

# ARE YOU LIVING UP TO YOUR FULL SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

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Let me ask you a question. You have heard it asked many times in recent years in our Western society, but it is being asked even more frequently in the 90's. The question is, "Are you living up to your full potential?" Are you everything you ever hoped to be? Are you doing everything you ever hoped you would do? Are you filled with self-confidence, self-assertiveness, and self-discipline? In other words, are you awesome, both to yourself and to all who come in contact with you?

Many of you who work in major businesses are being encouraged to attend seminars designed to help you reach your full potential for the well-being and profit of yourselves and your company. We have all heard of or personally experienced the pressure within the sports community to strive for one's full potential for personal as well as the team's benefit.

This pressure not only affects us, but if we are parents, we find ourselves at times pushing our children to find their full potential at an early age. The following newspaper headline caught my eye last week in the San Francisco Chronicle:

Parents who push children to strive for accomplishments. A typical day for a 15-year-old Berkeley High School tennis star would often include jumping rope 3,000 times, working out for five hours and sometimes getting a spanking from her father and former coach. She ran away earlier this month. Her father says there is no way you can push a child too much. "Parental pushing seems to have intensified since the mid-1970's," says Dr. Margo Leahy, child psychiatrist and assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Stanford University... "Parents who push intend the very best for their children, but often become embroiled in needing their children to excel to gratify their own needs."

Tension surfaces when the Christian community tries to mix the world's philosophy of what it means to be a whole person with the Lord's definition of what that means. Christians need to ask questions about achieving their full potential, but in a way that takes the question into the spiritual dimension. We should be asking ourselves, "Are we living up to our full spiritual potential?" When we reached out in faith to Jesus Christ and asked him to become our Lord and save us, we immediately began a spiritual process of becoming like him. Our goal is no longer to discover our full potential in the flesh, but to experience our full spiritual potential in the Spirit. This means that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to choose daily to become servants of our Lord and allow him to live his life in and through us by his power, for his honor and glory, not ours. This new life in Christ takes time, training and testing, but the joy of realizing our full spiritual potential gives Christians a sense of wholeness that the world with all its full potential programs can never experience.

So let me challenge each of you this morning by asking, "Are you living up to your full spiritual potential?" Are you allowing the Lord to have full reign in your lives on a daily basis? Are you allowing him to train you and test you so that you will become all that he desires you to become rather than what the world wants? In order to help us answer that question, let us turn to Luke 9:1-17. Here we will see how our Lord trained and tested his disciples to experience their full spiritual potential.

In our studies in Luke's gospel we will see today that our Lord continues to travel throughout Galilee, fulfilling the words of Isaiah 61:1-2, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord..."

In chapter 8, which we looked at last week, we discovered that a frightened father and a sick woman placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior. The result was that the man's daughter was raised from the dead, and the woman was made physically and spiritually whole. Between chapters 8 and 9, several other healings occurred, according to Matthew 9 and Mark 6. Our Lord healed two blind men; then the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out a demon from a dumb man by the power of the devil; and Jesus returned for the second time to his home town of Nazareth where he began his ministry and was driven out of the synagogue. A year or so later he returned, "And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief." This was in stark contrast to the great faith expressed by those Jews in Capernaum, just 25 miles east of Nazareth.

Matthew 9:35-38 sets the stage for our study today. It is early spring, and our Lord is entering the final year of his Galilean ministry before he sets his face towards Jerusalem. There, he will submit to the will of his Father to go to the cross of Calvary for the sins of all mankind. "And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.' Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

At this moment our Lord's compassion was still directed to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." The Jewish leadership, the shepherds of Israel, had rejected their responsibility, so our Lord was going to prepare new spiritual shepherds to evangelize the "house of Israel." They would minister among the Jews until after the death and resurrection of Jesus; then they would move out among all the nations (Matt. 28).

As we study how our Lord prepared his disciples in their generation to minister during harvest time we will discover spiritual principles that will enable us to enjoy our full spiritual potential in our own "harvest time."

Are you living up to your full spiritual potential?

