

'A Vision for Service' series

Steve Jourdain

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Saved to Serve

Ephesians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10

Last week I talked about our dreams for 2004, our personal dreams, our dreams for our discipleship, and for St Albans. I asked some questions about how well our dreams fitted into God's purposes for our lives, both for the **relationship** and the **role** that God has for us. That the purpose of our lives is **not** about us but it's all about God.

I asked what we are building with our lives, and how we are growing in our lives, that is of eternal value, of kingdom value? What specific plans have **you** got in 2004 to help you go on maturing in worship, church, loving relationships and using your gifts in God's mission?

I then went on to share my dreams for St Albans Church. Sermon copies are available.

I said that we need to keep asking ourselves as individuals and as a church, whether our dreams and plans fit into God's big picture and long-term perspective.

So what is **our** part in this overall purpose God is working out in everything and everyone?

Two key words in God's purpose: a loving **relationship** with God and his family, and a loving **role** as God's witness and servant. The relationship is made clear in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 4 & 5 and chapter 2 verses 6 & 7. The role is made clear in Ephesians 2 verse 10 which reads:

"God creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing." (The Message version)

"For we are God's masterpiece ("workmanship" in the NIV). He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (New Living Translation)

God has created us for a life of good deeds.... To join God in the work he is doing to build his kingdom. The word translated "workmanship", "masterpiece", "craftsmanship" is from the Greek root meaning 'poem'. We are God's creative expression, God's masterpiece, although we may not always feel or look like it! We are not mass-produced on a production line, but a custom-made, original, masterpiece, for a task God has long intended.

God's purpose for us is well described in an excellent book called '**The Purpose Driven Life**' written by Pastor Rick Warren. Warren started the Saddleback Church in Southern California, by door to door visiting in a new housing area, which has become one of the largest churches in the USA with over 20,000 weekly attenders.

His book has now sold over 10 million copies and was on the New York Times' best sellers list for 43 consecutive weeks and got to number 1 five times! The book is designed to be part of a local church programme called '**Forty Days of Purpose**', during which the children's and youth programmes, small groups and Sunday services, all focus on God's five purposes for our lives. The programme is based on this book which church members are invited to buy, and then to read one brief chapter each day for the forty days.

Some of the Palmerston North churches along with many others throughout NZ are doing this programme after Easter, and our Elders have decided that it would be a great programme for St Albans to launch us into the next chapter of our life in the new building. The dates have yet to be decided.

Ephesians chap 2 verse 10 makes it clear that we were Made and Saved to Serve God. We were put on earth to make a contribution. You and I weren't created to take up space, to just eat

and breathe. We were made to contribute not consume, not to **get** the most out of life but to **give** the most with our lives; not to **take** from life but to **add** value to life.

Ephesians 2 verse 10 makes it clear we were created to do good deeds; verse 9 makes it clear we were **not** saved **by** good works, but **for** good works.

The Bible's key word for "doing good works" is service, serving; and we serve out of gratitude.

Romans 12 verse 1 says, "So then my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, **dedicated to his service.**"

We were created to serve and saved to serve and we do so with thankfulness. Have you ever wondered why God doesn't take us straight to heaven the moment we believe, the moment we accept Jesus as our Saviour? It would be a good method of controlling the world's population!

Some Christians act as if all they need to do after being saved is to sit on the sideline and wait for the next bus to heaven! We don't go straight to heaven, because God has a purpose for us, a role for us to play, in relationship with Him. We have a role, a service to do in the church (often called a "ministry"), and a mission in the world.

The term 'ministry' means 'service', to serve or help, and the terms are interchangeable. So too are the words 'minister' and 'servant'. We are called to be ministers, servants in the church community, the body of Christ.

Some churches make this point very strongly. On their newsletter where it says 'Minister' they type: 'The Whole Congregation' or 'All our Members'. Then underneath they put the 'Pastor' / 'Presbyter' / 'Teaching Elder' / 'Vicar' is Steve Jourdain, or whoever.

