

CALLED TO BE LOVED

There was an emperor in the Far East who was growing old and knew that he would soon have to choose his successor. Now normally when an emperor needed to choose a successor he would make his selection from one of his own children, but he had none. Ordering all the eldest children of noble birth in his kingdom to his palace, the emperor announced to them that he was about to step down from his throne. Then he gave each one of them a single seed and instructed them to go home and plant it. "In one year," he told them, "you will return to my palace and I will judge what you have grown." "The youth whose plant I deem most beautiful and best nurtured – will become the next ruler of my kingdom!"

One of the boys who was present was a boy named Ling. Eagerly taking his seed from the emperor he ran home quickly to tell his mother the good news. Together they took the seed and carefully planted it into a pot. Then, for the next several weeks, each day when Ling awoke he would look carefully at his pot to see if anything had grown. After three or four weeks all of the other youths who had received seeds from the emperor were all bragging about their plants beginning to grow. To Ling's great disappointment, his pot still contained nothing! He felt like a total failure! He was sure that he had done something wrong and that he had killed his seed. Five months went by, then six! Before Ling knew it one year had passed. The time had come for him and all the youths to return to the emperor's palace so that the emperor might inspect their plants. Everyone was so excited! Everyone, that is, except Ling! There was no way he was going to return to the emperor with an empty pot. But Ling's mother finally convinced him to return to the emperor and to be honest about what had happened. When Ling arrived at the palace he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by all the other youths. They were beautiful, and in many different shapes and sizes.

Placing his empty pot on the floor in front of him, many of the other children began to laugh at him. Some felt sorry for him and just said, "Hey, nice try." When the emperor arrived, he quickly scanned the room and greeted all the young people of his kingdom. One by one he walked around the room complimenting each one of them for their great plants, trees and flowers. Just then the emperor noticed Ling sitting in the back of the room embarrassingly trying to hide himself and his empty pot. To Ling's great horror and embarrassment, the emperor ordered him to come to the front of the crowd. "What is your name, son?" the emperor asked very kindly. Bowing before his emperor, he respectfully replied, "My name is Ling." Then to the surprise of everyone in the room, especially Ling, the elderly emperor announced loudly to the crowd, "Behold your new emperor! His name is Ling!" Turning towards the crowd, the emperor proceeded to tell everyone why he had chosen Ling as their new emperor. "Although you mock him now – Ling's empty pot is a good thing!" "You see," the emperor went on to say, "The seed that I gave to each one of you one year ago was a boiled seed. In other words, they couldn't possibly grow anything!" "Obviously then, when you all found that the seed I gave you would not grow, you unfairly substituted it for another seed, hoping that you might impress me and that I might make you emperor." Only Ling had the courage and honesty to bring me a pot containing "the" seed that I gave to him. Therefore, I choose him this day to be my successor!"

In the same way, God does not love us or choose us because of the things we have grown through our own strength and efforts. He loves us completely for who we are, empty pot and all.

Today we are continuing in our series Called. Today we want to look at the first E in our mission statement – the word Exalt. In order to understand your calling you have to first understand your purpose. That means we have to start with God. You can't tell yourself what your purpose is. Only your Creator can tell you what your purpose is. So what is your purpose? Why were you born?

Ephesians 1:4-5 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will

Ephesians 1:4-5 (MSG) Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. 5 Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!)

God created you to love you. Before God created the universe he had already chosen you and loved you. He made the universe so that he could make earth so that he could make the human race so he could make you so that he could love you. God made you to love you. The purpose of my life is to be loved by God.

Let that sink in a little bit. The first purpose of your life is not to serve God. The first purpose of your life is not to trust God. The first purpose of your life is not to obey God. The first purpose of your life is to let God love you.

God didn't create you to *do* something. He created you to *receive* something. Most people do not understand that. My number-one purpose in life is not to do something for God; it's to receive something from God. I was made to be the receptacle, a receiver, a benefactor of God's love. No matter who you are, no matter what your capacity, from the most athletic intellectual to the most handicapped and immobile, your purpose is not what you do for God but to receive love from God.

I want you to get this. Our first duty in life is not to do something. It's not to learn, it's not to listen, it's not to pray, it's not to give, it's not to sacrifice, it's not to serve. Those are all good things. But they are secondary. God created you to accept, to receive his love. To just let God love you. That's the first purpose of life. To be loved by God.

