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ON WASTING YOUR LIFE

Luke 2:36-38

By

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Christmas Message

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Life is short and uncertain. I am 56 years old, and the older I get, the more I think about the question, "Am I spending my life in such a way that when I stand before the Lord, I will hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant?'" How do you know whether you are wasting your life or investing it in the things that really matter?

In America we have several yardsticks by which we measure a life. One is *usefulness*. We are pragmatists at heart. We feel that if a person does something useful for society, whether it is a profession or a trade, he or she spends his or her life well.

Another yardstick we use is *busyness* or sheer activity. Our lifestyles reflect our values here—we're all busy people. Our weekly calendars are full to the brim. We have the notion that if you just sit around and do nothing, you're wasting your life.

We also gauge our lives by *adventure* and excitement. If we can't get it firsthand, we pick it up vicariously on TV or at sporting events. Our heroes lead exciting lives, either through romance or life-and-death risk taking. We read magazines that tell us about the rich and famous, secretly wishing that our lives could be like theirs. We generally think that money and fame define success.

Often the world recognizes that having warm *personal relationships* is at the heart of a life well spent. If you read the obituaries, usually they mention a person's work and hobbies. But they also mention the people whose lives were affected by the departed one. As Christians, we would concur that loving relationships with family and friends are an important measure of a life well spent.

Behind all of these yardsticks is that of *personal happiness*. Even if a person dies poor and unknown, if he or she was happy or content, that is what matters.

Against these yardsticks of a life well spent, I direct your attention to Anna. We meet her in the narrative about the dedication of the baby Jesus in the temple. She is described in three short

verses, is not even quoted directly, and is gone. If we met a modern-day Anna, we would probably find her a bit odd. Her values clearly are out of sync with those of modern America. Can you picture a reporter for *People* magazine interviewing her?

Reporter: What is your name?

Anna: Anna, daughter of Phanuel, tribe of Asher. I'm Jewish.

Reporter: Whose daughter? How do you spell that? How old are you, Ma'am?

Anna: I'm 84.

Reporter: Well, I'll bet you've lived an interesting life. What have you done with your life?

Anna: Like most Jewish girls, I got married in my teens, but my husband died when I was in my early twenties, before we had children. I've been going to the temple almost every day since then.

Reporter: You go to the temple every day? That's amazing! What do you do there?

Anna: Well, I fast and pray a lot. And, I'm a prophetess, so I hear messages from God now and then.

Reporter: Right! (He thinks to himself, "Maybe this story belongs in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, not in *People* magazine!")

What does the brief glimpse of Anna's life teach us?

You will not waste your life if you spend it in devotion to God.

By our American standards, we might look at Anna's life and think, "What a waste! Over sixty years spent in the temple fasting and praying! That's not the kind of life I want to live." I'll grant that we're not all called to devote ourselves to a ministry of prayer and fasting. Obviously, God had called her to that ministry, and she lived accordingly. But if we look just below the surface, we see that *Anna lived fully devoted to God*. God commends her life to us. In the Bible, every fact is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Along with Simeon, God chose Anna to bear witness to the infant Jesus as the Messiah. Her life was well spent.

1. Devotion to God is really all that matters.

Isn't it? Think about it—what else matters in this life? The Pharisees and scribes thought that their *religious duties* were what mattered. They scurried around the temple precincts that day performing their rituals, oblivious to this unique baby who was being dedicated to the Lord. They took pride in saying, "All my life I have kept God's commandments." But they missed the Messiah because they were really more devoted to their religion than to God. There is a difference, you know!

The Sadducees thought that *political influence* and power were what mattered. "Life after death," they scoffed, "is just pie in the sky when you die. What matters is here and now!" A group of them passed within yards of the child and Anna as they debated the latest edict from Rome.

The temple merchants thought that *a good income* was what mattered. They hawked their temple money and sold their officially approved sacrificial animals within earshot of this carpenter, his wife, and their newborn son. They lived well and left a nice inheritance to their children when they died. But they missed God's Savior that day.

In contrast to all of these, Anna knew that devotion to God is all that matters. She recognized the child as God's promised Messiah. She was wiser than all the religious leaders in Jerusalem!

I read once about a computer company that went public and its president became an instant millionaire. Hours later he lost control of his Ferrari, crashed through 20 feet of guardrail, and was killed. *The Los Angeles Times* reported, "Until the accident at 4:30 Wednesday afternoon, it had been the best of days for [the president] and the thriving young company, ..." The same week another obituary for a Chinese politburo official, who died of a heart attack, stated that his "death came one week before he was expected to be elected vice president of China." If either man died without Christ, we should ask, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

I once read of a man who thought that he knew how to live to be 120. I thought, "Okay, what if he succeeds? Then what?" Even if we could figure out how to live to 900, like the early patriarchs, we still have to die and face eternity. In light of that, devotion to

God is really all that matters in this life! With it, we can enjoy earthly blessings if God grants them. Without it, we've really wasted our lives. The fact is, not everyone can attain the things that the world labels as success. But,

2. Devotion to God is available to everyone.

No matter what your station in life, you can devote yourself to the Lord, and that makes whoever you are and whatever you do count in light of eternity. Take Anna, for example.

