

## What Kind Of Life Do You Want?

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In some ways, this message is a follow-on to the sermon I gave in December, entitled, “What Do We Do at the End of an Age?” That sermon began with the premise that the imbalances of society, pressures, and institutional decay have reached a breaking point, and that if this nation (in particular) is going to continue, it will have to undergo radical changes, some of which are already taking place. In this way, the age that we have known is ending.

That sermon drew on the admonitions God provided in the book of Hebrews, which was written to a people who were also enduring the pressures, instability, and uncertainty of the end of an age. We saw that Hebrews was written to help the audience recognize the supremacy of Jesus Christ over every being and institution. The author’s intent was to help them reorient back to putting Christ first because that was how their faith would survive the cataclysm that lay just ahead for them.

Today’s message asks a different question for us to consider, but there will be similar themes, especially evaluating what is most important to us.

Our question for today is, “What kind of life do you want?”

Granted, that question sounds like a life-coaching seminar. A thriving industry has sprung up in the West in the last 3-4 decades that is dedicated to helping people plan their futures, achieve their dreams, and create their ideal lives. Life coaching brings in billions in revenue globally, and it is most prominent in the nations that are descended from Joseph. It seems the Joseph countries have the most people who are wealthy enough that they are willing to pay other people to help them figure out what to do with their lives and how to do it. This is in line with what Solomon observed: People achieve a certain level of wealth, but it doesn’t fulfill them, so they keep searching. And now they pay others to help them.

But personal fulfillment is not our topic for today, at least not directly. Our question has a different emphasis, so I will rephrase it: “Do you want the life that you have?”

Now, depending on your disposition, your thoughts will either tend toward what you are grateful to have been blessed with, or toward what you feel is lacking.

And it is worth reflecting on whether you lean toward contentment or discontent—half full or half empty. But we will take this exploration one step further.

Those called of God and baptized in His name have been given a life—a life that is distinctly different. And that is what these questions have been leading to: Do you want this distinctly different life that God has given to you? How we truthfully answer that question reaches into every area of our existence.

As we explore this question, we will begin with a reality that often slips from our mind, which is the cost of this God-given life. In this case, I’m not talking about the cost the Savior paid, but the personal cost to us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in Germany under the Nazi regime. He was an outspoken critic of the Nazis, and they hanged him at the age of 39. He could have remained silent and saved his life, but instead he gave his last full measure of devotion in speaking what he believed. His book, “The Cost of Discipleship,” contains this well-known line: “When Christ calls a man, [H]e bids him come and die.”

That famous line is part of a larger paragraph, which I will read to you:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship, we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with [H]is death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is

not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, [H]e bids him come and die.

What Bonhoeffer said there is well-supported by Scripture, for the most part. It is the Father that does the calling, not Jesus. Even so, we need to be reminded periodically that God calls us to die to the world and to the self so that we can live fully for Him. And this death is not limited to baptism, which is a type of death, but rather this death is ongoing. Paul said that he died daily. Each day, he worked to put to death the deeds of the flesh.

So again, our question: Is this life of dying to the world and to the self, and living for God, the life that we truly want? We need to ask this because the old man, to the degree that he still remains in us—and he does remain in us—seeks to retain aspects of the world that he is fond of. He also fights, desperately and deceitfully, for self-preservation and self-sovereignty. So, we must evaluate regularly whether this life of separation from the world and self-sacrifice is what we still truly want, or whether our heart is turning away from God.

Please turn with me to Luke 9:

**Luke 9:23-26** Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.

We should understand that Christ is speaking symbolically here. He is not commanding us to wear a crucifix around our neck or wrist. Such a worship aid violates the Second Commandment. What He is talking about is reckoning ourselves as dead through self-denial so we can follow the One who redeemed us from the death penalty so that we could have life.

As it is used in this passage, the cross—the stake—is a symbol of self-denial and losing our life for a greater purpose, just as Christ did. It is a symbol of great personal cost. The fact that we must take up our stake daily means that we must lift it every morning and crucify our carnal nature, plus anything else God asks us to give up, until we go to sleep. Then the next morning, we rise and shoulder again those things we must bear, crucifying the flesh again. This practice begins at baptism, but it does not end until our final breath.

