

INTRODUCTION

A dairy farmer went to buy a new pickup truck. He had seen an ad in the paper about discounts and factory rebates, so he decided to trade in his old clunker. He chose a new model and was ready to write the check for the full amount. The salesman said, "Wait, I haven't given you the final cost yet." The farmer said, "Isn't it the price I saw in the paper?" The salesman said, "No, that's for the basic model, all the options cost extra." So after the options were added, the farmer reluctantly wrote a check and drove off in his new pick-up.

A few months later the car salesman called the farmer because he wanted to buy a cow for his son's 4-H project. The farmer assured the car salesman he had several good milk cows for sale for \$500. The salesman drove out and selected a cow and took out his checkbook. The farmer said, "Wait. I haven't given you the final cost yet." Then he handed the salesman a bill that read:

BASIC COW	\$500
Two-tone exterior	\$45
Extra stomach	\$75
Milk storage compartment	\$60
Straw recycle compartment	\$120
Four handy spigots @ \$10 each	\$40
Leather upholstery	\$125
Dual horns	\$45
Automatic rear fly swatter	\$38
Natural fertilizer attachment	\$185
GRAND TOTAL	\$1233

Whether you're buying cars or cows, it's important to get to what we call "the bottom line." What is the "bottom line" of following Jesus? You may go into sticker shock when you discover it. Many people are only interested in the basic model of Christian living. They want just enough Christianity to keep them out of hell without intruding on their fun. You don't find the full cost of discipleship advertised very often these days. Few preachers discuss it because it is unpleasant; it doesn't fill churches. It isn't the prosperity gospel that says, "Believe and you will be rich and happy." As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to die."

That's exactly what Jesus communicated in the passage we're examining today.

Matthew 16:24-28. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'"

When we read this we have a hard time understanding the word "lose." We live in a culture that has programmed into us that winning is good and losing is bad. I love it when I win a golf match with my son-in-law and I absolutely hate to lose. When athletes lose a big game or a salesman loses a big account they lose sleep as a result. I've never seen a parent driving a car with a bumper sticker that says, "My child is a loser."

Forget sports or business, doesn't it drive you crazy when you lose something? Have you ever lost your car keys or something else and turned your house upside down searching for it? You are miserable until you find whatever you've lost. The world's attitude is: "Winner Takes All." But then we read the words of Jesus that fly straight in the face of this obsession with winning and He says, "The real name of the game is 'Loser Takes All.'"

His statement about losing and gaining is a parable, but it is also a paradox. A paradox is a statement seemingly absurd at first glance but actually communicates profound truth. To help us get a handle on this great truth, let me substitute some other words and phrases for the word "lose." Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save (play it safe) his life will lose (waste) it, but whoever loses (surrenders) his life for me will find it (be rewarded)."

So instead of talking about losing, I want to talk about the wasted life and the surrendered life. The choice is yours. There are basically two ways you can choose to live your life. In this message I want to compare and contrast the wasted life with the surrendered life.

1. THE WASTED LIFE: "It's all about ME and what I want!"

I borrowed the title of this message from a great book I read recently by John Piper. It's entitled, *Don't Waste Your Life*. We have the book for sale in our bookstore today, but I want to warn you that reading this book could be hazardous to your comfortable life. The thesis of his book is that most people, including Christians are wasting their lives by living only for themselves.

Piper gives the illustration of a couple featured in *Reader's Digest* who took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast and moved to Florida. He was 59 and she was 51. The story was about how they enjoy their leisure retirement cruising the Gulf in their 30-foot boat, playing softball and collecting shells. Doesn't that sound nice?

But Piper wrote: "At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke—a spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great Day of Judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells?" That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life!"

Life philosophy: "For me, to live is to live it up, and to die is the end."