When we think of being **called to serve**, to be a minister, to ministry, to full-time service, we tend to think of the professional clergy – pastors, ministers, priests, nuns, missionaries, church workers. But the New Testament makes it quite clear that all Christians are called to belong, to love, to serve, to follow Jesus, in every moment of the day and in every area of our lives. Regardless of our work and our career, at home or outside the home, every Christian is in full-time ministry, in full-time Christian service. A non-serving Christian is a contradiction.

- How much of our time, how often in our work, do we conscientiously make ourselves available to God to be useful in his service? Paul says in Romans 7, v 4: "and now you belong to Christ who was raised from death in order that we might be useful in the service of God."
- How available are we to be useful in God's service?
- Do we have the sense that we are being useful in God's service?

In some churches in China, a new believer is welcomed into the church by the leader saying, "Jesus now has a new pair of eyes to see with, new ears to listen with, new hands to help with, a new heart to love others with."

The reason we are all called to serve in an interdependent, multi-gifted body is so that, as each of us serves and ministers with our gifts and passions, no one person or ministry should be stressed or overworked. But if some parts of the body don't do their role, the other parts suffer. Some churches seem glad enough that their members just turn up on Sunday and put \$5 in the offering – just like waiting at the bus stop to heaven and paying off the fare on time payment! But we are made and saved and called for much more, in the active service of God.

We are also **commanded /told to serve**. Jesus told us to follow his example.

John chap 13 has Jesus washing the disciples' feet, the menial work of a slave and Jesus says, "If I, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another's feet....I have set you an example to follow". And then in verse 17 says, "Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice."

In Matthew 20 verses 24f, disciples James and John are seeking prestige and power in the future Kingdom of God. Jesus replies that those who want to be great or first, need to become the servants of others" because that is what he is modelling as the way of the Kingdom, "for the Son of Man came to **serve** and to **give** his life to redeem many people." These two verbs, action words, "to serve and give", define Jesus' life on earth; and we are called to do the same.

At the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, after discussing what it means to love our neighbours, Jesus says, "Now go and do likewise", just as in John 13 verse 17 above.

We must act on what we know. Christian maturity, Bible knowledge, spiritual gifting, are not ends in themselves. Maturity is for ministry. We are saved to serve, healed to help, blessed to be a blessing. We grow up to give out; so often we grow and mature through giving out in practical service.

There is a wonderful example in comparing the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea in Israel. Both have water coming into them but only Galilee gives out water. It is a vibrant living sea. But the Dead Sea is just that. It doesn't have any outlet; it does not give out. You and I risk dying, risk stagnation in our faith, if we don't give out.

Most of us are well grounded in our faith, have a good grasp of the Gospel, know what God wants of us. We don't need more Bible studies, more training, more church services. We need to do more ministry, more service, more practical experience of doing the Lord's work, to stretch our faith, to develop our spiritual muscles.

This is why I dream of housegroups, study groups, getting involved in some practical ministry in our community. Not spending year after year studying the Bible, praying mainly for one another's needs, and often going stale as we grow to know one another so well. But just imagine taking on a practical project to serve some people or group in the community. Imagine if housegroups only met three times or even twice a month for Bible study and discussion and spent the other one or two evenings serving Hokowhitu or Palmerston North in some practical way together.

- Offering to weed people's gardens who were elderly, or plant flowers in Crewe Crescent gardens?
- Maybe going out to the prison one evening a month to take a service or to run an Alpha course. Wouldn't that get us on our knees, make us pray more, and give our Bible study more focus, as we decided what to share?
- offering to take away people's inorganic rubbish on a Saturday morning, instead of meeting on the usual housegroup night? or maybe some other random act of kindness?
- Taking part in a door-to-door survey on behalf of St Albans, to enquire about people's needs and the community's needs and how we could serve them; to introduce them to St Albans, leaving an introductory brochure about our ministries? Then after an hour of door knocking on housegroup night, come back to your group, share your stories and pray for those you visited. Perhaps a Homegroup could commit themselves to visiting one whole street over a six month period, say Te Awe Awe St, Winston Avenue, your own street.
- Cooking a meal one night, at one of the night shelters or at one of the Mash houses around town and spending a couple of hours chatting with the residents.
- Maybe you're not in a housegroup but could get together a few people you know – even some you don't know – and offer to run the Sunday children's programme in one school holidays or do something with the youth group one evening to give Brendan a break.
- Go to the Square with James Hanly or Bill Campbell and share the gospel message with people through the Black Book method; or do a prayer walk around some streets of our suburb.