If my purpose is to be loved by God, then what is my calling? My calling is to enjoy a relationship with God. I'm called to live in the love of God and return that love in worship. Your number-one calling in your life is not to a role, it's not to a responsibility, it's not to a bunch of rules, it's not to regulations, it's not to ritual, it's not to religion. It's to a relationship.

What kind of relationship does God want you to have with him? Does God want you to be his servant or soldier or slave? No. God wants you to be his son or his daughter. He wants you in his family.

1 John 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

What does it mean that we are part of the family of God?

1. I have ACCEPTANCE

Most people go through their entire life avoiding God. And the reason why they avoid God is because they're ashamed. They feel guilty. They feel under condemnation. They feel judged. They feel criticized. They think, God is a perfect God and I am not so perfect. So why in the world would I want to hang out with a perfect God who's simply going to remind me of all the ways that I've failed?

A well-known professional golfer was playing in a tournament with President Gerald Ford, fellow pro Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. After the round was over, one of the other pros on the tour asked, "Hey, what was it like playing with the President and Billy Graham?" The pro said with disgust, "I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat!" With that he headed for the practice tee. His friend followed, and after the golfer had pounded out his fury on a bucket of golf balls, he asked, "Was Billy a little rough on you out there?" The pro sighed and said with embarrassment, "No, he didn't even mention religion."

God accepts you for who you are. Jesus did not come to condemn you, He came to save you.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

God loves us and accepts us. He loves us so much Jesus came to die for us.

Romans 8:31-39 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God loves us just the way we are. There is no condemnation in Christ. However, that does not mean that God does not want us to change, God loves you just the way you are but He also loves us too much to let us stay that way. Like any good parent He wants us to make choices and walk in a way that will bring our lives significance and blessings. God loves you no matter who you are or what you have done, but that does not mean that He does not expect us to change.

There is a show on History Channel called Restoration Garage. It is about the Guild of Automotive Restorers and their shop up in Bradford North of Newmarket. These are people that love cars. If you go into that shop you see all kinds of cars in various states of repair. Some are just waiting for the restoration to begin. Others have been totally striped and are lying in pieces. Others are in different stages of assembly. They are not completely done until their owners show up and take them home. That is a good picture of the church. God loves us and want what is best for us. He wants us to mature in our faith and grow to become more and more like Jesus. All of us are in different stages of repair. Some are further along than others, but God is not done with any of us yet. The point is that God loves you regardless of where you are in that process.

2. I have ACCESS

Because I am a child of God I can be bold in my prayers. Why? Because I am a member of His family. I know God loves me unconditionally. When I pray to Him I can talk to Him about anything, because I am His child.

Romans 8:15-16 (MSG) This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" 16 God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children.

Jesus taught us to pray 'Our Father...' It is important to remember that we have access. God welcomes us into His presence. My kids are bold in making their requests to me. Often they will come and ask for my keys after the service – how many of you have done that? Sometimes they will ask for money because they are going to the mall. So far none of you have done that.

During the US civil war a soldier in the Union army had had lost his older brother and his father in the war. He went to Washington, D.C., to see President Lincoln to ask for an exemption from military service so he could go back and help his sister and mother with the spring planting on the farm. He got a day pass from the military to go to the White House and plead his case. When he arrived he was told, "You can't see the president! Don't you know there's a war on? The president's a very busy man. Now go away, son!" So he left, very disheartened, and was sitting on a little park bench beside the White House when a little boy came up to him. The lad said, "Soldier, you look unhappy. What's wrong?" The soldier looked at this young boy and began to spill his heart out to this young lad about his situation, about his father and his brother having died in the war, and how he was the only male left in the family and was needed desperately back at the farm for the Spring planting. The little boy took the soldier by the hand and led him around to the back of the White House. They went through the back door, past the guards, past all the generals and the high ranking government officials until they got to the president's office itself. The little boy didn't even knock on the door but just opened it and walked in. There was President Lincoln with his secretary of state, looking over battle plans on the desk. President Lincoln looked up and said, "What can I do for you, Todd?" And Todd said, "Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you." And right then and there the soldier had a chance to plead his case to President Lincoln, and he was exempted from military service due to the hardship he was under.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

I am accepted. Therefore I can be bold in praying my needs to my Abba Father. I encourage you, pray big prayers! Worship God with everything you have and are.

