

Topic: Following the calling of God's spirit in our lives

Title: Lent Time

Key Verses: Galatians 6:7-10

Part 1: Introduction

I've been given the next 20 minutes to share this message with all of you this morning. I've been given 20 minutes to share God's word with you. This 20 minutes isn't something that I've freely taken, it has been given. It's been lent to me. By all of you. And by God. It's my responsibility to use this 20 minutes wisely. There's a sense of stewardship in this opportunity. In a way, we could say that I have been lent this time to do God's work in his community of believers.

This isn't taken time or stolen time or stumbled-upon time... this time has been given to me, lent to me, so that I can share this message with you.

Time isn't something I can create on my own. The past, present and future that I live in has been lent to me by my creator. Through the grace of God, I have been given the freedom to live with this lent time in any way that I please. It's up to me what I do with this time. Should I squander this time? Or should I use this time wisely?

I might be getting ahead of myself though... let's come back to this thought in a moment...

It's New Years Eve. New Years resolutions. How many of you have or will be making some resolutions? Saving money, losing weight, quitting smoking, eating healthier... We've all got habits to kick or more disciplined approaches to living to commit to.

How many of us use a financial budget? How many of us set yearly goals? Julie and I do both of these. It's sometimes fun, sometimes not so much... But, it helps keep us on track.

Does all of this sound familiar to you? I'm sure that this is familiar ground and that most of you can relate. We all make plans. We all anticipate the future. We all look forward and try to maximize what we are doing now to make us more comfortable in the future. In this way, we use our "lent time" to live our lives to the fullest.

But, I'm not here today to talk about financial goals... I'm here to talk about something much more important. Something else that requires upkeep, planning and long-term decision-making. Something that impacts more than our material needs and our short-term challenges. I'm here to talk about our spiritual well-being. Do we use our collective lent time to enhance our spiritual lives? Do we have spiritual goals? Do we have good spiritual health? Do we feel a close relationship with God? Do we understand the gift that Christ gave us on the cross? Are we using our lent time to make the most of that gift of salvation that we have been given?

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What are our spiritual goals? Do each of us have them? Do we plan our spiritual growth in the same way that we plan other parts of our life? Many of us make budgets. Many of us make exercise plans. And many of us make school or career plans. But how many of us take the time to sit down and identify where we want to be spiritually and build a plan to achieve our spiritual goals?

I like to call this intentional living. It is about consciously living our lives for the things that we believe. We all believe that we need a financial plan because we need money to survive, to buy food, to pay the mortgage, etc.. We all believe that we need a school or career plan in order to obtain a better standard of living. And since we're all here this morning, we are in agreement that God plays some part in our lives. In the same way that we plan in other areas of our lives, do we plan spiritual health, growth and well-being? My challenge for you this morning is this: Do you have a spiritual plan and if not, why not?

Part 2: Contextualize the letter to the Galatians

Today's scripture reading is taken from Galatians. The book of Galatians is a letter from Paul to the churches in southern Galatia, which had previously been founded by Paul and others within the Christian church. The letter is dated to approx 49 AD. The Galatians were struggling to understand how to live as Christians. There were disagreements pertaining to how to live as a Christian. Many within the Galatian community were falling back on old customs and laws, specifically many of the Jewish traditions.

As we can all see in the Gospels, Jesus was constantly at odds with Jewish traditions that involved strict adherence to the laws set forth in the Torah. As Paul reminds the Galatians in Galatians 3:5: "*Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?*"

Paul's letter to the Galatians served to remind them to be careful when following ritual and tradition at the expense of faith and intentional Christian living. To Paul, and Christians everywhere, the new law brought by Jesus could be summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." This law appears to be quite simple, but when put into practice it can be quite complex and all encompassing.

Paul urged the Galatians to do good to all and to live lives of positive Christian intentionality.

Galatians 6:7-10:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

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The key here is the word “please”. As in “the one who sows to please his sinful nature” or “the one who sows to please the Spirit”. The word please means to gratify or to appease. The New Living Translation uses the word “satisfy” in this context.

Galatians 6:7-10:

Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

To Paul, your motivation is key. Without the motivation to please the spirit, your intentions miss the mark. With proper motivation, you please the spirit. And to Paul, it is important to persevere and to use the time that we have been given for good and for pleasing the Spirit.

Part 3: Understand the call

But what exactly should we do to satisfy our Spiritual nature and to avoid our sinful nature? There are numerous lists in the Bible of positive and negative acts. Galatians contains a pretty good overview of appropriate and inappropriate actions. Consider:

Galatians 5:16-26:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

I don't want to dwell on each of these items at this time. What I do want to highlight again though is the intentionality of these acts. *Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.*

We must understand that our motivation is the key. As I mentioned earlier, if my family doesn't meet our family goals for 2006, we haven't necessarily failed. Circumstances change. We sometimes miss the mark. We all suffer setbacks. The important thing is how we deal with those setbacks. Do we simply give up and call it failure, or do we reassess the situation and modify our plan so that we can keep

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moving forward? Do we quit, or do we persevere as Paul tells us to do in verse 9: “we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides us with the concept of “The Visible Community” in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Consider:

Thus the life of the Christian community in the world bears permanent witness to the truth that “the fashion of this world passeth away” (I Cor, 7:31), that the time is short (I Cor. 7:29) and the Lord is nigh (Phil. 4:5). [...] The world is growing too small for the Christian community, and all it looks for is the Lord’s return. It still walks in the flesh, but with eyes upturned to heaven, whence he for whom they wait will come again. [...] They show the love of God to all men, “but specially to them that are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10, II Pet. 1:7). [...] But they are only passing through the country. At any moment they may receive the signal to move on. Then they will strike tents, leaving behind them all their worldly friends and connections, and following only the voice of their Lord who calls. They leave the land of their exile, and start their homeward trek to heaven.

