

“Fighting for Someone’s Soul”

Galatians 4:19

September 29, 2002

Dr. Jerry Nelson

The last two weeks I have addressed the subject of the purpose of the church.

Two weeks ago I said that **the church is God’s primary means for restoring humanity to a right relationship with God.**

He created people and he did so that we might live in positive relationship with him for eternity.

But early in the biblical account of God’s relationship with people, as early as Genesis 3, we learn that sin so completely warped, so negatively changed, every aspect of what it means to be human that unless God remade us, recreated us, we would be separated from him forever.

And so beginning with Genesis 3:15 we have God’s defense of his creation, his plan to remake humanity.

The rest of Scripture - Genesis, Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Malachi, Matthew, Romans, Galatians and Revelation - tells us how God is working out that plan.

**Just as he chose Abraham** and his descendants in the older testament so in the newer testament **he called the church.**

And he called it to the same purpose – to be his means to save people:

The Apostle Paul wrote, Ephesians 3:8-11 “...Grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ... **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...** according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Peter said it this way: 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

“The **church** is God’s appointed means for accomplishing his purpose of saving humanity.”

Last week we looked at that a little more closely.

**What would we be like** if God accomplished his purpose of recreating us?

I showed you last week from the Scriptures that **God’s goal** is that **we become like Jesus**.

When we think and act like Jesus, when we reflect his character, then we will have reached God’s goal for us.

That reshaping may not be completed until Jesus comes again but the Bible is clear, that is God’s work in us now.

### **And here’s a major issue: WE are God’s means to accomplish that in each other’s lives.**

Don’t miss this – To us as individuals, who make up the church, has been given the awesome privilege of being God’s means to accomplish his purpose of recreating humanity in the likeness of Jesus.

That is our highest calling in this life!

The apostle Paul took it seriously and spoke of his concern this way: Colossians 1:28-29 “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in us.”

Putting it more personally and emotionally he described it his way:

Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”

Changing the metaphor, last week I spoke of this as “fighting for someone’s soul”.

Thinking of the same intensity, urgency, work, and single-mindedness as giving birth, we give ourselves to doing all we can to see Christ formed in those for whom we are “fighting”.

Fighting for someone’s soul is not just about seeing him or her converted but seeing them wholly saved – seeing them brought to maturity, seeing them become like Jesus.

**After last week’s message, several asked for more input on this subject – what does it look like to fight for someone’s soul?**

As I have experienced it and thought about it there are both **attitudes** and **actions** that make up “fighting for someone’s soul”.

First some of the attitudes:

**I. Caring:**

It starts with simply caring – caring what is happening in someone’s soul.

We use the word “soul” quite intentionally because it speaks of that which is most us.

We are material and immaterial – we are talking about that immaterial part of us that is the eternal us.

Our bodies as they now exist aren’t eternal but our souls are – people are eternal.

Do I care what is happening on the inside of a person?

Do I care that their soul is growing or dying?

Can I see past the exterior and genuinely care what is happening to the soul of a person?

I look at my own children and my wife and I deeply care what is happening to them.

Not just their health, jobs, and happiness but what is happening in their souls – Are they becoming more like Christ?

But what about others?

Paul wrote to the Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”

“My dear children...”

It was with deep fatherly affection and concern that he labored over them – his heart was moved for them, his life was given for them.

I sat down in a restaurant recently and couldn't help but notice a very unattractive person seated nearby.

The face was especially large, fat and slightly distorted. The rest of the body matched and the clothes were unkempt.

As I sat there I tried to look past the sloppy and slightly dirty clothes, past the unappealing exterior and tried to look deeply inside.

I saw a person, a person with feelings, with longings, with dreams, but no doubt with pain, maybe great pain - a human being, a soul, a person made in the image of God but, as with all of us, deeply fallen.

How do I see others?

Do I see a person, made in the image of God deeply scarred by sin **but in whom** God is working to remake them?

It is so easy to write people off.

I talk with someone who is destroying his own life and the lives of others around him and part of me wants to give up.

I'm tempted to say they're impossible and they're getting what they deserve.

Then I remember Paul's words: “My dear children...”

