

**Message: Greater Than Gold**

**What’s greater than gold?**

To most of the athletes competing in the 2016 summer Olympic games the answer is “nothing.” The gold medal is seen as the pinnacle of accomplishment, the goal that justified all of the sweat, sacrifice and tears they’ve shed for years. It’s part of the American dream and the dreams of people from countries around the world. After all, the gold medal comes with the belief that riches, fame and success will follow.

The desire accelerates with time. The first goal is to make the Olympic team. Then that’s no longer enough. The goal is to win a medal. Then winning isn’t enough, the medal has to be gold. The dream of Olympic glory doesn’t come from a noble basis, but on what athletes think it will give them: success and acceptance, along with happiness and joy.

**Yet we hear story after story about how that kind of gold doesn’t deliver.** Michael Phelps was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) in September 2014. Phelps was struggling with drugs, alcohol, meaningless sex and psychological challenges of feeling like he was a failure. The most-decorated person in Olympic history felt like he was lost, without purpose. Phelps told ESPN, “I had no self-esteem, no self-worth. There were times where I didn’t want to be here. It was not good. I felt lost.”<sup>1</sup> Like a lot of people struggling with those feelings, he self-medicated.

After the DUI, Phelps cut himself off from family and other loved ones. He thought, “the world would just be better off without me...I figured that was the best thing to do – just end my life.”<sup>2</sup> That’s when a friend came to his rescue. That friend is former All Pro linebacker Ray Lewis, who is like an older brother. Lewis is Christian and he told Phelps, “This is when we fight...This is when real character shows up. Don’t shut down. If you shut down, we all lose.”<sup>3</sup>

**Lewis convinced Phelps he needed help.** And he gave Michael a book to read while he was in rehab, “The Purpose-Driven Life” by Rick

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<sup>1</sup> Colson Center, Breakpoint Daily, August 11, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Warren. The book changed Phelps’ life. He called Lewis and told him, “I can’t thank you...enough, man. That book saved my life.”<sup>4</sup> Later, Phelps told ESPN, Warren’s book “turned me into believing there is a power greater than myself and there is a purpose for me on this planet.”

**If you haven’t read “The Purpose-Driven Life,” one of the things it tells us is that relationships are always worth restoring.** Michael Phelps followed the advice. And we’ve all heard of the successes he has had during the past week. We’ve seen the pictures of his fiancée and son. Michael Phelps’ story reminds us that no matter how big a mess our life may be, no matter how defeated or without hope we feel, God is still there. It’s also a reminder of the role we’re called to play as those who bring hope and serve as agents of restoration. The results may not be as dramatic, but they will matter every bit as much because they’ll impact our friends, family and neighbors.

**You see, the real gold we seek isn’t something we can hang around our neck.** You can’t spend it. The banks won’t deposit it. It can’t be saved or stored in a mattress. One thing we can do is invest it and watch it grow. That’s because the real treasure we all seek is the experience of being in God’s presence. When we feel God’s love, our hearts are warmed, we feel hope and peace, and we know we’re blessed. No matter what we’ve done, in spite of our failures and limitations, we know God loves us.

**How do we know God loves us?** Love is unique. We can’t just read about it and know it. Love is something we experience. It’s difficult, particularly in a world that tells us we have to prove we have a right to exist. That’s because the world puts all sorts of conditions on love. You know how it goes: “I love you, but there’s just one thing ....” That’s conditional love.

**How do we know and experience unconditional love?** When we’re unconditionally loved, we know it with our whole heart and mind, our complete being. That kind of love can’t come from the internet, lectures, TV programs or workshops. The world always tries to put

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

conditions on love, to confuse and mislead us. The way we know unconditional love begins with our spirit. When God’s Spirit comes together with the spirit living in us, we feel it – that’s God’s love. That union changes us. It warms our hearts and transforms our minds. God’s love is indescribably pure and moving.

**What else would have the power to radically transform our whole being, from the inside-out?** What else would have the power of turning murders into apostles, criminals into those who give witness to God’s power, restoring those who feel lost and alone to life in relationship, family and community? It’s the love of a parent for a prodigal child. It’s the love of a shepherd seeking one lost lamb out of a hundred. It’s the love of a Savior who willingly gave his life on a cross so we would be saved and the power of sin and death broken forever.

