

FOUR FRIENDS

A recent television documentary pointed out that the cheetah survives on the African plains by running down its prey. The big cat can sprint seventy miles per hour. But the cheetah cannot sustain that pace for long. Within its long, sleek body is a disproportionately small heart, which causes the cheetah to tire quickly. Unless the cheetah catches its prey in the first flurry, it must abandon the chase. Sometimes Christians seem to have this same cheetah's approach to ministry. We speed into projects with great energy. But lacking the heart for sustained effort, we fizzle before we finish. We vow to start faster and run harder, when what we need may be not more speed but more staying power -- stamina that comes only from a bigger heart.

Do you have a cheetah heart? You sit in a service and hear God's word and jump into something but then find yourself losing interest and quitting before you finish. This is especially true of reaching people for Christ. To succeed we need perseverance.

Luke 5:17 One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. 18 Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19 When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. 20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." 21 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? 23 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" 24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

1. Understanding the Need (17-18)

I want you to put yourself in the position of this paralyzed man. All your life you have been stuck in a bed. Then you hear that there is someone nearby who is able to heal you but you cannot get to him for help. It is a terrible thing to know where to need to go but you cannot get there. Remember the story of the paralyzed man in John 5? There was no chance of getting to the place of healing.

John 5:2 Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. 3 Here a great number of disabled people used to lie -- the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. 4 5 One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" 7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

This man had put his hope in a myth. He sat there day after day staring at the water, hoping that would be the day the angels would stir it. There are millions today in that same place.

So many people we see around us have put their hope in myths. They are so fixated by religious systems and legends that they reject the one who stands beside them who is really able to save. They think if they can just do the right things and say the right words then they will be saved. They are trusting in something. The problem is the trustworthiness of that they have put their hope in.

Both of these men were paralyzed. Spiritually we have all been where they were. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has been separated from God by sin and we are unable to save ourselves. Our only hope in salvation is in getting to the one who is truly able to set us free - Jesus. But how can we get to him without help?

Romans 10:14 How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Have you ever seen the TV show, M*A*S*H*? One pastor told the story of a real life MASH unit. Because of the vast number of wounded, they had to color code the victims of war. Yellow was good. If you had a yellow card put on you, it meant that your injury was not serious. You were given an injection for the pain, and could wait for further treatment. Blue was good. If you had a blue card put on you, it meant that your injuries were serious, but if they operated on you right away, they could save you. Red was bad. If you had a red card, it meant that there was nothing they could do. They just put you to sleep with an injection of morphine, and that was it. It was tough business. The doctor looked at one such hopeless case and told the nurse to red-tag him. The soldier knew what was happening. He grabbed the nurse and told her to say good-bye to his wife and his children and his father and mother. Tears were flowing, and the nurse couldn't bear to put a red tag on this young man. She placed a blue tag on him instead. Months later, a general came to inspect the camp. He had some serious questions as he looked over the charts. "For example" he said "Why was this one soldier given a blue tag instead of a red one? Who switched the tags?" No one dared to say anything, until the brave nurse finally spoke up and said she did. Then the general ran over to her and hugged her and cried out, "thank you, thank you for what you did, that was my son, and today he is alive because of you."

In this story some men pick up the man and take him to Jesus. We know very little about the men who brought the paralytic to Jesus. While the Luke account does not give the number, we know from Mark 4:3 that there was 4 of them carrying the bed.

This man was fortunate. He had those who loved him enough to come and carry him to Jesus. Today there are billions of people on this earth who still need to be taken to Christ. They are lost and have no chance of being saved until someone reaches them.

I lived for 10 years in Kuwait. When we visited there in 1995 we were told that, while the church had been in existence there for more than 80 years, not a single Kuwaiti had ever come to Christ. Can you imagine that – not a single conversion EVER! How are they ever going to hear the truth? How will they know that God so loved the world he gave His only Son? There are so many people today trusting in myths who are lost without the hope of salvation unless we do something to help them get to the feet of Jesus. Around the world and across the street – do you see the need? Understanding the need.

2. Overcoming the Obstacles (19)

It was not an easy task to get this man to Jesus. When they got the man to the house the crowds prevented them from getting close. There were three distinct barriers that had to be overcome:

The first hindrance were the Pharisees and religious leaders. They were in the crowd there as spectators looking to find reasons to accuse Jesus. Religion always acts as a barrier to people finding Jesus. This is true of the different major religions around the world today. Religions are man made systems by which men try to get to God through good works. God has placed in all of us a conscience that knows the difference between right and wrong. Guilt should lead us to God by bringing us to the foot of the cross through repentance. Religion masks guilt and misdirects it toward works rather than grace. Even Christianity can become an empty religion based on works if we allow it.

Many today believe that all religions are basically the same. They say that it does not matter what you believe as long as you believe something. They say “all roads eventually lead to Rome”. If you try hard to be a good person and do good things then God will forgive you and you can go to heaven.

One pastor told the story of a time he was flying home to Philadelphia. He got onto the plane and the man beside him introduced himself. When he heard he was a pastor he told him that he believed that all religions were the same. They were all paths to God and each lead to heaven. The pastor politely let the matter drop. As they were about to land in Philadelphia there was a terrible storm. The plane was being shaken and everyone was nervous. The pastor turned to the man beside him and said “I’m glad that the pilot does not share your religious philosophy”. The man did not understand what he meant so he explained. He said the guy flying the plane right now is listening to the control tower. He is doing exactly what he is told in order to land the plane safely. He said he was glad that the guy flying the plane was not just saying “there are many ways to get to Philadelphia. There are many different roads to take – all of them lead to the same place. I can do whatever I want”. That would only lead to destruction.

The second hindrance to the lame man getting to Jesus were the disciples and followers of Christ. Sometimes we who are closest to God can be the worst at keeping others away from Him. Remember the story of the disciples keeping the children away from Jesus (Mark 10:13)? How about the time the disciples told blind Bartimaeus to be quiet and stop bothering Jesus (Mark 10:46)?

Often the greatest obstacle to the Gospel is Christians. Over time a dynamic relationship with Christ can be replaced by empty religious practice. During Seminary I was a youth pastor at a church in Toronto. It was a hurting church that had recently split. What major theological dispute had caused all the problems? The church had gone through a renovation and had changed the colour of carpet. They chose red but a number of people wanted blue. When those people did not get what they wanted they left the church.

Don’t get me wrong, I do not think the people who were crowded around Jesus that day were intentionally doing anything wrong. It was their love for Him that was keeping others away. Likewise today it is often our love for the church that keeps others away from it. Praise God for those who are willing to sacrifice their own wants for the sake of others. If we are going to reach this generation for Christ we must be a people that are willing to sometimes make way for those trying to get to Jesus.

There was a third barrier and that was the building. It was the house itself. To get this man to the feet of Jesus was going to mean they would have to damage the building itself. They were willing to do it. When they could not go in and could not get around they went over and ended up destroying the person’s roof in order to lower the man down.

Why would they have gone to all this effort? Didn't they know they were damaging another person's house? They did it because they saw the person was worth more than the property. They were willing to do whatever it took to help the man.

Likewise the Church today must see people of greater worth than programs or property. God seeks us to be a people of compassion, not comfort. When we focus more on buildings than bringing people to Christ we are in deep trouble.

Remember the story of Jonah? He was sent to Ninevah to tell the people to repent. Afterwards he stuck around to see what God was going to do:

Jonah 4:6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." 10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Jonah was so upset about the vine that he had lost sight of what was most important – people. He was concerned about his own comfort. God was concerned about the people of that great city. Sometimes as churches we can get so preoccupied with our 'vines' that we lose sight of the people outside the walls of our church.

Getting people past religion and tradition to the feet of Jesus is not an easy thing. It takes effort and is usually very messy. Those who had witnessed before know that you don't just snap your fingers and people start lining up to follow Christ. Sometimes it takes years to see any fruit at all. Being a church that reaches out to the community means a loss of comfort. It means 'letting go' of things we cling to.

