

## **OUR IMPOSSIBLE GOALS**

Evangelist Johnnie Lavender  
2 Pet.3:9; Jn.17:11; 2 Tim. 3:17

If I had known how impossible our goals are in ministry, I might not have signed up! Actually, that isn't true, because, as Paul says in Ephesians 3:7, **I** was *made* a minister according to the gift of God's grace ... Don't ask me why. I don't know. There are many people more qualified than I am to fulfill this calling. But that's the point, isn't it? It's a calling. And, for reasons of his own, back in 1941 while I was attending Wheaton College, God tapped me on the shoulder and **I** was made a minister.

Even so, at times, I am overwhelmed with the daunting task of living up to what I have chosen to call Our Impossible Goals. For one thing, we are called to the impossible goal of being--

### **Perfect in Our Holy Purpose.**

And what is that impossible purpose? It's spelled out in 2 Timothy 3:9 **A**(that) all may come to repentance. This means we must do more and be more than average. We must follow the example of Jesus of whom it is said, **A**He went a little farther.

Among other things, Jesus went a little farther in his evaluation of the worth of a soul. And so must we. We must learn to see in every sinner what Jesus saw -- the possibility of a saint. For then, and only then, will we even start to commence to begin to approach the impossible goal of reaching some of the all God had in mind when he said his desire is that **A**all may come to repentance.

And then, there is the impossible goal of being --

### **Perfect in Our Point of View.**

John. 17:11 records Jesus' prayer for his body, the church, and we hear him pray **A**that they may

be one.@ I don't think Jesus was concerned about church union, so much as church unity.

As a participant in the creative process, Jesus knew the diversity built into people would express itself in different styles of worship. In fact, according to Genesis four, the very first argument recorded in Scripture was about worship!

Jesus was concerned about, and prayed for, unity within his body. Not that we all might share the same denominational blood type, but that we all might understand and celebrate the principle of unity within diversity. Third, there is the impossible goal of being --

### **Perfect in Our Person.**

And this is where I want us to place our primary focus this morning. 2 Timothy 3:17 spells out a kind of bad news -- good news story. The bad news, according to Paul, is that the goal for young Tim, his ministerial protégée -- and for us! -- is that Athe man of God may be perfect.@

AWow! That's impossible,@you say. Absolutely! But here's the good news. There's a sense in which this impossible goal is already an accomplished fact through the grace of the Lord Jesus! If God's word is true, and I believe it is, then, according to Jude 24, Jesus Awill present (us) faultless before the presence of (the Father's) glory with exceeding great joy.@

Having said that, I must go on to say there is also a sense of which it is a goal yet to be achieved. Not in the sense of attaining immediate, or even gradual, full-scale sinless perfection. That's not possible in this life. Rather, our objective is to move toward our destiny in Christ. As your Greek New Testament makes clear, the word translated Aperfect@in our English Bible is *telos* which, as you may know, refers to a target or goal. Completion in Christ is our *telos*. It is the target at which we aim. The goal toward which we move. Why? So we will fulfill our destiny in Christ, which Paul spells out in Romans 8:28,29 when he explains that God's purpose for us is that we Abe conformed to the image of his (God's) Son (Jesus).@

Let me suggest three areas in which conformity to Christ is a goal toward which we should aim. To begin with, our impossible goals include being--

**Perfect in our Consecration.**

Galen Drake, the famous broadcaster, shared this Short Sermon for Young Preachers written by Dr William Barrett Millard,

APray every night and shave every morning.

Keep your conscience clean, and also your linen.

Let your light shine, and shine your shoes.

Press your advantages, your opportunities, and your trousers.

Brush the cobwebs from your brain and the dandruff from your collar.

Beware of a reputation for bad breath and rancid jokes. Both offend.

Covet a golden tongue more than a >greenback.=

Don't mix your metaphors, but, at the same time be a good mixer.

You can't put fire in your work unless there is fire in your heart.

Two things cannot be imitated; God's sunset and man's sincerity.

It is better to establish a solid precedent than to follow a poor one.

It is better to lose a good fight than to win a bad one. And--

Always be content with what you have, but never with what you are.@

Someone has said, APreaching is not the art of preparing a sermon and delivering it. Preaching is the act of preparing the preacher and delivering him.@ Someone else said, ALive so people will want your autograph and not your fingerprints.@

Abraham Lincoln loved to tell the story of a man from Illinois who was arrested for passing a counterfeit bill. The judge who was hearing the case asked the man a question. ADid you take the bill to the cashier of the bank and ask him if he it was good?@AI did.@ AWhat did the cashier say?@ AHe said it was >a pretty tolerable, respectable= sort of bill.@ Applying the story to a foot-loose, fancy-free, conniving preacher he did not respect, Lincoln said he thought the man was a Apretty

tolerable, respectable@sort of a preacher.

