

"PURPOSEFUL LIVING"

January 1, 1989

TEXT: John 14:12 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father."

Not long ago my office mail brought me a piece of advertising which asked this very interesting and thought provoking question: "Did you ever hit a target you couldn't see?" Now, you know the answer to that as well as I do. All you have to do is watch a group of children playing "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" or "Blind Man's Bluff" or trying to break open a pinata. The only way we hit a target we can not see is by sheer accident. Oh, I remember seeing a circus act once where a man threw knives blindfolded. But before he put his blindfold on he stared intently at his target until he had it memorized.

And when I was playing football, the first thing we learned about tackling was to keep our eyes fixed firmly on the ball carrier's belt buckle. Not at his head, or his shoulders, or his legs because he can fake with those. But looking right at the runner's belt buckle gives a tackler a target he can trust. And it is the same way in baseball, or golf, or volleyball. The first, and most important, lesson is to keep your eyes upon the ball. Why? Because you can not hit a target that you can not see.

And most of us can not hit more than one target at a time either. One day my wife and I came to a familiar street corner in St. Louis just after the city had installed new four-way pedestrian crossing lights. It was now possible to cross in any direction, including kitty-corner, when the "Walk Carefully" lights were on. And, in her enthusiasm for this bit of the new and different, Peggy turned to me and said, "Oh look, now we can walk in all four directions at once!" Unable to restrain myself, I smiled and answered, "Maybe you can, but I can't." Yet, that is what many of us try to do in life. We work hard --sometimes very hard-- but we do not seem to get anywhere. And, if we did, we would not know it, for we have no clear target by which to judge our progress.

That is why goals are so important. That is why we need to have some purpose, whether we are taking a walk, or deciding on a college major, or considering a job offer, or anything else. Without a purpose, we find ourselves just going around in circles. Working hard, and getting nowhere. And that is not only frustrating; it is also bad stewardship. What better time,

then, than this first day of the new year, to ask ourselves, "Where are we headed? What do we want to do with our lives? What is our target, our purpose, in life? These are crucial questions, for churches and for individuals.

Now, in this morning's scripture, we found Jesus telling his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." And it seems to me that we would have to go a very long way before we found a better goal than that. To do the works that Jesus did. Oh, I do not mean exactly the same. I do not know anyone who can raise the dead, or walk on water, or turn water into wine. But we can do the same kinds of things he did and, God willing, even greater things because he has gone to the Father.

For one thing, we can remember that churches—and church members—exist, not to serve ourselves, but to serve God. To some that might sound like a chore or a burden, but it is not. It is our purpose and our glory, just as it was Christ's. Again and again Jesus pointed out that he came, not to glorify himself, but to glorify his Father. He said, "I can do nothing on my own authority . . . because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." And again, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." And, like Jesus, we, too, find joy and freedom only by committing ourselves to God. Without that, nothing else matters. As Francis Thompson writes in The Hound of Heaven, "All things betray thee who betrayest Me."

We may think that money, or fame, or power will make us happy, but they can not. In his book, Raising Positive Kids in a Negative World, Zig Ziglar describes a TV interview shortly after actor Freddie Prinz committed suicide. According to Ziglar, the person being interviewed probably knew more Hollywood celebrities than anyone else in the world. And she was asked, "Do you know any other superstar in athletics, music, TV, or movies who might be in danger of accidentally or deliberately taking his own life?" And, after a moment's reflection, she answered, "I don't know anyone who is famous in these fields who is not . . . because I don't know a single one who is happy." [Emphasis mine]

Now remember, she was talking about people who already have everything we are working for, the things we think will make us happy. But they are not happy, for happiness comes only when we are what we are created to be, servants of God.

And we serve God best when we serve others. Jesus said, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them, but it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you, must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

There you have it. Again, not a burden or a chore, but the key to happy and successful living. Not what we get, but what we give; for life is like a game of tennis; the player who serves well seldom loses.

"Go, labour on; spend and be spent--  
Thy joy to do the Father's will;  
It is the way the Master went;  
Should not the servant tread it still?"

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father."

So, as we begin this new year by gathering at the table of our Lord, let us come with a purpose. Come, not just because it makes us feel good, but because here --and only here-- can we find the life's true power and its true purpose. Let us come to the True Vine that we may fulfill our calling and bear fruit for God and for others. AMEN.