Making Your Life Count

Developing Vision and Attitude to Accomplish All the Great Things That God Has for You to Do

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I've called this message "Making Your Life Count: Developing Vision and Attitude to Accomplish All the Great Things That God Has for You to Do". It is a big title to live up to, and I thought about changing it to something less bold, because I didn't want people to come away from this saying that the best thing about the message was the title.

When you prepare a message, it is good to have a clear objective in mind, and to have a purpose high enough to even inspire yourself to dig deeper and uncover more gems to share. I feel privileged to be sharing an important, potentially life-changing message with you today. This is a message that I wish I had heard when I was younger.

But no matter how old you are, every person alive has a "rest of your life" to live. Even if you are the oldest person that you know, you have a "rest of your life". And don't you want the rest of your life to count? Don't you want to make a difference in this world for God, even if you only have a short time left here? If you haven't given up on living the rest of your life with a purpose, then this message is for you.

If you only knew how much you were worth...

Much of the foundation of this talk hinges on two passages in Ephesians. The first is from chapter 2 verse 10, the second from chapter 5, verses 15 to 17. The first part of Ephesians 2:10 helps lay a necessary foundation, and this foundation is that we all come to an understanding that you are of great value to God, and therefore, of great value.

On the screen, you can see three different ways that the Greek word [ποίημα] poiēma used has been translated into English. The Amplified says "handiwork"; ESV says "workmanship"; and NLT says "masterpiece". The bottom line is that this first part of the verse tells us that you were made by the hands of a master craftsman, and you are a work of art, a masterpiece. You are not mass produced. They didn't just break the mold when you were made, there was no mold. You are not an accident, and you are not here by accident. You were made on purpose, with a purpose, and you have a purpose.

The Psalmist said something similar when he wrote in Psalms 139:14 “I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works” (ESV). I used to think this was just speaking about our physical bodies, but it is what makes us unique individuals -- personalities and traits as well as our bodies -- that are God's wonderful works.
You need to value yourself as highly as God does

It is important to not downplay the fact that you are masterfully crafted and highly valued, because when you disrespect yourself like that, you are in some sense disrespecting your Creator, and you will find it hard to believe that He has created you to accomplish great things -- which He has.

Genesis 9:6 says that “God made humans in his image reflecting God's very nature” (Message). Truly, God is the Creator, and as an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving Being is worthy to be worshiped by us and followed by us. But by making ourselves lower than we are, we don't actually make Him any higher than He already is. So let us value ourselves. And let us value all people, because each person was created in the image of God, just like you.

I could have filled slide after slide with reminders of how we are esteemed by God, but I chose to add just a couple here. Ephesians 5:1-2 reminds us that we are “dearly loved children” (NIV). And Colossians 3:12 tells us that we are “God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved” (NIV).

God has GREAT plans for you... Shouldn't you find out what they are?

We looked at the first half of Ephesians 2:10, now let's look at the second half. Let me read the whole verse, just so we can pick up on the context for the second part of the verse: Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV)

The phrase "created in Christ Jesus" is a little confusing. What does it mean to be "created in"? I think that what this is saying is that while any person can do good works, it is only when we have been made into new creatures by being born again -- that is, by putting our hope and trust in Jesus -- that the good works that the Apostle Paul is writing about here can be done. By putting our hope in Jesus, he gives us a new heart, and he comes and lives inside of us, sets us free from sin, and makes us new again. When we are changed like that, then we are ready to do the kind of works that God prepared for us to do.

What kind of works are these? It doesn't say here, but I think that the implication of this whole passage in Ephesians is that these are things that bring the Kingdom of God on earth. Sometimes they might be obviously Kingdom things like leading people to faith or performing miracles, but I think we need to think bigger and wider, not to exclude these things I just mentioned, but to include other things.

Seven mountains

Some of you may have heard of Lance Wallnau, and he has been teaching the past several years about the seven mountains of culture which span the areas which the Kingdom of God needs to impact in order for an entire people or nation to be touched by God. Lance didn't dream these up himself -- he learned about these when he learned of a historic meeting between Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and Loren Cunningham, the founder of Youth With A Mission. Each of these guys independently had a vision / dream, with God revealing the seven mountains. When they met, they each shared the vision, and realized that God was instructing them with a strategy for reaching the
world. The seven areas are: religion, family, education, government, media, arts/sports, business/technology.

Given the careers and paths that you are already on, you might think about how your life so far might fit into one or maybe more of these seven areas. This might give you some ideas for how God already guided you. Or perhaps you don't feel that you are on the path that God ultimately has for you. That's fine too... These seven areas can perhaps provide some food for thought for how you might get involved in God's plan for you.

I believe that things like making movies that change the way people think about God; or working in agriculture to develop new crop varieties or techniques that can be used to feed a nation; or showing compassion like a Mother Teresa or perhaps a Heidi Baker -- all these things fall under the category of good works which God prepared in advance for particular people to do. And the thing is, he has good works for each of us to do.

But then the question arises, "What are the good works that you are supposed to be doing?" And a closely related one, if you don't really know the answer to that question is, "How would I even find out?" I promise to answer that shortly, but first wanted to look at the other foundational passage for this message.

**Be wise: opportunities are knocking**

The second foundational passage for this message is in Ephesians 5:15-17. It says “Be very careful, then, 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” (NIV).

The main point is that what you do with your life matters a lot. You can make unwise choices, potentially wasting the impact that your life could have, or you can make wise choices, allowing your life to have the kind of impact that God intended for it to have.

If you want to make a foolish choice, then don't bother trying to understand what the Lord's will is. But please don't be foolish, be wise. Now if you want to make a wise choice, you need to understand what the Lord's will is. How do we do that?

First, I would like to suggest that the Bible, particularly the New Testament, provides a solid foundation for understanding the Lord's will. [See, for example, 2 Timothy 3:16-17]. As you read the Bible, especially the New Testament, you begin to understand more of God's character and desires. Understanding these things go a long way to understanding what the Lord's will is.

But in day-to-day and moment-by-moment questions, we need more than just a written Word. We need God Himself to lead us and guide us. Fortunately, God has given us Holy Spirit to live inside us. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Comforter and Counselor, and He will teach us all things, according to John 14:26. So we have to learn to listen for Holy Spirit's guidance, which for most of us takes quite some time to learn to do. I have taught before on how to hear God's voice, so I won't do it again now.
However, if you are interested in reading more on this particular subject, I have an article on my website at WowGod.org. Look under the heading "Essentials".

As a younger person in the Pentecostal and charismatic movement, I used to think that the leading of the Holy Spirit was always spontaneous. That is, the Holy Spirit would not help you formulate long-range plans, but would just show up on the spur of the moment and tell you to do something that was to be done as soon as possible. However, now that I'm older and have become more familiar with the ways of God, I would like to suggest that God can speak to you in the moment, and He can also speak to you about plans and directions for the future.

So when we read the phrase "making the most of every opportunity", it might mean that there is a "spur of the moment" opportunity to be seized, and it might also mean that there is some strategic and tactical thinking to be done. Chances are pretty good that some are scared by the spontaneous thing -- especially us shy people who like to appear respectable and dare I say "in control" -- and some are scared by the thoughtful, planned out approach -- especially those of us who have trouble with commitment and staying focused. But all of us need to be open to both.

What is my mission? And how do I do it?

I think that one of my biggest regrets as a Christian was my false belief about God only speaking in the moment, and not in longer-term planning. The reason it is a regret is that I suspect that my life and service to God might be much better focused at this stage of my life, and I might have borne much more fruit by now, if I had sought God more about the "good works that he prepared in advance for me to do" and if I had sought God to better "understand what his will" for me is, so that I could make the most of every opportunity. However, it is not profitable to dwell too much on the past, which we cannot change, but rather on the future, which we can still change.

I have read recently a number of articles and books on creating a vision statement and mission statement for your life, your marriage, your family, your church, and your business. There are indeed some useful comments out there on how and why to do these statements. But let us remember that we are trying to understand what the Lord's will is, which may be contrary to what the secular and even Christian writings suggest. It is one thing to try to learn how to do something and to collect all wisdom one can to do it, BUT remember, the Lord is indeed the Lord, and He has a will and mind of His own that seems to me often deviates from the prescribed general wisdom.

The rest of this message is really about seeking God for his vision and mission for your life.

And yet I need to tell you that it may turn out that God doesn't want to tell you what His vision is for your life, at least not now. Perhaps you aren't ready to know. Perhaps it would make you too proud knowing the answer. Or that it would scare you so bad you would run. Or perhaps God's concept is so foreign to what you can understand right now that it would make no sense.

Nevertheless, praying that God will help you see his vision and mission for your life is a good thing to do, because it may put into action God's eventual answer to your prayer (remember that Jesus said "seek
and keep on seeking and you will find’); and, it may help you to learn things while you are cooperating with God in this envisioning phase. What I mean by that is that since God is the Creator, and we are made in his image, we are also meant to be creative, which includes conceptualizing -- dreaming and planning.

**God's ways are different than the business world’s**

While I think there are things we can learn from books that are essentially from the business community that deal with vision statements and mission statements, keep in mind that we are not trying to dream up our own vision, we are seeking God and perhaps we might say dreaming with God or if that is too radical a term, planning with God.

Let me read to us what Jesus says in John 15:4-5 (ESV): “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

The way to come to understand God's vision for your life is through abiding with God. As these words of Jesus emphasize, you cannot do anything of lasting value -- that is, you cannot bear fruit -- unless you have an intimate walk with Jesus. "Abide" means "to live your life in".

As you abide in Jesus, you will begin to know His heart more and more, and you will be able to sense His guidance and will better and better. Abiding is a choice we make. It means that we intentionally make space for Jesus in our lives, by setting aside time. It means that we purpose to grow in love more and more every day. It means we do our best to do His will, once we understand what that is. In fact, in terms of hearing God's voice and understanding what his plan for you is, you won't get very far until you get to the place where you want God's will for your life more than your own will for your life. This sounds hard, but actually once you get a revelation of how loving he is toward you and how wise his ways are, it becomes much easier.

**“Choosing with Intention” (Graham Cooke)**

Graham Cooke just published an article he wrote called "Choosing With Intention". In it he says some of the same things that I have been trying to say, but sometimes it's helpful to hear a different voice saying it. He writes:

"We can choose to be a victim rather than a warrior. We may prefer to be an employee rather than an heir (Luke 15:19). We can cut down our dreams to manageable proportions. [But] God will have none of this. To live the life that only he can create for us we must first, of necessity, accept His vision for us. We must step into the place of intention when we agree with the identity that He prefers. When we take the road we must journey with the same intention as the Father... [through] abiding."
A God-sized vision

The quote from Graham Cooke is a nice lead-in to the next point, and that is that we have a tendency to dream small, because we see ourselves as small, and we lack faith that God would come through for us in a pinch. But I want to challenge you to muster all the faith that you have when you are seeking God for a vision for your life -- something that can only come to pass if God is in it. We know that in our own strength, we are weak, but as we are reminded by Philippians 4:13, we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

This passage from 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 seems to say very plainly what we need to understand: “‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ -- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”

This is thought to be a quote from Isaiah 64:4, which is worded slightly differently. It seems that the Apostle Paul substituted the phrase “those who love him” for “those who wait for him”. The original version emphasizes the idea of abiding -- that is, people who love God enough to listen to him and wait for his timing and guidance.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I suppose when we were kids we were all asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I guess the reason we keep asking that question is because we have a view of life that people choose their professions or careers, and once in the profession, they take advantage of the opportunities that it presents to them.

I wonder, however, if this is the wrong question to ask -- or at least the wrong way to think about God’s vision and plans for our lives. It seems to me that who we are is settled. In Jesus, we have multiple identities like dearly loved child, friend of God, called, and chosen. I’m wondering if we should be asking God what we are to do with our lives -- in the sense of what He want us to accomplish?

Perhaps this point isn’t an issue for other people, but for me, I sometimes get hung up on my identity coming through my positions and roles, but for thinking about vision, it seems more helpful to me to think about goals and actions.

Secular schmecular... It’s all God’s

We already talked about the Seven Mountains and how the Kingdom of God needs to have influence in all those areas if it will change cultures, nations, and societies. So when we are seeking God for his vision for our lives, we have to think outside the box. We should not just narrowly focus on things like being a pastor or worship leader or Sunday school teacher or missionary or whatever. These are all good things, and if God has a vision for you in those areas, great! But don’t feel second class if the vision God gives you is completely outside of the church sphere.
BUT, keep in mind the big picture. God loves everybody! Jesus died so that people could be set free from a state of condemnation and being held captive to come into a state of freedom from bondage and reconciliation with God. It grieves God that people are separated from Him.

Ephesians 4:11-12 (ESV) tells us that the real work of the ministry is not done by professionals, but by everyone else. "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." As we minister at our places of work and shopping and volunteering and schools, the body of Christ is built up, because people will come to faith as we share ours.

I usually read Acts 17:26-27 (NIV) from the perspective of God drawing people to Himself. It says "[God] determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." I think it is important to understand that one of the key ways that God uses the places and times in which he puts people is other people -- His followers -- who were also placed there in those places and times to help others find him.

We are to be change agents for God. We are to help change the atmosphere of any place we occupy. We are to help change institutions for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and we are to help people change for their sakes and for the love of God.

**GROW and don't SETTLE for the easy path**

The two passages from First Corinthians on the slide, from 12:31 and 14:1, tell us that we should desire better spiritual gifts than we have now, so that we can be a greater blessing to the Body of Christ. I don't know why we don't hear this more, but what this passage is saying is that we should ask God again and again and again to grant us the gifts to be an apostle or prophet, since the Paul tells us that these are the highest 2 gifts. That in fact not to ask God for at least the gift of being a teacher or worker of miracles (the third and fourth highest gifts) is probably just plain disobedient to the Word of God. Now I know I put that strongly, but if the Apostle Paul says we should do something because it is what faithful person of God is to do, and yet we don’t do it, then there is some kind of disconnect there. I keep praying to become an apostle. I want to be a great blessing to the Body of Christ. I hope you’ll pray that way for yourselves, as well.

But a second point here from these verses is that what we are today isn't what we will be in the future. The gifts of God are not static. We can get additional gifts as we grow. Which is to say that when I am praying about what kind of vision God has for my life, I should not limit God to what kind of gifts I have now. What I have are "starter gifts", or now that I'm in my 50s, they might be "intermediate gifts" -- but the gifts I have now are not the gifts I will have as I grow toward completeness in Christ.

Take a look at this passage from John 15:7-8 (ESV), which is just a verse past where we stopped earlier when reading about abiding in Christ. Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." These verse are pretty amazing, because they tell us that as long as our objective is for the answer to
our prayer to give glory to God, as long as the answer to prayer will help us bear fruit, and as long as we keep abiding in Jesus, God is going to answer our prayer!

So as we continue abiding in Jesus, we will see more and more apparent power in our lives as we stay attuned to the heart of God.

**More BOLDNESS, please!**

One of the guys I really admire in the Bible is Caleb. He was one of the 12 spies, and only he and Joshua from among the 12 had faith to tell the people that with God's help, they could take the land. But the other 10 discouraged the people, and in the end, God sent the entire nation into the wilderness for 40 years until the entire generation -- except for Joshua and Caleb -- died.

Let me read from a conversation Caleb had with Joshua in Joshua 14:10-12 (NLT): “Today I am eighty-five years old. I am as strong now as I was when Moses sent me on that journey, and I can still travel and fight as well as I could then. So I'm asking you to give me the hill country that the LORD promised me. You will remember that as scouts we found the Anakites living there in great, walled cities. But if the LORD is with me, I will drive them out of the land, just as the LORD said.”

Now the Anakites are referred to in the book of Deuteronomy as giants. So this was not a small task. In fact, these were the people that caused the 10 spies to say that Israel could not conquer the land. But Caleb had more than a small faith and more than a little boldness. And he took the land. Caleb did it with just his clan.

I would love to have faith and boldness like Caleb. I would love to grow in both areas for the rest of my life, so that, Lord willing, when I reach 85, I won't hesitate to take on a mountain full of giants.

**God loves “bold” prayers**

Another instance where boldness came into play is in Acts chapter 4. Peter and John were put on trial before the Sanhedrin and were threatened with severe punishment if they kept speaking about Jesus. But after they were released, they met with the other disciples, and during the meeting they prayed a powerful prayer, recorded in Acts 4:29-31 (NIV): "'Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

God liked this prayer so much He shook the place, just so they would sense His pleasure in it. And God answered their prayer, not only for boldness, but as they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the implication is that signs and wonders confirmed their message. Let us pray for boldness, and in seeking God for a vision for our lives, let us go for a vision that requires boldness. Let us develop a lion-heart, even if we are more lamb-like. Let us develop an attitude that runs to the battle rather than hides from it.
The value of a team

Sometimes when we are seeking God for a vision for our lives, we tend to get focused on ourselves so much that we forget that while sometimes great things are accomplished through God working through one person, probably more often great things are accomplished through God working through a team. Don't forget it was God's idea to call us the Body of Christ. When we are part of a team, our weaknesses are covered by the strengths of another. Perhaps you will be the one to lead the team, or perhaps you will simply be an important member of the team. But keep yourself open to how God can call diverse people together to do great things that He has laid on all of their hearts.

I like 1 Corinthians 12:14,18-19,21-23 (NIV) which says "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many... God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

Never give up!

The final point I want to leave you with is DON'T GIVE UP! Don't give up if it takes some time to discern God's vision for your life. And don't give up if, as you are walking out that vision, you hit some serious obstacles or even have some serious losses or failures.

We in the Church quit too easily. Lack of success when you try does not mean that God is not blessing you. It may simply mean that God wants your character to develop. Or it may mean that the time wasn't right. Or it may mean that you have a thing or two to learn before you will succeed. Our actions are to proceed from God guiding us, not from reading the signs of the times.

I want to share two verses with analogies to farming that are meant to teach us to persevere. The first is from Galatians 6:9 (NIV) and it says "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." And the second is from Jesus' parable of the seeds, in which three kinds fail to yield any fruit, but one does yield an abundant harvest. Jesus says about it in Luke 8:15 (NIV) "The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." You cannot reap a harvest if you don't plant. You cannot reap a harvest if you give up too soon. It takes time for crops to mature, and it takes time for our missions to succeed.

My vision statement

I felt like I needed to give you an example of a vision statement, so it would be a little more concrete. So I decided to give you the present version of what I have been praying about and working on for the last 6 months, so that you would know that this isn't simply a hypothetical thing that I'm teaching about, but something that I am trying to put into my life, as well.
Keep in mind that I am still working on this, and it may change as I get a clearer picture of what the Lord's vision for me is. It says:

Because I have found such a priceless treasure in my Beloved and His incredible love for me, I will endeavor to dwell each moment in His Presence; share with all who will listen how to find and cultivate such a love; and respond to my Beloved's heart by helping those whose lives are hindered by poverty. I will especially care for and nurture the precious wife and children God has given me.

**Action step example**

A vision needs to have some action steps to make it happen, so I developed steps for each point in the vision statement. I will just show you one, because I don't want this to take any more of your time. My first action step is as follows:

Continue to develop and fine-tune how to get people intimately connected to God. This will include finishing writing a book on this topic, promoting its sales and distribution, and speaking at conferences and perhaps on radio and TV, and seeking new ways to expand influence, perhaps through advertising, podcasts, the Internet and cellphones.

**Can I pray for us now?**