## **I. Allow the Lord to train you, Luke 9:1-9**

And he called the 12 together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases. And he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God, and to perform healing.

According to Matthew 9, Jesus reminded the disciples not to go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but only the "lost sheep of the house of Israel. "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Jesus was going to accomplish through his disciples the work of the ministry which his Father gave him.

The Lord's heart was filled with compassion over the helplessness of the Jewish sheep (the flock of God) who had no spiritual shepherds. In times past, the Lord spoke to the wicked shepherds of Israel through the prophet Ezekiel, pointing out the poverty of his flock: "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with wool...those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered....My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to seek for them" (Ezekiel 34:1-6).

Jesus directs his twelve disciples to spread out among the Jewish nation, but only after they understand they need his power and authority working in and through them as they faced the power and authority of the kingdom of darkness. They were going to be sent into the very heart of the "kingdom of darkness" to rescue those who had been held captive by Satan through disease, demons, and the fear of death, and seek to deliver them into the "kingdom of light." When the Jewish people saw Christ's power being expressed through his disciples over sickness, death, and demoniacs, that would open their hearts to believe the gospel of Jesus

Christ. After the day of Pentecost the promised Holy Spirit would indwell believers and enable them to minister in each generation as our Lord did in his generation.

The Old Testament Jew was encouraged by the prophets of old to look for the Messiah and his kingdom, a kingdom on earth where the Messiah would overthrow Israel's enemies and rule the nations in righteousness from Jerusalem. The good news to the "lost sheep of Israel" was that the Messiah had come and his name was Jesus. Once they invited the King to come into their hearts, they were eligible for all the spiritual resources—righteousness, peace and joy—of the kingdom. Preaching the kingdom of God therefore means the lively proclamation of the reign of God in human hearts unto salvation full and free. They were learning that they could be saved not by keeping the letter of the law, but only by faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. If the people rejected the message, they were rejecting God as well as him. This rejection would be followed by the judgment of God, as the warning given in Matthew 10:16-42 states, "Behold I send you out as sheep among wolves...you will be arrested, and brought to trial and the Holy Spirit will witness for Me through you. You will be hated, persecuted as servants of Satan, but don't fear but take up your cross and follow after me...for he who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it."

Jesus was about to send them out two by two (including Judas, Mark 6:7). He told them not to pack for this trip like every other long trip, trying to anticipate every need and packing for it so as to feel secure. This time they were to live moment by moment, depending on their Heavenly Father to provide all their needs. So Jesus went one way to preach and minister, and the disciples, two by two, went all over Galilee and Perea (Mark 6:13), "and they were casting out demons and were anointing people with oil and healing them."

Unknown to the twelve disciples at this time was the fact that news of their's and the Lord's ministry of teaching and healing had reached the ears of Herod Antipas, the governor of Galilee. A year and a half earlier this man had had John the Baptist beheaded at the request of his adulteress wife, Herodias (Matthew 14:1-8; Mark 6:17-29). Herod became very perplexed when he heard the stories of the miracles among his people. He said to his servants, "This (Jesus) is John the Baptist, he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him" (Matthew 14:1-2). Others of his advisers said that no, it wasn't John, but Elijah, the prophet of old who had been taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (1 Kings 2:11) some 850 earlier. He had never died but had returned to Israel as the prophet of God to fulfill Mal. 4:5, "Behold I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." Others said no, it was not John the Baptist or Elijah, but some other prophet who had been raised from the dead. But Herod was not satisfied with the answers of his advisers. He said, "I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?" And he kept trying to see him. (Note that all three explanations as to who this person was describe him as coming back from the dead or the other world outside our reality.)

In the age of the Spirit, our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is calling on all who love him and want to follow him to ask him to provide for us his heart of compassion, his power, authority, message and provision to minister among those around us who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and be delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light until he comes again.