The person who wastes his (or her) life lives only to please "me." This is natural because the default setting for humanity is to be a self-centered, self-pleasing person. We put the "Big I" at

the center of our own little universe and everything revolves around our “ego.” When we’re babies we cry when we’re hungry, even if it’s in the middle of the night because “the Big I” is hungry and “the Big I” doesn’t care if mom and dad are trying to sleep, “The Big I” says, “Feed me and feed me NOW!” Of course, a baby can’t help himself, because it’s the way we’re wired. But the problem arises when we grow older and we still keep “the Big I” at the center of the universe. We continue to need to feed the “Big I” so we spend our lives working hard to get more money to buy more toys so we can have more fun. You’ve probably seen the t-shirt that says, “The one who dies with the most toys wins!” Jesus is saying if you live that way, you don’t win—you lose. You end up like that television show, you are the biggest loser!

Mass media has shaped our lives more than we’ll ever realize. If you’re old enough you can remember the old Schlitz Beer commercial popular in the 1960s. A manly voice came on and said, “You only go around once in life, so you’ve got to grab for all the gusto you can.” I can remember watching that as a child thinking, “Hey, he’s right. I’d better start grabbing for some gusto because this is my only chance!” Of course, I had no clue what “gusto” was, but I sure liked the sound of it—and so did a lot of other people. People are still grabbing for gusto, even though they aren’t sure what it is and wouldn’t even recognize it when they find it. They are living for themselves because they are swallowed the lie that this life is all there is. Jesus said that if you live that way, you are wasting your life.

Life goal: Play it safe for the temporary reward

When I say, “Play it safe,” I’m not talking about someone who hides in his house and never ventures out. I’m referring to the person who settles for the temporary rewards this life offers and never takes the risk of trusting God.

For instance, thousands of people are thrill seekers and live on the edge simply because they want the temporary reward of a rush of adrenalin or a new buzz. But the thrill is only temporary and they have to look for the next big thrill and they are constantly unfulfilled. There’s nothing wrong with seeking fun, adventure, and pleasure unless it becomes the driving force of your life. If it does, then you lose.

There is an interesting verse hidden in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. He is writing about some women in the church who were misbehaving. Apparently some of them were following this wasted lifestyle of pleasure seeking. In that context, Paul slipped in this observation. “She who lives for pleasure [self-indulgence, luxury] is dead even while she lives.” (1 Timothy 5:6) The word for “pleasure” only appears here and in James 5:5 where it is translated “luxury.” The Bible says the person who lives to accumulate more and more possessions and lives a self-centered, self-indulgent life is actually dead. Can you think about someone you know, male or female, who is obsessed with having more and more and more and more? They live for the next big toy, the next big thrill, or the next new experience; know anyone like that? Maybe if you stop and think about it, this is a description of your life. If it is, you’re wasting your life.

One of the scariest movies of my teenage years was the black-and-white movie, “Night of the Living Dead.” All these zombies came out of their graves and attacked some living people who hid in an abandoned farmhouse. I can still get the “heebie jeebies” thinking about it! But every

day we live around and work with the living dead. They don't look dead, they look very much alive, but they are spiritually dead.

Christmas is only 69 days away! How many of you put up an artificial Christmas tree? How many of you put up a live Christmas tree? Well, if your tree has been cut down, it's not alive; it's a DEAD tree. It looks alive, but it was cut off from the source of life when someone cut it down. But you'll decorate it and make it look a lot prettier than it ever looked when it was alive, but it's dead. And many people who are cut off from the source of life, Jesus, look like they are living life pretty well. They have decorated themselves with a lot of accessories and clothes, and have been to the gym to look fit. But they are dead while they live. And for the person who thinks, "It's all about me and what I want" they are living a wasted life. They're trying to play it safe, but they end up losing it all.

2. THE SURRENDERED LIFE: "It's all about Jesus and what He wants!"

But there is another kind of life you can choose to live. You can choose to surrender your life to Jesus. When you do, your focus shifts from what you want to what Jesus wants.

