

September 21, 1986

POWER FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING

I Timothy 2: 5-7

Papillon, the French prisoner who was condemned to life imprisonment on Devil's Island, was disturbed by a recurring nightmare. Repeatedly, he would dream that he stood before a harsh tribunal. "You are charged," they would shout, "with a wasted life How do you plead?" In his dream he would reply, "Guilty. I plead guilty." How do we avoid the feeling that our lives have been wasted, that there was really no point to it all? Is there a way whereby we can know that our lives really do matter? Is there some secret source of power upon which we may tap to put more life into our days?

I don't believe that anyone would have ever charged the Apostle Paul with having wasted his life. He was charged with many other things. He was beaten and thrown into prison because of numerous confrontations with political and religious authorities, but never could he have been charged with wasting his life. Indeed, few men have ever made the contributions to human existence that St. Paul made.

It was St. Paul who took the gospel to the Gentiles. It was St. Paul who gave us the most beautiful description of love ever written--in I Corinthians 13. It was St. Paul who gave us the definitive statement of life after death in I Corinthians 15. St. Paul was certainly one of the most influential men who had ever lived. Ironically, he would receive much more credit for his contributions if he had not been so effective in convincing us that he was but an instrument of the risen Christ.

The secret to his purposeful and powerful life is contained in these words from I Timothy 2:5-7: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. . . For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth."

Let's consider for a moment that first clause: "FOR THERE IS ONE GOD . . ." You and I take that great truth for granted, but the writers of the Bible could not. They knew what a struggle it had been for their fathers to declare the unity of God, for mankind has always worshipped many gods.

It was these stubborn Jews who maintained that there was but one God, Yahweh, and that mankind should have no other gods but him.

They declared the unity of God, and they declared the universality of God. Yahweh is the God of all creation. Indeed, he is the creator of all that lives and moves

and has its being. Who could doubt the truthfulness of that proposition? The one-hundredth birthday of the Statue of Liberty brings to mind an observation of Oscar Hammerstein II. He was privileged to view this inspiring statue close-up from a helicopter. He was quite impressed by the great painstaking detail that the sculptor had employed even on the very top of the head. Every strand of hair was in place. What impressed Hammerstein so was that the sculptor lived before helicopters or airplanes. He could not know that the top of the statue's head would ever be viewed by anyone except perhaps a few seagulls--yet he went to the trouble to do his work right. Of course, the handiwork of the greatest human sculptor of all time pales in comparison to the actual creation of a human being. Talk about painstaking detail! Who would be foolish enough to declare that there was no superior intelligence behind the creation of this world?

The children of Israel declared his unity, his universality, but even more importantly, they declared his unique intimacy with the world he had created. Yahweh was no remote god who had created a world and then forgotten it. He was involved in the life of his people in a very personal way. I got a chuckle out of a story that Tip O'Neill tells on himself. O'Neill had a chance encounter with a man while waiting in an airport not too long ago. After a few minutes the man said to O'Neill, "Say, you don't recognize me, do you?" "No, I really don't think so," said the senator. "You see, I'm so well known. I have this big shock of white hair and this large red nose, and I'm on the TV news two or three times a week. A lot of people recognize me, but I can't keep track of all the people I meet. Who are you?" The man answered, "We met at a dinner party about six weeks ago in Washington. My name is Robert Redford."¹

I'm glad that someone else besides me has difficulty with names. Tip O'Neill may not remember you, my friend, but God does. He is intimately involved with his world and in the lives of each of his children. "There is one God," declares St. Paul.

"AND THERE IS BUT ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MEN, THE MAN JESUS CHRIST, WHO GAVE HIMSELF A RANSOM FOR ALL . . ." We have moved now from the universal to the specific. Our Muslim friends declare that there is but one God. Our Jewish friends declare that there is but one God. Most thinking people in the world today declare that there is but one God, but it is the unique claim of the people called Christians that there is but one mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus.

Again, this was no frivolous claim. Most of the early Christians had been Jews.

The God they worshipped was a God of power, majesty and strength. To look upon God was to die. To even touch the things of God with unclean hands was to risk awful retribution. The Jewish God was no “man upstairs.” He was a God whose glory could not even be properly contemplated by mere mortals. And yet, St. John writes in the prologue to his Epistle, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father. . . .” Old John’s hands must have trembled as he wrote those words.

The early disciples believed with all their hearts that there was but one mediator between God and humanity. There was one way, one truth, one life, one shepherd, one door—and that was Jesus.

They heard him teach, they saw him heal people’s hurts, they witnessed his death upon Golgotha, and they encountered him in his eternal glory on the road to Emmaeus, in the Upper Room and on the mountain where he ascended to the Father. And throughout the New Testament they tried to sum up the impact of his life on theirs. They called him Prophet, High Priest, Servant of God, Lamb of God, Son of David, Son of man, Holy One of God, Son of God, Savior, Messiah, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. E. Stanley Jones, that great missionary/evangelist/writer once said that this is the great divide between Christianity and the world religions. Not that they do not have truth, not that they lack noble sentiments, gracious teaching, or gifted leaders. But in them, said Jones, the Word became word--a set of teachings, a morality, a religious framework. Only within Christianity does the Word become flesh. And it is that Word become flesh that offers human beings access to the Father.

In his great work Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot pictures the entire human race as patients in a hospital ward. There we lie sick and dying. Ministering to us, however, is a physician, the most splendid physician of all. Only, if you look closely, the physician himself is wounded. He bends over us with “bleeding hands.” Only he can heal us--only he can save. That physician, of course, is Christ.

“There is one God . . . there is one mediator . . .” writes St. Paul. “For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth” Now what does all this have to do with St. Paul’s sense of power and purpose? St. Paul’s life was grounded in his knowledge of God and his experience of Christ. That knowledge and that experience had two effects on St. Paul’s life. We may call the first effect the focal effect and the second, the funnel effect.

We know now that great accomplishments in this world are made by persons who are totally dedicated to a single cause. St. Paul's great cause was to glorify God—whether he was making tents or writing letters to young churches, or preaching on street corners, the object was the same. He did all things to the glory of God. And, my friends, that is your task and mine as well. To do everything we do—whether it be in an office, on a construction site, in a classroom, at home or wherever—to do everything we do to the glory of God. We are concerned in our land right now with the pursuit of excellence. Here is the key: We need to center in on everything we do and ask ourselves, Is this something I can do to His glory? If it is, we ought to give ourselves to it with total abandon. That is one secret of a super, successful life—to have a focal point for our lives that we can believe in without reservation and to give all we have to it. That is the focal effect.

The second effect we may call the funnel effect. St. Paul saw himself as a funnel through which God's purpose and power could flow. Someone did a study of the lives of great people and they discovered that invariably these monumental achievers did not consider the path of greatness as leading from them but rather as leading through them. The source was somewhere other than themselves. Have you ever completed a task and looked at it and thought to yourself, "Wow. I couldn't have done that! And felt that behind your work was an unseen hand? St. Paul believed that about his life. He was but a channel through which God's power flowed.