The possibilities are endless. As you prepare for and pray for and come back to discuss your experiences you will grow and mature in your discipleship. One of our best Christmas days Shirley and I ever spent, was serving lunch at the Christchurch City Mission. It was a formative, stretching experience, putting aside our own celebration and pleasure, to give pleasure to others, to try and see and treat people as Jesus does, and love the needy.

Too often when we are looking for a church to belong to, we look for a church that meets **my** needs, where I feel comfortable, which will be a blessing to **me**. Maturing Christ-followers don't ask, 'How will my needs be met?'; don't say, 'This church isn't doing anything for me!' Maturing disciples of Jesus ask, 'Where can I serve, who needs my help, how can I **be** a blessing?'

Serving is not natural in our modern, western, individualistic culture. But if we aren't serving, we aren't living life to the full; at least not the Jesus' Way. If you're not involved in some ministry or service, what excuse have you been using? You may have had a very good excuse, like many Bible characters.

Albert Schweitzer said, "The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve". The Anglican Book of Common Prayer has a collect, a short prayer for peace:

"Oh God, who is the author of peace and lover of harmony, in the knowledge of whom stands our eternal life, **whose service is perfect freedom**: defend us your humble servants...."

Service of God, through the service of others, is the pathway to real significance and true freedom. Freedom is not ultimately about doing what we like, but doing what is right. God wants to use you in his service, to make a difference in his world. Will you dedicate yourselves to God's service in this new year, taking practical opportunities to carry out your calling?

Serving with Attitude

Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10

In the last two weeks I've been speaking about our dreams and plans, and how they fit with God's dreams and purposes for our lives. I've talked of how we discover our life purpose and shared my dreams for St Albans. I sharpened the focus last week, saying we are saved to serve God, in fact we are created, saved, called and told by Jesus to serve.

I shared my dream that every St Albans member would be in a housegroup or in some accountable relationship with one or two others, and that housegroups would become service teams/ministry teams, taking on a practical ministry serving our community, using one or two of the housegroup nights each month or so. And that our new St Albans building would become a service centre (a ministry /helping /healing centre) for Hokowhitu.

Many of us feel we don't have much discretionary time, but we all need to seek a balance in our Christian discipleship between our own personal and family dreams and God's dreams and purposes for us. We each need to be conscious that one day we will all stand before God to give account of what we have done in our lives; and God will evaluate how well you and I have served Him, served His purposes, served other people.

For unbelievers who have lived for themselves and their own self-oriented purposes, God's evaluation will be one of eternal consequences. For Christ-followers, it will be an evaluation for eternal/heavenly rewards.

Unbelievers will be asked what they did *with* Jesus? Believers will be asked what they did *for* Jesus.

On that day God will compare how much time and energy we spent on ourselves, and on our families, compared with what we invested in serving others. I keep mentioning our families because our children can become an excuse, an idol even, which restricts our service of God.

Raising our children in a God-honouring way is a most significant aspect of our service as Christian parents; but it can become completely consuming and out of balance. Similarly with our work. It is a significant part of our service of God but can become all-consuming and out of balance.

Christian discipleship involves a continuing reassessing of our lives, a continual conversation with God, and especially listening to God, about the balance and priorities of our lives.

When we stand before God, all our excuses will sound hollow: "I was too busy", "I had my goals to achieve", "I was preoccupied with my work, my sport, my studies, home and garden, planning for my retirement, enjoying my well-earned retirement...." Actually folks, do you realise there is no retirement age in the Kingdom of God? There's no retirement from God's service! The only release from service is when the body or mind is no longer able.

To all our excuses God will respond, "Sorry, wrong answer. I created you, saved you, called you and told you to live a life of service. What part of that did you not understand?"

