

What Are You Doing With Your Life?

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Greetings to all of you listening to this message over the internet, wherever you may be. I'm recording this for the web site because the first time I gave it several weeks ago on the Sabbath, the message didn't get recorded due to technical difficulties. Technology is great except when it doesn't work.

I want to start by asking a question: What are you doing with your life? What are you accomplishing with this physical existence that God has given you?

Of course we all know that Jesus said, "Seek you first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." And whether first means first in sequence on a list of things to do, or whether it means first in the sense of being primary or uppermost, the inference is that there are other things to be done.

So while we know that the long term goal of our lives is to fully enter into the Kingdom of God as spirit composed children of God someday, what about the short term? What are our short term goals? What are we to be doing with our lives in the short term? What should we be doing each day with this physical existence that God has given us? What will we do tomorrow? And the next day? And the day after that?

Of course we know the importance of spending time with our Father each day. We know that we need to feed on the Word of God every day. The lesson of the manna teaches us that. Jesus said, "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever..." (John 6.48-51)

And just as the Israelites gathered the physical manna to eat to sustain their physical existence each day, we must gather and eat the spiritual manna each day to sustain and nourish our spiritual lives.

And we have the example of Daniel who prayed three times a day. "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime." (Daniel 6.10)

We also know the importance of meditating on what we read in the Scriptures. As God instructed Joshua, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." (Joshua 1.8)

And David wrote, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day." (Psalm 119.97)

But meditating on God's law is not all that David did. He also had the responsibility of tending his father's flock of sheep. And Joshua had other things to do as well. He was tasked with conquering the city of Jericho, and then Ai, and then the next one. He had the responsibility of leading the nation of Israel into the Promised Land.

So although we must make seeking the Kingdom our first priority, and though we must make time each day for reading God's Word, for talking with Him in prayer, and meditating on what we've read, there are other hours of the day. What are we doing with them? And what should we be doing with them?

I think that many people in the churches of God do not have the right perspective on this question. The perspective that many seem to have is that physical achievement doesn't matter, that physical accomplishment in this life is of little or no value. They know that Jesus gave us a parable about the importance of using the talents that we've been given, but they think that parable only applies to spiritual talents.

I know of many people in the churches of God that have been or are seeking to figure out what their spiritual gifts are... striving to find ways to use those spiritual gifts, but many of those same people fail to see any importance in seeking to find and use the physical gifts, the physical talents that God has given them.

Let's look at the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Beginning in verse 14:

“For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.”

We usually think of the talents spoken of here as talents in the sense of spiritual aptitudes or gifts, and while the talent is actually a monetary unit, I don't think it is incorrect to think of the talents as aptitudes because Jesus says that the talents were distributed “to every man according to his several ability.”

So we find that two of the servants used the talents that they were given and they accomplished something with those talents. But the one servant did nothing with his talent. He buried it in the ground.

And what does the Master say to the servants? To the ones who accomplished something with their talents he says

“Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. But to the one who buried his talent in the ground he says, Thou wicked and slothful servant... and cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

I think we all understand the importance of making good use of the Spiritual talents that God gives us. But is there more to this parable? Is there also a message here about the use of the physical talents we've been given?

There is a movement in this world to devalue accomplishment and achievement. Participation is valued over accomplishment. We see this most clearly in our educational system and in the programs designed for our young people. Some schools no longer assign grades to the students' work. And in many schools that do still assign grades the students are passed along regardless of whether they have mastered the course material.

The goal of this movement toward participation over accomplishment is to promote greater self-esteem. It is an attempt to right the wrongs perpetrated by a system that works on the principles of wrong competition, but ultimately it is an attempt that fails. The idea is that if we don't honor achievement, then those who fail to achieve will not feel bad about themselves. But at the end of the day lowering standards or getting rid of standards altogether does nothing but promote mediocrity.

And one thing we must know and be aware of is that whatever is happening in the world around us is going to affect those of us in the church organizations as well.