My physically, emotionally, financially and finally spiritually bankrupt friend whom I told you about a couple of weeks ago, just returned from his first Christian outreach ministry in South America. He told me a most wonderful story of how the Lord worked through him and an Argentine Christian friend after he had made a common mistake many foreigners make. He was walking through a run-down section of a city and saw a woman come out of her home carrying a basket of newly-picked oranges to sell in the local market. Instinctively, he raised his camera and took a picture of her. She responded in anger and began to yell at him in public. His Argentine friend followed the woman home and explained why he and his friend were in their village. He then explained to her the gospel of Jesus Christ and in time she invited the Lord into her heart. Then she requested that my friend come to her home the next day so she could ask his forgiveness for her anger. Talk about just showing up in the power of the Holy Spirit and experiencing ones full spiritual potential!

How can we experience our full spiritual potential? Allow the Lord to train you and...

## **II. Allow the Lord to test you, 9:10-17**

And when the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done. And taking them with Him, He withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. But the multitudes were aware of this and followed Him; and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing. And the day began to decline, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the multitude away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place."

But He said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people." (For there were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, "Have them recline to eat in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, and had them all recline. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to his disciples to set before the multitude. And they all ate and were satisfied; and that which was left over to them of the broken pieces was picked up, twelve baskets full.

"And when the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done." The disciples had been ministering for some four or five months and now it was time to return and report to the Lord. You can picture them all coming back into Capernaum and meeting with Jesus, everyone trying to share their experiences at the same time: "Lord, It was wonderful, we were able to do everything you said we could do if we would but show up. We preached and many came into the kingdom. We healed the sick, raised the dead, cleansed the lepers, and cast out demons in your name" (Matt 10:8) "Lord, it was wonderful! We became all that you said we could become if we but put our faith in you and minister by your power and authority."

"And taking them with him, he withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida" (a small town about a mile northeast of Capernaum). They went by boat (Matt. 14:13). He may have retreated not only for rest for himself and the apostles, but also because: Herod was looking for him; the Jewish people wanted to proclaim him king by force (John 6:15f); the Pharisees wanted to kill him; and he needed time to do some more training of his apostles to trust him for all their spiritual, emotional and physical needs when he would no longer be with them after the ascension. (This story is recorded in all four gospels: Matt 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:12-17 and John 6:4-13.)

"But the multitudes were aware of this and followed him; and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the Kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing" (9:11). The Lord and his disciples had been going out to the crowds, but now the tide had changed and they were seeking him. The hearts of the Jewish people were filled with the hope now of the coming kingdom; an age of universal peace and joy might be on the point of fulfillment. (Mark 6:34: "...He felt compassion for them because they were sheep without a shepherd.") Our Lord knew the hearts of his people and how they wanted to be set free from the bondage of frustration, disappointment and pain of living under the Romans and the Jewish religious community. Jesus responded by welcoming them and telling them about the kingdom of God. Within that message was the hope of salvation and the hope of being spiritually cured of sin.

To make this spiritual point clear, our Lord then demonstrates to them the reality of his Messiahship by offering physical healing. This physical healing confirmed his Messiahship. According to Isaiah 35:2-6, "they will see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, take courage, fear not. Behold your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but he will save you. "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy."

As the sun began to set, the disciples were concerned with the physical needs of the crowds gathered in that desolate place. They suggested that Jesus send them to the surrounding villages in order to find restaurants and motels. They were saying, in effect, "Lord it is you whom they have come to see and it is you who is curing them, so would you send them away?" What happened next shows how inadequate their ideas were even yet about the person and powers of Christ, and also the true nature of the spiritual kingdom which they had been heralding around Galilee. They had forgotten where the power comes from to accomplish God's will in heaven

and on earth, for God will never ask us to accomplish any task in his name without providing the power necessary for that task.

Jesus challenged them: "You give them something to eat!" John 6:5-6: "Philip, where are we to buy bread, that these may eat? And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do." The disciples responded, "We have no more than five (barley) loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people." They had a horizontal view of reality. They looked around at the 5,000 men, women and children (adding up to some 15,000) and they looked at what they had in hand, five barley loaves and two fish, which they had taken from a young boy (John 6:9), and they concluded the only way to feed these people would be to go to a local 7-11 and buy food for them. And where would they get the money? These are the same 12 men who had just come back from a wonderful ministry of healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out the demons, as well as preaching the wonderful good news of the Kingdom of God. Now when the Lord placed this new problem back into their laps, their minds were overwhelmed by the immediate visual and physical problem-the 5,000 plus who were in need of food. They had worked miracles on individuals, but never on a crowd.