Remember these words of Jesus, "If you insist on saving your life you will lose it. Only those who throw away their lives for my sake and the sake of the Good News will ever know what it means to really live." (Message Version)

This truth is so important that it is recorded five times in the Gospels. If we aren't serving, we're simply existing, because life is meant for ministry. God wants us to learn to love and serve others unselfishly.

There are two key aspects of our Christian service. One is our *SHAPE* and the other is our *ATTITUDE*.

SHAPE is one way of referring to our personal attributes/equipment.

It is an acronym for Spiritual gifts, Heart/passion, natural Abilities, Personality and Experience of life.

Others refer to our personal attributes as a combination of gifts/passion/style.

Knowing our *SHAPE* is very important to serve God effectively and joyfully, because we serve best when we find our best fit in the interdependent, multi-gifted community that is the Body of Christ.

But even more important than knowing our SHAPE is having a servant-heart or servant-ATTITUDE; the attitude of Jesus who came “not to be served but to serve and to give his life” ...

Or as Philippians chapter 2 verse 5 says, “You should have the same attitude as Christ Jesus...”.

The world defines greatness and success in terms of having power, position and possessions. There is nothing wrong with any of these in themselves; but the key is the attitude with which we use them.

Jesus measures greatness and success in terms of service and self-sacrifice; by how many we serve, not how many serve us.

Without a servant attitude, we are more likely to misuse our personal attributes for personal gain or to excuse ourselves from service.

Just as we are never too old to serve, we never become too important, too wealthy, or too powerful to serve. 2nd Corinthians chapter 8 verse 9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, (powerful, important) yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich.”

Although our shape determines our primary ministry/area of service, we must always be ready to serve casually wherever we are needed. We cannot say that our spiritual gift is not service or helps or mercy, therefore I don't have to serve. That would be like saying that my gift is not giving so I won't give any money to God's work; not teaching so I'll never help out at Sunday School when they're short; not healing so I'll never pray for a sick person to be healed.

General Christian discipleship requires a servant-heart, an attitude of service. Any Christ-follower, indeed every disciple of Jesus, can be and is called to be a servant. Our SHAPE reveals our ministry, but our SERVANT-ATTITUDE reveals our maturity. You don't need talent, gifting or experience to tidy up after church, pick up rubbish, make a meal, pick up someone for church, to be a servant; you only need character, the character of Jesus growing within you.

I want to finish with some characteristics of a true servant-attitude.

1. Real servants make themselves available to serve

Real servants are “at your service, Lord.” They don't fill their lives with so much personal and self-centred stuff, whether work, family, leisure or whatever, that they are not available to serve. Serving only when it's convenient, is not true service.

How available are you to God?

Can God mess up your plans, bring someone across your path, interrupt you, without you becoming resentful? True servants don't get to pick and choose when or where they serve. A servant-attitude means giving up the right to control our schedule and being available in God's service.

It is helpful to remind ourselves at the start of each new day that we are God's servants and that our agenda will be whatever God brings into our lives; that interruptions may be divine appointments for ministry.

Often discernment is needed however, to decide whether it is really an interruption from God, or a person abusing our kindness and willingness to serve, or whether we really need time out for recreation.

2. Real Servants pay attention to needs

Real servants are observant, looking out for needs, ways to help, and then seize the moment. I like David Watson's daily prayer, “Lord give me eyes to see, and the grace to seize every opportunity for you”.

Opportunities to serve often pass quickly. We may only have one chance to serve that person.

Real Servants are sensitive and spontaneous. Paul told the Galatians, "Whenever we have the opportunity, we have to do what is good for everyone, especially for the family of believers." (chapter 6v10) God calls us to make the needs of fellow disciples a high priority.

Real servants don't look for great opportunities to serve but to do small tasks as if they were great opportunities. That incredible servant of God, Methodist preacher John Wesley, had a great motto, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

3. Real Servants do their best with what they have

Real servants don't procrastinate, make excuses, wait for better circumstances or until they are better equipped. As Nike commands us, real servants 'Just Do It!'

