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UNSTUCK: FROM UNDERACHIEVEMENT Michael B. Beaugh
John 12:20-33 March 29, 2009
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In Malachi 3:10b, God promises to open the windows of heaven for us and pour down for us an overflowing blessing. One of the things that keep our windows shut is our addiction to underachievement. There has never been any question in my mind that God wants to break us out of the cycle of underachievement. To get us unstuck.

An underachiever is someone who regularly fails to achieve what they are capable of. An underachiever has greater capacity to achieve more but simply doesn't do it for a variety of reasons. If it is a chronic underachievement, it could be because of what is called underachiever syndrome. This is a treatable condition, but takes lots of work.

I know teachers deal with this in their classrooms. How discouraging to see a child with great potential simply refusing to perform up to his or her capacity. How exciting when a child exceeds his or her capacity! Talk about report card time! I am sure many parents are having this conversation about underachievement right now. Is it thumbs up or thumbs down? I love what my wife has always said. She taught school for 29 years. "It doesn't matter how smart you are. What matters is how you apply yourself, what you do with what you have."

God wants us to live up to our capacity, to do the best we can with what we have. In terms of John 12:24, God wants us to bear much fruit. It is why God has chosen us to be Christians.

Did you hear that? You might think you chose to be a Christian, but it is God who has chosen you if you believe it. You have been picked for the Jesus Team. You know you have been picked if you believe in Him. If you have been picked for the Team, then God expects you to produce.

It is why Jesus died on the cross. It is why our mission here at SBPC is *to make and grow disciples who give their lives to make a difference in the world*. It is why we have Growth Groups, to grow that kind of disciple. It is why we are still trying to discover our Signature Ministry, a primary mission that gets us out into the community to make a difference in people's lives. That for me is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to break us out of the habit of underachievement.

Before we look at how to kick the habit of underachievement, let's be clear about the fruit God wants us to produce and bear. We might spend a lifetime producing lots of stuff. We might even become highly successful overachievers but fail completely in producing the good kind of

fruit God wants. Churches can even be highly successful but not be producing the good kind of fruit. What is this fruit?

Now listen to this. The Bible speaks of several different kinds of fruit. For example, fruit of the loom, I mean, of the womb. God promises to give the human family children as a sign of God's promise for the future. Children are a sign of God's faithfulness and love. They are a sign of hope.

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit. The closer we draw to Jesus Christ, the more the Holy Spirit produces in us positive, life-giving attitudes and behaviors, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In John 12, Jesus speaks of a different kind of fruit. The fruit he came to produce is a new kind of community that will take the good news of God's forgiving love to the ends of the earth. He came to produce followers who serve him. He came to produce followers who in turn produce more followers. Followers who carry his life into every corner of the world and create new communities bound together by the glue of God's love.

Let me emphasize new community. Jesus did not die on the cross just to get me into a buddy-buddy relationship with God. Or to get me to dress a certain way. Or to talk a certain way. Jesus died on the cross to bring me into an eternal relationship with God. To redeem me and then to use me to form a new kind of community. A community not based on power or status or hierarchy or wealth or family connections or brainwashing or threat, but based on servanthood and respect and forgiveness. A community where each person is safe and honored and welcomed. A community that exists not for itself but for the good it does because of whom it follows. A community that understands that all of life comes from God and that gives him all the honor, glory, and power that belong to God's name.

To what extent is our life of faith helping to build the kind of community Jesus died for? If we are not producing and growing that kind of community, we are underachievers in the Kingdom of God.

Well, there's the challenge, isn't it? Learning how to build community of the sort Jesus came to create is not the easiest thing in the world to achieve. Living in community, even as Christians, takes lots of hard work.

How do we make it happen?

Now we get to the heart of John 12:24. Here Jesus speaks of his own death. At this point in John's gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has already made his triumphal entry. The whole city is abuzz with excitement because it is spring break. It is the week of the Feast of Passover. In a few days Jesus will be the center of attention. He will be cursed by the people and nailed to a cross. He has told his followers before that he must go to Jerusalem to die,

and they didn't like it. Now he gives them a simple lesson using a grain of wheat as his object lesson to explain why he has to die.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Folks, if we want to bear much fruit, the kind of fruit blessed by God, the kind of fruit that makes a difference in the world, we must fall into the earth and die. Sounds kind of drastic, doesn't it? But the reason we can do that is because we follow the One who goes before us.

Now let me tell you about Eddie. [This part is based on a video shown in worship.] I don't know Eddie personally, but I get the feeling that before he got involved with Special Olympics he wasn't producing much fruit of the kind Jesus is talking about.

I suspect he was a Christian before. He probably attended worship, and gave to the church. He could rationalize all the time and money he gave to the church, but he did those things more out of duty or guilt than out of love for Christ.

I sense that he had never felt that more was needed from him or even that he had more to give. Maybe his church had never challenged him to think bigger, to think about where God wanted to plant him so God could produce more fruit through him. Not just to grow the community in size, but to create a new kind of community rooted in the character and love of Jesus Christ.

All that changed when he "happened" to be in the hallway at a sales meeting. As we always say here, we go no place by chance. God has a purpose for us wherever we are, whomever we meet. Eddie didn't just "happen" to be in that hallway when he fell into conversation with a young man who was going to be in the Special Olympics. As a result of that conversation, Eddie became a coach for special needs people. As he put it, it felt good doing something for someone else. Eddie had been an underachieving Christian before that chance encounter. Now he is serving Christ with his heart and making a difference, bearing the fruit of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I love what is happening in this church and in so many of your lives. I love it that so many of you are committed to growing as disciples. I love the passion I see, the things that are happening, our search for a Signature Ministry even as we engage in so many other missions. But I know that God has so much more for us to do. And I don't mean so many more programs to create, or jobs in the church to do. I mean so many more lives to touch, so much more fruit to bear. Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

God wants to scrape away the underachievement that keeps the windows of heaven shut. Jesus died on a cross so we might bear much fruit. Let us today commit ourselves anew to follow him and see what happens.