John Piper wrote: "The opposite of wasting your life is to live by a single, soul-satisfying passion for the supremacy of God in all things. If you want your life to count, if you want the ripple effect of the pebbles you drop to become waves that reach the ends of the earth and roll on into eternity, you have to know one great all-embracing thing—and be set on fire by it. For example, the apostle Paul said that his life and ministry were riveted on a single aim: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2). (*Don't Waste Your Life*, p. 43-44)

Do you have a single passion in your life, glorifying God? In order to get to that point you must surrender your life to Jesus. You must say, "Lord, I am no longer in charge, I need YOU to run my life." Jesus said you can never be His disciple unless you "deny yourself." That doesn't mean you have to deny yourself something like sweets, sleep or food. It means you deny your Self. Think of your "self" as your "ego" or the "Big I." Next, Jesus says we must take up or cross daily. The meaning is so simple it has often been missed. A person carrying a cross had only one destination: Death. It was always a one-way trip. For you to take up your cross doesn't mean you carry a cross in your pocket or wear one around your neck. It doesn't mean you carry around a large wooden cross as some have done. Other people think their "cross to bear" is some kind of physical ailment. I've heard people complain about their ingrown toenail or migraine headache and say, "But I guess it's just my cross that I'll just have to bear." Jesus isn't talking about ingrown toenails or migraines. He is talking about dying. It isn't physical death but death to self. That's the surrendered life.

Life philosophy: "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Paul was in prison waiting to be executed when he wrote those words. He expected to die any day, but he wasn't worried about that. He lived every day as if he was going to die the next day. That's why he was so focused on living for Jesus. If God let him live, it would be Jesus. If God took home, it would be even better, he would GAIN the literal presence of Jesus. Do you have

that kind of attitude? For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain?

A few years ago country singer Tim McGraw had a great song entitled, "Live Like You Were Dying." It's a story of a man in his forties who learns that his father has a terminal illness. His father's message is to live life to the fullest and not to waste his life. Tim McGraw's dad, baseball great, Tug McGraw, had been diagnosed with cancer a year before Tim recorded this song. In the song, once the son realized how short life really is he sang, "I went sky-diving; I went Rocky Mountain climbing; I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu; And I loved deeper; And I spoke sweeter; and I gave forgiveness I'd been denyin'; And he said, "Some day I hope you get the chance; to live like you were dying...like tomorrow was the end. And ya got eternity to think about what do with it; what should you do with it? What can I do with it?" Tug McGraw died the same month Tim recorded this song, but Tim said they had a great year together.

Everybody has to answer the question that song poses: in light of eternity how should I live my life now? The Bible says we should all live our lives like we were dying, because we are! We just don't know when. But a person who lives a surrendered life isn't afraid of dying because they know they'll go to heaven. Until that happens they are totally focused on taking as many people with them to heaven.

Life goal: Risk it all for Jesus and receive the eternal reward

When Jesus spoke of losing your life for Him, He was talking about living a risky life of absolute faith and trust. The Bible is full of people who lived the risky life of absolute trust in God.

If you were making a list of the top ten people God used in the Bible, Moses would be near the top. And yet Moses provides a case study for us for a man who almost wasted his life. He was born at a time when Pharaoh commanded all the Hebrew baby boys be killed the moment they were born. Pharaoh was alarmed at the growth rate of the Hebrews, so this was his attempt at population control. However, a couple of brave Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah refused to commit these very late-term abortions. When Moses was born he wasn't killed. Instead his mother hid and then she placed him in a basket in the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter found him and raised him as her own son. Coincidentally, she also hired Moses' birth mother to be Moses' nursemaid. So Moses grew up knowing he really was a Hebrew.

As the adopted grandson of the richest, most powerful man in the world, Moses spent his first forty years living in luxury. He had access to finest food, drink, entertainment, and education offered in the world. Many scholars suggest Moses might have been next in line to be a Pharaoh himself. However, Moses had his first mid-life crisis when he turned his back on the riches of Egypt and chose instead to align himself with the people of God.

Here's how the Bible describes his choice in Hebrews 11, which is often called the Roll Call of Faith: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." (Hebrews 11:24-26)

If we had been in Moses' sandals, most of us would have chosen to stay in the palace to enjoy the lifestyles of the rich and famous. But Moses understood that God had a greater plan for him. But even after making this choice, Moses blew it by murdering an Egyptian and fled to the desert where he spent forty more years wasting his life. He probably thought he had retired; he lived the easy life of a shepherd. But when he was 80 years old, God finally got Moses' attention and he stopped wasting his life. He surrendered to God. It was a risky move to leave the comfortable life of a shepherd living in obscurity. But Moses died to self and the last years of his life were the most productive years of his life.

