

Interlinked Meanings of Purpose: When we say God is a God of purpose, what do we mean? Purpose actually has at least three interlinked meanings. All three categories are pertinent to God and His activities. Purpose can be (1.) the reason for something's existence, e.g., smallpox vaccinations exist to protect people from getting the disease. (2.) The reason for doing something, e.g., I saw a fire and quickly rang the fire bell to alert the students. (3.) A specific goal to be achieved, e.g., my objective is to prepare a lesson every week.

God's Overarching Purpose for Believers: Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) Q 1 says God's purpose for believers is for them to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. This is the overarching purpose for every believer's life. It is to direct our thoughts and actions. Believers can glorify God in worship and in all they do. Not only did God create people for His purpose, He also purposefully created them in His image and likeness. He purposefully calls His fallen people to salvation.

Obviously, a created being cannot be exactly like God. God has attributes which are His alone. But certain important attributes of God are communicable and can be given to created creatures. Communicable attributes include spirituality, knowledge, wisdom, truthfulness, goodness, love, mercy, holiness, peace, orderliness, righteousness, jealousy, wrath, will, freedom, power, and creativeness.

God's communicable attributes are present in some degree in all His created people. They enable people to be sufficiently like Him to love and honor Him as He loves and honors them. That was true with Adam and Eve in the beginning. They conditionally had holiness and were immortal. They disobeyed God and fell from their lofty position drastically changing things. They lost their holiness. They died spiritually and began to die mortally. Their fallenness has been transmitted to all their descendants. Everyone born since the Fall is born spiritually dead and unable to achieve God's intended purpose for which holiness and immortality are necessary. To enable fallen people to be ultimately restored to holiness and immortality and to live eternally with Him, God in grace purposed restoration through salvation. God both made possible and initiated salvation.

God's purpose has always been to have a people who could and would live eternally with Him. As we have seen, the condition for living forever in God's

presence is holiness and immortality. To restore fallen people to the necessary condition for eternal life with God, several things must happen. The penalty due their sins must be paid. They must be transformed (eliminating their sin nature) and made holy as God is holy. They must be given eternal life.

God's Will and Circumstances: We truthfully say God does not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We say His will is unchanging. Yet we find in Scripture verses where it appears God changes His mind. What is going on?

The explanation lies in distinguishing between the unchanging principles God applies in His dealings with His people, and the conditions and circumstance in which He applies those principles. God is eternally against sin. God loves His creation (John 3:16). God is steadfast and unchanging in applying His principles.

But circumstances and/or conditions to which He applies those principles can and do change. When it appears to us, God has changed His mind, we need to look at how circumstances have changed. For example, each of us in our natural fallen state were subjects of God's wrath with no possibility of eternal life with Him.

But when God intervened and regenerated us, gave us faith, justified us, adopted us into His family, and set us on the path of sanctification aided by the indwelling Holy Spirit, circumstances were drastically changed. His principles in dealing with us remained the same, but the circumstances to which He applied those principles were different. No longer were we under His wrath, no longer were we outcasts from eternal life. We are now "in Christ" and members of God's own family. No longer are we "far from Him." We can come close to Him.

You see the difference. His attitude toward us is different because the circumstances are different. The principles involved have not changed. He continues to hate sin and sinners are subject to His wrath. But our sins have been forgiven and their due penalty paid by Christ. I am saying this the best I can, but I know it may be confusing. The point is God's principles remain always the same. What changes are the conditions in which the principles are applied. People change. Principle A no longer applies. Instead principle B applies. God did not change, We did.

"Without Holiness No One Will See the Lord" Hebrews 12:14b (NIV):

To live eternally with God, we must be holy. To become holy our fallen state must be changed. We can't change that state, but God can and does. In our new state,

God's principles in dealing with us will not change. He converts us from being fallen to being regenerated and justified. In our new condition, different ones of God's unchanging principles apply. The Holy Spirit indwells us and aids our sanctification. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit will glorify us making us both holy and immortal (like Christ), prepared for eternal life with God. All is made possible by Christ's salvation work. Christ is every believer's High Priest in heaven interceding on their behalf.

Believer's Role in Sanctification: Philippians 2:12b-13, "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" "Work out" is what believers are to do in the sanctification process. "Works in" concerns what God does. We get further insight into our part from Galatians 5:16 (NIV) when Paul says, "*live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*" Psalm 51:6-12 deals with God's part in changing the essence of man deep in the center of his being.

Sanctification begins at conversion and continues to the end of life. Justified believers have been declared by God to be legally righteous in His sight. Sanctification is the process of transforming a justified believer into a believer who is also existentially righteous (righteous in their being), made holy as God is holy. Believers are to do external things which correspond to the internal transformation being wrought by the Holy Spirit.