A brawny man stood in front of a painting by the great artist Sargent in an art gallery in New York City. He kept muttering to himself, "I've been given a place at last. I have a place at last." Artist Robert Henri was standing nearby. Henri was mystified at the man's words. "Art you in this sort of work?" he asked the man. "Oh, yes," said the man, "but this is the first time I've been displayed like this." Now Henri really was disturbed. "But I thought that this work was by the great painter Sargent," he said. "That's right," said the man, "but it was me that made the frame." St. Paul saw himself as the frame, but Christ was the painting. It was the power of the risen Christ working through him that was the source of his great accomplishments. "I live," he wrote on one occasion, "but not I, but Christ Jesus liveth through me." (Galatians 2:20) Is that a truth too great for our little hearts? It is to say that if we will but surrender our lives, there is a source of power available to us—that can flow through us—and help us to accomplish more than we ever dreamed possible.

No, St. Paul could never have been accused of wasting his life. That great scholar Augustine once said that there were three things he would like to have seen:

1. Jesus in the flesh.
2. Imperial Rome in its splendor.
3. St. Paul preaching.

It is no wonder. St. Paul preached as he did everything else--to the glory of God. St. Paul believed that divine energy flowed through him. That is what a renewed faith in God and in Christ can do for us--it can give us new power, new purpose for the living of our lives--to the extent that men may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven.

¹ Bruce Larson, ed., The Power to Make Things New (Waco: Word Books, 1986).

MENTOR, MEDIATOR, MASTER

I Timothy 2: 3-6

When Karen Morse of Henniker, New Hampshire was about to graduate from high school in 1984, she revealed a startling fact--she could not read or write at even the most basic level! Karen was in the National Honor Society, in "Who's Who in American High Schools," was class president, and was student-council president. She was known as a superb orator and a model student. Yet, Karen--a severe dyslexic--had developed elaborate ruses through 12 years of school to cover the fact that she couldn't even read street signs!

For her whole life, Karen had lived in fear that people would unmask her inadequacy. Her energy went into concealing the truth. She had become a slave to protecting her false image. (1)

Many people play the same game in their relationship with God. In their hearts they know the hidden sins that prevent a real relationship with their Lord. Deep down they know that their spiritual activities are a facade. They know that things are not at all what they pretend them to be, but it has become more important to maintain the image than to possess reality.

Karen had no possibility of learning to read until she dropped the facade and asked for help. Likewise, it is impossible in the spiritual realm to have an adequate relationship with God while trying to maintain a dishonest front, a pious lie.

If we wish to walk with God, we abandon the lie and admit our need. If we prefer to pretend that everything is o.k., then our hunger for God will always go unsatisfied.

Thus we come to our text for the morning: "This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, The man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...."

It is God's will that we drop our masks and become authentic in our faith and in our living. And there is only one way that can happen, and that is when we come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, His Son. In Him is true knowledge, in Him is salvation, in Him is the power to live. Let's consider for a few moments how Christ helps us in our search for authenticity.

FIRST OF ALL, CHRIST IS OUR MENTOR. "Mentor" is an "in" word nowadays. It means "one who is a trusted counsellor and friend." But more than that. It means one who guides us, instructs us, inspires us. A mentor is more than a teacher, more than an example. A mentor is one whose very life is a model for our life. God desires, says St. Paul, for us all "to come to the knowledge of truth." And for this reason, first of all, we come to Jesus.

It is sad when somebody no longer feels the need to grow. There is a story about a wealthy gold miner who had an son destined to take over the family business. The father sent his son back East to study in the finest engineering school and to learn all he could about managing the mines.

The young man studied hard and proudly received his degree and diploma. On his graduation he said to his father, "Dad, I'm ready to go to work. Give me your best mine, and I'll show you how to run it."

The father replied, "No, Son, first you must change into your work clothes and go down into the mine. There you will gain experience. You may start at the bottom and work your way up."

But the son insisted, "Look, Dad, I've been to school. I've received my diploma. With all due respect, I know more about mining than you will ever know. And if you will just give me your best mine, I will prove it to you."

And so the father, against his better judgment, gave his son the most productive mine. For a while it did well. Then one day the father received a letter, stating, "Dad, you know that the mine I am working is backed up to the lake. Well, the water is seeping in. We've shored it up, but the shoring does not seem to hold. What do you think we ought to do?" The father did not answer.

In a few more weeks the son wrote again, "Look Dad, this is serious. We are not able to stop the water. What do you think we ought to do?" Still no answer from the father.

Finally the son frantically wired his father: IF YOU DO NOT GIVE ME AN ANSWER SOON, WE ARE GOING TO LOSE THE ENTIRE MINE. WHAT SHOULD I DO? The father wired back: TAKE YOUR DIPLOMA AND SHOVE IT INTO THE LEAK. (2)

It is sad when somebody thinks that he or she has already arrived. Surely one of the reasons Jesus told us that we should become like a little child is that a child

is teachable. They called Jesus, RABBI, TEACHER, and so he is. We learn from him. We study his words, we marvel at his example, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we walk in His presence. We learn from Him in a way that we can learn from no other. He is our Mentor.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, HE IS OUR MEDIATOR. He is the one by whose life and death we become acceptable to God. That is a difficult concept for many of us. In a permissive culture such as ours, we cannot even conceive of God punishing sinners.

Fairly or unfairly, in the 1988 Presidential campaign, attention focused at times on the prisoner furlough program and the liberal attitude of criminal justice in the state of Massachusetts--the famous "Willie Horton" case. A recent newspaper story from Northampton, Mass., makes the picture even a little more titillating.

A homeless man of that area, Samuel Gallezzo, wanted to be housed for a while in jail. He first tried throwing a newspaper vending machine through a window, but the arriving officers merely handed him a summons to appear at court later on charges of misdemeanor vandalism. Gallezzo next stole a \$175,000 Western Massachusetts Bus Lines bus and took it and himself down to the police station. After turning himself in and taking the desk sergeant outside to see the bus, he was finally arrested. However, he was released 24-hours later on his own recognizance. (3)

You can't get arrested in Massachusetts even when you try! We are kidding, of course. Such stories amuse us. But there is nothing amusing about our casual attitude toward sin. Sin destroys people. God hates sin. Sin separates man from God. We take the atonement seriously because we take sin seriously. We need a Mediator to intervene in our behalf!

One of the more dramatic (but lesser-known) scenes of American history took place on August 4, 1735 in New York City. It occurred at the start of the trial of Peter Zenger.

