

April 6, 2008

Title: Live Like You Were Dying

Text: Romans 13:11-12

Thesis: Life is best lived as a gift spent well.

Series Introduction:

Tim McGraw's hit song Live Like You Were Dying is the springboard for the series of messages that will unfold in the next five weeks. The song is the story of a man who learned he was dying of a fatal disease and what he learned about living his final days well. It is a song about what he found to be important and how he hoped everyone could have the chance to live like they only had thirty days to live.

The series is based on the materials provided for the Live Like You Were Dying Church Campaign Resource Kit available from WWW.LLYWD.ORG. In addition to the general outline, I have attempted to cite specific references lifted from the resources.

Message Introduction:

That's Life DVD from worshiphousemedia.com – Life is full of ups and downs. One of the things we know is that a long life is not a guarantee.

According to the Social Security Actuarial Period Life Table, it seems the longer you live, the longer you live.

If I live to be 60 years old the actuarial table says, my life expectancy will be an additional 23.53 years. At 83.53 years of age, the actuarial table projects that my life expectancy will be an additional 7.59 years. If I live to be 90.59 years old, my life expectancy is projected to be 4.60 additional years. If I live to be 95, I may then live to be 98.41 years of age where I am granted the possibility of an additional 2.66 years. At nearly 102 years of age, they give me another 2.08 years. Even if I live to be 119 years old, I am granted an additional .57 year of life expectancy.

However, eventually the actuarial table will run out of years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds of life expectancy. In other words, I am terminal. We are all terminal. Apart from the Second Coming of Christ in one's lifetime, the death rate is 100%.

None of us is exempt and not one of us will escape.

None of us can hold back our spirit from departing. None of us has the power to prevent the day of our death..." Ecclesiastes 8:8a

According to an article I read in the New York Times just last month on March 23, an affluent person has a better chance of staving off the day of death than a person living in poverty. In the year 2000 a wealthy person in our country could expect to live 4.5 years longer than his or her poor counterpart. "Men in the most deprived countries had 10 years' shorter life expectancy than women in the most affluent countries. The difference between poor black men and affluent white women was more than 14 years."

The disparity of life expectancy is due largely to education, unhealthy lifestyles, unsafe communities, and health insurance. (Robert Pear, Gap in Life Expectancy Widens for Nation, the New York Times, march 23, 2008)

But the lives of rich and poor alike are marked by temporality. The Psalmist says our days are numbered... (Psalm 139:16) The producers of the Live Like You Were Dying Campaign state: Your death certificate is as certain as your birth certificate.

The bible clearly teaches that the follower of Jesus Christ is destined to receive eternal life. (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; I Corinthians 15:51-53; I Thessalonians 4:13-18)

So we deduce that the comparative brevity of our lives according to scripture...

[God] brings our lives to an end just like a dream. The fact that we are merely tender grass that sprouts and grows in the morning, but dries up by evening, (Psalm 90:5-6) does not mean that physical death marks the end of our existence.

If we look at life as a timeline continuum, we begin with eternity past, which stretches out infinitely before us. Our earthly existence begins at our birth and continues to our death. And then the line continues on infinitely after us into eternity future.

So what do we do with the brief time granted us in this life? Does how we live now have any impact or effect on our eternal future? We believe it does... we believe that what we do with our brief lives is important to us, others, and to God.

That is why the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 13:5-6:

This is all the more urgent, for you to know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up; our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove

your dark deeds like dirty clothes; and put on the shining armor of right living. Romans 13:5-6

The first of three challenges found in this text is that we are challenged to live with a sense of urgency.

1. Live with a sense of urgency

It is an interesting paradox... we know that our life expectancies are ticking away but we live and act like we will live forever. It would seem that most of us live in a perpetual state of denial.

“There was an interesting survey done among college students. They were asked, ‘If you could know the exact date of your death, would you want to know?’ 87% said, ‘No.’” (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 4)

Many of us live with the notion that what we do not know won't hurt us or doesn't matter, but in the end, perhaps it does. When I was young I wondered what older people meant when they said things like, “The years just seem to go by faster and faster.” When I was a kid I didn't think I would ever turn sixteen so I could get a driver's license. When I was a young man I didn't think I would ever graduate from high school. When I was engaged, I didn't think our wedding day would ever arrive. When I was thirty-five, I had no idea how quickly thirty-eight years of ministry would pass by.

