

“Don’t Waste Your Life”

Deuteronomy 6:1-7; Luke 14:12-24 ¹

In the movie, *Pearl Harbor*, Rafe McCawley is an American pilot who volunteers to serve with the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain prior to America’s entrance into the war. As Rafe arrives at the British airfield, he’s greeted by the commander of the British squadron as he walks past a line of Spitfire fighter planes that have been shot up during the day’s battle.

As the commander shows Rafe the plane that has been assigned to him, another officer walks up to report that two more British planes have just been shot down. The commander turns to Rafe and asks, “Are all Yanks as anxious as you to get themselves killed?” And Rafe replies, “I’m not anxious to die, sir. *I’m anxious to matter.*”²

More recently, another person said, “My life is hectic! I’m running all day—meetings, phone calls, paperwork, appointments. I push myself to the limit, fall into bed exhausted, and get up early the next morning to do it all again. My output is tremendous; I’m getting a lot done. But I get this feeling inside sometimes, ‘So what? *What are you doing that really counts?*’ I have to admit that I don’t know.”³

And a third person confessed that “Most of the time, I just don’t enjoy life. For every one thing I do, I can think of ten things I don’t do, and it makes me feel guilty. The constant stress of trying to decide what I *should* do in the middle of all I *could* do creates a constant tension. *How can I know what’s most important? How can I do it?*”⁴

A missionary pondered this question of life significance and concluded that “***Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn’t really matter.***”⁵ It’s awfully easy to get caught up “*in the thick of thin things,*” living with the uneasy sense that what we’re doing with our lives is only getting us to the wrong place faster.⁶

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the average life expectancy for U.S. citizens in 2013 was 78.8 years.⁷ This means that, statistically, if you’re 10 years old, you’ve got 833 months left. If you’re 20 years old, you’ve got 715 months. If you’re 30, you’ve got 601 months. At age 40, you’ve got 488 months. At age 50, 379 months remain. At age 60, you’re down to 278 months, and at age 70, to 187 months. And if you’re older than 79, well, you’re on borrowed time.⁸

Another way to look at this is that *if you’re 40 years old, you’ve got 1,952 Saturdays left.* That’s it. One man, thinking about this reality, put a number of marbles equal to his number of projected Saturdays in a large jar, and removed one each week as a way to be reminded of the value of every day. As I’ve told you, I do the same thing every Sunday morning.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 17, 2016.

² *Pearl Harbor* (Touchstone Pictures, 2001), written by Randall Wallace and directed by Michael Bay.

³ Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 17.

⁴ Covey, p. 18.

⁵ Unknown New Tribes Missionary, *Eternal Perspectives* (Fall 2003), 15.

⁶ Covey, pp. 20, 25.

⁷ www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/life-expectancy.htm

⁸ These are from the CDC life-expectancy table. It is not strictly linear, since younger people’s life spans are generally expected to increase. It is also the case that once a person has attained a certain advanced age, their life expectancy improves a little bit.

Such considerations are sobering, are they not? If we're paying attention at all, you and I live every day with the haunting question of whether or not what we're doing with our lives matters now, and whether our lives will matter in any enduring way after we're dead to this world. This question is always at the edges of our consciousness, and if you're not aware of it, you should listen more closely, because it's there. Once we reach "the age of accountability" as children, this question is never silent, no matter how old we are, because God's call to every person is always and forever to "Come in farther. Come up higher! Make it count!"

The question of life significance is there for us to hear because God has planted eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11). **Our two most fundamental human desires—desires put in our hearts by our Creator—are for *a life that matters* and for *relationships that last*.** And, because we only get one life, a life is far too precious to waste, we're going to take 40 days to look intently at what God wants us to do with the days we have left, so that we use them well. And we're going to start this journey together on Sunday, February 7.

The Good News is that *God has given us plenty of help* in finding our way toward lives that matter and relationships that last. One of God's most important instructions to us about not wasting our lives is found in the passage that we read earlier from Deuteronomy. There Moses told Israel to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" (Deuteronomy 6:5). More than a thousand years later, Jesus confirmed that this is in fact God's First & Greatest Commandment, followed closely by the command to "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 22:37-40).

So what in the world does it mean to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*"? When Chuck Colson, the famous "hatchet man" of Nixon's reelection campaign, asked this question after he became a Christian following the Watergate scandal, he was frustrated by the superficiality of the answers he received.

Colson studied this matter closely, and he wrote a powerful book, *Loving God*, to describe his conclusions.⁹ Colson's answer had four parts, and he passionately pursued these four things for the remainder of his earthly life: (1) **radical hunger** for a pure and holy life; (2) **absolute honesty** about personal sin, leading to full confession and repentance; (3) **disciplined study** of the Word of God; and (4), **uncompromising obedience** to that Word.

Radical Hunger. Absolute Honesty. Disciplined Study. Uncompromising Obedience.

This sounds a great deal like what I call living as a "Great Commission Christian," living as a disciple of Jesus whose life is Bible-centered, Prayer-filled, Virtuous, Compassionate, Integrated, and Spiritually Powerful; and I submit to you that this is what it means to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

In God's divine economy, you and I do different things to make a living, and we have differing gifts for ministry in the church, but we're all called to the same *vocation*, which is to follow Jesus in holiness, repentance, discipline, and obedience. With this in mind, I invite you to open your Bibles to Luke 14 and let's look briefly at a very interesting parable. We'll begin with verse 16.