Yes we see people as sinners but that does not mean we write them off – it means we see them as one of us – as one author put it: “wonderfully made, yes, deeply fallen but greatly loved.”

One author put it this way: “To see a person as a sinner, then is not to see him or her as hypocritical, disgusting or evil. Most sinners are very nice people. To call a man a sinner is not a blast at his manners or his morals. It is a theological belief that the one thing he needs most is forgiveness and grace.”

“If we rigorously define people as **fellow** sinners, we will be prepared to share grief, shortcomings, pain, failure, and have plenty of time left over to watch for the signs of God’s grace operating in this wilderness, and then fill the air with praises for what we discover... So “sinner” becomes not a weapon in the arsenal of condemnation but the expectation of grace.” (Peterson The Contemplative Pastor)

I must care! “God give me compassion, a heart for people, for specific people – people whose souls I can fight for.”

## **II. In addition to caring, there must also be intentionality!**

I must know what I am fighting for – The Bible puts it this way: “until Christ is formed in you”.

How many times have you heard a variation on: “What I want for my children is their happiness.”

Mom, do you think I should get married?

Mom, do you think I should have a baby, take that new job, get divorced?

“Whatever will make you happy, honey.”

As I listen to many prayers it would seem that what we want most for those we care about are healthy bodies, material prosperity, and enjoyable relationships.

If we pray at all for other people it is only after they are sick, have lost their job, or are having difficulty in their marriage or with a child.

Is there a verse in the Bible that says, “Without happiness no one will see the Lord?”

No, but there is one that says, Hebrews 12:14 “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

What do you want most for your children?

I have heard hundreds of parents stand before this congregation and in profound and poignant ways state their desire for their children's spiritual welfare.

Was that just empty rhetoric or were they vowing to fight for the souls of their children and were they inviting us to join them in that fight?

I think their vows and pleas were genuine but many of us so easily slip into only the here and now that we lose perspective on the eternal.

It takes a recalibration of our hearts and minds to see the important once again.

What is God's goal for my child's life, my spouse's life, my friend's life, my neighbor's life?

**We are stewards** not only of our own lives but of the lives he has entrusted to us – our own families first and then the community of faith (the people of our church) and then those with whom we live and work and beyond that God says I have a responsibility to the people of the world.

God says, 1 Corinthians 6:19,20 "You are not your own; you were bought at a price.

What do you want for the people you love most deeply?

What do you want for your best friends?

- The Apostle John, as an old man wrote in 3 John 4 "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.
- Paul wrote in Galatians 4:19 "My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..."

Happiness is not what I want most for my children – I want holiness for them.

I want for them the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

I want for them what Peter wanted for those he loved:  
 2 Peter 1:5-7 “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”

I want for them what Jesus said is the greatest commandment and the second greatest commandment: Matthew 22:37-39 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

**III. In fighting for someone’s soul it not only starts with caring for them and then intentionality – knowing what we are fighting for - but it must include awareness - awareness of what God is doing in that person’s life now.**

If you were running an organization or a program you could lay out a plan and work the plan.

But if you are fighting for the soul of a person it is much less systematic than that – in fact it is usually quite messy because life is messy.

Therefore in fighting for the soul of another I should ask, as one author suggested,

- “What is God doing in this person’s life right now?
- What has God set in motion that I can get in on?” (Peterson in The Contemplative Pastor).
- What are they going through right now?
- How specifically can I pray for them in their present situation?

**So “fighting for someone’s soul” is not nearly so much laying out a plan as it being aware of where God has them right now and how we can come alongside the person to cooperate with God in their life.**

Most of us would probably agree that the times of greatest growth in our lives have not come in a classroom but in a crisis.

Suffering seems to be a much better teacher than success.

If I believe that nothing comes into our lives but what God allows, then I must also believe that God would use those circumstances, good or bad, to accomplish his purpose in our lives.

And so we watch and when our friend is weak and poor we pray for them for strength and provision and when they are strong and rich we pray for them for humility and generosity.

We ask, “What word of encouragement or exhortation would be most appropriate in this situation?”

“How can I demonstrate a genuine concern and love for them in these circumstances?”

