

Introduction to the Course: Appreciate and Accentuate



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I admit it. There are just a lot of things that I'm not very good at. I'm not good at serving a tennis ball. I'm not great in making Moroccan food. In fact, my family got kind of sick last summer; I made that attempt. I'm not very good at water skiing. In fact, that was a painful experience the last time I tried that. I don't enjoy cleaning up peoples' messes. And I don't enjoy confronting people when they've done something that I don't appreciate that they've done. I'm sure you can think of some things too that you're not very good at. Are there things that really bother you; that you just don't feel comfortable doing? Now think about other things you are good at. What are some of the things that you just love? For me, I actually am very good at taking a splinter out of a child's finger. In fact, I'm really good at it. I can do it without them crying. My kids will bring kids in from the neighborhood to get that splinter out, because they know I can do that. It's a small little talent that I have. I can also make a great mango salsa. I can translate the book of Amos from Hebrew into English. I can encourage leaders to become all that God has created them to be. I enjoy that. In fact, that's the thing that really gets me going. I can do a vast array of things. God has created me that way.

And my experiences have allowed me to really develop those things into even more gifts and talents as I've grown up. Do you have that going on in your life? I know you do. Think about the things that you are good at, the things that you enjoy doing. Here's the thing. We serve an intentional God. He delights in how He has created us and how we are developing to become all that He has created us to be through our experiences. As Jeremiah says, "God has plans for good and not for disaster. To give us a future and a hope." Our intentional God plans for us. He has wonderful plans for us. He wants to join us in our work in our homes, in our communities, and in the world.

In His plans, we find purpose, direction, and self-satisfaction. Of course, this idea of finding God's purpose in our lives is not new.

There's been a ton of books that have been written on that. In fact, I'm sure you're all familiar with *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren. In that book, Rick says: "Long before you were conceived by your parents, you were conceived in the mind of God. You're alive because God wanted to create you. Your life has profound meaning. We discover that meaning and purpose only when we make God the reference point of our lives." God has a reference point for our lives; not your friends, not your family, not what you've read. Not your education, not your neighbors, not even your dog. God is our reference point and that truly is the main thing that matters as we look at how we've been created in the purpose that we want to put in our lives.

Bruce Wilkinson has also written a book called *The Dream Giver*. In his book, he talks about this purpose as a dream. And I'd like to read you the direct quote from his book. He says: "You do have a dream. It's part of what it means to be human, created in the image of God. You don't have to invent your dream. Like the color of your eyes, or your one of a kind smile, your big dream was planted in you before you were born. The psalmist David wrote, 'All the days of his life had been fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.' Your dream is unique and important. You've been handcrafted by God to accomplish a part of His big dream for the world. How? Your dream is meant to fulfill a big need that He cares deeply about. The reason you're here is to take part of His dream. From point A to point B. No one else can do it quite like you. Your dream is yours to act on. God is waiting for you to value His gift of your dream enough to live it. He will not force you to choose, nor will He make it happen for you. You must choose; you must act. Your big dream is what God has laid hold of you to do. And fortunately it is never too late to pursue your dream.

"Your dream is yours to act on. You don't have to do anything first. You don't have to put your life together first. Your dream is meant for you to act on right now, today. It is not something you have to invent. It is something you want to uncover. It's been with you, from the day, actually the day before you were born. Years before you were born. You were in God's mind, and He knew what He was creating you to be." Psalm 139 tells us that "God created our inmost being. He knit us together in our mother's womb. We shall praise Him because we are fearfully and wonderfully made." God's works are wonderful. That means we're wonderful. Sometimes it's hard for me to take inside, because I know me. And I'm not so wonderful some of the time. But God has created

us to be perfect in His eyes today. But how do we discover what God intends for us? It comes through understanding how we were created. How He created us to be very special. And then observing how all of the experiences that we've gone through have molded us into the person that we are today. By looking at those things then we can focus our efforts on becoming who He desires us to be in this world and in His ministry.

To understand this process, I suggest four basic principles. I call them the 4 A's of understanding our leadership. The first is appreciate; the second is accentuate. The third is alleviate; the fourth is activate. Let me give you a little more. Appreciate who we are. Accentuate our uniqueness. Alleviate obstacles. And activate God's vision for us in our lives. We will explore these things over the next few lessons. We will look at how to appreciate, accentuate, alleviate, and activate.

As I mentioned before, our task isn't to invent our purpose. We serve an intentional God. He's a purposeful God, and He's a participatory God. He is the One that we turn, to try to understand how He's created us to be. He's known us from the beginning. As Isaiah 46:10 says: "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." God has a plan and a purpose for us. He has from the very beginning, and His plan will be fulfilled. Our participation in this plan really comes down to a few things: If we can understand how we've been uniquely created by God, and then also to understand how our experiences have continued to develop us as we move through our life, then we can understand what our purpose, that God has preordained, what it is.