Back in the 1970s & 1980s I was involved in the church's YOU (Youth Opportunities United) basketball program. In 1976 and for a number of years after that the church held an annual national basketball tournament for the teens. The teams that advanced through the district tournaments went to the regional tournament in their area and the winners of those tournaments got to participate in the national tournament.

I had the chance to play in the first two national tournaments, and I can tell you that it was very exciting to be a part of it. Of course there can only be one team that wins a tournament, but the prize of winning was a great incentive to the young people to strive for excellence and it produced a high quality basketball program.

Later after several years of playing basketball at the college level I once again was involved in the local YOU program, but now as a coach. But there was a big difference from the days that I played YOU basketball. There was no national tournament. There wasn't even a regional tournament. We only had a tournament at the district level, so a lot of the incentive to strive for excellence was taken away. And eventually there wasn't even a championship game at the district level. There was what the powers-that-be called a "showcase" game. There was no trophy given to the winner of that game. Everyone got participation awards.

The last year I coached, the push for limiting the competitive aspect of sports in YOU had progressed to the point that we weren't even allowed to hold a practice once a week during the basketball season. I think we were limited to only about 8-10 practice sessions. How can one strive for excellence without putting the time into it?

I'm sure the people in charge thought they were doing the right thing, but the end result was mediocrity. At the end of the day there was no emphasis on striving for excellence. The idea I suppose in not giving out a trophy and instead giving out participation awards to everyone was to make everyone feel good about themselves. But the young people weren't fooled. The lowering of standards and touting the value of participation over accomplishment doesn't solve the problems of the wrong kinds of competition and the problems of low self-worth.

Think about this statement: True self-worth comes from accomplishment. There are no shortcuts, no easy fixes. I repeat, True self-worth requires from accomplishment. That's why God inspired this instatement in Ecclesiastes 9.10

"Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

The movement toward participation over achievement is actually a movement away from excellence and toward mediocrity. When we do not strive for excellence, nothing of value is produced. God's way is to produce things of great and lasting value. God is the great Creator. That's what He does. He creates. And what He creates is very good. God's way is the way of striving for excellence.

The world, that is those people without the Spirit of God, are quite capable of seeing the problems in the world, but they can't see and don't know the answers. They see the problem of a lack of self-esteem in people. They see the problems that the competitive spirit of this world creates, but they don't know the answer.

But God does know the answer. God's way of developing self-esteem is to create something real. God's way of creating self-worth in an individual is to have that individual develop the talents and abilities that He has given that person. But that requires work and effort. It will most certainly involve some failures along the way. Some disappointments. Some sweat and maybe some blood and tears too.

Just participating without striving for excellence does not require those things. But it doesn't produce anything either. You know, the idea that we don't have to accomplish anything to be given eternal life is related to this "participation" movement.

The popular belief is that God gives eternal life as a free gift to anyone who will participate by simply accepting Jesus' sacrifice. There's no achievement necessary. No creation of righteous character.

Even within the church of God groups we've bought into this. Most people think that righteous character is not a requirement for eternal life. They think that God, like the world around us, will relax the standards to allow people in who haven't met the requirements. But listen to the Scriptures:

ROMANS 2.13 "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified."

James 1.25 "But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

1 John 3.7 "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous."

1 Corinthians 6.9 "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived..."

Now why would God say, "Let no man deceive you?" And, "Be not deceived?" Well it's because He knew that people would be deceived about these things. He knew that there would be those saying that we don't have to achieve anything.

But God is the Creator. And what He is creating is perfect, holy, righteous character in his children. And the way that He is creating that character is through this physical existence. This is the crucible in which God is creating that in us.

It is true that the physical is only temporary, but this physical life that we're living is the crucible in which God is creating something in us that will last for all eternity.