Anna was a woman. While Jewish women enjoyed more respect in that day than women in other cultures, there still was a fair amount of discrimination against them. The rabbis did not approve of the same amount of instruction in the Torah being given to girls as to boys. They regarded women's minds as not adapted for such investigations (Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* [Eerdmans], pp. 132-133). Women were restricted to an area of the temple called "The Women's Court." They could not enter the inner court where the ceremonies were performed. According to Josephus, women and slaves could not give evidence in court (cited by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* [McGraw-Hill], 1:156).

And yet the Lord is pleased to include the testimony of Anna concerning Jesus. God is no respecter of persons. He is pleased with the devotion of any person, male or female.

Anna was a widow. In fact, she had been widowed at an early age. She easily could have grown bitter toward God. She could have complained of her loneliness. Widows in that culture didn't have much opportunity to get an education and learn a business or trade to provide for themselves. They were often the target of unscrupulous businessmen. No doubt Anna had experienced a difficult life. And yet she did not turn her back on God. In fact, God declares that He has a special concern for orphans and widows: "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows is God in His holy habitation" (Ps. 68:5). Anna took refuge under God's protective care. Her trials drove her to deeper devotion to God, not away from Him.

Anna was elderly. While the elderly were more respected in that society than they are in ours, they were still subject to abuse. In our pragmatic society, the elderly are often viewed as a useless burden

on society. They can't take care of themselves. They can't make a living. But, thankfully, God does not view the elderly that way, and neither should we! If an elderly person is devoted to God, their life and death is precious in His sight (Ps. 116:15).

The point is, no matter what your station in life—male or female, young or old, rich or poor—you can devote yourself to God and He will be pleased with your devotion. The world may ignore or despise you, but God always has had such a godly remnant. They are the salt of the earth; they preserve the whole mass from corruption. You can be counted among them.

Thus, devotion to God is all that matters; it is available to all.

3. Devotion to God takes many outward forms, but it always involves worship, witness, and waiting.

A. Devotion to God involves worship.

Probably Anna did not live in the temple, but Luke means that she was there all the time. The word translated “serving” (NASB) has the nuance of worshipful service to God. Anna’s worship took the form of “fastings and prayers” (2:37).

Fasting usually means going without food for some period of time for the purpose of seeking God in prayer. For the Jews, the most common fast lasted from sunrise to sunset, although the Bible mentions longer fasts. The Day of Atonement was an annual national fast. Otherwise, fasting was done in times of personal or national distress, or as preparation for special times of seeking the Lord. If you’d like a challenge, read (as I did this year) John Piper’s *A Hunger for God* [Crossway Books], subtitled, “Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer.” I confess that I am no where near Pastor Piper in his experience with fasting. I have, though, found it to be a beneficial way of seeking the Lord when I needed to know His will and in times of crisis. (Donald Whitney, in *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life* [NavPress], has a helpful chapter 9, “Fasting” for the Purpose of Godliness.)

Anna’s worship also took the form of prayers. God gifts some of His saints by enabling them to devote large blocks of time to the ministry of prayer. Part of that time involves interceding for others, but part of it also consists of praise and thanksgiving. The main thing in prayer is to seek God and commune with Him.

Even if the ministry of worship through fasting and prayer is not your area of gift, you still should set aside time to seek the Lord as Anna did. Whether it is a half-day each quarter, one lunch hour each week, or an hour or two each weekend, I encourage you to put it on your calendar. Spend the time in devotion to the Lord. Read His Word, sing some hymns or praise songs, and pray. I have found that if I don't put it in my schedule, other things crowd it out and I don't do it.

B. Devotion to God involves witness.

Anna couldn't keep it to herself; she "continued to speak of Him" to others (2:38). If your cup is brim-full, you can't help but slop some of it on others. If your heart is full of thankfulness to God, who sent His Son to save you from your sins, people around you will know about it. Some believers justify not witnessing by saying, "I don't talk about it; I just live the message." But part of living the Christian life *is* talking about it!

We all talk about the things we love. Have you ever been around a sports fanatic? What does he talk about? "Did you see that game last night!" Have you ever been around a young man or woman who has just fallen in love? What do they talk about?