Peter Zenger was a German immigrant and local printer who had dared to take a stand against the very corrupt New York Governor, William S. Cosby. As Gov. Cosby's acts became more outrageous and Zenger's newspaper spoke more harshly against those acts, Cosby had Zenger jailed. Cosby's Supreme Court jus-

tice then had the lawyers disbarred who had stepped forward to defend Zenger. Although no charges were placed against Zenger, his bail was set at an enormous 800 pounds. Two months later Zenger still sat in jail, although the grand jury refused to indict him for anything.

After 9 months, Zenger went to trial for publishing "false, scandalous, malicious, and seditious libel." His original attorneys had been disbarred, his current lawyer had been appointed by a Cosby man, and the jury had been instructed to rule only on whether Zenger did or did not publish the newspaper. His "guilt" as to the "libel" in the paper had already been decided by the appointed justice. Zenger did not have a chance of acquittal.

Then it happened! From the back of the courtroom a dignified and well-dressed gentleman arose and walked forward to the front. He announced that he would represent Zenger. The court immediately recognized the man as Andrew Hamilton, a respected member of the Pennsylvania Council and the Philadelphia Assembly and also the most celebrated lawyer in the New World. Hamilton admitted that Zenger was the publisher but pled for the right of men everywhere to be able to publish the truth--and Zenger was acquitted.

Somehow that scene seems reminiscent of something else that happened in history, although much farther back. All the individuals throughout time stood on trial for their sin and the outcome of the case was certain. The sentence was death. However, this time the verdict was not the outcome of a crooked court. Every man stood justly accused of his sin. Then a man stepped forward on our behalf. He did not plead our innocence; we had none. He pled the right to take our guilty place and have us pardoned. He pled the right to be the sacrifice in our place. (4)

What a beautiful portrait of the love of God. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...." Writing years ago in the SATURDAY REVIEW, John Ciardi told of the influx of synthetic emeralds that had flooded the market. So perfect were the synthetics, an expert told him, that there was only one way to tell them from the real thing. If you want to know which of two emeralds is synthetic and which is genuine, heat both stones to a prescribed temperature and give them both a tap with a small hammer. The one that breaks is the real one. (5) We know God's love is real. We can see His heart break on the hill of Calvary. He is our Mentor. He is our Mediator.

FINALLY, HE IS OUR MASTER. Abraham Lincoln went down to the slave block to buy back a slave girl. As the slave girl looked at the tall, homely-looking white man bidding on her, she figured he was just another white man, going to buy her and then abuse her. Lincoln won the bid, and as he was walking away with his property, he said, "Young lady, you are free." She said, "What does that mean?" He said, "It means you are free." "Does that mean," she said, "that I can say whatever I want to say?" Lincoln said, "Yes, my dear, you can say whatever you want to say." "Does that mean," she said, "That I can be whatever I want to be?" Lincoln said, "Yes, you can be whatever you want to be." She said, "Does that mean I can go wherever I want to go?" He said, "Yes, you can go wherever you want to go." And the girl, with tears streaming down her face, said, "Then I will go with you."

That is our response after we have experienced Christ as Mentor and Mediator. We gladly call Him Master, for He has set us free. No more facade. No more pretense. Free to be all he created us to be. That is why our hope is in Him. Our Mentor, our Mediator, our Master, our Savior, our Lord, our Friend.

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1. Allen, Mel. "The Cost of Karen Morse's Education," *Yankee* (January, 1988), pp. 66-69, 149.
 2. Adrian P. Rogers, *GOD'S WAY TO HEALTH WEALTH AND WISDOM*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987).
 3. "Man Steals Bus But Still Walks," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*: (April 28, 1989), Section A, p. 7.
 4. Robbins, Peggy. "The Trial of Peter Zenger," *AMERICAN HISTORY ILLUSTRATED* (Dec., 1976), pp. 9-17.
 5. Eugene W. Brice, *BOOKS THAT BRING LIFE*, (Lubbock, Texas: Net Press, 1983).

DETERMINED DISCIPLESHIP

I Timothy 6: 11-16

Fact is often stranger than fiction. When authorities in Baldwin, Wisconsin finally caught some local cattle rustlers recently, it turned out that the men had been carrying off calves and yearling heifers in the back of a Chevrolet Chevette. That meant loading a cow of up to 600 pounds through the rear hatch of a tiny, tiny car. You have to admire their determination. Those rustlers were willing to work hard for what they stole! While a number of people might be tempted to load stray cattle into a pick-up truck, few would even be tempted to swipe stray cows with only a Chevette in which to put them. (1) We appreciate people with determination wherever we encounter them.

St. Paul had that kind of determination in mind when he told Timothy to "Fight the good fight." Of course St. Paul is talking about a very special "good fight." He is talking about the good fight of being a worthy disciple of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is not for sissies. It is for persons of drive and daring, persons of courage and character, persons of faith and fearlessness.

What are the qualities of a determined disciple? From our text for the day, we can deduce three.

FIRST OF ALL, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE. Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy is playing tennis. In picture one, Snoopy is shown with a brand new tennis racket. However, things are not going well. He is angry. In fact we see him throw his racket to the court, kick it and stomp on it. Finally, in great anguish he smashes it over the tennis net pole. In the final frame of the cartoon he is seen addressing a letter: "Gentlemen, under separate cover I am returning a defective tennis racket."

As someone has said, "It's not whether you win or lose that counts. It's where you place the blame."

Film star Greta Garbo once confessed to an interviewer, "I've made a mess of my life." At least Ms. Garbo didn't blame someone else.

St. Paul says to Timothy, "take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." In other words, take responsibility for your life. Realize that you were

called to greatness. Christ's disciples are to be characterized by abundant life. Don't settle for the petty, pathetic life of people who are continually making excuses rather than making progress. You have infinite potential within you. All you have to do is take hold of it.

On the trip home from the Nobel ceremonies in Stockholm, prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman stopped in Queens, N.Y., and looked up his high-school records. "My grades were not as good as I remembered," he said, "and my I.Q. was 124, considered just above average."

"He was delighted," reported his wife, Gweneth. "He said to win a Nobel Prize was no big deal. But to win it with an I.Q. of 124--that was something." (2)

That is something. Richard Feynman did not let an average I.Q. hold him back. He took hold of the opportunities that life presented him and gave his best. He fought a good fight.

Think how many of us who also have opportunities settle for so much less. "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called," writes St. Paul. Take responsibility for your life.

SECOND, UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING. Many years ago, the captain of a whaling vessel in the North Atlantic spotted through his binoculars the hull of a ship which was obviously very old and run down. It was surrounded by icebergs.

As the captain's vessel approached the ship, his crew's cries of "Ship Ahoy!" were met with no response. Going aboard the vessel, the boarding party found the entire crew frozen, but well preserved. The captain was fully dressed and sat before his logbook at his desk. The last entry revealed that these men had been adrift for almost ten years, far removed from ocean traffic in the cold, icy waters of the north.