The first thing—and remember I talked about this—we're going to talk about the four A's. The first A is "appreciate." Appreciate means to value highly, to recognize gratefully. This means that we recognize gratefully how God has created us. We recognize gratefully how our experiences have molded us into a very unique person. It means to value highly. Again, we value highly where we are and where we've come from. That's what serving a purposeful God is all about.

First, let's talk about how we can specifically appreciate how we were created. Now I'm going to talk about our personality, our gifts, and our talents. Now while I understand that these things are definitely formed through our experiences and the things that happen in our lives really have their starting point in our creation

and the DNA that God puts inside us, let's talk about personality first. Experts agree that DNA is a huge part of our personalities. While experiences, particularly in early childhood, might have an effect on our personality, they really start in our DNA. This is not a mistake. Your personality has been put together uniquely for you. To use in God's kingdom as He hopes that you will choose to join Him in it. He did not create a bunch of clones, walking around like robots that don't do anything unique. He's created each one so specifically and carefully. We all have this uniqueness in us that He delights in. It's tempting to wish that we had different personality traits. I know that when I go to a large gathering, and I'm standing at the door, and I'm looking in and I'm saying, "Oh my goodness, I don't even want to walk in the door. I just hope there's somebody there that I know." I want to just sink into my shoes. And so eventually I slap a kind of superficial smile on my face, and I creep in and stay close to the wall, just hoping that somebody recognizes me and comes over and talks to me. I am not an extrovert.

But the thing that I love is that God knows that about me. And He delights in me. He understands that He has made me to be the person that likes a lot of solitude. Somebody that likes to spend more intimate time, one-on-one with people. He uses those things to help me work in His kingdom and to help me make a difference in other peoples' lives. He doesn't expect me to be an extrovert. He didn't create me that way. Because of my unhappy relationship with extroversion, it makes more sense to me to think of personality as a preference or an inclination. I want you to think about if you were writing your name with the hand that you're comfortable with, it's easy. It flows quickly. And you're fast at it. You don't have to put a lot of thought into it. But if you were to switch that pencil to the hand that you're not comfortable with, and you try to write your name, you have to really concentrate on that. And it takes awhile. It's not an easy thing to do. As you can see, appreciating your personality just makes you more productive. If you're not going against your personality inclinations, you're just more productive and things are easier for you. It doesn't mean that you can't do things that are out of your comfort zone. I still have to go to groups of large people and talk with them. But it's not something that's easy for me. And if I can avoid jobs that make me do that a lot, it'll probably make me more productive. There are a number of assessments that can help you understand your personality. And we've included these resources in the resource section of this class.

Next, I'd like to talk about gifts and talents. These are also things that God has put into you and created in you when you were born. Gifts, in this case, I'm going to refer to as spiritual gifts. These are given to Christians as a result of the Holy Spirit indwelling inside them. Every Christian has spiritual gifts. And they're critical to God's work here on earth. Spiritual gifts are spoken about in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. If you read these passages, it will help you get a better idea of what God's intention was for spiritual gifts. There's a number of ways to discern these gifts. These different types of strategies are also listed in our resources' section for this course. There are a lot of free surveys that you can take that will help you pinpoint exactly what your spiritual gifts are. It might be leadership, it might be teaching. It might be the gift of mercy. But I encourage you to find out what those gifts are, because they're critical to how you'll engage in God's work in this world.

Talents are another thing that God has put in us when He created us. Talents are things that we do well naturally. They may be developed as you go through life. But they are in you. It's a natural inclination when you were born. I think about, like, a musical talent. They may look different as you go through life. But it's still a musical talent that you can use. For instance, a musical talent might be used as a high school band trombone player, or perhaps an opera singer in New York, or just the joyful bongo playing of a child in India. All of these things are musical to God's ears. What kind of talents do you have? Are you good at speaking? Do you have a green thumb? Are you great at seeking out complicated math scenarios? Are you a good problem solver? Are you a good listening ear? These are all things that you have natural inclinations for.

As Thomas Lamanse said, "Talent is God-given." Be thankful. Conceit, that's self-given. Be careful. Understanding the source of our talents is really the most important thing. And it helps us in appreciating how these talents should be used. Since our talents are given to us by God, they should glorify Him. Now this does not mean that our talents have to be used in an official church setting. That doesn't make sense. But God gets great joy out of seeing us and delights in the talents that He put in us at creation. Now that we've understood how God has put talents and other things into us when we were created, now let's look at how our experiences have been developed in us since we have grown over the years.

