

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 16, 2008**

## **UPWARD SPIRITUAL MOBILITY**

### **Ephesians 4:17-24**

A few weeks ago we began thinking together about the three priorities the Session of Faith has adopted for our life and ministry as a church in 2009. Three Sundays ago we looked at the first of these three priorities: *To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life.*

Last Sunday we turned our focus to the second priority: *To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to disciple and minister to one another.* Using Paul's instruction in Galatians 6:2 to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" as our text, we looked at how we can minister to one another in practical ways by "bearing one another's burdens."

Next Sunday, as we dedicate our Faith Promises of financial support for the ministries of Faith and Redeemer – and dedicate ourselves anew to be the people God has called us and saved us and equipped us to be in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit – we will examine the third priority: *To care for the poor and hurting in the church and the world.*

Today, though, we return to the second priority, to consider our calling to "disciple one another."

Discipleship, of course, is part of our mandate as followers of Christ. In fact, it is the central part of the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples. In Matthew 28, Jesus said: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have command you" (28:19-20).

Jesus did not say: "Go and make *converts.*" He said: "Go and make *disciples.*" Winning converts to Christ is not enough. It is important – there is no question about that! You can't be a disciple of Christ until you have experienced His forgiveness and saving grace in conversion. But a convert is not necessarily a disciple. Those who have been converted know that their sins are forgiven through the saving work of Christ on the cross, and that they will go to heaven when they die. Praise the Lord for that! I hope that every person here knows the joy of having your sins forgiven and the assurance of a home in heaven. It is all a gift of grace – God's grace – and I pray that you have experienced this grace in your life. If not, I hope you will experience this grace right here this morning by turning to God in a spirit of heartfelt repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving work for you.

But God doesn't want you to be just a convert. He doesn't want us to trust in Christ simply in order to receive forgiveness and to get our ticket to heaven. There is joy in heaven, Jesus said in Luke 15, the angels in heaven throw a party, whenever a sinner

repents and turns to Him in faith (15:7, 10). But conversion is not the finish line. Receiving salvation (or being born again, or having a spiritual awakening and coming to faith in Christ, or whatever language we may use to describe it) is just the beginning.

I'm not telling you anything most of you don't already know. Jesus calls us not just to believe in Him. He calls us to follow Him. Following Him in the course of daily life is the essence of discipleship. The goal of discipleship – the purpose for which God calls us to be and to make disciples – is spiritual maturity in Christ.

Most of you have probably memorized Romans 8:28, or, if not, it is one of the most easily recognized verses in the whole Bible. In the NIV translation, it says:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Amen! It is a wonderfully encouraging and reassuring verse, reminding us that God is sovereignly and graciously at work in all the circumstances of our lives. But if we have been “called according to His purpose,” what is the purpose for which God has called us to Himself? The answer is found in the very next verse – in Romans 8:29, which says:

For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.

There it is. This is God's purpose in your life and mine. He wants us to become more and more like Jesus. He wants us to be conformed more and more to the likeness of His Son. He wants us to cultivate the mind and heart and character of Jesus.

Paul says it in a slightly different way in the first part of Ephesians 4. In verse 13, he says that God wants us – each of us and all of us – to grow up to full maturity in Christ. He wants us to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” In *The Message*, it says that God wants us to become “fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ” (emphasis mine).

*The Message* goes on, in verses 15 and 16, to express God's purpose this way:

God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth  
and tell it in love – like Christ in everything.  
We take our lead from Christ,  
who is the source of everything we do.  
He keeps us in step with each other.  
His very breath and blood flow through us,  
nourishing us so that we will grow up  
healthy in God, robust in love.

This is God's plan, His purpose, His will for your life and mine. And for the church, God wants us to become like Christ. Or, as Paul says in our text today, in verse 14, having

received the gift of salvation through faith in Christ, we were “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” In the words of Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, we are meant to live a “God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your (our) conduct as God accurately reproduces His character in you (us).” A God-fashioned life in which we become more and more like Jesus. This is God’s will for us. And it is way more than just having our sins forgiven and a ticket to heaven, as essential as they are.

The process by which we grow to become like Christ in our values and attitudes and conduct, the process by which God reproduces the character of Christ in us, is what we call discipleship. Discipleship is the process by which we grow toward spiritual maturity as followers of Christ.