When Jesus said "seek first the kingdom of God" he also said "and his righteousness". We are to seek God's righteousness. And God's righteousness is not a fictitious righteousness where we remain sinners but God looks at Jesus' righteousness and pretends that we're righteous too. God is not in the business of giving out eternal life as some sort of participation award for non-achievers. He is creating real righteousness in his children. And this physical life is the crucible in which he is accomplishing that.

Think about it. How will God know that we are ready for the responsibility of ruling with Jesus over the earth and the people in it in the Millennium? He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. That's found in Luke 16.10.

What did the Master say to the profitable servants? "You have been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things."

So even though the physical is only temporary, this physical life and what we do with it matters. We must not bury our talent in the ground and do nothing with it. And our talents may or may not have anything to do with the church service. Some seem to think that unless they are utilizing some spiritual gift such as preaching, they have no useful gift to exercise. But what does Paul say about spiritual gifts?

1 Corinthians 12.29 "Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?"

By implication the answer is, "No." We do not all have the spiritual gifts to be involved in the preaching of the gospel. Nor is that what most of us are called to.

1 Tim 3.2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;"

Again, by implication, there are those who are not apt to teach. Does that mean that they have no gifts, no talents, no abilities? No. but it may mean that their talents lie in an arena that has nothing to do with the church service. And that's okay.

Too many people seem to think that unless they have some role in the church service they have failed. But that's just not the case.

James 3.1 "Be not many masters [teachers]."

But we have those who think that unless they are a teacher, a preacher of the gospel, they have failed. And so some look for evidence that God has called them to some great work as proof of their validation with God. In extreme case there are those who proclaim themselves to be one of the two witnesses, or that they are God's apostle, sent to be the successor to Herbert Armstrong.

But God says the validation is this. He who is faithful with a little will be faithful with much. The validation is the character that God is creating within us. And that doesn't require that we have some big position within the church. It simply requires that we strive for excellence with what we've been given.

So how do we implement this principle in our day to day lives? I've got two points, two ways that I'd like elaborate on how we can do this.

The first is: Whatever job we are given to do we must strive for excellence in it.

"Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

We all have a job to do. Many of us are part of the workforce with jobs that take us outside the home. But some are homemakers whose job is to take care of home and family. Others may be students whose job is to learn the course material and eventually graduate with that piece of paper that tells the world that you are educated.

We may not see our job as important. We may have only a lowly position, but the size of the job is not important. What is important is what we do with it. Whether we are the CEO with the penthouse office or the janitor who sweeps the floors at night, the important thing is to do it with our might. The important thing is to strive for excellence.

When we first meet David in the book of Samuel he does not have a big job. His family did not even think him worthy to show to Samuel. He was just the boy tending the sheep. But since he was given the responsibility of tending his father's flock of sheep, he did it with his might. He strove for excellence. He strove to be the best shepherd he could be. When the bear and the lion came for the flock he stood firm and protected them. He killed both the bear and the lion.

How did God know that David was the one to anoint king? He knew what was in David's heart because he had seen how David had been faithful over a little. He had seen David strive for excellence in what he did, even though it was just tending a flock of sheep.

When you strive for excellence in your job, whatever that job may be, good things will happen. They may not happen right away, but they will happen. You will go places.

Psalm 75:6-7: "For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another."

Promotion comes from God. And while God's timetable may seem long to us at times, He is never late and He never fails. I think that one of the most powerful examples of this is the prophet, Daniel.

Think about how Daniel's life must have seemed to him as a young man, or at least how it must have looked to someone not seeing through the eyes of faith. He was taken as a captive in war. He was ripped away from his home in Jerusalem and taken to Babylon, where according to every indication in Scripture he was castrated and made a eunuch and a slave.

Can't get much lower than that, right? But Daniel strove to be the best that he could be in his situation, in the job he found himself in. Whatever your hand finds to do... And he looked to God for help and guidance in doing his job with his might.

And we all know where Daniel ended up. Second only to the King ruling over the rich and powerful empire of Babylon.