First, let's look at skills. Skills are things that we have developed

over time. They may be influenced by our talents. But they are things that we have learned that we might not have known before. These things can be something like organizing a library. Learning to walk across a log on a river. Learning how to pour cement. Or learning how to search the Web. These are all skills that you might have accumulated over the course of your life. I had a friend named Hector. He made great enchiladas. This was a skill that he had developed. He loved to make these enchiladas, and so every year during football season, he would have a party where he would invite everybody over and he would serve his enchiladas. This skill ended up being a mode to where he shared the gospel with people. After the football games, somehow the conversation always turned to God, and he had his chance to talk to them about this hope that he had been given. Hector's enchiladas, the skill that he had learned, helped him further the purposes of God. Skills are one way that we have been developed through the experiences in our lives. But we go through a lot of experiences—either your education or your training. These things are an experience that would really develop skills.

Other types of experiences might include relational experiences. How have you related to people in your family? Related to friends? Related to acquaintances? Have those experiences been positive? Have they been negative? How has that made you react to your environment now and to other people? How have those relational experiences affected who you are today? Understanding those again can help you know where to plug in to God's work in this world.

Other types of experiences are ministry related. Sometimes these can be most impactful, sometimes for the positive and sometimes for the negative. But how you've engaged in ministry—whether it was a formal ministry in a church, or in a parachurch, or a mission trip, or just ministering to people who you work with—these are the types of experiences that you want to key in on. How have they affected you? And how have they developed you as a person?

Another type of experience is the spiritual experience. What have you had as times of spiritual growth? Stagnation? Special spiritual experiences? What have you seen in others? Sometimes that's more impactful than what has happened to us personally. I know that people who knew Mother Teresa and actually were very close to her said that her spirituality was almost palpable. You could almost touch it. And they said they were forever changed, just by being in her presence and watching her work in this world.

Experiences could be job-related. I mean, sometimes these are the most obvious because you know what you're good at, and what jobs you've had. You can actually list them on a piece of paper. But don't discount them. Don't even discount the silliest ones, when you were maybe a waiter and it was a total disaster. That's okay. Maybe you had a job as a dog sitter. That's okay too. All of these job-related experiences actually have helped mold you into who you are today.

We have experiences that are challenging. Now if we can learn to appreciate these times of challenge, it really gives us an insight into who we are and maybe even areas that we might want to improve on. There are times of physical challenge, emotional challenge, intellectual challenge, or spiritual challenge. Were you able to rise to the challenge? Or did obstacles get in your way? How do you feel about that? Do you want to change how you react to challenge? These are all things that go together into your makeup of who you are today.

There are painful experiences. These sometimes cut so deep and really, really have put their imprint on our lives. There are some people that have a difficult time moving past painful experiences. But they can really develop you into someone that can work in this world with God. I had this great experience with a girl, her name was Susanna. She, all through high school, was ignored. No one even knew she existed half the time. Some of the teachers couldn't even remember she had been in class. She was very quiet. Most of the kids either ignored her or made fun of her. This was very painful for her going through high school. But once she got out of high school, she decided she was going to do something with that pain. She ended up going to college. She became a nurse. And now she advocates for other people who might otherwise be ignored.

And finally, there are successful experiences. These experiences can be physical success, emotional growth, worldly success, or intellectual accomplishments. Successes are often good indicators of where your talents and skills lie. Usually you're more successful in things that you're good at doing. It makes sense. Other experiences have also impacted our lives, and obviously I can't include all of those. But it's really important for us to understand how our experiences have molded us into the person that we are today. We need to appreciate those things.

Once we've learned to appreciate how God has created us and

how our experiences have developed us into unique beings, the next step is to accentuate our uniqueness. Accentuate means to emphasize, to pull out, and to focus on. We have more impact if our efforts are focused. Just think about when you try to wash your car with a hose. And you have it on the fine mist. I mean, the fine mist doesn't do a lot in trying to get the mud off your car. But if you can focus that spray into a nice tight strong spray, the mud comes right off. This type of focus is what we call accentuating or emphasizing our uniqueness. It allows us to be much more efficient and have a greater impact. To accentuate how God has created us and how our experiences have continued to mold and develop us, I have a few suggestions on how to accentuate those things.

First, I would suggest that we pray. I mean this is obviously the most important thing to do. We need to understand how God wants us to use how He has created us, and how He's developed us in His work in this world. Number two is to explore the connections between different aspects of how you were created and how your experiences have molded you. For example, someone might have a great sense of humor and love to work with kids. Those two things could be combined into maybe working with at-risk kids in the inner city. On the same wave, someone might have a great sense of humor but really like to write. That person might combine those gifts into working on a church bulletin, writing humorous articles, though hopefully help the congregation laugh a little.

