

Imagine a World without the Church

It's a Wonderful Life--part 1

DAY 1: Corporate Light

"It's a Wonderful Life" is the story of George Bailey, a banker who has fallen on hard times. He decides that the world would be better off without him so he decides to jump off a bridge. But an angel is sent to rescue him and show him just how important his life really is. The angel shows George how the history of his town would have unfolded without him. People that he would have helped go without his help and their lives end up much worse. Bedford Falls is taken over by his banking rival, a ruthless man whose greed brings crime and poverty.

By the end of the movie George is begging for the chance to go on living. He's seen his life in a larger context. His current trouble, which seemed hopeless, is now small compared to the fact that his life is a gift meant to bring blessing beyond what he could have imagined.

It's a message we all need to hear. Our lives matter. There is a reason for us. If your life is full of trouble it's easy to forget the gifts you have been given. If your life is good it's easy to take those gifts for granted.

Recently I was talking with a young man at a restaurant. He asked what I did. When I told him he said something I hear a lot. "I'm a spiritual person but I don't believe in organized religion". What does that mean? For him it meant that he tries to do good. In his view it's when Christians get together and organize that things go haywire. He is okay with God but not the church.

For him a world without the church would be a better world. That's not what Jesus had in mind.

Matt. 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

1. We tend to think of these verses as given to *individual* Christians, but the words were given to *the disciples as a group!* What thoughts go through your mind with this? What did Jesus have in mind?

2. We tend to think of good deeds we could do on an *individual* basis, which is fine, but the power is when we are light *together!* There are the deeds that are done, but in addition, the light shines through how we relate to one another! What thoughts go through your mind with this?

3. I was watching the Baylor football game at a local restaurant. On another TV, a group of twenty folks were cheering for UCLA against Arizona State. As long as UCLA was fighting back, the folks were happy, cheering, and delightful. In the last minute UCLA tried to rally and was plagued with a number of bad plays. The folks turned sour, grumpy, negative toward the coach, and critical of the players.

a. What could have light looked like *in that context?*

b. What could light have looked like *between the people?* To customers around them? To the staff?

DAY 2: God Uses You, and Us!

1. It looks like the Bailey Building and Loan company will go bankrupt. George's good deeds, done over many years to most of the townspeople can't prevent his own demise when \$8,000 is lost.

But the people of the town hear of George's dire straits and news spreads fast. The townspeople to whom George had been so kind rally around him. A financial miracle happens as people turn generous and sacrificial.

Acts 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

2. How would you describe the attitude of the people toward their own possessions?

3. How would you describe their attitude toward sharing?

Acts 4:33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There were no needy persons among them...

4. In the middle of verses about their generosity, Luke records how there was power in testifying? Do you think the two are connected?

Acts 4:33b ...For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

5. What do you think was the effect of this generosity on people in the church?

6. What do you think was the effect on the non-Christian community?

7. How is your generosity quotient?

8. Many people wonder if they have any value to anyone. "Can I make a difference?" God wants to use your life to make a difference! Is there anyone you know who has a need? Is there a way you could meet that need?

DAY 3: God Uses the Church to Display His Wisdom, the Way of Wisdom!

Ephesians 3:10–11 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, (11) according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1. What is the central point of the church, in 3:10?

2. "Manifold" wisdom means, multi-faceted--the many, many ways that God's wisdom is seen. Below are some examples of God's wisdom on display. Put a check mark by ones you have seen through the church:

- I see how to better relate to my spouse.
- I understand the wonder of grace to me.
- I have been motivated to serve God.
- I have seen some of the benefits of walking with God.
- Only God can make people love like this!
- God's ways are amazing!
- No one but God can make good out of the tragedies of life.
- I discovered I need wise people in my life.
- I don't want to trust my emotions.
- Other: _____

3. In 3:11 Paul describes how important the church is to God. What does Paul say?

4. The church is not a "super-saint" operation. We are not "know-it-all," "have it all together" Christians. If you claim to be one of these, you have missed the point! We are sinners saved by grace. The process of growing in Christ-likeness is a slow process. We all have a loooooooooooooooooong way to go. This is important to remember. In the following examples, jot down how you would want to display God's wisdom (the wise way to live).

a. When you're criticized:

b. When you're discouraged:

c. When you meet a new person at church:

5. You are on display! We are on display, to a lost and dying world. Pray, and ask God to display His wisdom through our lives.

DAY 4: Acceptance and Unity

1. Before Christ came to earth, women were considered second class citizens, at best. In many parts of the world, they were treated as chattel, or worse. Among the Greeks there was a popular expression of gratitude to the gods. "I am grateful that I was born a human being and not a beast, next a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian."

Wives were little more than slaves. In parts of the Middle East today, women are executed for not wearing the proper clothing. "Honor killing," the murder of a daughter or wife, is a way of life in some countries.

2. Christianity came to break down the walls between people!

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

3. What differences do you see between the three sets of people in Gal. 3:28?

4. There is an old saying, "We are all equals at the foot of the cross." What centuries of "human progress" could not do, the cross of Christ made possible. Why do you think that is so?

5. What is it about the gospel that makes us equals?

Ephesians 4:1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

4. To Whom does Paul attribute the unity we share? (4:3)

5. What is our responsibility to do with that unity? (4:3)

6. Which qualities from 4:2 make that possible?

7. How are you doing at maintaining unity of the Spirit? Do people sense that you are glad to be with God's people? Do they sense humility coming from you? Patience? Jot down your thoughts that come to mind...

8. Finish today by praying over what you wrote down in the last question.

DAY 5: Sacrifice

Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

1. Paul makes some ASTOUNDING statements about the price he paid for others, the church!!! Beneath each statement, jot down what strikes you about it.

a. *"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you..."*

b. *"...and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking you regard to Christ's afflictions,..."*

c. *"...for the sake of his body, which is the church."*

2. The most natural thing to do when suffering is to complain. The idea of rejoicing seems so "outside the box." But this is some of the very light we saw in Monday's devotional. It is the same wisdom we saw in Wednesday's devotional!

3. Why do you think Paul rejoiced in his sufferings?

4. Let's put together what we've studied this week:

- We live in a dark world that needs light!
- We live in a callous and greedy world that needs generosity!
- We live in a foolish world that needs wisdom!
- We live in a fractured world that needs unity!
- We live in a disappointing world that needs eyes to see Jesus--the reason to rejoice!

5. The church changed the world for the better, not just by being there, but by paying a price to advance the love of Christ in this world. There is more history to be made, but it will only occur as Christ-followers like you and me add to the sacrifice of Christ with our own sacrifices.

6. "It's a Wonderful Life" shows two very different cities. Bedford Falls, the one *with* George Bailey; and Pottersville, the one without him. Bedford Falls didn't just occur. George Bailey sacrificed much.

The wonderful life we enjoy doesn't just occur. Many Christ followers sacrificed. Now it's our turn.