A floating sepulcher, surrounded by icebergs, adrift on an ocean with nowhere to go! It is amazing to me how similar are the lives of a lot of people today to the men who were aboard that frozen vessel. Good educations, excellent family backgrounds, with all the right equipment, but they are morally and spiritually adrift with nowhere to go.

The revered English historian, Arnold Toynbee, observed this phenomenon in his writings on world history. He entitled one volume, "Sense of Drift." In this volume Toynbee describes the carelessness of man about the loss of spiritual values. He analyzes the drift of civilization from a higher form of spiritual values to a baser, more materialistic view of life and living. (3)

Many of us can relate to that drift. We too have lost our way. One would be hard-pressed to find anything distinctive about the way we live our lives as compared to our non-believing neighbors.

E. Stanley Jones was about to go across a street. A woman pulled on his arm and said, "Look at the red light." Jones replied rather weakly, "But look at the people going across." She replied, "Don't look at them. Look at the light and follow it." That's good advice, but many of us have quit looking at the light. We are content to watch other people and to do as they do. And thus we remain adrift with no fixed point of reference for our lives.

In the novel, *THE CAINE MUTINY*, Herman Wouk has one of the characters, Willie Keith, receive a letter. The letter came from his father who was dying of an incurable disease. His father offered three bits of advice to his son:

"First, there is nothing, nothing more precious than time. Wasted hours destroy your life.... Second, religion. I'm afraid I haven't given you much...But I think...I will mail you a Bible before I go into the hospital. Get familiar with the words. You will never regret it. I came to the Bible as I came to everything in life: too late. Third, Willie, think of me as I might have been at the time in your life when you come to crossroads. And for my sake, for the sake of a father who often took the wrong turns, take the right ones. Be a man, son. Love, Dad." (4)

There are right turns and there are wrong turns. St. Paul says to Timothy, "I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach...."

In the archives of the long-running CBS news program, *60 MINUTES*, there is a most interesting interview that Mike Wallace did years ago with presidential candidate, Richard M. Nixon. Here is how it went:

MIKE WALLACE: "There's been so much talk in recent years of style and charisma. No one suggests that either you or your opponent, Hubert Humphrey, has a good deal of it. Have you given no thought to this aspect of campaigning and of leading?"

NIXON: "Well, when style and charisma connote the idea of contriving, of public relations, I don't buy it at all. As I look back on the history of this country, some of our great leaders would not have been perhaps great television personalities, but they were great Presidents for what they stood for...The most important thing about a public man is not whether he's loved or disliked but whether he's respected. And I hope to restore respect to the presidency at all levels by my conduct."

If only Richard Nixon had maintained that high standard. He opened the door to China. He was re-elected by an enormous majority. He might have gone down in history as an outstanding president. Instead, it all ended in disgrace. "I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach...." Take responsibility for your life. Understand the importance of righteous living.

FINALLY, REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A REPRESENTATIVE OF JESUS CHRIST. In advertising, one of the keys to success in today's market is to get celebrities to endorse your product. Advertisers will pay as much as \$100,000 a year to a top star for endorsing one product.

Occasionally, celebrities don't take these endorsements seriously. Take the case of Darryl Dawkins, the immense professional basketball center.

In the spring of 1982, Dawkins signed a \$50,000-a-year endorsement contract with Nike sneakers. In return for wearing Nike shoes when in uniform, Dawkins also received a royalty for each pair of shoes sold. Dawkins also was promised a Nike bonus of \$10,000 if voted the most valuable player in the National Basketball Association or if he finished first in league scoring or rebounding. Finally, Nike had 20,000 posters of Dawkins printed for distribution.

In light of all this, it was understandable that Nike executives were just a bit dismayed when Dawkins showed up on the basketball court wearing shoes made by a major competitor. Nike promptly sued Dawkins the cost of the useless posters and punitive damages for fraud.

Actually, Nike was lucky. According to the company's general counsel, another athlete once wore shoes with one company's stripe on one side and another company's mark on the other and tried to collect from both!

"When we caught him," they reported, "he said that if he'd had any more room, he would have tried three." So it goes in the big-money world of professional sports and advertising.

To tell you the truth, it doesn't impress me very much when a celebrity endorses Christ. It may impress some people, but not me. What does impress me is when any follower of Jesus Christ genuinely tries, by the grace of God, to live a Christ-like life. Nothing is more beautiful or more winning than that. We are representatives of Jesus Christ.

An old eastern fable tells of a man who possessed a ring with a beautiful opal. The ring bestowed upon the wearer qualities such as kindness, truthfulness, bravery and justice--all the qualities to make a man much-loved. The ring was passed from father to son until it happened that a man had three sons. Before his death he had two copies made so each of his sons would have a ring. The sons were disturbed. How would they know which had the original? They took the matter to court and the judge said, "We will know who has the genuine ring by the goodness of his life." (5) Somehow I believe that is also how we know that Christ genuinely lives in a person's heart.

These, then, are the qualities of a determined disciple. Take responsibility for your life. Recognize the importance of righteous, Christ-like living. Remember always that you are a representative of Jesus Christ.

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1. "Rustlers Stuff Steers in Little Car," The Knoxville News-Sentinel: (April 11, 1989), Section A. p.5.
 2. Rev. Harry L. Morgan
 3. Arthur Fay Suelz, LIFE AT CLOSE QUARTERS, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982).
 4. Nancy Faber in "People Weekly"
 5. John R. Brokhoff, PREACHING THE PARABLES, (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1988).

THIS BEQUEST OF WINGS

II Timothy 3: 10-17

Kathryn Crosby, widow of Bing Crosby, has auctioned off her entire collection of “Bing-a-brac.” Sold were Bing’s platinum record for “Silent Night,” a plastic loving cup to “The World’s Greatest Dad” from son Nathaniel, all of Bing’s fishing gear, and the Crosby family Bible.

Now that last item caught my attention. What did it signify, I wondered. Does the Crosby family no longer need a Bible? Had Kathryn concluded that Bible was of no use to her? Was it a reflection of a modernist attitude that jettisons the ancient faith for the latest fad and fashion? Perhaps I am prejudging. I wonder who bought that Bible. I wonder if they knew what a treasure they were getting.

Waldensian Christians, a reforming sect preceding the Reformation, sometimes traveled about Europe as merchants dealing in precious stones as a way of obtaining access to the families of the nobility. When they had shown their rings and trinkets and were asked if they had anything more to sell, they would answer: “Yes, we have jewels still more precious than any you have seen. We will be glad to show them if you promise not to betray us. We have here a precious stone so brilliant that by its light a person may see God and another which radiates such a fire that it rekindles the love of God in the heart of its possessor.” Then, unwrapping their bundle, they would reveal a Bible.

A high moment took place during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. At one point in the ceremony, the Archbishop of Canterbury handed a Bible to the Queen with these solemn words: “Your gracious majesty, I present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords . . .”