The third thing is to develop the areas that we see as our strengths. What we are good at, God wants us to do. It makes it so simple. And fourth, learn to enjoy what you're good at. If you're enjoying it, you're actually highlighting it; and God just enjoys to see us enjoying Him. Now once we have accentuated these gifts and talents and ways we are unique, there are actually three benefits to doing this accentuating. We work and serve for an intentional purpose and a participatory God. And He wants to see us using these things in His work in the world. The first benefit of accentuating is that it allows us to prioritize. It allows us to say "no" to things, and when to say "yes" to things. If we know how we've been created and how our experiences have developed us, it helps us to be very strong on saying "no."

I have a really good friend who has worked as a missions pastor in a large church for a long time. And she's a really gifted speaker. I mean, she can motivate even the most lazy person to want to

sell everything they own and go work in another country. She's amazing. And her events become very, very well attended. Her church misunderstood this, and they thought that these events were so successful because she somehow was a program organizer. And they asked her to organize their next big large church program. Now Connie knew that she has no organizational skills in that area. And she knew that her gift was the speaking. So she wisely said "no." At times, it can be hard to say "no" to things we think we should do. Sometimes we say "yes" out of pride. "Oh gee, they asked me." Or we might say "yes" out of guilt. "Oh gee, I haven't volunteered in a while." Or we may say "yes" out of loyalty to a friend. "Oh, you know, they asked me. I think maybe I should do it."

Understanding and accentuating how God created us and understanding the experiences that have developed us allows us to get past those temptations and just learn to say "no" when it's appropriate. Prioritizing can also help us know when to say "yes." A friend of mine named Rosemary found out that she was actually a pretty decent writer. She used to write for a neighborhood newsletter, just little funny notes and things. She got a lot of compliments on them. And in fact, there was a newspaper editor that had read her things. He ended up asking her to write some articles for the local newspaper. She said "yes." Because this is something she was good at, it was something she was talented at. She now is actually working on a book project for that same editor.

The second benefit of accentuating means that it allows us to refuse to compare our talents against anyone else's. Comparing ourselves to others really has no upside. It either leaves us feeling dissatisfied with ourselves or it promotes a feeling of jealousy or resentment toward the person with the talent that we wish we had. Our identity is in who God has created us to be. We can rest in the fact that He was intentional about it. Remember, we serve an intentional, purposeful, and participatory God. And He desires us to fit into the body in a certain way. Not the same way someone else does. First Corinthians 12 talks about the importance of all the aspects of the body of Christ. No one is better, and no one is worse. We are all important to God. We don't act alike. We don't speak alike. And we don't play alike. You get the impression of what I'm trying to say. What a boring world we would live in if everyone was just like us! I mean, just the other day we were in a business meeting and I was watching a finance person speaking about prepaid expenses and budget forecasting and realized

revenue. And my head was spinning. I had no idea what she was talking about. Now I know that I have an obligation to try to understand some of that because it does matter to my job. But I just sat there and watched her. I mean, she was just like she was talking a foreign language—and enjoying it.

What I love about God's plan for His world is He takes her gifts and He takes my gifts and He works them together so that we can all make a difference in leadership.

Now the third benefit of accentuating our uniqueness is it allows us to debunk the myth that leaders need to be well rounded. This really doesn't make sense if you look at God's plan for His world. As leaders, our goal should be to focus or concentrate on our own unique gifts and abilities and then surround ourselves with a well-rounded group. We cannot do everything and neither should we try. It's not in God's plan for us. In this way, we can plan for the development of our gifts and talents and skills. If we know what we're good at, it makes more sense to put more energy in developing what we're good at and what we enjoy doing.

I had a pastor at one of the churches that we attended. He was starting a church plant, and he was a very gifted speaker, and that is what he did well. And he was also very motivational and visionary. Well, starting a church, as we all know, has a lot of administrative pieces to it. And at first, he had to do those things. But as soon as he could afford it, and the church congregation got large enough, he hired an administrative assistant. Early on, he had to help set up chairs. But later, he could concentrate on vision casting for that church. And speaking so powerfully that it brought many, many members into the church. That church is growing exponentially now.

One cautionary note as we talk about accentuating our strengths and gifts: make sure that we remember that we don't start to depend on those strengths and gifts. Our dependence needs to remain on God. When we start depending on those instead of God, we lose the vision that God has for our lives. Accentuating our uniqueness is what God desires for us. He made us in a certain way. And He's watched us as we developed through experiences. He is joyful as He sees how we're putting these things together to join Him in His work in this world.