God expects us to do what we can, with what we have, wherever we are. Less-than-perfect service is always better than well-intentioned-statements.

Some people are reluctant to serve or never serve because they feel, they fear, that they are not good enough. These people believe the myth, and some churches foster that myth, that serving God is only for the professionals, the gifted, the experienced; and so people of ordinary, everyday ability don't offer to serve.

We have all kinds of proverbs in our Western culture, "If it can't be done with excellence don't do it!" "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Actually Jesus never said either of these!

Counsellor David Riddell recognises the impact this philosophy has had on many people's self-esteem. He says, "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly until you get better at it!" He also says; "Sometimes good enough is good enough."

Rick Warren, of Saddleback Church, initiated a principle in their church called 'the good enough' principle. Your service doesn't have to be perfect for God to use and bless it. Every biblical hero was less than perfect; every member of God's family today is less than perfect. So if you're feeling less than perfect today, join the club. And if you do happen to be feeling perfect, you'd better leave, as you'll soon be feeling uncomfortable! St Albans is a hospital for sinners not a hotel for saints.

God would rather involve thousands of ordinary Kiwis in ministry than have a perfect (empty!) church led by a few gifted professionals.

4. Real Servants are faithful in their ministry.

They stick at it; finish their tasks, keep their promises, fulfil their responsibilities. They don't quit when they get discouraged. They are dependable. Many people today make commitments casually and then break them for the slightest reason, without hesitation or regret.

Can others rely on you? Are there promises or commitments that you need to honour?

Life is a test. God is testing our faithfulness, our reliability, our stickability in small things, before entrusting us with greater things. God has promised to reward our faithfulness in eternity.

How good will it be to hear those famous words of Jesus, "Well done my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness."

5. Real Servants are humble not proud

Self-promotion and servanthood don't mix. If a real servant is recognised for their service, they humbly accept it but don't allow recognition to distract them from their work.

Jesus exposed the piety of the Pharisees as an empty show, a kind of godly behaviour that appears to be spiritual but is done to get attention. It is "eye-service" to catch the eye of another, to impress; rather than humble service that doesn't seek the approval or applause of others. Real Servants serve an audience of one! (Colossians chapter 3 verse 23)

Sometimes you may feel unnoticed or unappreciated in your area of service, but God knows and God values what you do. Stick at it faithfully until God moves you on.

The Message version has a fresh translation of Colossians chapter 3 verse 4, "When Christ shows up again on this earth, you'll show up too - the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ."

In the USA, there are more than 750 'Halls of Fame' and more than 450 'Who's Who?' publications, but you won't find many real servants in these places. Real Servants know the difference between prominence and significance. The most significant service in God's Kingdom is often unseen and on Judgement Day, God will visibly acknowledge and reward his many obscure and unknown servants.

Friends, don't stay discouraged when your service for the Lord goes unnoticed or unappreciated. Stick at it. As Paul said to the Corinthians "Keep abounding, stay enthusiastic, in the Lord's work, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort." 1st Corinthians chapter 15 verse 58.

These then are some marks of the servant-attitude.

Which of these marks challenges your life the most?

Service Through Weakness

2nd Corinthians chapter 12 verse 1 to 10

Here are verses 7 to 10 of our reading from the Message version:

"Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

"My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness."

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size – abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become."

Can you name an experience of God's power being evident when you felt very weak?

And when God has used your weakness to help another person?

God loves to use weak people in his service. Ever realised that? God doesn't have any choice does he, if God wants to use us! We all have weaknesses; we are a bundle of flaws and imperfections, as well as strengths and abilities.

We usually want to hide our weaknesses; deny, excuse, defend them and we often resent them. We think that God only wants to use our strengths. In recent years the church has focused on gifts and passions and finding our best fit; and all this is worthwhile. But God also wants to use our weaknesses in his purposes. God's ways are not always our ways. God often has a different plan and perspective.

Remember Paul's words to these same Corinthians in his first letter in 1st Corinthians chapter 1 verses 26 to 31. Verse 27 says, "God chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chooses what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful." (GNB). Here is the same theme that Paul talks about in today's passage, this human tendency to boast and brag, about our achievements and ability and contribution.