3. I have ASSURANCE

That means we have peace in pain when we don't understand. There are a lot of things that happen to us in life that we do not fully understand. Let me just say this up front. As Job reminds us, God doesn't owe you an explanation for why he allows anything. I'll tell you this: Not everything that happens in the world is God's will. God hates evil and there's a lot of evil done in the world. God could easily take away evil. But that would mean eliminating free will.

You are going to go through life and a lot of things will happen to you that you are not going to understand. Losses you don't understand. Hurts you don't understand. Rejection you don't understand. Problems you don't understand. But here's the thing. You don't have to understand them to be at peace. In fact an explanation doesn't give you peace anyway. If someone dies and someone told you an explanation for it, it wouldn't make you any happier. You'd still have the loss. Explanations don't comfort.

What you need is not an explanation. What you need is presence. The presence of God in your life. What you need is what the Bible calls “the peace that passes understanding”.

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What is the peace that passes understanding? It's when you feel at peace even though you don't understand what's going on. You have no reason, no explanation, no discernment. You don't know why it's happening but you're still at peace. And that is a supernatural peace that comes from God. The peace that passes understanding, because I don't know why this is happening. But I do know this: I do know God is a good God. And I do know that he loves me. And I do know that he wants what's best for my life. And I do know that I can trust him even when I don't understand it. That's the peace that passes understanding. And it comes from feeling the love of God in your life.

Story of baptism testimony in Virgil. She was able to continue because she knew that her father was right there with her.

God's love does not exempt you from pain or suffering in this life. No. Christians have the exact same problems that non Christians do. The difference is that we get the peace that passes understanding, where I can trust God in a moment when everything is falling apart around me.

There once was a king who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried. The king looked at all the pictures. But there were only two he really liked, and he had to choose between them. One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror for peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace. The other picture had mountains, too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky, from which rain fell and in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all. But when the king looked closely, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest - in perfect peace. Which picture do you think won the prize? The king chose the second picture. "Because," explained the king, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hardship. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."

4. I have ASSISTANCE

As a child of God we have assistance. When somebody believes in you, you are capable of accomplishing things you would never be able to accomplish on your own, just because they believe in you. It gives you additional power. It gives you additional energy.

When people are cheering you on you find strength you did not know you even had. That is the Home Team Advantage. Playing basketball in Bible College with Naomi watching.

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

We stand in a position of Grace. Not only do we have peace in our hearts but joy in our lives. Because God loves us and accepts us we can be courageous.

In addition to all this we have the Holy Spirit living within us so we have access to real power. All the resources of God are at our disposal.

Romans 8:28 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.

God works for our good. But notice that this promise is conditional. It is only for those “who love God and are called according to His purpose.” In order to enjoy the benefits of being a child of God you have to be adopted by God. That means you have to accept the gift of salvation that Jesus offers us. You have to receive the love that God offers you.

Right now there is a movie out called Dunkirk. In May of 1940 the British Expeditionary Force of 350,000 soldiers were trapped on the beaches of France with their backs to the sea. The German forces were closing in and it seemed that all hope was lost. In the middle of the fighting a British Naval officer was able to wire just three simple words back to Head Quarters in London. Those three words were BUT IF NOT.

When you hear those three words, what immediately comes to mind? While you may not recognize them, these words were instantly recognizable to the officers in HQ who had spent the first 18 years of their lives in schools that hosted Bible reading in 30 minute chapel services every day. The British officers’ serving in HQ knew the naval officer was referring to the story in the book of Daniel. The message harkened back to Daniel 3:17-18 in the King James Version:

“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O King. But if not, let it be known unto thee, O King, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”

Three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, stood before a fiery furnace and were resolved to obey God whether or not God chose to save them. They courageously chose to face the furnace rather than disobey God’s Commandments.

The allied forces were trapped. They knew that they would probably die, but they were willing to give their lives for what they knew was right. It would take a miracle to save them. But they would not give up and give in to their enemy. Just three words communicated all of that.

Those three words BUT IF NOT launched Operation Dynamo. The Axis powers hesitated in their advance, and so between May 27 and June 4, 1940, British fishing boats and pleasure craft left their ports in Southern England, evacuating 338,000 British soldiers off of the beaches of Dunkirk.