I am not sure but that many of us wondered how that Bible could be “the most valuable thing that this world affords . . .” to this woman who owned enormous estates and priceless treasures of jewelry and art and palaces without compare. Why, then, did she receive it so gratefully, acknowledging with a nod of her crowned head that she agreed with the prelate’s assessment?

One thing is for certain – we hardly know what a tremendous treasure the Bible is.

A 90-year-old ophtamologist in Philadelphia who still has an active practice, reports that when he first started, many years ago, patients would come to him complaining that they could not see the print in the Bible. “Now,” he says, “they complain that they can’t read phone books and racing forms.”

The Gallup Poll indicates that 60 percent cannot name the four gospels. Seventy percent do not know that what Jesus said to Nicodemus was – “You must be born again.”

I have heard the Bible called The Owner’s Manual for My New Lease on Life. But how can you learn about that life and the Lord who gives it and how you can have it, if you do not know what the

Bible is all about?

A teacher asked a third grade class if anyone knew the first book in the Bible, and one little boy quickly raised his hand. "Preface," he said.

My sermon this morning is, hopefully, a preface to much else that I should and will say about this most valuable thing that the world affords. And my text is the very elementary one in II Timothy 3:16, which according to a translation by E. M. Blaiklock, reads: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting false ideas. It straightens out a man's life and trains him for upright living."

So I shall speak about the Bible and how it transcends, transforms, and trains.

It is said that Louis XIV of France was not only a worldly monarch, but that he had, at the same time, a strange desire to take a balcony view of Religion. He liked to listen to preachers – incredible as that may seem. On one occasion a certain monseigneur began his address with unadulterated flattery. "If the world addressed your majesty from this place, the world would not say 'Blessed are they that mourn,' but 'Blessed is the prince who has never fought but to conquer; who has filled the universe with his name.'" Can't you almost imagine Louis XIV purring. But then the preacher continued. "But, sire," he said, "the language of the Bible is not the language of the world."

The language of the world in our time has been materialism. The really real is the material we can measure, mark, manipulate and possess. But the secret is out that the universe is awesomely vast. It cannot be possibly confined in a test tube, or smeared on a slide for microscopic examination, or apprehended with cool scientific detachment, or calculated in dollars and cents. There has also been in our time a rebellion against the folly of imagining that technology and treasures could satisfy human beings. As St. Augustine had put it: the human heart is restless until it finds its rest in God.

But where to find God? Where to hear that language which leaps the bounds of materialistic mutterings? The answer has been sought in some strange and even perilous places: mind-expanding drugs, mindless sex, the occult, even science fiction. The desire to transcend earth-centered, human-centered, sun-centered, even galaxy-centered schemes underlies Steven Spielberg's phenomenally successful motion picture E.T. It is a perfect example of a secular search for transcendence.

The film's message could be that we are not alone in the universe. We are not condemned to live in what Bertrand Russell called "cosmic loneliness," for there are other and superior beings up there.

They are friendly, though powerful. A child's faith can easily grasp the possibility with wide-eyed delight and love. And it all ends in an experience of overwhelming rapture and mystery and benevolence: a veritable ascension into the heavens.

So what does the Bible have to offer that the cinema around the corner cannot give? Paul simply says the Bible is inspired by God. No matter how wondrous effects Steven Spielberg and George Lucas bring to the screen, they are only momentary escapes from your struggles with the difficult issues and complex problems of living. The need is not for more and better illusions but for some overarching perspective, an ultimate reference point.

The Bible is God's inspired word and not a movie maker's musings, nor the latest pop from the fizzle of the newest humanistic theories, nor the most recent best-seller on how-to-be svelte, sexy and successful.

The Bible transcends our powerless and prideful lives, because it is inspired by God. It rings like a bell and cuts like a sword as it calls you to lift your eyes from the relativities of daily life and turmoil to Him who is the Way and the Truth and the Life. The Bible lifts you above human manipulation and prejudice until it brings you face to face with its Author, Him who cannot lie. The Bible transcends the smoke of battle, the murk and misery that appall you, the darkness of the hour, the threatening forces of evil that seem so rampant — transcends it all and brings you into the presence of incomprehensible peace and inexpressible joy and interminable assurance — the presence of God.

Not only does the Bible transcend, it also transforms. It straightens out a man's life — as Blaiklock's translation would have it.

The story is told about an atheist who came across an unlettered laborer who carried a Bible in his lunch bucket. The atheist began to ridicule the Christian and his Bible. He began to ask about apparent contradictions in Scripture and how anyone could believe in miracles as recorded in the Bible and a host of similar questions. The uneducated Christian could not answer the questions whereupon the atheist sneered: "See, that book won't do you any good even if you carry it in your lunch bucket forever." "There are many things I don't know," came the modest answer, "But this I do know: Three years ago I was a drunkard. My wife was broken-hearted. My children were afraid of me. I couldn't hold a steady job. Then I decided to take seriously what's in the Bible. I committed my life to the Lord and began to live according to this book's every word. And today, I am a sober man and I have a happy home. My wife loves me. My children no longer fear me. I may not know all the answers. But the Bible sure had what it took to change me."

J. R. Green's old classic Short History of the English People in the eighth chapter tells of the great moral reformation that swept over Britain in the two decades from 1583 to 1603. Some say the greatness of the English people derives from that experience. Green writes, "England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible. It was yet the one English book which was familiar to every Englishman. It was read in churches and read at home, and everywhere its word, as they fell on ears which custom had not deadened, kindled a startling enthusiasm."

Dr. E. V. Rieu was the most distinguished classical scholar of his generation. His translation of Homer into modern English is still the standard. When he was sixty years old the Penguin Publishing Company in England invited him to do a new translation of the Gospels from Greek. Dr. Rieu was an agnostic without any church affiliation. His son remarked at the time, "It will be interesting to see what Father makes of the four gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four gospels make of Father."

The answer was that a year later the great scholar said, "I got the deepest feeling. My work changed me. I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of the Son of Man and God. And they're the Magna Carta of the human spirit."

The illustrations are endless of so vast a company encompassed by the truth that the Bible transforms – people and even peoples – it straightens out lives – of internationally known scholars as well as the commonest laborers.

So the Bible transcends and transforms; it also trains.

There is no question that the Bible speaks forthrightly about such topics as marriage, divorce, sexuality, family relationships, roles in the home, citizenship, war and peace, the church – and many others. The Bible does propose standards by which we are to judge issues and commandments which should correct our behavior and promote our growth.

Jesus says in His Great Commission that we are to teach all nations to observe what He has commanded (Matt. 28:20). And Paul writes to Timothy that his instructions are about how to govern one's life in the Household of God (I Tim. 3:15). And to the Colossians he writes, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. . . ." (Col. 3:16).

But, let's face it, we have often trivialized the Bible by making it relate to relatively safe issues: such as going to church on Sunday, love (without specifying who we are to love), prayer (which is always petition and seldom penance), hope (a pious pie-in-the sky), faith (that God is synonymous with good-luck).