There's nothing inspiring about a Apretty tolerable, respectable@sort of anything, let alone that kind of preacher. And the man of God who is content to be average, Aa reasonable facsimile@of the real thing, a Apretty tolerable, respectable@sort of a preacher, is not going to be of much use to God.

Take the case of Noah. Scripture says Noah built an ark. After the flood he built an altar. For a time he was a leader of people. He was a powerful person of towering ability. But, we're told, ANoah got drunk.@ After that, all the Bible has to say about him is, ANoah lived so many years, and he died.@

God couldn't use him any longer. You see, it's not important whether a pipe is made of gold, silver, precious jewels, lead or iron. But it is important that it be a clean pipe. An open pipe. A conduit free from clogging debris.

How can these things be when we are so painfully aware of our humanity? It comes down to intent, not content! Jesus doesn't expect our lives to equal his. But, he does expect our lives to resemble his. Not that they of the same strength, but that they be of the same kind.

You'll discover, as I am, there is only one way to get from here to there. It's by way of the cross. A poet who understood that wrote,

AOh God, is there no other way  
Except through sorrow, pain and loss  
To stamp Christ's likeness on my soul?  
No other way except the cross?  
And then a voice stilled all my fears  
As stilled the waves on Galilee.  
I bore the cross. I know its weight.

I drank the cup I hold for thee.  
Canst thou not follow where I lead?  
I know the way, just follow me.@

And then, along with being perfect in our consecration, we have the impossible goal or telos of being--

### **Perfect in Our Scholarship.**

Paul, our elder brother in ministry, put it this way, AStudy to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth@(II Tim. 2:15).

I know a little Greek and a little Hebrew. One of them runs a restaurant and the other runs a pawn shop! But one of my ministerial buddies who *is* a Greek scholar, pointed out that the word translated Aapproved@of God means to be Athoroughly equipped, fully prepared, and perfectly suited@to the task God sets before us.

That includes being a man of vision. The tragedy of the church today is that all too often it doesn't know where it's going. Why? Because, as someone has pointed out, AMinisters like us to make churches like ours.@

The Bible says, AWithout a vision the people (emphasis mine) perish.@ This reading of the text suggests that, for the people to have a sense of purpose and direction, their pastor must be a person of vision!

As I've moved around the country and observed our fellow preachers, I'm sorry to say some, not all, thank God, but some are like the French Revolutionists who said, AThe mob is in the street. I must find out where they are going, for I am their leader.@

That kind of Aleadership@won't cut it in a day like this. The man of God must know what he

believes and why. He must know where he is going and how he plans to get there. He must be sure of his ground and sure of his God. He must be willing to change and adapt and *grow*.

Instead of giving a few churches many years of experience, some preachers give many churches a few years of experience! And that's sad. It's sad that there are preachers out there who have lost *both* their ground *and* their God because they failed to stretch toward the telos of being perfect in their scholarship.

Edgar DeWitt Jones, the great Congregational preacher, tells how one of his key laymen had a heart attack and was close to death. Dr. Jones loved this man and visited him often in the hospital. The man had been a self-made, self-sufficient individualist all his life. Now, after coming face to face with his own fragility, he was struggling to just stay alive and regain his physical and emotional equilibrium.

One day Dr. Jones walked into the hospital room and asked his friend how things were going. The man replied, AOh, pastor, I've lost God. Through all of this pain and long recuperation, I've lost God.@ Quick as a flash, Edgar DeWitt Jones replied, AOh, my friend, you are in company with the saints! Job cried, >Oh that I knew where I might find him.= Jeremiah cried, >Thou hast covered thy face with a cloud so I cannot pass through.= The Lord Jesus cried, >My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?= To be in such a state, my friend, is to be in company with the saints.@ Only having been perfect in his scholarship, and in his knowledge of God's word, could he have given such an inspired and spontaneous response.

Being perfect in our scholarship demands that we discover and deal with the difference between doubting and thinking. Tillich said, ADoubt is part and parcel of a mature and genuine faith. One must be secure in himself (and I might add, in his God) before he can honestly doubt.@

We must be courageous enough to press on toward a higher skepticism. A skepticism which is skeptical of our skepticism. We must learn to doubt our doubts and believe our beliefs lest we

believe our doubts and doubt our beliefs.