#### **IV. And the fourth attitude must be one of Patience.**

Fighting for someone’s soul is not a matter of a quick prayer, a week’s attention, a passing interest – but is a matter of a lifetime.

There must be a patience and persistence in following through even with those who waiver for a season.

Change is usually almost imperceptible.

Day after day we can ask our children what they learned in school today and almost invariably they will say, “Nothing”.

But amazingly over months, and year and years they learn much.

Do I trust that God will work in this person’s life and will I wait with God?

I have, this morning, given some of the attitudes that form the foundation of fighting for the soul of another but now I wish to address the “how to” – **what does fighting for someone’s soul look like?**

Now to the actions – What does it look like to fight for someone’s soul?



Last week I described the fight for someone's soul this way:

It is to:

**Intercede for someone in prayer**  
**Interact with someone in the Word.**

I've asked Dr. Steve Loomis to come and describe for you what Interceding for someone in prayer is like.

Jesus said, Luke 22:31 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."

The Old Testament prophet Samuel said, 1 Samuel 12:23 "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.

God said of Job, Job 42:8 "My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.

Steve please tell us what interceding for someone in prayer looks like.

I've also asked D Thompson to come and describe what **Interacting with someone from the Word** looks like.

Many of us in this church have a vision for this church – a vision of what this church could look like:

It includes the following:

- Every believer is fighting for his or her own soul using the means of grace that God has given us: the Word, prayer, fellowship, worship, service, giving, etc.
- Dads and moms are intentionally fighting for the souls of their children.

That in addition to providing shelter, sustenance, education, and recreation, every parent would see the far more important soul of their child as worthy of fighting for.

- Every believer is “fighting for the souls” of specific others. We want it to be true that five years from today or sooner that every person in this church who is willing would be able to say I know who is fighting for my soul and could be able to say specifically whose souls they are fighting for.  
Every leader and teacher in the church is not just running programs or teaching lessons but is consciously fighting for the souls of those in the group.

Yesterday I spoke to the teachers of our elementary-age children.

I encouraged them to continue to get to know and love and think carefully about the spiritual condition of every one of the children in their classes.

I asked them to fight for the souls of your children.

We are God’s instruments, God’s means for the most important work ever in a person’s life – becoming more like Jesus.

The measure of our success will not be in numbers but in spiritual formation; Is Christ being formed in the people for whom we are responsible?

Our vision is

- organism not organization,
- corporate not corporation,
- sacramental not institutional,
- pastoral not professional,
- called not driven,
- and mentored not managed.

We haven’t been commissioned to build an organization or to have more members than a church down the street - we have been commissioned to make disciples.

We have been commissioned to see Christ formed in the people of this church, this community and this world.

**My vision is to see Christ formed in you and me.**

**To do that we must fight for each other’s souls – we need each other.**

I have paraphrased a charge from Eugene Peterson to pastors – but as I have paraphrased it, it applies to all of us in our relationships with each other.

Read this as your own plea to someone else to fight for your soul AND as a description of your responsibility in fighting for someone else's soul:

“I need your help in keeping my beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. I don't trust myself; my emotions seduce me into infidelities. I know I am launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith in life, and there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. I need your help. Let God speak through you into all the different parts and stages of my life – in my work and play, with my children and my parents, at birth and death, in my celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over me in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle.

This isn't the only task in the life of faith, there are other things to be done but this task is vitally important for my soul. One more thing: This is not a temporary job assignment for you but a way of life that I need lived out day after day. I know you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as I am. I know your emotions are as fickle as mine and your mind is as tricky as mine. That is why I am asking you to commit to this. I know there will be days and months, maybe even years, when I won't feel like believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And I know there will be days and weeks and even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it. You are called to this role in my life.

Promise right now that you won't give in to my reluctance and resistance. You are not the servant of my changing desires or my time-conditioned understanding of my needs, or my secularized hopes for something better.

There are many other things to be done in this wrecked world, and I am responsible for doing at least some of them, but if I am not reminded of the foundational realities with which we are dealing – God, kingdom, gospel – I am going to end up living a futile, fantasy life. Your task, in my life, is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, and speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation.” Will you fight for my soul?

(Paraphrased from Peterson The Contemplative Pastor)