I suspect most of us have or most certainly will one day wonder – “what happened... where did my life go?”

Because this particular anecdote has stuck so permanently in my mind, I am sure I have shared it before. I once read a Dear Abby type column written by a twenty-seven year old man who wanted to be a doctor. He apparently had the tools to do it but was wondering if he should, in that he would not graduate from medical school until he was thirty-seven years old. The columnist wrote back, “In ten years will either be a thirty-seven year old doctor or you will be thirty-seven and still thinking about being a doctor.”

Being urgent about life doesn't mean you go berserk in an all-out frenzy to get it all done... whatever it is. But it doesn't mean you procrastinate forever either.

John Ortberg tells the story about a man who returned to his childhood home after twenty years. He went into the house and made his way through the rooms. He went up to the attic and found his old high school jacket. He put his hand into a pocket and pulled out a receipt for a pair of shoes he had left at the shoe repair shop twenty years earlier and never

picked up. So he went to the repair shop... the cobbler was still there and in business. So he presented his receipt to the old man and asked, "Do you still have these shoes?" The old man went back into the work area, returned to the counter, and said, "They'll be ready on Friday."

We probably ought not to live life quite that laid-back. However, Jesus taught us to relax and stop fretting about tomorrow.

Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares about the wild flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, certainly he will care for you." (Matthew 6:27-30)

The first challenge of Living Like You Were Dying is simply to seize the day God has given you.

This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)

Today is the day God has given each of us. Today is the day we embrace as a gift. The Live Like You Were Dying people suggest we live the next seven days without regrets. They suggest that we come back in seven days having lived each day in the present. That means we do not spend our present, living in the past. That means we do not live our present, fretting about the future. They say, "Live each day in such a way that you can say, "I didn't take life for granted. I didn't take the people in my life for granted. I embraced each day as a gift." (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 7)

So we begin by living with a sense of urgency and we continue by living with a sense of eternity.

2. Live with a sense of eternity.

In our text for today the Apostle Paul said, "Wake up, for the coming of your salvation is nearer than when we first believed..." (Romans 13:11-12)

While there is spiritual danger in living life with no sense of urgency or as if our days were without limit, there is also a danger in living life with no sense of eternity.

I like the way we theologically understand the concept of salvation. The text says the coming of our salvation is nearer than it was when we first believed. The idea is that we were saved, are saved, and will be saved. The

concept is further explained in Philippians 1:6 where we are told that God, who began a good work in us, will bring it to completion on the day of Christ's return. The concept is, God is at work in our lives today, but we are being moved along in a spiritual process toward eternity.

Everyone is moving along the timeline continuum toward eternity... and when life is over, it is over!

We will only die once, and then we are judged. Hebrews 9:27

When I play ball with our grand children an amazing phenomenon takes place. I get to pitch and chase the ball while they are allowed unlimited "do-overs" at bat. They strike out and then they claim a "do-over" until they get a hit.

Once we break through the barrier between the temporal and hit eternity... there are no do-overs. So we live every day knowing that this day has brought us closer to our last day on this earth.

So what do we do?

We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. II Corinthians 4:18

So how do we do that? How do we fix our eyes on the eternal? The Live Like You Were Dying folks remind us that we spend our days "chasing after that which is going to wear out, go out of style, break down, collect dust, and ultimately end up in the landfill." (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 8)

If we are to successfully embrace today as a gift from God and keep in mind that this life is not all there is, what do we make this relationship between today and eternity?

We have to prepare in this life for life in eternity. So we live with a sense of priority.

3. We with a sense of priority.

The Live Like You Were Dying people pose an interesting question: "If you really only had a month left to live, how would your priorities change? How would you spend the last 30 days or 720 hours, on this planet?" (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 9)

How we spend our money reflects our values and priorities. Budgets help us live within our means and when we are forced to live within our means we have to prioritize our wants and needs.