Bonhoeffer: pg 269-270.

As Christians, we are a Visible Community. We live within the world, yet we are striving for a life of salvation in heaven. The question to ask here is, “Are our eyes upturned to heaven”? And do we use Jesus’ example to live our lives?

Are we making the most of this time that we have been lent? As Paul mentions in Galatians 6:9: “for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” Thus, it is important to be disciplined and to intentionally use the time that we have been given, this Lent Time, to make every day count and to look to that long awaited harvest.

Part 4: Putting the call into action

So how do we go about living in this way? Paul provides a pretty good rulebook of do’s and don’t’s. We could spend a lot of time talking through each of the items mentioned in Galatians 5:19-26, but we’ll leave that for another time. For today, let’s all try to take away at least one tangible way of enhancing our spirituality.

We’re all different. In our fall Christian parenting Sunday school class, we discussed the personality differences in birth order with children. We also looked at the different dynamics that tend to develop in families between boys and girls as well as between male and female parents. In today’s society, we accept that people have different learning styles and that each of us is expected to express ourselves differently from our neighbours. This is okay. In fact, it is encouraged. Such a rich diversity is bound to confuse those of us that thrive on structure and formulas for success (I’m one of those “structured types”). Lucky for us, there are many different ways to achieve success in the area of spiritual growth. I can guarantee you that for each one of us, there is a method for enhancing our spiritual health and well-being.

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For starters, we need to understand what it is we want to accomplish. In what ways do you want to enhance your spirituality? Do you want to increase your ability to pray out loud? That's one of my personal goals. I struggle with public prayer. As a student pastor, I've made that one of my learning goals for this year: public prayer. It's hard for me and I want to improve it. So I've committed myself to practice. And now that I've shared it with you, I've committed myself further. Now I have to improve. Otherwise, others will know. That's a lot of pressure! Haha

Other goals:

- Increase your knowledge of the Bible;
- Connect with other like-minded Christians;
- Enhance your marriage relationship;
- Or maybe even go back to the basics (The Alpha Program and Baptism);

Thinking outside of the box, we can see opportunities to build relationships with people outside of our immediate church and family communities in areas such as:

- Helping the poor in our communities and beyond;
- Caring for the sick; or
- Participating in public discussion about peace, war or some other cause that might interest you;

The possibilities are endless. All of these are examples of ways to connect with God and to position ourselves as a Visible Community of Christian believers. Just as we are called to be stewards with our money, we should also be called to be stewards with our time and with our intentional worship.

It's one thing to identify these goals. It's quite another to execute on them. How do we turn these goals into action? Looking within Niagara United Mennonite Church, we can see plenty of opportunities coming up in January:

- Our Sunday school program is filled with classes that are sure to appeal to everyone here;
- The library has a ton of great material that can be borrowed for free;
- The pastoral team is approachable and well equipped to help as well;

And there are plenty of other ways to get involved here at Niagara United Mennonite Church. The volunteer opportunities are endless. Each of us is uniquely skilled and we are all able to contribute in our own distinct ways.

Outside of NUMC, the resources are endless:

- Take a wander down to Chapters or Mitchell's Bookstore and you'll see a ton of material just waiting to engage you and inspire you;
- You can take classes at local schools. There are plenty of opportunities for those interested in pursuing Christian spirituality in an academic setting;
- Almost every hospital, nursing home, educational institution and many other facilities have volunteer programs that are looking for help;

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- MCC: If your local neighbourhood isn't challenging enough, then Mennonite Central Committee just might be able to find an offsite missions trip that will keep you challenged and spiritually invigorated;

This is only a small sampling of the many possible opportunities and methods of connecting with God. And remember, you don't have to go big or go home. This isn't about who can volunteer the most or who can raise the most money for a cause. It's about being involved in Christian community in a way that pleases the spirit. Whatever your calling, whatever your interest and whatever your skill, I can guarantee that there is a need for anything that you can provide. We are all uniquely skilled and we are all uniquely valued within our community.

There's one last one that I'd like to mention that I haven't touched on yet. This is perhaps the simplest and the most effective method of developing spiritual well-being: Direct communication with God. The gift of prayer is something that each of us can do. And we can each do it in our own way and in our own time. Before bed, after waking in the morning, at a special time during the day or even while commuting to and from work, there are many different ways to connect individually with God. The important thing is to be intentional about it and to do it on a regular basis. Make it a habit. Make it a routine. Make it meaningful. And make it happen. Just as we communicate with our spouses, our children, our parents and our friends, make conversations with God a regular part of your day. Nurture that relationship and watch it grow.

Part 5: The Call of God

Alright... We've been given clear instructions. What is holding us back? I challenge us to identify those barriers and find a way to overcome them. We don't want to be caught off-guard. Embrace the freedom that faith can provide. And remember Paul's words: *"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."* We all want to be there for that harvest.

So... set your personal spiritual growth plan for 2007.

This is about intentional living and making every day count. We've been given the gift of life. Should we squander it, or should we use it for God's glory? Should we use this time to be a "Visible Community", or do we hide under the cloak of anonymity? Use our Lent Time to honour God in ourselves and within our community.

God bless you in the year to come. I wish each of you a very exciting and spiritually rewarding year in 2007.

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NIV Version:

Galatians 6:7-10:

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Galatians 5:16-26:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

New Living Translation Version:

Galatians 6:7-10:

Don't be misled – you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith.

Galatians 5:16-26:

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility,

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quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.