Actions Believers are Enabled and Required to Do: Paul lists things believers are enabled and required to do. All are external actions. Colossians 3:12-14, "*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*"

"Be Imitators of God" (Ephesians 5:1): Paul says believers, as part of their role in sanctification, are to deliberately imitate God. Such deliberate actions help the believer acquire moral character like that of Christ. Ephesians 5:8b-10, 15 "*Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.*"

Being Transformed into Christ-likeness: Putting together the pieces, we find that in transforming a believer into Christ-likeness: (1.) God enables and requires the believer to put on the outward form of Christ-likeness. (2.) God works the necessary inward change to Christ-likeness in the innermost being of the believer.

God enables us to do many things, but inward change of heart is something He must do for us. Trying to do in our own power what only God can do is a great error, as great an error as failing to do what he has enabled and expects us to do.

Facts, Values, Preferences, and Decisions: It is important to distinguish between facts, values, and preferences. Facts show “what is” and are subject to verification. The importance of a “fact” is always subject to interpretation and varies with circumstances. Some facts may be dismissed by one Christian group as unimportant but be considered vital to another Christian group. Such differences have produced significant denominational divisions among protestant Christians.

Values indicate “what ought to be.” Values cannot be verified with the same rigor as facts, but should be traceable to a trustworthy source. Values also vary in importance. Which values are most important is subject to interpretation.

Preferences are simply likes and dislikes and are chosen by each individual.

Decisions: Believers make many decisions every day. Some require a “value-based” decision, some factually based decisions, some both, and some are simply preferences. Everyone needs to be able to discern which is which and deal with each decision properly. All of a believer’s decisions are to be consistent with the revealed character of God and His commandments.

As we saw in part 3, decisions are always made according to the strongest desires and inclinations presented to the will at decision time. All decisions are important.

The decisions we make define our path through life. A life sequence of decisions either defines a righteous or an unrighteous path. The notion of “Two Paths” is found in a number of key Scripture passages. One of the most memorable passages is recorded in Matthew 7 where Our Lord Jesus is speaking toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount. He gives several illustrations that highlight the necessity of making decisions which keep us on the path of righteousness. Keeping to the path of righteousness is not an easy task. In fact it is impossible without God’s provision.

Jesus says unrighteousness is a path with a broad gate. The path is wide and easy to walk on. The path of righteousness has a narrow gate and the path may be narrow and steep and difficult to walk on. He also uses an analogy with fruit trees. Trees, which superficially look much the same, may produce different fruit – a good tree, sound in every respect, produces good fruit. A look-alike tree of the same variety which has hidden weaknesses may produce bad fruit.

In another analogy, He speaks of the construction of houses. Houses, which superficially appear to be the same, may have different types of foundations. A house built on a poor foundation cannot withstand storms of rising water, but a house with a strong foundation can withstand terrible storms. Jesus closed His comments with the path believers should choose. Matthew 7:13-14, ***“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*** This is a warning and whether or not we choose to follow His recommendation is a “test.” We need to be certain our foundation is strong.

Umbrella Decisions: Joshua gives an important lesson when he confronts the Israelites in Joshua 24:15 (NIV), ***“But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”*** This is an umbrella decision, a guiding principle. It embraces many particular decisions, but the guiding principle is make each decision consistent with following God.

Just what this means to Joshua in terms of the myriad of decisions he will have to make as a husband, father, warrior, and leader will have to be worked out. But, in principle, he knows what he will do. He will follow God in all that he does. As Christians, we face a similar situation. In our everyday decisions at home and at work, in all our varied relationships, our particular decisions should follow the umbrella decision to follow Christ. Umbrella decisions are important tools in organizing daily decisions and make it easier to make right choices as decision points arise.

Priorities: Not everything in life is of equal importance. There are priorities. Jesus established priorities. His priority for Himself was to obediently complete the task for which He became incarnate. He did complete His assigned task (John 17:4). What are our priorities in life? God has some suggestions.

First Priority: Matthew 6:31-33, *“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’* ³² *For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.* ³³ *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* God is aware of our human needs. He says they will be provided, but we need, as priority, to seek God, His kingdom, and His righteousness. God’s commandments are intended for our benefit and are to be obeyed. This represents an umbrella decision.

The Greatest Commandment: Obedience to the greatest commandment is obviously a priority. When asked which commandment is greatest, Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40 replied, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* This commandment is also an umbrella decision.

Love for One Another: God established love for one another as a priority. About love for one other, in John 13:34-35 Jesus said, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you (that is, with action in your best interest and sacrifice on your behalf), you also are to love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (Jn 13:34-35). Love for Jesus is a special priority because it is tied to obedience to Him. About our love for Him, in John 14:15 Jesus said, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* This too is an umbrella decision.

Actions Toward One Another: Right behavior toward others is a priority. About our actions toward others, in Matthew 7:12 Jesus said, *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* On the same subject, Paul said in Romans 13:9-10, *“For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’* ¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”* This is an umbrella decision.

Instructions for Dealing with All People: Making disciples of all the nations is a priority. After His resurrection, as He was about to return to the Father, Jesus’

instructions in Matthew 28:18-20 were, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” This is an umbrella decision.

What Next? Part 5 will examine “being transformed through the renewing of our minds.”