Politicians and economists talk a lot about upward mobility, which is the ability to move from a lower to a higher economic or social status. *The Wall Street Journal* posted an article online this past week reporting that, along with all the other depressing economic news recently, it seems that upward mobility – a central feature of the American dream – has remained stagnant over the last 20 years. The good news is that mobility rates haven’t fallen. It is not worse today than it was in the 80s or 90s. But, in terms of the total population, approximately the same percentage experienced downward mobility in their income and standard of living as those who moved up in economic or social status.

Discipleship is not about upward mobility in economic or social terms. It is about upward *spiritual* mobility. It is about growing up to spiritual maturity in Christ.

This doesn’t happen instantaneously or automatically. We don’t become like Jesus overnight. It is really a lifelong process. If you think you have arrived spiritually, if you think you have scaled the highest spiritual mountain there is and you have no more growing in Christ to do, if you think discipleship is only for others who aren’t as spiritual as you, you’re wrong. It just ain’t so! Let me urge you to repent of the spiritual pride which is blinding you to the truth, which is that none of us has arrived and all of us have room to grow to become more like Christ in our thoughts and attitudes, in our character and conduct. I know there is plenty of room for spiritual growth in my life. And the same is true for each of you, no matter how long you have been walking with Christ.

But there is a problem in the church, a problem among professing Christians, that we’ve got to acknowledge. We use all kinds of initials in our culture as a sort of shorthand in our communication with one another. We’ve got ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, CIA, FBI, USA, POTUS (President of the United States), FCC, GOP, EPC, HIV/AIDS, ADHD, BFF, LOL, NASCAR, and NFL. You can probably think of a lot more. Here is one that is new to me: FTT. Do you know what FTT stands for? I learned it from one of my favorite authors, John Ortberg, who learned it from his wife Nancy, who was a nurse when John first met her. Though there were some parts of nursing she didn’t particularly like, she loved diagnosis. John says: “She is constantly telling me her private diagnoses of people – even total strangers – based on their skin color. She can tell you how long you have to live if she gets a long look at your face and the light is good.”

He is not serious, of course. But then he turns serious and says this: “But of all the diagnoses I ever heard her discuss, FTT is the one that sticks in my mind. Those initials would go on the chart of an infant who, often for unknown reasons, was unable to gain weight or grow.” FTT. Failure to thrive.

Failure to thrive is a big deal, even a life-and-death issue, for any child or parents of a child to whom the letters FTT are applied. FTT is also a serious problem in the church. Some believers in Christ who have experienced conversion have a kind of spiritual FTT. There is a cute TV commercial I’ve seen which features a lively bevy of chronologically advanced women who sing this song (some of them even dance to it): “When I grow up, I want to be an old woman” – meaning, I want to live a long, full, healthy life. I love it!

Here is the problem, though, in the realm of spiritual things. As Rick Warren says in *The Purpose Driven Life*, millions of Christians grow older, but never grow up. I don’t have an audience of millions, like Rick Warren, but I’ve been around enough and I’ve seen enough to know that his assessment is right. Too many of us grow older without ever growing up spiritually. FTT – Failure to Thrive – is the sad diagnosis of the condition of many who claim to belong to Christ.

I hope it does not describe your life. I hope it does not fit the life of any person here today. If it does, I urge you to confess the condition of your heart to the Lord and repent of your spiritual inertia. I urge you to turn back to the Savior and make a commitment to grow spiritually as a disciple of Christ for life.

In our text, beginning in verse 17, Paul depicts for us the downward spiral of evil, which begins with the willful rejection of God’s revealed truth. The designation of “the Gentiles” in verse 17 in this context simply means pagan unbelievers. First comes the hardening of their hearts, then their ignorance of spiritual truth and being darkened in their understanding. As a result they are alienated or separated from the life of God, having “refused for so long to deal with God that they’ve lost touch not only with God but with reality itself” (*The Message*). Finally, they become callous and give themselves over to their sexual passions and indulge in every kind of sin their hearts desire (4:17-19).

It is not a pretty picture that Paul paints here. It is a picture, like the one we find over in Romans 1, of what happens when people reject God and determine to go their own way in life. Or they pick and choose which teachings of the Bible they will embrace, and create their own “designer religion.” But then in verse 20 Paul says: “This is not how you came to know Christ.” More literally, it says: “You did not learn Christ this way.” The word translated “learn” is the Greek word *emathete*, which comes from the word *mathetes*, which is the New Testament word for “disciple.” A disciple, in the New Testament sense, is a learner, a student, a follower who seeks to become like the teacher.

Isn’t that what you and I are called to be? Jesus calls us to be His followers, His students who desire to become like Him in the way we think and act and love. In response to His grace, not only do we experience the forgiveness of our sins and the assurance of a home

in heaven, but we begin the adventure of growing up to spiritual maturity in Christ, which is God's will for every one of us, regardless of our age.