So point one is do your job well. Do it extremely well. Strive for excellence in it.

But there is more to life than work. I'm talking about recreation. The importance of creating. Creativity or creating has been removed from our lives through the socioeconomic system we have built. The advent of the assembly line signaled the impending death of creativity.

Most of the work force are involved in jobs where they are a little wheel in a bigger piece of machinery, and there's nothing creative about their jobs. And so at the end of their day, there's plenty of room for stress, but little room for fulfillment. People then try to escape their empty life through entertainments. They try to get rid of the stress with TV, movies, alcohol, drugs – whatever physical enjoyment they can find to take their minds off the stress and drudgery of their days.

Our work days are filled with drudgery and stress and our free time with being sedated.

BUT GOD INTENDED FOR MAN TO BE CREATIVE. God instructed Adam and Eve to dress and keep the garden. God is a creator, and God made man in his image. He made man to be creative.

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” But it wasn’t finished. “...And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.”

Creativity as Development. God creates the platform and then gives man the opportunity to finish the creation. The earth was an unfinished creation. Adam and eve were to take what God had made and develop it.

Are you developing what God has given you?

You know, it could be something very small. I know a lot of people who think that physical exercise is not important because “well, this is just a temporary, physical existence and what does that matter? Paul said to Timothy that bodily exercise profits only a little”. I know people who don’t take care of themselves with what they eat. They’ll just put any junk food into their mouth, and then they wonder why they get sick. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been at a potluck after a church service and the table is filled with junk food, and somebody gives a prayer in which they ask God to bless the food and remove the impurities from it and nourish it to our bodies. As though God is going to somehow magically transform this junk food into something that’s healthy for them.

How we take care of this physical body that God has given us is important. Not in the sense that this physical body is going to last forever – it’s not. But it’s the principle of being faithful over a little. So you should get exercise.

And being creative in small ways in this physical realm has huge benefits. I know of a person who, for a long time, struggled with feelings of depression and worthlessness. This person had a terrible childhood, and since they were a child, struggled with depression. This person got involved in a sport that they discovered they had an aptitude for, and they really enjoyed it. And within a relatively short period of time – less than a year – not only had their health greatly improved, but their attitude and outlook on life began to change. Their depression began to lift. They became much stronger, both physically and mentally. And do you know why? It was because they were accomplishing something. They were seeing improvement in their physical body, advances in what they were able to do. And yes, in the eternal scheme of things, our bodies are going to wear out and we’re all going to die. It’s not about trying to preserve this body. It’s not about trying to glorify ourselves. Exercise is about taking care of – dressing and keeping – something that God has entrusted to your care. It’s about being faithful over a little so that God can make you ruler over much.

Now, physical endeavors such as sports might not be your thing. I’m not saying that everyone has to get involved in some sport. Maybe your aptitudes are in the area of music. Maybe it’s artistic, like crafts or building something or cooking. My wife recently started making beer. Being creative in some way, and striving for excellence at it, is very important.

In conclusion, two things to keep in mind. Number one is to strive for excellence in your job. We’ve all been given jobs to do. We all have roles to play. Whatever your job is, whatever role you’ve been given, strive to do that job as well as you possibly can without regard for how important that job is. Strive for excellence. God will promote you.

Number two is to find a way to use the aptitudes that God has given you to do something creative. Find a way to develop those aptitudes in the direction of the interests you have, so that God can see that you're going to take what he's given you and develop it and use it, and he'll give you more.

And of course, we all have to keep in mind our overall purpose of seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, letting our light shine, to glorify God. We're not doing these things to glorify ourselves. We can't forget that our longterm goal is the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We can't neglect to read His Word, to talk to Him in prayer and to meditate on His Word. But also remember that we also need short term goals in our day to day life, and that we must find ways to develop what God has given us and to strive for excellence in all that we do. The physical is only temporary, that is true, but the physical is the crucible in which God forges in us the character that will last for all eternity.