

PUTTING IN GOOD MINUTES, ONE AFTER THE OTHER

Our eventual biblical text this morning, taken from Isaiah 58, will point us to a perspective on Christian living that **focuses on the present, not the future.**

But I will introduce this theme with an unusual source, a novel written by Robert Pirsig with the strange title *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Pirsig tells the story of a father and son on a cross country motorcycle trip that is a **joint search for values to live by.**

At one point in their trip when they could see **their eventual destination, a mountain top far off in the distance,** the father says to the son (with some paraphrasing on my part).

Son, do you see the top of that mountain way off in the distance? We will eventually get there. But reaching the top of that mountain is not our real goal.
The real goal is for the two of us to **put in good minutes, one after the other.**

The father was teaching his son that **living well had to do primarily with right now, not some time in the future.**

I remember well when that lesson was first brought home to me about 45 years ago.

I was in my first teaching position at The King's College in Briarcliff Manor, New York, about 40 miles north of my hometown of Brooklyn, New York. The college was not yet accredited. But a few of us young faculty members had **a vision for the future of the college.** So we rolled up our sleeves and worked tirelessly to shape that exciting future (the mountain top we could see off in the distance).

The older faculty, college administration and even the students took notice of our hard work, and I became a "big man on campus," a "Christian big shot" (or so I thought). I would even get to speak in chapel from time to time and I would receive words of praise like "nice message, Harold."

At home, after a hard day of work at the college, I would typically give our three young children, Jonathan, Janice and Jeffrey, a bath, all together in the same tub, while Pat prepared dinner.

One night, our three J's were particularly rambunctious in the tub, merrily splashing around. Soon there was more water on me and the floor than was left in the tub. And I completely lost my cool, and started ranting and raving at my kids, who were probably wondering who this old man was who had forgotten how to have fun.

No big deal you may think. That kind of thing happens to all of us. But it was a big deal for me, since shortly after my ranting and raving, **a painful thought came to me that changed my life**. Those folks at the college who think I'm such a Christian big shot should have seen me, ranting and raving at my fun loving kids. I was so preoccupied with shaping a good future for my college that I lost sight of how I should live well as a Christian in the present moment, soaking wet next to the tub. Maybe my problem was there was no one around to say "nice bath, Harold."

The lesson I learned from that apparently mundane experience was that the depth of my Christian living, or lack thereof, should not be measured primarily by the future that I could shape, even a good future from a Christian perspective. The real measure is how I live now, today.

The ideal that came to my mind that day long ago is that today, whatever I am doing, or wherever I am, on public display or in the privacy of my home, I should give expression to the fruits of the spirit spelled out in Galatians 5: 22-23: love, Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And I should be that kind of a person **each day, one minute after the other**. Believe me, I have often fallen far short of that ideal. But from that day onward, I knew that was the ideal.

Now you may have found that personal story to be interesting, although I shouldn't assume that. Every once in while when I am talking to my twin brother John on the telephone, I say "John I have something interesting to tell you." John then jokingly responds, "Harold, just tell me what you want to tell me. I will decide whether it is interesting."

In any case, **you may be wondering if there is any biblical support for my focus on the present rather than the future**. I believe there is. Before quoting a Biblical passage, let me share with you my understanding of what the biblical record, as a whole, teaches us about Christian living, especially about those passages that refer to Christians being "**led by God**."

I will make my point by summarizing two views about God's leading in our lives, the first of which I will call the "**zap**" theory.

According to the zap theory, I passively sit around, not doing much of anything now, waiting for God to "zap me" with some special revelation of what I should be doing as a Christian someday in the future.

As teenagers in high school and college, my Christian boyhood friends and I were very fond of the zap theory about God's guidance in our lives. We used to flock to sermons about "finding the will of God for your life," hoping that for a meager 45 investment of our time we would gain clarity as to what our vocation should be (someday in the future), where we should live (someday in the future), maybe even who we should marry (someday in the future).

We had it all wrong.

To be sure, God can indeed zap me with a special revelation about my future. But that static view of God's leading is not the biblical norm. The biblical norm about God's leading in our lives is a dynamic view that can be succinctly summarized as follows

As I walk TODAY, one minute after the other, faithful to my understanding of how God would have me live TODAY, it is in that very process of walking that I gain greater understanding of how I should continue walking. Since this is by far the most important thing I will say to you today, let me repeat it.

The way Richard Foster says this much more succinctly in his book on prayer is that **“obedience begets obedience.”**

Let me now read one biblical text that points us to this dynamic view of Christian living and God's guidance in our lives (Isaiah 58: 9-11 – Revised Standard Version)

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am. If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, **if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually,** and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

I call your attention especially to the portion of this text that is now on the screen [highlighted above]. A careless reading seems to suggest that you are promised unconditional guidance from God. That is simply not true. That portion of our text is an “if, ...then” statement; there is a “condition” attached

If you pour yourself out for the hungry (today); if you satisfy the desire of the afflicted (today), then ... the Lord will guide you continually.

The teaching is clear. It is as you attend to the needs of those who are hungry and afflicted now (today), that you will sense guidance from God as to how you should continue meeting the needs of others in the future.