Years ago, before Bonnie and I were “living in high clover” we had three small children, we needed groceries, and payday was a week away. So I made a choice. I sold my antique 1897 Model, octagon barreled Winchester rifle and bought groceries. Did I value the rifle? Of course I did. But we valued our children more. Food for the family was a priority.

Priorities force us to act and in some cases make changes in order for our lives to reflect those priorities. That is what Paul was saying in Romans 13:12 when he said, “So don’t live in darkness. Get rid of your evil deeds. Shed them like dirty clothes. Clothe yourselves with the armor of right living as those who live in the light.”

It is kind of a vague verse... he just says we should take off our evil deeds and put on good needs like we remove one set of clothing and put on another outfit.

Perhaps this morning we could suggest one of the things we could remove or “take off” would be the frenzy or frantic pace in our lives.

Sometimes I have wondered what I would do if I really knew I had only a limited amount of time left to live... I have wondered what I would do if the oncologist said, “Monty, you have six months to a year to live.”

I don’t know exactly, but I do know how having faced my own bout with cancer and our oldest son’s death affected me initially. I slowed down... I stopped to smell the roses. I took walks. I remember one afternoon when Corky and I spend hours in a farm pasture turning over layered limestone rocks searching for fossils. It affects the way I saw my own children and how I see our grandchildren... it affects how I see their imperfections. I am a much more relaxed and understanding grandparent than I ever was as a parent. That is not to say that I am indifferent, but it is to say that I now see that some things aren’t very important while other things are.

Somehow we have to examine our lives and take steps to slow down so we can do what really matters.

The bible says, Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

A relationship with God and relationships with people are not forged in frenzied activity. Time for God and others is the first thing to go in a busy person’s life.

Bonnie and I live very busy lives... busier than you would think and we would like. So we have to carve out “be still” time with each other. One of the things we carve out is our little Starbuck’s date night on Sunday

evening. Date night is when we catch up and when we talk about whatever needs talked about.

When my life is frenzied, the easiest thing to do is skip my devotional quiet time with God... It is interesting how I manage to always check my e-mail, even on a busy, busy day. Priorities.

If we are too busy to go to church or leave on time to get to work without blowing a gasket or your horn or take time to read a story to a child or visit an old friend in the care center... we are too busy. Take off the frantic pace of life.

We could also suggest that we might “take off” the pursuit of the good life.

Do you remember the haunting lyrics of The Cat’s in the Cradle by Harry Chapin? The first stanza goes like this:

My child arrived just the other day
He came to the world in the usual way
But there were planes to catch and bills to pay
He learned to walk while I was away
And he was talkin' 'fore I knew it, and as he grew
He'd say "I'm gonna be like you dad
You know I'm gonna be like you"

It is essentially the pursuit of planes to catch and bills to pay and the desire to live the good life that cheats us of the relationships of life... one day the father in The Cat’s In the Cradle came to regret his pursuit of the good life because it cost him the one thing he ultimately came to love most... his son.

But let’s end with a positive word. What we need to do is “put on” more time for relationships.

If we are to take off the frenzy of this life and put on what is most important, we have to focus on that which outlasts this life... our relationships with God and others.

The Living Like You Were Dying people rightly point out that Jesus “spent large blocks of time nurturing his relationship with his Heavenly Father and he paid attention to the people in his world.” (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 12)

Jesus noticed the conspicuous man who climbed a tree in order to see him. He noticed the blind man who kept shouting to get his attention. And

he also noticed the inconspicuous woman in the crowd who touched his coat and he noticed little children.

Perhaps we could begin to just notice the people in our lives... the people we see every day. Notice your spouse. Notice your children. Notice your father and mother. Notice your colleague or classmate. Notice the clerk at the grocery store. Notice your neighbor. Say the things that don't get said. Say words of love, affection, appreciation, and encouragement. Enjoy the people God has placed in your life.

“The clock is ticking. You don't get a second shot [do-over] at today. So let's commit to a 'no regret week.'” (Live Like You Were Dying, P. 13)