Yes, you need to be tactful and sensitive. Yes, you need to wait on the Lord for the right opening. But, most of us don't err on the side of being too bold. The order, by the way, is important: Worship first, then witness. The reason Anna was telling everyone about the Lord Jesus was that she spent much time in private devotion with the Lord. All too often, the reason that we do not bear witness is that we have lost our first love.

C. Devotion to God involves waiting.

Not only Simeon and Anna, but others also were "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:25, 38). While that phrase has nationalistic overtones, it also refers to the spiritual redemption that God had long ago promised and now was bringing to fruition for His people (Isa. 40:1, 9; 52:9; 63:4). J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 2:74-75) observes that although these people lived in a wicked city, they "were not carried away by the flood of worldliness, formality, and self-righteousness around them. They were not infected by the carnal expectations of a mere worldly

Messiah, in which most Jews indulged. They lived in the faith of patriarchs and prophets, that the coming Redeemer would bring in holiness and righteousness, and that His principal victory would be over sin and the devil." With Jacob, all who are devoted to God cry out, "For Your salvation I wait, O Lord" (Gen. 49:18).

Devotion to God is really all that matters. It is available to everyone. It takes many outward forms, but always involves worship, witness, and waiting for His final redemption to come.

4. Devotion to God is one and the same with devotion to Jesus Christ.

Anna was devoted to God, but the instant she saw the baby Jesus, she thanked God and began to speak of Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Note:

A. God the Son and God the Father are inextricably joined in Scripture.

Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The mystery of the Christmas story is that the eternal God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. Through the miracle of the virgin birth, Mary's offspring is Immanuel, which means, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). While we can never fully understand the nature of the Trinity, we must affirm the revealed truth of Scripture, that the one God exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This means that you cannot know God the Father apart from knowing Jesus, God the Son. In John 8:19, Jesus told the Jews, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also." First John 2:23 states, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also." You cannot separate God and Jesus Christ. Those who say they worship God, but who deny the deity of the Son of God, are badly mistaken. Jesus claimed, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (John 5:23).

B. God the Son is the Redeemer of God's people.

Anna was looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem," and she found it in Jesus. The entire human race is in bondage to sin and under the just condemnation of God's law. But God sent "Christ

[to redeem] us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us ... in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14).

The concept of "redemption" implies three things. First, *redemption implies antecedent bondage*. A free person does not need redemption; slaves need redemption. Every person is born enslaved to sin and under the curse of judgment imposed by God's holy law. Second, *redemption implies cost*. A price must be paid to buy the slave out of bondage. Since the wages of sin is death, that was the price to redeem us from our sins. A sinless substitute had to die in our place to satisfy God's justice. Jesus Christ did that on the cross. Third, *redemption implies the ownership of that which is redeemed*. Since Christ bought us with His blood, we are not our own. "For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20).

When the slave trade was active in West Africa, the traders would go into the interior and capture hundreds of people. They would put an iron collar around the captives' necks to keep them in check until they arrived back at the coast for shipment. A chain went from one iron collar to the next, so none could escape.

As the captives marched through the villages on the way to the coast, a villager sometimes recognized a friend or relative among them. If he were financially able, he could redeem that person with a payment of silver or gold. He delivered him from bondage by the payment of a price. Scripture says, "you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

We see God's great love in that He sent His Son to this earth to meet the demands of His holy justice. What God required, He provided at great cost to Himself. Jesus came to offer Himself as the price of our redemption. If you have not been redeemed through Christ's blood, then whether you realize it or not, you are enslaved to sin and headed for God's eternal judgment. You are wasting your life. Receiving by faith God's gift of redemption is the beginning of a life of devotion to Him.

Conclusion

On his deathbed at age 52, Matthew Henry, whose commentary on the whole Bible is still widely used almost 300 years later, said to a friend, “You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men—this is mine: that a life spent in the service of God and communion with Him, is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this world” (source unknown).

Anna would agree. A life devoted to God is not wasted. It is a life well spent. A life devoted to anything else, no matter how noble or how highly praised in the world, is a life ultimately wasted. Here is an action point for the New Year: Read John Piper’s excellent new book, *Don’t Waste Your Life* [Crossway]. It’s about how to lose your life for Christ’s sake, and thereby not waste it. I wish I had read it when I was 20. Whether you are young or old, you will find reading it to be a profitable use of your time!

Whatever you do for a living, make sure that devotion for Jesus Christ is at the heart of *why* you are living. To live for anything else is to waste your life.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you agree with or dispute the statement, “Devotion to God is really all that matters”? What are the implications of this biblically?
2. If a person is fully devoted to God, will he or she go into “full-time” Christian service? Why/why not?
3. Should every person seek to find fulfillment in his or her job? Why/why not?
4. How can a Christian know where and in what capacity God wants him or her to serve?
5. How can we maintain fervent devotion to Jesus Christ in the midst of life’s pressures?

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