Now all my emphasis on how we should live as Christians today **may make you think that I am not concerned about the future. Not at all!** Let me explain how I see **the connection between now and the future.**

I can imagine the father and son on their motorcycle trip driving through a pouring rain and finding shelter under an overpass. As they wait for the rain to stop and look off into the distance **they see the mountain top, their eventual destination, and that glimpse**

gives them hope and encouragement. Whatever the ups and downs of their journey, there is a marvelous ultimate destination.

The mountain top for Christians, their ultimate destination, is what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God.” The day will come when there will be no more hunger and there will be no more affliction.

Jesus elaborates on other aspects of that coming Kingdom beyond what is pointed to in Isaiah 58 in what some have called his “Parable of the Kingdom” recorded in Matthew 25.

Matthew 25 is a meddlesome and disconcerting chapter in the Bible because it suggests that what is most important is **not what you say you believe but how you live.** There is not a word in Matthew 25 about dotting all the i’s and crossing all the t’s in an airtight theological system of beliefs. Rather, those who will enter the kingdom are those who gave food to the hungry, those who gave drink to the thirsty, those who welcomed the stranger, those who gave clothing to the naked, those who took care of the sick, and those who visited inmates in prison.

The end of Matthew 25 broadens these examples when Jesus suggests that we are to minister to all of those who are considered by worldly standards to be the “least among us,” the oppressed, the marginalized, the downtrodden, those who are less fortunate than we are.

As we look at the brokenness that we humans have foisted on God’s good creation, it boggles the imagination to believe that the day will come, when we reach the mountain top, when there will be no more hunger, no more thirst, no more sickness, no more nakedness, no more prisons, no more oppression, no more marginalization of people groups

Other things will not be found on the mountain top that are not specifically mentioned in Matthew 25: there will be no more wars, no more injustice, no more abuse of spouses and children, no more ignorance, no more ugliness, no more devastation of our natural environment.

God’s ultimate redemptive purpose is to eliminate all these signs of brokenness, to restore all of His good creation.

That is a marvelous vision of the future that should give us encouragement and hope. But how do we get there? One day at a time.

It is my firm conviction that we as Christians are called to create hints, partial glimpses, intimations of the full glory to come by faithfully “partnering with God” to eliminate all these signs of brokenness as agents for God’s redemptive purposes, **one day at a time, one minute after the other.**

But where should I start? Where should you start?

An answer to that question is suggested by the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Given who I am, what I find most fascinating in this parable is that helping the wounded stranger on the side of the road was probably not on the good Samaritan's "To Do" list for that day. That fascinates me because in addition to being addicted to chocolate and strong coffee, I am addicted to creating "To Do" lists, either on paper or in my mind. As some of you who have worked with me know, I am highly organized, to a fault. I can tell you exactly what I will be doing at 10:17 tomorrow morning. Well, not quite. I may be a minute or two off.

So, I need to constantly keep in mind the parable of the good Samaritan to save me from the tyranny of my "To Do" lists.

You see what the good Samaritan did was simple, at least in theory, if not in practice. Helping a wounded stranger was probably not on his "To Do" list for that day. Rather, he simply responded sensitively to a need that unexpectedly presented itself to him in his walk that day.

Since our attitudes affect what we do and do not see right around us, I suspect he was characterized by an attitude of caring (another "fruit of the Spirit") which helped him to see the immediate need right under his nose (which the Priest and the Levite did not see, possibly because of attitudes of indifference).

So, you can be an agent for God's redemptive purposes today by simple responding sensitively to the needs of those around you. Of course that may not exhaust your Christian calling, since we should be responding, as we are able, to the needs of people we don't know, including people in far off lands. But it is the **place to start**.

And here is the amazing thing if my main point in this sermon is correct, that **As I walk TODAY, one minute after the other, faithful to my understanding of how God would have me live TODAY, it is in that very process of walking that I gain greater understanding of how I should continue walking**. If that message is correct, then your responding sensitively to the needs of the people whose paths you cross today may give you greater insight into what you should do tomorrow and then the next day, and each day into the future.

I will close by giving a concrete example of how what you do now can lead you into your future; an example that is geared toward college students, but could provide insights for young people of all ages.

Summarizing what could be another sermon, let me suggest that if you are a college student wondering about what your future vocation ought to be, the first thing you should do is to identify the particular gifts that God has given you and the things you love to do.

Then ask yourself how you can give expression to those gifts and loves **now** to further God's redemptive purposes.

For example, you may have the gift caring for those who are ill and you may love doing that. If so, you should explore the possibility of doing a bit of volunteer work at a health care facility like a hospital or a hospice or doing such work during a summer break. Such volunteer work may lead you to decide that health care work does not fit you as well as you thought it would (it is better to find that out now rather than later). But such volunteer work may reinforce your love for such a ministry, thereby giving you greater insight as to a possible future vocation that fits well with your gifts and loves and fosters one of God's redemptive purposes for his world.

In conclusion, my prayer for each of you this morning, and for me, wherever we are in our life's journey, is that as followers of Jesus, we will **put in good minutes today, one after the other**, and will continue doing that each day into the future until we reach the top of the mountain.

Benediction (I Thessalonians 3:12): "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and for all."

Go in peace, love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Amen

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