

Numbering Our Days

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In the weeks since my mother passed on, I've found myself doing a lot of thinking. It's impossible to go through life on earth without being reminded of death, and when we lose someone close to us, that really reminds us of death. I've been exploring the realization that my own days are numbered, and that every time I go to sleep and wake up, that brings me one day closer to the end. To some, that might be a dismaying realization. The French existentialist philosophers were so dispirited by death that they argued about whether the only appropriate response was suicide.

Of course, such an attitude is neither useful, wise, nor godly. Moses presents us with a much better approach in Psalm 90:12. Once we realize that our days are a limited resource, that every sunrise and sunset brings us closer to the end and our meeting with God, that should transform our perspective on life generally. As a rule, we value things that are scarce and dismiss things that are common. If our days are scarce, we should prize each one of them and not waste them. We should make sure that we are using every one of those precious days to accomplish something worthwhile.

If we want to succeed in this goal of maximizing our days, we first must figure out what goals are worthwhile and what goals are not, and simply because some goal seems worthwhile to us does not make it so. The heroin addict spends every day doing whatever he must do to accumulate the money to buy more heroin. That seems like a worthwhile goal to him, so much so that he is willing to break any moral or legal rule to accomplish it. However, from our perspective, we recognize that the addict is a fool. He's devoting his entire life to the very thing that will sooner or later destroy him.

There are plenty of other ways to use our days foolishly, just as there are many ways in which we can use them wisely, and God's word will help us tell the one from the other. Let's see what it has to say about numbering our days.

Wasting Our Days

As we said, there is a whole category of ways in which we can waste our days, and one of the foremost things we can waste them on is **SIN**. Paul discusses one example of this in 1 Timothy 5:5-6. He distinguishes here between the wise widow, who devotes her days to God, and the foolish widow, who devotes her days to wanton pleasure. Paul's condemnation of the second choice here is striking. He says that the pleasure-seeking widow is dead even while she lives. In other words, because she is getting so little out of her gift of life, she might as well be six feet under.

This points us to a truth about sin that we don't often consider. One of the reasons that God hates sin so much is that sin is a waste. It's like taking our income tax refunds and hurling them into the air from the top of the Willis Tower. We give our time to sin, we give our money to sin, we give our thoughts to sin, and what do we get out of it? Nothing, and indeed, we get less than nothing. We alienate God, we suffer the bad consequences, and we put ourselves on track to spend eternity in hell. In short, sin is a lousy investment of our time. Let's make sure we don't make it.

In a similar way, **LAZINESS** is also a poor way to spend our time. Let's look at Solomon's condemnation of idleness in Proverbs 12:11. Idleness is dangerous in the first place because it often leads us to sin, but there are problems associated with it even if we aren't actively doing evil. If we choose to be idle and spend our days doing things that are fun instead of productive, that too is an investment that yields nothing. Here, I'm afraid that I must use myself as an example. I love to read, and I love to play computer and video games. All the way through high school and college, that was pretty much what I did with my time. In my father's house in Missouri, there are bookshelves filled with books that I spent thousands of dollars buying. There are half a dozen computers that I upgraded out of because they couldn't run the games that I wanted them to run anymore. And what did I get for all that time and money? Not a thing.

That's the problem with all the books and movies and TV shows and what have you that pull us away from real life. They offer us the easy satisfactions, the easy victories, that are so hard to come by in the real world, and so we reject the reality in favor of the fantasy. If we have some problem with our marriages, for instance, it usually takes a lot of time, a lot of unpleasantness, and a lot of emotional energy to work on that problem, and it still probably won't get all the way fixed. On the other hand, when we watch some sitcom, the characters on there get their problem tied up in a nice neat little bow in half an hour. Is it any wonder that we prefer the TV show to the sit-down with our spouse? Sadly, that doesn't make the real-life problems go away. It only masks them, and we can easily waste our lives in the masking.

In the opposite direction, we can waste our lives on **WORK** too. Solomon describes his own bitter realization about this in Ecclesiastes 2:18-19. He spent his life toiling to build a magnificent kingdom filled with magnificent enjoyments, and then he realized that sooner or later, he was going to die and leave it to his son, who well might be a fool and waste it all. In point of fact, Solomon's son Rehoboam was a fool and did waste it all. His work went for nothing.

Today, there are many people who are caught in the trap of work for the sake of work. All they do from the time they rise in the morning till the time they go to bed is work. It's not like there's some great financial need that drives them to work so hard. It's not like they have some overarching life purpose they're looking to accomplish. They work just

because. As Solomon points out, though, all the labors that we do under the sun are ultimately meaningless. I've spent countless hours working on the flowerbeds around my house, but sooner or later, somebody's going to live there who will let them be filled with weeds, or just tear them up and replace them with bowling balls and garden gnomes. A life spent in work, then, is a wasted life, and at the end, will have nothing more to show than the life of sin or of idleness.

The worst of all ways to waste our lives, though, is by **FORGETTING THE END**. James outlines this problem in James 4:13-14. However, as dangerous as it is, this is the way that we will think if we don't watch ourselves. We naturally tend to assume that our lives are of indefinite duration, that we will always go on as we have before with no end in sight. For most people, only serious illness and death, either in themselves or someone close to them, will shake them out of their complacency, and if they continue on, they will soon forget again.

This is where all of the other problems come from. If we knew that we only had one day to live, most of us probably wouldn't spend that day getting drunk or practicing sexual immorality. We probably wouldn't spend it watching TV. We probably wouldn't even spend it on that project at work that's due next week. The reason why we fall into all of those things is because we aren't thinking about where we're headed. The forgetful life ends up as a wasted life.

Using Our Days Wisely

However, just as we can waste our days, we can also use them wisely. One of the most important useful ways to live is **RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Paul praises this alternative in Ephesians 5:15-17. When we understand what God's will is, and when we use that understanding to make wise decisions about our walk in life, that is when we are making the most of the time that we have been allotted. Just like sin is a waste, righteousness is a good investment. Instead of separating us from God and His blessings, righteousness brings us closer to Him. Instead of giving rise to all sorts of disasters that we weren't wise enough to anticipate, righteousness will fill our lives with unanticipated blessings. When we spend our time, for instance, working on being godly spouses, we will often get that investment back threefold. Finally, of course, instead of putting our feet on the broad way to destruction, righteousness sets us on the narrow path to life. If we can look back as we're going to bed and see that we made godly choices throughout the day, we can be well pleased with that.

Likewise, honest **LABOR** is a good use of our time. Paul recommends this to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. At first glance this seems like a contradiction of what I was saying ten minutes ago, but in reality, it isn't. If we take work and we turn it into an end in itself, that's bad. However, once we put work in its proper place, and recognize that it is only a means to more important ends, it becomes appropriate and good. Work is the way that we earn money to support ourselves and our families. It's the way that we prove ourselves to be good citizens of our communities. It's the way that we ensure we have enough to give to the Lord's work and help the needy. All of those things are important spiritual goals. The time that we spend working to meet them is time that was well spent.

We should also remember to make room in our lives for the **ENJOYMENT** of the fruits of our labors. Let's consider Solomon's thoughts about this in Ecclesiastes 3:12-13. The point is that it's important for us to step back from time to time from all the things we're doing, relax, and savor what we've done. As with so many other things, just like there's a wrong way to use recreation, there's a right way to use it too. It must never be something that we dive into to avoid the problems and challenges of the real world. That doesn't make those problems go away. It only makes them worse. However, once we've finished mowing the lawn, it's entirely appropriate to rest in the hammock reading for half an hour to appreciate what we've done. Once we've landed the big contract at work, we have the right to take the commission, go out, and spend it on something for ourselves and our families to enjoy. God doesn't expect us to be clenched-jaw, clenched-fist, work work work all the time. He created us to need down time, to take pleasure from the things that we have earned for ourselves, and as long as we don't let it get out of hand, we should embrace those things. A day that we spend in celebration of our achievements and enjoyment of life is a day well spent.

Finally, the most global thing that we can do to number our days and to use them wisely is **REMEMBERING GOD**. Solomon eloquently points us to this in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. Whether we're making moral decisions, or working, or playing, we must always keep God in the forefront of our minds, and make sure that our thoughts and actions are pleasing to Him. If we do that, we've pretty well got life nailed. If we don't, our lives are headed the wrong way.

This God-centered attitude is so important because God is where we're headed. In so many areas of life, our destination determines what we want to bring with us. If we're going to Florida in July, we know there's no sense in bringing along a heavy coat and skis. Likewise, if we're headed to Colorado in January, the scuba gear might as well remain in the closet at home. What Solomon tells us here is that the destination for all of us is the judgment seat of God, and what we're taking with us is the record of the way that we spent our days, whether wisely or unwisely.

When God examines that record, He is going to do so minutely. He will remember things that we ourselves have forgotten, and He is going to judge literally everything that we have done, whether those actions were good or evil. He will determine whether we fulfilled our duty to Him or not. This isn't an examination that we can cram for on the night before. It's something that we spend our lives preparing for, and only as we remember Him will we prepare as we should.