Because of the aging generation of Baby Boomers, millions of Americans will be approaching retirement in the next ten years. So what are you going to do? Are you going to settle for a luxury condo and a fat pension? Are you going to spend the rest of your life living for yourself? If you do, you're going to waste your life. Instead, like Moses, the last years of your life can be the best years of your life if you surrender your all to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Let me give you two case studies of men who illustrate this paradox principle. Howard Hughes was one of the richest men in the 20th century. He dated actresses, piloted test aircraft, and owned a chain of hotels and casinos around the world. He accumulated more than \$2 billion, but in the end, he died one of the most miserable men in history. A man's true character is revealed by how he finishes the race of life.

Howard Hughes' last years were spent in isolation, hidden on the top floor of the Xanadu Hotel in the Bahamas. One biographer wrote about Hughes' appearance before he died: "He was emaciated, practically skeletal, with only 120 pounds stretched over his six-foot, four-inch frame. He was not dead, but it seemed his body was already in decay. Only the long grey hair that trailed halfway down his back, the thin straggly beard that reached midway onto his sunken chest, and his hideously long nails still showed sign of life. He lay naked in bed, deathly afraid of germs. He spent his days watching movies. He watched his favorite movie, 'Ice Station Zebra', at least 150 times. Finally emaciated and hooked on morphine and codeine, he died at age 67." (Bill Hybels, *Character: Reclaiming Six Endangered Qualities*, p. 47- 48)

When he died in 1976, there was no one to claim his body. Finally a distant cousin was given custody of his body. *Time Magazine* reported: "Howard Hughes' death was commemorated in Las Vegas by a minute of silence. Casinos fell silent. Housewives stood uncomfortably clutching their paper cups full of coins at the slot machines, the blackjack games paused, and at the crap tables the stickmen cradled the dice in the crook of their wooden wands. Then a pit boss looked at his watch, leaned forward and said, 'O.K., roll the dice. He's had his minute.'"

Howard Hughes really "lived it up" in this life, but he ended up losing what was most valuable—his soul. That's exactly what Jesus meant when He said, "What good will it be for a man, if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26)

Compare Howard Hughes to the life and death of Jim Elliot. On January 8, 1956, he and three

other men were attacked and killed by the Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador while they were taking the gospel to them. Before he went to South America Jim wrote these words in his diary: "God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life that I may burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God for it is Thine. I seek not a long life but a full one like You, Lord Jesus." ... "He is no fool to give what he cannot keep in order to gain that which he can never lose."

Although the world would say that Jim LOST his life that day, the truth is he lost his life to Christ before he ever went. He surrendered his life to Jesus and lived a crucified life. The Aucas couldn't really kill Jim Elliot that day because he was already dead; he was dead to self and alive in Christ.

Howard Hughes is a sad story of a man who attained great riches, but basically wasted his life. Jim Elliot is an example of man who surrendered his life to Jesus and ended up gaining everything for eternity.

So does mean that you should quit your job and travel to the jungles to risk your life taking the gospel to savage tribes of people who've never heard? Not unless God specifically tells you to. Instead it means you need to surrender you life to Jesus and risk it all for Him among your family, your workplace, or at your school.

When I was growing up in South Alabama, there were four small signs spaced about 100 feet apart someone had placed in their pasture beside a highway. Each sign only had a few words on it, and only as you read all four did the statement make sense. But I read those four signs hundreds of times and the message is burned into my mind. The four signs said: ONLY ONE LIFE; IT WILL SOON BE PAST; ONLY WHAT'S DONE; FOR CHRIST WILL LAST.

I've never forgotten that simple message. I think that's one of the reasons I devoted my life to spreading the gospel. In this world of temporal things everything around us will one day be dissolved into forgotten cosmic dust. There are only two eternal things we deal with in this life: The Word of God and souls of men and women. When you are touch souls with the word of God you are doing work that will last for all eternity.

Whatever you do in the short period of time that God gives you on this earth: Don't waste your life!

OUTLINE

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"She who lives for pleasure [self-indulgence, luxury] is dead even while she lives." *1 Timothy 5:6*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes