

Let us pray: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

After a Christmas break, this Sunday, we continue our sermon series on hope. Today will be the fourth in that series. Today is also the first Sunday after Christmas. The church's Christmas season is only 12 days long and starts after Christmas, not before Thanksgiving, and culminates on January 6th with Epiphany, the day the Wise Men and their contingency arrive in Bethlehem.

Jesus says: **"With God all things are possible."** (Matthew 19:26) Jesus also said, **"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."** (John 10:10) Do those two scriptures give you hope? I hope so!

Hope is important, so how can we increase our hopefulness and become less fearful, more motivated, more able to dream and capable of making a difference in this world? The sermon series is covering seven factors that each of us can use in our lives to increase our hopefulness. Paying attention to each of these factors in our lives will enable us to be more hope-filled.

So far, we've covered two of the seven factors that raise our hope. Factor #1: Recharge your batteries. You can't be hope-filled if you are out of fuel in your life. Keep your life fueled and full of hopeful energy. We looked at 5 things you can do to keep your batteries charged: invest in your own growth, understand the power of worship, unleash the power of the Bible into your life, build great relationships and pay attention to whose voice you are listening to – listen to Jesus' voice.

Factor #2: Raise your expectations. If you have small plans you'll get small results, so believe that impossible things are possible. There are better days ahead. You can see those better days when you adjust your perspective on life. You can't be fearful and be hopeful at the same time. Instead of boxing yourself in, replace 'what if' with 'why not.'

Today, we're going to look at hope factors 3 & 4. The third hope factor: **Refocus on the future.** The author of Philippians says in chapter 3, verse 13: **But I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.** The writer of Philippians, Paul, focused on the future and became a powerful force in spreading Christianity to the world. He wasn't discouraged. He asked a simple question: what can this become?

Jesus focused on the future when he recruited his disciples. Mark 1:17 - **And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”** (NASB) We often forget that the people Jesus picked to work with him were not a stellar group of intellectuals. Matthew was a selfish tax collector. Peter always was putting his foot in his mouth. Thomas doubted that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

How did this motley crew turn into a group of people that changed the course of history? Yes, Jesus was a good leader – a leader that didn’t focus on the way people were, but focused on the what people could become. Jesus focused on the future.

Howard Hendricks was a seminary professor who taught and influenced many students over the more than 50 years he taught at Dallas Seminary. However, he wouldn’t have been a professor at all if it hadn’t been for Miss Noe.

Howard described himself as ‘a trouble maker, a hell-raiser whose reputation preceded him in grade school; that is, until he got to sixth grade. When the school year began, Miss Noe was taking roll in the first day of class. When she called Howard’s name, she looked up only to see him sitting with his arms crossed waiting to go into action. Miss Noe said to Howard, “I’ve heard a lot about you.” Howard immediately thought – here we go again. But Miss Noe smiled and added, “but I don’t believe a word of it!”

Those words stunned Howard. He realized for the first time that someone cared. Howard recalls that moment was, “a fundamental turning point, not only in my education, but in my life. Suddenly, unexpectedly, someone believed in me. For the first time in my life, someone saw potential in me.” Miss Noe believed in what Howard could become and focused on the future, not the past.

When we start focusing on what something or someone can become, rather than on present conditions, then everything changes.

The question for you to ask is: what can this become? This question moves the focus off the present to the future and gives you a fresh vision. Fresh vision leads to encouragement. Encouragement leads to hope. Hope leads to change. Change leads to passion for better days ahead.

What are some of the benefits of asking the question: ‘what can this become?’

The first benefit: You can experience great comebacks with that fresh vision. Look at Moses. He did nothing significant for the first two-thirds of his life. Then he led the Hebrew people out of slavery to the Promised Land. Now that's a comeback. Jonah ran away from God only to return to do God's work and save a whole city from destruction. Paul persecuted Christians but ended up spreading Christianity throughout most of the known world. Now that's a comeback. Peter denied Jesus three times, but became a great Christian leader.

It's not where you start, but what you become. So, ask yourself what can you become.

The second benefit: asking 'what can you become' gives you a fresh vision that fuels you onward, to reach for something better.

Has God's grace and forgiveness freed you from your past, but you're not too excited about your future? Are you someone who has great ideas, but the past holds you back?

Try focusing on the what you can become. Hope replaces guilt and encouragement overpowers discouragement.

The author of *The Hope Quotient* has a sign in his church that says, "Come, fail, but for God's sake, try something." What fresh vision do you have? What is your dream?

The third benefit: Focusing on what you can become frees you to dream. What category do you fall into?

- You have no dream. You just want to make it through the day.
- You have little dreams, small dreams. Your dreams provide you with no challenge.
- You have the wrong dream. Let me explain. Some people give their allegiance to a second-class cause. Many people have great talent and abilities, but are not working on spreading the gospel or making the world a better place to be or helping the poor. Think about your dream. Does it forward God's kingdom? Would someone know your dream involved your Christian beliefs?
- You have vague dreams. Dreams that are not clear or dreams that are unfocused. You need razor sharp dreams. At twelve Jesus told his parents: "I must be about my Father's business. (Luke 2:49) Ask yourself, is your dream focused enough so you'll know when it's finished?"

- You have God's dream. How do you know if your dream is from God?
Ask yourself:
 - Is this dream God honoring?
 - Will this dream change lives and influence people?
 - Does this dream resonate with godly, visionary people?

People with God honoring dreams know their dreams are aligned with God's purposes when their dreams agree with what's written in the Bible, the Spirit inside them tells them their dream honors God, and believers they trust all agree that their dream is God honoring.

The fourth benefit: Asking the question, 'what can I become?' gives you energy and stability. When you know where you're going, you have passion and hope and you have a future, all which fuels you with energy and stability.

If you want to have more hope in your life, ask yourself 'what can I become?'. Focus on the future. Remember the scripture I mentioned earlier when Paul writes: **But I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.**

When you focus on the future you will be contributing to God's kingdom using the gifts and talents God has given you. You will be set free to use those gifts to pursue your dream.

Moving on to hope factor four: **Play to your strengths.** I remember in graduate school one of my professors said the manager's challenge is: should I develop my strengths, or should I work on my less than strong skills? I'm here today to tell you to develop your strengths! Develop your God-given gifts and use them.

When you use your God-given talents, you are maximizing your potential. God has given you your specific set of gifts. When you use them, you are at your best for God. You might say, you're in your groove. Use the gifts God has given you and you'll be happier and more productive.

When you use your God-given talents, you discover your purpose in life. Many people go through life unhappy in their job, or for some of you, unhappy with retirement.

As Christians we need to ask ourselves:

- What does God want me to do with my life?
- What should my mission be?
- Why am I here?
- How do I make a maximum impact for Christ with my life?

These questions get answered when you discover and use your God-given gifts. God would not have given these gifts to you if God did not want you to use them! When you take your gifts and use them, God shows up and works with you. So, it's important to know your gifts so you can know your purpose in life.

When you use your God-given talents, you can be freed from insecurity and inferiority.

Let me ask a question. How many of you are really gifted? Raise you hands. Don't be bashful or shy.

In truth we're all gifted by God. So, let me ask that question again. How many of you are really gifted? I want to see every hand go up because you are all gifted by God.

There's an old story about a mother yelling at her son about getting out of bed and getting to church on Sunday morning. The son was whimpering about how he hated church and the people were unfriendly. His mother said, "you have to go to church." The son replied, "give me one good reason." The reply, "because you're the pastor."

Maybe that son didn't want to go to church because the people there were not using their God-given talents. The pastor's talents are not the most important. There are others whose gifts are important. How about the person who greets you at the door with a big smile and welcomes you? Doug uses his talents to make people welcome. That's important. What about Jeffrey and Nathan? They use their talents to help us make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Our liturgist and readers share their talents with us. There are those behind the scene. Kevin uses his abilities to make a beautiful, easy to read bulletin and the slides you look at on the TV. Stan sees to it that the checks to pay the bills get written. Laurie makes sure the kids have a Bible lesson on Sunday. Mary is skilled at writing meaningful messages in the cards she sends out for all of our life events. Those are only a few of the folks who use their talents to make this church work.

Without all these folks using their God-given talents, we'd be sitting here in the dark without music. Thank God for all who help this church function!

A revival took place in North Carolina in 1934. Two 14-year-old boys came up to the tent and were looking in and about to leave when an usher came up to them and showed them to a seat. The speaker that night was Mordecai

Ham, someone you've probably never heard of and a person not well known in 1934. At the end of Mordecai Ham's sermon, he gave an invitation for people to come forward and give their lives to Christ. Both of those boys came forward that night and became Christians.

One of the boys was a tall, skinny kid names Billy Graham. The other was his best friend, Grady Wilson. You know the rest of the story. Together, Billy Graham and Grady Wilson started an evangelistic association that has reached more people for Christ than any one in modern history.

Who would you credit with seeing to it that Billy Graham became one of the most important evangelists in the twentieth century? Was it Mordecai Ham? No, it was the usher who used his skills to encourage two disinterested teens to attend the church service. That usher had skills and, when he used them, he changed history.

No job is too little or too unimportant. We are all called and gifted by God. When you see that and understand that, you no longer need to be insecure or feel inferior to anyone.

When you use your God-given talents, you can be motivated and encouraged. Each of us is motivated and encouraged when we're doing what we're supposed to be doing. Nothing is more draining than trying to do what God has wired you NOT to do. There's a reason I'm not an accountant or an artist or a carpenter. I'm not wired to do those things. God didn't give me those gifts. When each of us is doing what God wants us to do, we have energy!

When you use your God-given talents, you have at your disposal the best way to change the world.

We all know of people who have changed the course of history. Billy Graham was just one example I just named. You can think of others. But changing the world doesn't mean famous changes. You never know how your behavior will affect someone else. I'm sure that many of you have had someone come up to you and tell you the difference you have made in their life. When you influenced that person, you were probably using your God-given talents – and they could see it. When you find that groove, using your God-given talents, you will find yourself able to affirm others and help them. Who knows how you've already changed the world.

When you use your God-given talents, you can be free from fear of failure. I can't play the piano like Jeffrey or sing like an opera star. What is it

you can't do? What is it you can do? Your can't do list is probably miles longer than your can-do list. But which list is important? The can-do list!

And how do you find out the can-do list? By trying on new things, new ways of doing things. As I mentioned before, the new mantra in business today is 'if you're not failing, you're not succeeding.'

Thomas Edison said, "I never failed once. It just happened to be a 2,000-step process." Discovering what our God-given talents are is certainly a multi-step process. There's no reason to fear failure as you go through this process of discovering your God-given talents.

But please fail fast. When you fail, look on the positive side. You will have found what you're NOT good at and you'll have many funny stories to tell for the rest of your life!

When you use your God-given talents, your stress level is lower and your joy increases.

When you're free to let others be who God created them to be, to use their talents to bring honor to God, you don't have a lot to worry about. I'm so thankful for all the folks around this church who keep in humming by using their God-given talents. For example, I'd be stressed if I had to provide the music each week. You'd be stressed to, just listening to my piano playing. That would be painful. I'm so thankful for all of you who make the church work. It sure lowers my stress level!

So, don't let it bother you that you're not good at this or that. God has you covered, covered with a whole bunch of talented, gifted people, each with the privilege of doing what God has called and wired them to do.

Would you want it any other way?

I've spend time talking about using your God-given talents and strengths. Some of you may wonder what are your strengths?

We've just discussed the value of knowing your gifts, so there's no reason not to want to discover your gifts. And, yes, we all have gifts. You have God-given gifts. The Bible tells us that we have received gifts. First Peter 4:10 - **serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.**

You have to discover those gifts. If you say you're waiting for God to tell you what your gifts are, it probably will not happen. Remember what I said earlier. You have to fail to find out your gifts. You can't steer a parked car. You have to keep moving to discover what gifts God has given you.

Once you discover the gifts, then you have to use them. You have to develop your gifts by using them. The more you use them, the better you become at using them and more effective you become.

And where do you use them? Where God needs them. You can't approach your gifts with the preconceived notion that you know how God wants you to use them. Your job is to use your gifts where God wants you to use them. That might be a hard step for some of us to process.

As I mentioned earlier, how do we find out if we're doing what God wants us to do? We know our talents are being used to give God glory when they align with what the Bible says, when the Spirit inside tells us that what we're doing is right, and, perhaps most importantly, that believers we trust all agree that these are our talents and we're using them in a God-honoring manner.

Be aware of your gifts and use them. First Timothy 4: 14 - **Do not neglect the gift that is in you.** I would change that to say, do not neglect the GIFTS that are in you.

Today, we covered two more hope factors to consider if you want to increase the amount of hope in your life. We looked at focusing on the future, not on the past. I asked you to ask yourself, 'what can I become?' Having a future gives you hope.

The second factor we discussed today was play to your strengths. Develop your God-given gifts. Know what your gifts are and use them to forward God's kingdom. Don't keep them hidden, discover them.

Close with Yates oil field story, page 97