Our Lord was about to give his apostles and the people before him a foretaste of the kingdom to come. Isaiah had prophesied about the physical and spiritual blessings that would come from the Lord out of the "desolate" ruins of cities, palaces and enemies: "...prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined aged wine...he will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of his people from all the earth; For the Lord has spoken and it will be said in that day, behold this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us, this is the Lord for whom we have waited, let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (25:6-9).

Jesus asked the disciples to divide the people into groups of 100 and 50 and have them recline, and to give him the five loaves of bread and two fish. Then, looking unto heaven, he brought the power of heaven-all the heavenly resources necessary to meet the needs on earth-to earth. He blessed the food, broke it and kept giving it to his disciples to set before the crowd, until "they all ate and were satisfied." There were twelve baskets left over to be picked up by twelve apostles; each one got a basket to hold and think about his own personal lack of faith and confidence in Jesus. Norval Goldenhuys wrote,

It is vain for us to attempt by ourselves to give real food to needy mankind with our five little loaves and two fishes, the insignificant gifts and powers possessed by us. But, when we place at his disposal, in faith and obedience, everything we have received from him, he will, in spite of our own insignificance and poverty, use us nevertheless to feed souls with the bread of eternal life. He sanctifies, blesses and increase our talents and powers, everything consecrated by us to His service.

John 6: 14 -15 adds, "When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is of truth the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus therefore perceiving they they were intending to come and take Him by force to make him king He then send the disciples back to Capernaum by boat, asked the multitudes to return home and He withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone" (to pray, Mark 6:46). Later, our Lord would teach the multitude who were seeking him and who finally found him the meaning of the miracle of the bread when he said (John 6:27), "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father even God, has set His seal. They said therefore to Him. 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him who He has sent.'"

In order to provide the bread of life to a spiritually hungry world around us we first must turn moment by moment to the very Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, and ask him to provide all we need physically, emotionally and spiritually to minister to the hungry. As we reach out to our Lord to provide bread in a desolate place, he will not only provide the bread of life, but he will do so in overflowing terms with the result that the spiritually hungry will be fully satisfied.

Two Sundays ago after the second service, I had arranged to met a man who is attending our men's Bible study on Wednesday morning in downtown Palo Alto. In the course of our conversation he invited Jesus

Christ to come into his heart as his personal Lord and Savior. Two weeks ago, he confessed his new faith to all the men at "Agora." Last Wednesday after our study, I was introduced to his Christian son-in-law who told me that he and his wife and four children had been praying for the last eight years that his father-in-law would come to know the Lord. Then the son-in-law told me that just recently he had been in his church and had seen a family sitting across from him in which the grandparents were included. He said that sight made him wish that one day his father-in-law would sit with his family and children and listen to the gospel together. Then he confessed his lack of faith by thinking, "There's no way." Now two weeks later, here he was studying the word with his father-in-law and hugging him as his new brother in Christ.

When the world asks us to live up to our full potential it has in mind a program whereby we will commit all our human abilities-self-effort, self-discipline, self-confidence-towards a goal of self-achievement that will bring great profit to the sponsors and great personal benefits to us. When the Lord asks us to live up to our full spiritual potential, on the other hand, he asks us to put no confidence in the flesh, but to turn to him as the Bread of Life, moment by moment, in order to have the power, authority, message and provision to the meet the needs of this sick and dying world. And whatever we do we are to do for his honor and glory.

Are you living up to your full spiritual potential? If your answer is no, but you want to enjoy your full spiritual potential, then turn to the Lord Jesus and ask him to train you and then to test you so that you will have the eyes to see the spiritually hungry and be available to share with them the Bread of eternal life, whose name is Jesus.

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