You can talk about the need for evangelism in the church, but have you ever talked to anyone about becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ? You can talk about how the world needs God, but what have you done about the poor, the destitute, the socially scarred, the lonely, the lost who live right next door perhaps or down the street but no further than just across town? You can bemoan the disintegration of families and homes, but is your home filled with God's praise and love? You confess that you would give of yourself in every way to God – but do you tithe? Do you even want to know what tithing is? Would you teach Sunday School? Would you just attend Sunday School? Would you be in a church choir? Would you come to a Bible study? Think about it!

We need today to grasp the radical life-training, spirit-lifting Word of God, with all its demands and difficulties, its power and provision for all our lives. "I have a very simple thing to ask of you," Woodrow Wilson told this country. "I ask every man and woman that from this day on they will realize that part of the destiny of America lies in their daily perusal of this great book" – the Bible.

And I think that a part of the destiny of this church lies in that same direction – the taking seriously of the indispensable and unsurpassable Bible which transcends, transforms and trains you and me for eternal life.

In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson describes something of what I have tried to say:

He ate and drank the precious words,
His spirit grew robust:
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was dust.
He danced along the dingy days,
And this bequest of wings,
Was but a book. What liberty
A loosened spirit brings!

God in His infinite mercy has given to us, in a sense, wings – wings to transcend this world and come into His presence; wings to set us free from this frame of dust and dingy days and transform us from caterpillars into butterflies; wings to fly us in the right direction. Yet . . .

There is an old children's story about a nightingale and a peddler. The peddler was selling worms for feathers, for wing feathers, a feather for a worm. The nightingale got all caught up in the transaction – giving one of his feathers for each worm – until he almost denuded himself, hardly a feather left on him. Well, it didn't seem to bother him much as he enjoyed the feast of worms. But night came. It was chilly now. He realized the need for his feathers. So he worked frantically all night long digging for worms so he could buy back his feathers. In the morning he rushed to find the peddler. But the peddler just laughed at him. "You don't understand," he said. "I am giving worms for feathers, not feathers for worms."

Is that such a strange story? You have wings. Don't ever, no never, trade off these wings . . .
for things.

Amen.

HOW TO WIN THE PRIZE

II Timothy 4: 6-8; 16-18

A woman rushed up to famed violinist Fritz Kreisler after a concert and cried: "I'd give my life to play as beautifully as you do." Kreisler replied, "I did."

The same principle that governs success in music applies to every other endeavor in life as well. Earlier in his second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of being a good soldier or a good athlete. He could have spoken of being a good business person, or teacher, or farmer, or parent. The principle is the same. It is in the giving of our lives that we regain, then it is in the losing of our selves that we find ourselves. When there is no effort, there is no reward; when there is no race, there is no prize.

In a most remarkable short story¹ the British writer C. C. Montague tells of a man in his early fifties who awoke one morning with a curious numb feeling in his right side, which affected him from head to foot. He had lived an active life, achieved a reasonable degree of success, and was alone in the world, his wife being dead and his children grown and married. He saw the numbness as the beginning of age and the dissolution of his powers. He was not a man for suicide but, as he pondered his situation, he came at length to a decision. This moment was an opportunity for him, while his strength and vigor remained, and before he began to decline, to carry out an experiment in which he had long been interested. He was a lover of the mountains and a first-rate climber. He would go to the Alps, where he had often climbed before, and pursue, right to the end, the piquant experiment of paring and paring away that limiting margin of safety which mountaineers, even the boldest, keep in reserve. He had nothing to lose by such an experiment. No precipice could frighten him any more. He could climb as he had never climbed before. And, when he reached the limits of strength and endurance, that would be that.

So Christopher Bell went to Switzerland to a special place that he had in mind, and one morning some weeks later started out alone to climb a 12,000 foot ridge over the steepest route. He noticed as he started his walk that the numbness was with him in his right leg and arm, but that he did not seem to notice it so much as he went on.

By mid-afternoon he was part-way up the ridge, slowly and painfully cutting steps in the ice wall with his axe. He was beginning to tire, and the way ahead was ever steeper and more dangerous. But he felt no fear. Never had the world seemed so beautiful. Never had the zest of climbing been so great. He came at last to a precipitous cliff, sheathed in ice, which was even more steep than the vertical. It had

several overhangs which seemed almost impossible to negotiate. But without hesitation he began the ascent, cutting holds for hands and feet with his axe, and holding on against gravity with his free arm. The progress was slow, but at last he reached the most hazardous spot of all: a place where the overhang was directly above him. Progress could be made only inch by painful inch, and at tremendous expenditure of strength and endurance. He began to feel the drag of a huge fatigue, the ache in all his joints, which warned that his strength was failing. And yet, knowing that one relaxed muscle could let him drop hundreds of feet to his death, he went on and on until he reached the moment when he could no longer raise his arm to chop the steps in the ice which were his only safety. He looked up at the overhang still above him, and knew that he could not make those last few feet. And he knew also that he had reached at length the moment he had sought.

Suddenly he became aware of something above him, on the upper side of the overhang. He could not see, but he could hear voices, and presently an ice axe came sliding over the edge of the overhang and fell into the abyss below. He knew that somebody was above him, and that whoever was there was in trouble. Then he heard a cry of distress. New strength began to flow into his arms and legs. He knew no numbness, no cramps, no fatigue. He knew only that he must get up there to give what help he could.

Swiftly and yet carefully he began to climb again, cutting the steps with his axe, pulling himself miraculously upward. And then suddenly he had made it, and saw above him two people: a woman dangling helplessly on a rope, a man above her unable to move from a precarious perch since his whole strength was necessary to hold the woman. Bell came to the rescue and was able to bring these two people to safety. Together the three surmounted the ridge, found a hut, and spent the night in warmth and conversation. Bell had, of course, rescued the man and the woman. But they had also rescued him. For, if he had not heard their distress, he would have yielded to exhaustion and lost his own grasp.²

Christopher Bell had discovered that life-giving principle. It is not in hours and hours of introspective contemplation that one discovers the key to life. Rather it is in total commitment -- total surrender -- total involvement -- that the soul transcends meaninglessness. There are far too many people today who want to have gusto in their lives by lying on a sofa with a can of beer in their hands. It never happens. There must be a striving, a sense of purpose, a dedication, and a discipline. The human creature is so constituted that it is the finely tuned body, mind, and soul that discovers the exhilaration of abundant living.

As Toyohiko Kagawa once wrote: "Virility always goes with an adventurous spirit. So-called good men are often too weak to be really virtuous. The biography of such an adventurous humanitarian as Livingstone inspires us. But genuine adventure does not necessarily imply a geographical escapade like the exploration of the dark continent of Africa. What adventure does require always is the spirit to put heart and soul into the quest and the service of the good."³

Where does one find that adventurous spirit - that discipline of mind, body, and soul? What makes a person reach the top? What motivates him? Experts generally agree that it is an inner drive, a powerful will to achieve. But drive for what? Money, power, self-fulfillment - these are important, but still don't provide the complete answer, says industrial psychologist, Harry Levinson, in his book, The Exceptional Executive, Harvard University Press.⁴ The most powerful motivation force, says Mr. Levinson, is a person's "ego ideal" - the image he has of himself at his future best.

Do you have a picture of yourself at your "future best?" This is to say that the best way to begin a diet is to imagine how you will look as the new slender you. The best way to begin a new business is to see it as a successful enterprise ten years from now. Who are you when you visualize your future best? Of course, in the realm of personal living we have a model who exceeds all of our ego ideals. "Have this mind in you," writes Paul to the Phillipians, "which was also in Christ Jesus."

Visualize, and then actualize. We need to imagine our best future selves. Then we need to move into action. Obviously that is easier said than done.

The story is told about a family that moved from the Methodist Church to the Episcopal Church. One of the children was asked why the family had changed churches. "I believe," said the little girl, "that my mother likes the Episcopal 'lethargy' better.

Lethargy is a major problem in our time. Many of us come home in the evening feeling so tired that we don't even do things that we know we would enjoy doing. And yet we recognize that the problem is not physical.

Wilson Weldon tells about a boy who was taken by his father to the altar of a great church where they knelt and prayed that God would heal the boy's crippled leg. Of course the lad hoped that through prayer he might be able to take the braces from his legs. After they had prayed for a long, long time, they walked back down the long aisle of the church. The braces were still necessary, but the boy said: "I had a sudden exaltation that God had not taken the braces from my legs, but He had taken the braces

off my mind. I could bear the rest.”⁵

Some of us have braces on our minds, and those are the most deadly braces of all. The more we sit around, the less we feel like doing. In the process we are robbing ourselves of years of productive, zestful living.

Visualize, actualize, and then set some clear-cut goals to measure your progress.

There was a swimming coach at the University of Michigan who was a very blunt and outspoken man. He had a young swimmer on the team with beautiful form and a perfect stroke, but he never won any races. Finally, the coach said to him one day, “Son, everything is good about you, and your form is nearly perfect. The only trouble is that you stay in one place too long.” And man is not made to be content with just perfect form, but he must get somewhere and accomplish something.⁶

Visualize, actualize, set measurable goals -- and one final step if you would win the prize. Live as if the prize is already yours. That is what faith really is. It is living now as if future blessings have already come to pass.

As Dr. Earl Brewer has put it: In eschatological faith, we pray for an understanding of God’s goals for us. These are God’s image for our future. They become God’s reality that is and is coming. God’s goals and image of the future for us fold back upon our present to inspire and inform our behavior. The certainty of our faith in God’s goals for tomorrow becomes a measure of our realization of them today. God’s scenario for our future feeds our faith so that the Kingdom which is coming is already here. To act today as if tomorrow’s goals have already come to pass is the best way for them to come to pass.”⁷

How do you win the prize, whether in work or play? Visualize, act on that vision, set measurable goals, and then live as if the prize is already yours. What if the prize is the high calling of God In Jesus Christ? The steps are the same. Visualize yourself as God would have you to be. Act on that vision. Begin to set measurable goals for yourself in carrying out service to Him and to others. And live as if He had already given you the grand prize of coming to live in your heart -- for He has!

HOW TO WIN THE PRIZE

FOOTNOTES

¹From Action and Other Stories, Doubleday and Company, Inc. Copyright 1929 by C. E. Montague.

²Harry C. Meserve. No Peace of Mind (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), pp. 139-141.

³Toyohiko Kagawa, Meditations, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 5.

⁴Bits and Pieces, April 1974.

⁵Wilson O. Weldon. A Plain Man Faces Trouble (Nashville: "The Upper Room," 1970), pp. 69-70.

⁶Gerald Kennedy, Good News About Security, Morality, and Faith, (Nashville: "Tidings," 1969) p. 17.

⁷From an address at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina entitled Reflections on Reports and Renewal.

October 26, 1986

FINDING STRENGTH FOR THE FINISH

II Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Norman Vincent Peale tells a story about a man who had acquired a claim in a far western gold field. The claim was in a lonely spot in the mountains. When the man started to dig for gold, he found evidence that much work had been done on the claim a long while before. Far into the excavation he found an old rusted pick, its handle rotted off but its point sticking firmly in the rocky soil. He went to work and, to his amazement, just a few feet beyond where he had found the pick he came upon a rich vein of gold.

Later he would learn that another man had once worked that claim. This man had invested many years of his life searching for gold. He also had begun with high hopes and great dreams. But those hopes dissipated into bitter disappointment when he labored and was not rewarded. It became harder day by day to sustain that dream, to swing the pick and lift the shovel, without evidence of progress. And so he quit—just a few feet from striking it rich.¹

A recent study of Nobel Prize winners indicates that they may be no brighter intellectually than their colleagues. Something else explains their success. Among the traits that their colleagues noted to explain their success was this one: they were good finishers.

St. Paul, in his second letter to the young pastor Timothy, looks over his years of service to Christ and writes, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (4:7-8 RSV).

The secret of life is not where you begin but where you finish. Sometimes that means that you “keep on keeping on” even when it would be so much easier to simply throw up your hands in futility and despair and walk away. That means that you “hang in there” and “see it through” when a person of lesser determination, lesser courage, lesser character would “cut his losses” and seek an escape. That is true in a good marriage, in raising children, in pursuing your dreams in your vocation, in battling disease and old age, and in a host of other areas of life including your faithfulness to Christ. In the words of the champion heavyweight boxer Jim Corbett, the secret of success is often simply fighting one more round. Or as an aging Winston Churchill put it in a speech to a group of young men, “Young men, never give up! Never give up! Never! Never! Never!” St. Paul never gave up. In spite of shipwrecks,

numerous beatings, and imprisonment, he had been faithful to his calling to be an evangelist, a missionary, a preacher of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Now he could look back over his life with satisfaction and say, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness. . . ." What are the lessons you and I can learn from St. Paul's words?

FIRST OF ALL, WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FEW THINGS IN LIFE OF REAL WORTH COME EASILY. It makes no difference how much talent or natural ability we may have—to excel requires extraordinary effort.

There was a great woman athlete of a few years back named "Babe" Didrickson Zaharias. In the 1932 Olympics she placed first in the women's eighty-meter hurdles, first in the javelin throw, and second in the high jump. She was also superb in baseball and basketball. Then she turned to golf where she also became a world champion. Natural ability? Yes, most certainly. But there was also much more. When the "Babe" took up golf she sought an exceptionally fine instructor to teach her. She studied the game. She analyzed the golf swing, dissected it, and tested each component part until she felt that she understood it thoroughly. When she went on a practice tee she would practice as much as twelve hours a day, hitting as many as one thousand balls in an afternoon. She would swing and keep swinging until her hands were so sore that she scarcely could grip a club. She would stop swinging long enough to tape her hands before picking up her club again. That is the method she used to perfect her powerful swing.²

It is amazing how much natural ability you discover when you are willing to work. It was said of America's premier inventor, Thomas Edison, that no matter what the obstacles were, he would pound away until he had demolished them.