**Our spirit is fed by the love of God expressed through the thoughts, words and deeds of other people.** Those who live their lives authentically, who serve as a witness to God’s love in all they do, touch us. These people may be close to us, at home, church or in our neighborhood or city. They can also live far away or may have lived at a different time, even a long time ago. They embody the words of Hebrews 10:24-25, “... *consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another....*” They’re God’s workers, who live their lives surrounded by the harvest: everyone who needs God’s love.

**Do you know the best place to find those people?** At church, where they’re gathered with others to praise God, to serve others and to know and experience God’s loving presence. Best of all, God’s children are called by God and given an invitation to share with others.

**There are two invitations we’re called to share with all people, regardless of whom or what they are.** The first invitation is the good news Jesus preached: God loves you and that love is free all the time for everyone. The second is an invitation to connect with God first and then with our congregation. Doing so deepens our spiritual relationships: first with the source of unconditional love, God, and second, with the means by which we can know that love, God’s children.

**Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 4:9**, “... *be careful, and watch yourselves closely so you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.*” When we come together, our shared experience develops community and we become the living word. When we say, “Let me tell you what we saw. Come and listen to what we did. Sit down and let me explain what happened to us. Wait until you hear who we met,” people come together and our lives become lives for others. The power of God’s living word brings us together and calls us into community. All of us, our bodies, hearts and minds, become part of a body of people. Within the body, we find our identity and purpose. We are bonded by our shared, common experience. We know God’s love, intimately and fully, spiritually and physically.

**Building relationships with God’s children has many benefits.** We become more grounded in our faith, assured of God’s love. As we’re fed by God’s word, prayer and our shared experience, our spirit bears fruit: we exhibit joy, peace, patience, gentleness and more. Our congregation will grow as others are drawn by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the care we have for one another and others. We become a community of trust, where we carry one other’s burdens (Galatians 6:1-3), rather than holding on to worldly measures of performance. We’re all connected to Jesus, the one whose love changes us, inside and out.

**That’s important.** “We need to experience loving relationships in order to heal and grow. In loving relationships we experience the safety that allows us to face the truth. In loving relationships we experience the support we need to begin to change. And in loving relationships we learn that we are lovable and valuable. Because we have been wounded in relationships, our instinct is often to run from relationships. We don’t want to be hurt again. This leaves an enormous void in our souls. And it’s this void which we desperately try to fill with addictions and compulsions of various kinds.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Dale & Juanita Ryan, NACR

**1 Corinthians 13:3** says, **“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”** *“I surrender my body”* and *‘I gain nothing’* are an accurate description of chemical addiction, work addiction, sexual addiction and relationship addiction, as well as many self-abusive compulsions and other addictions.”<sup>6</sup> These behaviors result when we listen to the voices that tell us performance means success. Paul, the author, sums up the result: we gain nothing. All the time and effort we spend trying to numb the pain doesn’t achieve the desired result: the emptiness inside remains.

**Although loving relationships may be frightening for some of us, it’s the path to wholeness and health in our heart, mind, body and spirit.** The vulnerabilities of intimacy may remind us of earlier, difficult times in life, but there’s no way to recover in isolation. Remember, the net result of compulsions and addictions is *“I gain nothing.”* The net result of loving relationships we can trust is very different. There’s something to be gained by all the hard work required. God’s steadfast love expressed through others builds in us a capacity to receive love and a capacity to give love to others. And that’s a real gain.

**“Churches with an inward focus will find things more difficult in the future.** Passive faith and only seeking to reconnect those we have lost will lead us to an increasingly smaller portion of our community. If any church or denomination is to have a future, it must reconnect to the early church movements. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To do so requires us to be people who widely, continually and passionately share their faith in Jesus with those who do not yet have such a faith. We need to share in ways that are relevant and authentic.”<sup>7</sup>

**What better way to share God’s love than by building relationships?** That’s greater than gold and far more fulfilling. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *Farr et al., Get Their Name, 2013, p. xi*

Let us pray:

*Lord, help us to be the people you want us to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there, and help us to focus and pursue you, freely and willingly. Help us to follow you and be transformed by your love so we may serve others with that same love. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**Ezekiel 34:28-31 (NRSV)**

They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

**Matthew 9:35-38 (NRSV)**

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”