In your name I pray. Amen.