The English novelist, J. B. Priestly, was once asked why several gifted writers with whom he had been associated in earlier years had not progressed in their work as he had. His answer was direct and simple: "Gentlemen, the difference between us was not in ability, but in the fact that they merely toyed with the fascinating idea of writing. I cared like blazes! It is this caring like the blazes that counts."

Few things in life of real value are acquired without momentous effort or consecrated determination. It took six years for Dr. Kenneth Taylor to convert portions of the New Testament into a format that nearly everyone could read easily. The first publisher he sent it to flatly rejected it, as did a second and a third. Finally he used his savings and published it himself—but only 800 copies were sold the first year. He

did not quit, though. He continued the tedious business of translating the entire Bible and continued to seek a publisher. Today there have been over 25 million copies of Dr. Taylor's work sold. Many of you own a copy. It's The Living Bible. Few things in life of real worth come easily.

Here is the second thing that needs to be said: **THE REAL CHALLENGE IN LIFE IS TO BE AT YOUR BEST EVEN WHEN IT DOESN'T SEEM TO MATTER.** Paul had not simply persevered. Paul had given everything that was in him. Paul's life was a study in excellence. He could look back with satisfaction not only because he had "fought the fight" but also that it was a "good fight." That is the meaning of character. To be able to say, "I had some tough breaks and I had some heartbreaks along the way, but I gave it my best shot." Such dedication will always earn a reward.

Lee Buck tells about a young actor in a play many years ago. The play was called the Up and Up, but the Up and Up was nearly down and out, and was about to fold. It had received dismal reviews and the audiences were dwindling. In such a situation, it would be natural for any young actor to do less than his best. After all, what difference would it make? The play was a loser. This particular young actor, however, believed that it did make a difference. Someone once told him, "Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with all your might. . . ." He believed that, and so he gave his very best even in this dismal play. The play folded and he went on to play in other small productions.

It was over a year later that he received a call from Hollywood from one Howard Hughes, who, at that time, was a major film producer. Hughes had been in the audience of one of the performances of the Up and Up. He was not impressed by the play. But he was impressed that a young actor named Pat O'Brien was giving all he had in the role he had been given. Hughes remembered that performance and cast Pat O'Brien in the movie The Front Page, the first in an impressive collection of films in which O'Brien would eventually star.³ Give your very best regardless of your circumstances! That is a great secret of successful living.

There is a story about an Italian duke who was wandering through his flower garden when he came upon a young workman building a box for his flowers. He noticed the workman was finishing the box with intricate carvings that required painstaking detail. "Why are you wasting your time on this flower box?" The duke snapped at the workman. "No one will even notice the intricate details. What is your name?" The young workman answered quietly, "My name is Michelangelo." You have to believe, do you not, that even in the humblest situation Michelangelo would have given his best?

Many of you know the name Pele—the now retired international soccer star. When Pele retired from soccer a few years back, he said, “It is the saddest moment of my life, but life is not all flowers. It is much harder to end a career than to start one. What I did with my life in soccer was put my heart in my work.” That is the secret, isn’t it? “I put my heart in my work.” You could substitute the word “marriage” in place of work. Or the raising of my children. Or serving Christ.

This brings us to the final thing to be said. Few things in life of real value come easily. The real challenge in life is to be at your best even when it doesn’t seem to matter. IT IS VITAL, THEN, THAT WE HAVE A WORTHY PURPOSE TO WHICH WE GIVE OUR LIVES.

Denis Waitley, in his book, The Double Win, gives us a beautiful example of the power of purpose. He says: I was watching the “Today” show one morning, and my attention was captured by an interview between Jane Pauley and a “Mr. Smith” who was celebrating his 102nd birthday. Mr. Smith had brought his potted plants and was proudly referring to them as his “upstarts” during the brief conversation.

Jane Pauley was becoming a bit frustrated. Time was running out and all Mr. Smith was doing was making a fuss over his chrysanthemums and night-blooming cirus. Jane tried to bring him back to the main point. “But Mr. Smith, we all would really like to know to what you attribute your long life.” Mr. Smith, not the least bit senile, still went ahead showing off and talking about his flowers. He touched them, watered them, and concentrated on them while the audience watched and listened patiently at one hundred thousand dollars per minute.

“This little lovely won’t bloom for another two years,” he chuckled, as Jane made one last attempt, before the cutaway to a commercial, to discover his elixir for longevity.

“What’s your secret for living so long and staying so active?” The old man replied with a question of his own: “Who would take care of these beautiful flowers?”

Jane sighed, turned a little pink, and “Today” took a time-out to sell something.⁴

You and I know Mr. Smith’s secret, don’t we? It is the saddest of all conditions to have no real purpose for which to live. St. Paul had a purpose—a purpose that helped him persevere when every earthly helper had forsaken. He had a purpose that drove him to excellence in all things—even when it didn’t seem to matter. His purpose was to serve Christ.

What a wise and fortunate choice that was. We retire from our jobs. Our children grow up. Our life’s partner may precede us to be with God. But the service of Christ is for all eternity. St. Paul writes: “Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of righteousness

which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

In the Christian life, finishing is everything. This life is but prelude. The symphony is yet to begin. That’s the Gospel. This world is but a preparatory school. The real world is yet to come.

Gary Inrig, in his book, A Call to Excellence, gives us a beautiful analogy: “In the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, a Japanese gymnast, Shun Fujimoto, was competing in the team competition. Somehow, during the floor exercises, he broke his right knee. It was obvious to all reasonable observers that he would be forced to withdraw. But they reckoned without the determination of a true competitor. On the following day, Fujimoto competed in his strongest event, the rings. His routine was excellent, but the critical point lay ahead—the dismount. Without hesitation, Fujimoto ended with a twisting, triple somersault. There was a moment of intense quiet as he landed with tremendous impact on his wounded knee. Then came thundering applause as he stood his ground. Later, reporters asked about that moment and he replied, ‘The pain shot through me like a knife. It brought tears to my eyes. But now I have a gold medal and the pain is gone.’”⁵

Few things in life come easily. The real challenge is to give our best even when it does not seem to matter. It is vital then that we have a worthy purpose to which we give our lives. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

¹ Faith Is the Answer.

² Kenneth Hildebrand, Achieving Real Happiness (New York: Harper & Row, 1955).

³ Le Buck, Tapping Your Secret Source of Power (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1985).

⁴ Dr. Denis Waitley, The Double Win (New York: Berkley Books, 1985).

⁵ (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985).