This became painfully clear to me during my college years. The faith in short pants of that nine year old boy who gave his heart to Jesus, proved to be inadequate for a maturing young adult. I needed a grown-up faith in trousers. It took me a while to get it.

I remember vividly how, during my college years, while working on a dual major in philosophy and psychology, there came a night when I knelt beside my bed and, for the first time in my life, could not pray. I remember saying to myself,

AThis is just a verbal catharsis. I'm talking out loud so my ears can hear what my mouth is saying, in the hope that I'll feel better. No one's listening.@ I remember getting off of my knees and climbing into bed gripped by an icy indifference. I had chosen to believe my doubts and doubt my beliefs.

For several months I walked a painful, bewildering, increasingly desperate path as I attempted to whittle God down to a size with which I could more comfortably live. And then, after months of emptiness, there came a moment when I decided to doubt my doubts and believe my beliefs! I decided to let God be God. That night, kneeling beside that same bed, I prayed, ALord, I believe, help my unbelief.@ And, to borrow the words of another, in a quiet, holy, life-altering moment, AMy knees did climb those altar stairs which slope through darkness up to God.A

Later, I came upon a powerful poem which describes my journey.

AThey tried to take you from me.  
They said you were but an idle myth,  
A delusion and a childish superstition.  
When I prayed, they mocked me.  
When I worshiped you they called me mad.  
  
But oh, my master, I have met you and I know.

I have heard your voice in the stillness of the night  
And in the infinite silence I have beheld your glory.  
In the hour of pain I have felt your comforting hand.  
How can I doubt you whom I know?

They tried to take you from me.  
They proved in learned discourse that you never were.  
They told me I was simple and you were just an empty dream.  
Scientific proof they gave and spoke wise words I could not understand.  
They ridiculed and mocked and laughed.

But oh, my master, he that once has met you cannot doubt.  
He that once has felt your holy presence cannot question more.  
Though they are blind, yet I have seen your glory.  
Though they are deaf, yet I have heard your voice.  
How can I doubt you whom I know?@

And then, ours is the impossible goal of being

### **Perfect In Our Passion.**

Our passion to propagate. To win others to Jesus. To evangelize. To care, and care deeply, for the lost. I believe our greatest danger may lie right here. And I urge you to beware of the temptation to ratchet back your passion for souls to accommodate the endless list of distractions, masquerading as demands, upon your limited time and energy.

Determine before God, and with God's help, to put and keep first things first. For hear me -- you may possess God's word, you may spend hours poring over God's word, you may passionately defend God's word, but, if you do not propagate God's word with a holy passion, you will fall short of one of our impossible goals.



It is said of Jonathon Edwards that he was a AGod-intoxicated man.@ He had a fire in his belly he could not ignore. He is quoted as saying, AThe whole world is on fire, and I am the only one who can put it out.@ A bit of hyperbole? Perhaps. But, with that kind of mind-set, is it any wonder people trembled when he preached? Is it any wonder whole towns and cities and regions were moved toward God when he prayed?

A young missionary arrived on the foreign fields to which he had been assigned. He saw the teeming masses of people meandering about with a sense of sadness in their eyes. He turned to the retiring missionary whose place he had come to fill and said, AIt looks like I got here in the nick of time.@ The older man smiled and said, ASon, that's exactly what I said when I arrived here forty years ago.@ Quick as a flash the young man fired back, AYes, but you've got to admit the times are getting nicker and nicker!@

I don't know who said it, but, are you as motivated by it as I am?

Yesterday is already a dream.

Tomorrow is but a vision.

But every today lived for Jesus Christ

will make every yesterday

a dream of happiness,

and every tomorrow

a vision of hope.

AThat the man of God may be perfect.@ Perfect in consecration. Perfect in scholarship. Perfect in passion. Impossible goals? Of course. But remember, we aren't in this battle alone. Through Christ we are A**more than conquerors.**@ He who is with us, is the same today as he was yesterday, and as he will be tomorrow. And, with his help and blessing, the little world in which we live out our large calling, will know that, like Paul, we, too, A**were made a minister.**@ And that's what you really want, isn't it? Me, too!

ABe strong!

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift.

We have work to do and loads to lift.

Shun not the battle, face it, tis God=s gift!

It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,

How hard the battle goes, the day how long.

Stand up. Fight on.

Tomorrow comes the song.@