Throughout the Bible, God was never impressed with human strength and self-sufficiency. In fact God is drawn to people who admit their limitations. In the Beatitudes, those wonderful statements about how to discover God's blessings. The first one says blessed are those who are "poor in spirit"; the humble, self-aware, reliant on God alone. The Bible is full of examples of how God loves to use imperfect, ordinary people to do extraordinary things in spite of their weaknesses and failings. This is encouraging news for us all!

What was Paul's weakness, his "thorn in the flesh"?

Better than 'thorn' is the word 'stake' in the flesh. It appears to have been a recurring, physically painful experience, a painful disability. There have been many speculations throughout Church history: spiritual temptations, persecutions and opposition, sexual desires, physical appearance, epilepsy (like Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Oliver Cromwell), headaches, eyesight trouble (Paul was blinded during his Damascus Road experience; the Galatians said they would have plucked out their eyes and given them to him (chap 4v15); and Paul writes, "See in what large letters I am writing to you" (chap 6v1). The most popular explanation is chronic malarial fever, very prolific on the coasts of eastern Mediterranean. The headache associated with malaria is likened by sufferers to "a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead", "the grinding boring pain in one temple like the dentist's drill" which when acute, reached "the extreme point of human endurance."

In his book 'The Purpose Driven Life', Rick Warren considers Paul's "thorn in the flesh" as a *weakness, a limitation that we have inherited or a situation we find ourselves living in, that we have no power to change.* This weakness or disability is not sinful habits or character defects that we can change.

It may be a physical limitation like a disability, chronic illness, debilitating or tiring condition.

It may be an emotional limitation such as hurtful memories, emotional scaring from some trauma, a personality trait or quirk.

Or an intellectual or talent limitation; or a relational limitation through a disabled or difficult family member, or a situational limitation through employment, financial or geographical factors.

Generally it is a situation that we have no personal power or opportunity to change.

Can you think of any such limitations in your life?

When we focus on such limitations we may be tempted to conclude that, "God could never use me, because I have this limitation." But God is not limited by our limitations. God can work through our weaknesses if we allow him; if we offer our limitations and invite him to use them. The apostle Paul's experience in 2nd Corinthians chapter 12 gives us some guidelines of how to do this.

1. Acknowledge your weaknesses & struggles. We need to stop pretending to have it all together and be honest about ourselves. Most of us are great mask-wearers, good at covering up our struggles and inadequacies. Some of us live in denial not even admitting to ourselves what we are like, what we struggle with, and what limitations we live under.

Most often it is extremely liberating to share our burdens, struggles and secrets with one or two others who can help us to bear our burdens. It is what we are commanded to do for one another in the Christian community.

One of the major diseases of our culture is individualism, self-sufficiency. Not only do we feel we have to cope alone, we also tend to feel that we are the only ones facing this situation or carrying this burden, because we haven't shared it. This applies to marriage and relationship issues, parenting and financial issues.

One of the privileges of being a pastor is that people share their burdens with me and usually I am aware of others with a similar challenge. We are unique in our personalities but not in our experiences of life. So often I've been able to link people with others with similar experience who've been able to support, encourage and share strategies for coping.

2. Accept your weakness. The apostle Paul goes even further in verse 9 and doesn't mean accept it grudgingly and resentfully, but accept it graciously, positively and become content with it. This is a key word of Paul's; "I have learned to be content in every situation ..." (Philippians chap 4 verses 11 to 13)

This may seem strange, to accept and be content with our inborn limitations or difficult situations. But essentially 'being content' is an expression of trust in God, that God has our best interests at heart. Contentment is a big-picture-trust that God understands my situation, loves me deeply, will not allow anything to occur that God and I cannot deal with together, and wants to use me for his purposes in my situation.

Contentment often means modifying our expectations and dreams to fit God's purposes for our lives; to have an eternal perspective on our situation. I think of those who set aside their own goals to nurse their sick or dying family member, believing it is the loving thing to do and of eternal value.