To become like Christ, we must let go of our old ways of acting. It is like taking off an old set of clothes that are filthy and stained and torn. We must "be made new in the attitudes of (our) minds" (verse 23). We must undergo a transformation in the way we think, having our minds renewed by the operation of the Holy Spirit at work in us. And, in response to God's grace in salvation, we must "put on" the new clothing of a Christlike character which reflects what God is really like.

Becoming like Christ – which is the goal of discipleship – is a lifelong process of growth. At whatever point we find ourselves on the road to Christian maturity, we are still "works in progress." When people who know about my brain surgery and subsequent brain injury ask me how I'm doing, I sometimes answer by saying: "I'm a work in progress." It is the truth. My recovery is not finished yet, any more than my growth toward maturity in Christ is finished! I am so thankful the Lord has brought me this far. I'm so thankful for the healing I've experienced. I'm so thankful for the milestones we've reached in my recovery. But I am still very much a work in progress. And it may be months, even years, before my recovery is complete. Just as it will be as many years of life that the Lord gives me here on earth, before I graduate from the school of discipleship. As long as I live, I know I will still have some growing in Christ to do. And I think the same is true for you. We are all works in progress.

The question is: Are we progressing? Are you? Are you experiencing upward spiritual mobility? Are you moving toward maturity in Christ? Have you sustained your spiritual fervor? Or have you gotten stuck, or sidetracked somewhere along the way? Could someone write the diagnosis FTT on the chart of your spiritual life?

Jesus our Lord wants you to grow in your relationship to Him. He wants us not only to believe in Him but to live for Him as fully devoted followers. That can only happen if we are intentional about pursuing spiritual growth. Discipleship requires effort. Spiritual growth requires training. Listen to what Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:7-8:

Train yourself to be godly.  
For physical training is of some value,  
but godliness has value for all things,  
holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

In *The Message* it says:

Exercise daily in God – no spiritual flabbiness, please!  
Workouts in the gymnasium are useful  
but a disciplined life in God is far more so,  
making you fit both today and forever.

Our mandate from Christ, as we noted at the beginning, is to make disciples. Not just converts to Christ, but disciples of Christ. That is our Great Commission. It takes disciples, dear friends, to make disciples. In order to make disciples in the name of Christ, we must first be disciples of Christ ourselves.

And we are called to disciple one another. It is both our privilege and our spiritual duty in the body of Christ. This discipling can take place informally, as we live out our faith and commitment to Christ together in the flow of daily life. It can be intentional, as when we seek to encourage one another, to serve one another in love, to honor one another above ourselves, to teach and admonish one another with wisdom and humility, and to build one another up in the faith by bearing witness to God's grace and faithfulness in our lives. It can also take place in formalized discipling relationships, where we invest in the lives of newer or younger believers to help them grow in grace and godliness, in devotion to the Lord and in ministry to others, as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether you call it a discipling relationship or something else, each of us can serve Christ by investing in the spiritual growth of at least one other person. Or you can prayerfully seek out a more mature Christian to help you grow spiritually.

God wants us to grow to spiritual maturity in Christ. He wants us to become more and more like Christ, so that when people look at us and observe the way we live, they will know what Christ is like. That is the goal of discipleship. And our desire here at Faith and at our daughter church Redeemer is to equip and inspire every member to disciple one another and to minister to one another in Jesus' name. And for His glory.

I want to close with this. A well-known Christian author was on a plane flying from San Francisco to Los Angeles. He was sitting next to the window, reading a Christian book. The man sitting next to him asked: "Are you a religious man?"

"Well, yes, I am," said the author.

"I am, too," the man responded.

They began talking about religion. In the course of the conversation, the author asked: "Can you give me a one-liner that captures the essence of your faith?"

"Well, yes," he said. "We are all part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution,"

The two men talked about that statement. After a while, the author said: "Would you like a one-liner that captures the Christian faith?"

"Sure," he responded.

"We are all part of the problem, but there is only one man who is the solution. His name is Jesus."

Dear friends, the trouble with the world is us. We are all part of the problem. But Jesus is the solution. The solution to my problem and your problem is Jesus. His grace is available. And it is sufficient.

The Lord Jesus wants us not only to trust in Him for salvation. He wants us to grow up to become like Him in the way we think and act and love. How did Paul put it? “Fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ” (Ephesians 4:13, *The Message*).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.