At the very end of the Bible, as the curtain falls over this creation prior to its destruction and renovation, we read these words: "*Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb*" (Revelation 19:9). It is of this feast that Jesus was speaking when He said, "*A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'*"

⁹ Charles Colson, *Loving God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

¹⁸ *“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’*

¹⁹ *“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’*

²⁰ *“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’*

²¹ *“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’*

²² *“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’*

²³ *“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’” (Luke 14:16-24).*

On another occasion, Jesus said to a man, *“Follow me.”* But he replied, *“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”*

⁶⁰ *Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

⁶¹ *Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”*

⁶² *Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-62).*

Jesus wasn’t denigrating family commitments, because He is their Author and Creator, and He intends for us to honor our commitments to our families. The truth is that the first man’s father wasn’t dead, or else the man would have been at the funeral. The man was making an excuse, trying to defer his obedience. Something of that sort must have been the case with the second man as well.

So here’s the point: to say *“Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me do this or that,* is to miss the point. **Delayed obedience is disobedience.** There can be no *“Yes . . . buts”* in your walk with God if you’re going to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”*

Look again at the invitation to the Great Banquet. Three men are invited to a banquet, and all three turn down the invitation. The first guy used his wealth as an excuse: *“I just bought some land and I have to go look at it.”* The second fellow used his work as an excuse: *“I’ve got to go plow my field.”* And the third man used his wife as an excuse: *“I just got married.”*

I’m reminded of the farmer who asked another farmer if he could borrow some rope. The first farmer said, *“I can’t lend you my rope. I’m tying my milk up with it.”* The second farmer objected, *“But you can’t tie milk up with rope!”* And the first replied, *“Yes, I know. But when you don’t want to do something, one excuse is as good as another.”*

So here’s the question you and I have to answer: What excuse are you giving God for continuing to put yourself first? *“Lord, let me do this first, and then I’ll be sold out to you.”* *“Let me do this first, and then I’ll be all yours.”*¹⁰ To do this is to miss the point and to miss the Gift.

¹⁰ Rick Warren, online sermon, “Don’t Waste Your Life.”

Jesus was very clear that “*You cannot serve both God and money*” (Matthew 6:24). There is only one thing, only one priority, only one service, only one love that can be in First Place in your life, and if that One Thing in your life is not a passionate and obedient love relationship with God, I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’re wasting your life. You’re going to get to the end of the race only to realize that you’ve lost it all. You’re going to get to the top of the ladder only to discover that you’ve leaned it against the wrong wall. *Don’t waste your life, my friend. Don’t waste your life!*

Let’s look at this from another angle. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to “*throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles; and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*” I suppose it should be obvious that in a race that involves obedience to God, we must clearly turn from all sin, because sin is disobedience. But if we look closely, there are other hindrances—some translations call them “weights”—involved here besides sin.

What are these other weights? Well, even as each of us is inclined toward our own signature constellation of sins, each of us is also burdened by a signature constellation of “weights.” These “weights” aren’t sinful. They’re not wrong. They just bog us down and make it really hard to stay focused on God’s purposes in our lives. A spiritual weight is some *thing*, some *attraction*, some *activity*, some *person*, some *goal* that, while not wrong in itself, functions in our lives as a “Yes, but” involvement that causes our lives to be distracted from our obedience to God.

Rick Warren, the author of the book we’ll be studying during our forty-day journey, wrote that “A weight can be all kinds of things. It could be a relationship, it could be an expectation, it could be an activity, it could be a club, it could be a memory that you refuse to let go of, it could be a fear, it could be a job. There are a thousand, or a hundred thousand different kinds of weights. And the Bible says, ‘to grow, I must learn to say no.’”

“You can’t say, ‘yes’ to everything. You have to say ‘no’ to some things. You often have to say ‘no’ to good things in order to have time for the best things. You have to say ‘no’ to things that are not bad. In fact, they’re quite good, but you say ‘no’ to them because you cannot do it all and have it all. . . . You can put so many irons in the fire that you put out the fire. . . .

“If you are serious about fulfilling your purpose in life . . . you have to make space for God in your life. And if you’re going to make space for God in your life, you’re going to have to cut some stuff out. Some good stuff—not sin—good stuff.”¹¹ We have to stay focused, to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing.

The Bible warns us to “*be very careful . . . how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is*” (Ephesians 5:15-17). My friend, is your life caught up in “the thick of thin things”? **Anything less than a conscious commitment to the truly important is an unconscious commitment to the trivial and unimportant.**¹² Is that really how you want to live your life? “I’m not anxious to *die*,” the young pilot said. “I’m anxious to *matter*.”

One of the most amazing things that happened at the 2004 summer Olympics happened on the rifle range. U.S. rifleman Matt Emmons was one shot way from the gold medal in the fifty-meter three-position rifle event. Matt didn’t need a bull’s eye to win. He was so far ahead that all he had to do was hit the paper somewhere.

¹¹ Rick Warren, online sermon, “Don’t Waste Your Life.”

¹² Covey, p. 32.

Matt prepared himself, aimed, and pulled the trigger. Normally the shot he made would have scored 8.1, far more than he needed for the gold medal. But standing in lane two, Matt fired at the target in lane three. He shot at the wrong target. His score for an excellent shot at the wrong target was zero. And instead of a gold medal, Matt Emmons ended up in 8th place. **It doesn't matter how accurate you are if you're aiming at the wrong target.**

C. S. Lewis once wrote that "If Christianity is true, then it is of infinite importance. If Christianity is not true, then it is of no importance. *The one thing Christianity cannot be is moderately important.*" How is it with your life this morning? Are you treating Jesus as if He is of infinite importance? Are you treating Jesus as if He is of no importance? Are you trying to ride the fence?

Don't waste your life, my friend. Don't waste your life!