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONTENT?

The apostle Paul gives some reasons for accepting our limitations, both personal and circumstantial.

a. Our weaknesses prevent pride and arrogance, and promote our dependence on God. In verse 10, Paul says his limitation prevented him from being puffed up and proud. God often gifts a major weakness alongside a major strength to keep us humble. A limitation can modify or govern us and keep our egos in balance; keep us mindful of our need of God, keep us from getting ahead of God's purposes.

Remember Gideon, the Old Testament leader who recruited an army of 32,000 to fight the Midianite army of 135,000. The odds were four to one. But God told Gideon to keep reducing the numbers by various tests, which only left 300 Israelite fighters at odds of over 400 to one! It appeared a recipe for disaster, but when Israel won the victory they knew it was God's power not their skill and strength, that enabled them.

b. Accepting our weaknesses, draws people together and encourages genuine fellowship. We realise how much we need one another, and when many weak strands are woven together we get a strong chord. Someone once quipped that, "Christians like snowflakes are frail; but when they stick together they can stop traffic!"

c. Accepting our weaknesses, increases our empathy and desire to minister to others. We are far more likely to be compassionate and considerate of the weaknesses and failing of others when we accept our own, although I have noticed some people become very intolerant of others who have not addressed the issues they themselves have dealt with and overcome. They want to oppose the evil they have struggled with wherever they see it, but often lack the maturity and insight about how to motivate and help others strategise for personal change.

But so often we can minister well to others out of our own experience of pain, struggle and failure, and then of recovery and healing. We become agents that God can use powerfully to bring healing to others. As Mel Gibson said in an interview about 'The Passion of the Christ', "pain can be the precursor to change".

3. Share your weaknesses. I have already touched on this. So often ministry opportunities are sparked by sharing our vulnerability. The apostle Paul models this in his letter by sharing his feelings of failure, frustration, fears; read this chapter and chapter 13.

Being honest and open with others about our struggles and weaknesses so often encourages others to reveal theirs. I've found this throughout my life and ministry when talking around an issue with someone. The person may be evasive, not wanting to open up, worried that I'll think less of them. Then I'll share a personal struggle, failure or weakness, that's related to theirs, and it's like the floodgates open. People get this immediate sense that you can understand and won't judge them because you've been there.

This sharing of our struggles and weakness is rather risky. Whenever we are honest about deeply personal things, we make ourselves vulnerable, lower our defences and risk being laughed at, talked about, and rejected.

But risking vulnerability is a sign of humility and God blesses the humble, the poor in spirit, those with an honest self-assessment, who are authentic, genuine people. "God resists/opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble", says Proverbs 3 verse 34.

Humility and vulnerability are qualities that draw people. Authenticity attracts. Proud and cocky people tend to push others away.

This is why God wants to use our weaknesses as well as our strengths. Often when people see our strengths, they feel discouraged and overwhelmed and think, "I couldn't ever do that I'm not good enough."

But when they see God using us in spite of, or through, our weaknesses, it encourages the thought, "Well maybe God can use me too." Parenting with Confidence leader and former Youth for Christ National Director, Ian Grant, is a great example of this. He has a stutter from birth yet God called him to be a major public speaker, and he never stutters when public speaking. He says his stutter keeps him humble and reliant on God.

Our strengths can create competition and discouragement. Our weaknesses create community and confidence.

4. Value your weaknesses (verse 5). The Message version of today's passage says, "I was 4. given the gift of the handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations", something which God can use. You are probably aware of examples of Christians like Joni Eriksen (who became a paraplegic through a diving accident), who came to view their disabilities as a gift which opened up ministry opportunities for them beyond their imagining.

And when the Evil One or nasty people point out your weakness, or mock it, or put you down for it, just affirm that God values your weakness and uses it in his mission.

We can ultimately only value our weakness because of the promises of God that his grace is sufficient for our needs, that God's power is greatest, strongest, most complete, in our weakness (verse 9); "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (verse 10). So the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

Please take a moment to reflect on your own limitations and offer them to God, inviting God to use them in his purposes.