In July of 2002 nine miners were trapped in Quecreek, Pa when mine shafts collapsed due to floodwater. The men were trapping in a pocket of air 244 feet down in the 50-degree cold waters. The miners gasped for air as floodwater rose to their chins. They tied themselves together so all of their bodies would be found if they drowned. Miner Blaine Mayhugh, 31, asked his boss for a pen when the water in the shaft kept rising. He wanted to write his wife and kids to tell them he love them. Night and day rescuers fought to reach the men. On Sunday July 28, 2002 the rescue workers broke through the coal-mine wall to find the nine trapped miners all alive and well. People were weeping and cheering at village roadsides and television sets at the news that the disastrous flood deep underground had left no fatalities among the crew that had disappeared.

Understanding the need and overcoming the obstacles.

3. Seeing the Real Problem (20)

The men who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus broke through the roof and lowered him down into the room. When the paralyzed man finally reaches the feet of Jesus he is told "your sins are forgiven". I would have loved there to have been a part of the crowd.

Do you think that is what the crowd was expecting? Do you think that is what the lame man wanted to hear? Yes Jesus would go on to heal him, but that was really only as an afterthought. It was used as a demonstration of Jesus' power. I wonder what that man was thinking at that point. If forgiveness was all that he had received that day, would he have been happy?

Likewise the greatest need in the world today is not money, or information or technology. It is salvation. When we get people to the feet of Jesus and they are set free of their sins, their lives begin to change. Sometimes we don't see the change right away, but it always comes.

Just a week before my 16th birthday I was worried about an upcoming math test. I had decided to go on a youth retreat that weekend instead of studying and I was regretting that decision since math was not my best subject. Part of the retreat involved us all driving to a local park. I was in the car my brother was driving. We were sitting at a red light with all the other cars following us. The light turned green and we started to move. A pickup truck came flying through the intersection and hit our car. My head flew sideways and caught a piece of chrome around the window and was cut wide open. I had severed 2 arteries and blood was pouring out everywhere. The car behind us stopped and pulled me in and we raced to the hospital. It was the one time I did not have to wait to be admitted! As soon as they saw me I was rushed to the operating room. An hour and 18 stitches later I was laying there in recovery room. Suddenly I realized I was not so concerned about the math test anymore. The accident had brought things into perspective for me. Things that seemed important before were really not.

Matt 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus met the paralytic at his true area of need. That is not to say that he had no other needs, just that his greatest need was met. The one who was able to save his soul was also able to heal his legs as well.

The people in the world around us today have so many needs. We see poverty and injustice everywhere. There are wars all around. The answer is Jesus. Peace begins in the heart. When people find peace with God through Christ they are able to find peace within themselves and are then able to extend peace to others. That cannot happen as long as people are in bondage to other religions which offer no true answers.

I started this morning talking about cheetahs and the size of our hearts. One of my favorite Christmas cartoons is the Grinch who stole Christmas. Perhaps each of us here needs to have a Grinch experience in our lives. In the cartoon, the Grinch experiences the true meaning of Christmas and his heart grows and gives him the strength he needs to return and reconcile with the Whos.

Our role as a church is to be a combat hospital on the front lines. Our mandate is to go into all the world and that includes this community that the Lord has planted us in. It means getting people to the feet of Jesus no matter what the cost. It means getting out of the way and letting go of everything that would hold people back. What this world needs is Jesus, and that is what you have to give.

Many years ago the king of Greece made the decision to travel to the USA along with many family members and friends. They even brought the family dog along with a servant who would walk the pet around the decks. One day the ship was in choppy water and the dog was running on the hard wood deck when it slipped and fell into the ocean.

The servant ran as fast as possible and told the Captain that the dog had fallen in. The Captain refused to turn the ship around for a dog. The servant begged "It is not just a dog, it is the king's pet!" The Captain still refused to turn the ship around for a dog.

The servant started running as fast as possible toward the back of the ship. He saw the dog swimming in the distance. He grabbed a life jacket, and jumped off the back of the ship. The crew started yelling, "MAN OVERBOARD! MAN OVERBOARD!" The Captain turned the ship around and went to save the man. When they found the man floating in his life jacket, he had the dog safe in his arms.

This man risked his life to save something precious. His focus was not on his own comfort or safety but on his task. What are we willing to do to get people to the place of salvation and healing? What roofs are we willing to destroy in order to reach this community?