It is easy to forget that our lives are not our own to direct. We are not masters of our fate and captains of our soul, as William Henry penned in his poem, *Invictus*. Our life debt has been paid, and continues to be paid, which means that every breath and every drop of blood belong to our Redeemer. Therefore, our continual thought must be an evaluation of what He wants for us, and what we need to do to follow Him as closely as possible. Our lives must conform to His. As it says, this involves self-denial, particularly regarding this world.

Notice that Christ is not saying here we must choose between Him and a life of sin. That goes without saying, but commandment-breaking is not what He warns against here. Instead, we must choose between Him and anything that interferes with following Him—things that may not be sinful by themselves, but which are not what He would have us do. We can see this in His statement about gaining the whole world. The principle of gain is not sinful. Yet He warns that a wrong pursuit could cost us eternal life.

This warning is especially relevant for us in this time. Christ's letter to the Laodiceans indicates that they have more love for material things than for Him. They do not reject God entirely, but neither do they commit to Him wholeheartedly because that would cost more than they are willing to pay. Perhaps they pay lip-service by saying things like God is the most important thing in their life, but their actions reveal something else. They are still clinging to their lives because surrendering would require too much.

Part of preparing for baptism is counting the cost, even though it is not possible to fully grasp ahead of time what that means. But whether we fully understood it or not, we committed ourselves to a life of self-denial and complete self-sacrifice when we went under the water. When God called us,

He bid us to come to Christ and then die, over and over again. The question is, is this still the life we want?

Of course, we know what our answer should be. We know the right thing to say. But we are mulling this question today so we can observe our own gut-honest responses in case we need to adjust our outlook and priorities. We are looking for signs that our commitment, resolve, or dedication to God may be slipping. We are watching for indicators that we have become tired of His work in our lives, or that the world's bowl of stew is more enticing to us than life with the Creator God.

Contrary to what the prosperity gospel and Christianity-flavored life coaching proclaim, God's main focus is not giving us the life that we want. His focus is giving us the life He wants for us, which may be hard to accept because we don't understand life the way He does. So, we must walk by faith, trusting that what God is doing with us will turn out better than what we would do for ourselves.

Please turn to Psalm 37. In addition to being Dr. Maas' third favorite verse in the Bible, Psalm 37 contains a proof-text that is often quoted yet not as often understood fully:

**Psalm 37:4** Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.

This seems to say that as long as we take delight in God—we call Him “Lord” and proclaim our love to Him—then He will give us whatever we want. But that misses the foundational condition of the first part of the verse. In the rush to claim the promise that God will give them the desires of their heart, many miss the fact that truly and fully delighting in the LORD fundamentally changes the desires of the heart. If we delight in the LORD, we will come into His presence sincerely and frequently. And being in His presence changes us, and changes what is important to us, and changes what we desire.

When God is the object of our life, and when we experience that joy, delight, and peace are found in His presence—when that is what we delight in, then that is what God gives us. When He is the desire of our heart, He gives us life with Him.

We can see God's intent if we keep reading:

**Psalm 37:5-6** Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.

Notice that His interest for us, as it says here, is righteousness and justice. There is no mention of gaining followers, or a life of ease, or winning the lottery (which we shouldn't be playing anyway). When we delight in God, the application of righteousness and justice in our lives will entirely overshadow the love of the world.

These verses are a precursor to what Christ said in Matthew 6:33, that we must seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then the necessary things will be added. While that may sound rather Spartan, I am sure we have all experienced how abundantly God supplies, yet still within bounds of what is good for us. But the siren song of the world is to seek first the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and God becomes an afterthought.

Again, we know what our priorities should be, but which life are we actually—right now—most interested in?

We will switch now to another biblical analogy that helps us to have a proper expectation about our life. Please turn with me to Isaiah 64.

**Isaiah 64:8** But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand.

This verse is found within something that is extremely rare in the Bible: a prayer of repentance by a humble nation. Here the people acknowledge that

they are entirely within God's hands for Him to do with them as He pleases, and it is in the context of pleading for mercy because they had strayed, and they know they need the restoration that only He can give.

This Potter-and-clay analogy is used again in Jeremiah 18, if you would turn there:

**Jeremiah 18:1-6** The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD , saying: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words." Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!

This passage has more drama than the one in Isaiah 64. Here, God intimates that even though the original vessel was marred and unusable according to the original intent, He could still shape it into something that would be useful to Him, even though it might not be as beautiful as the original. It is a story of redemption after something goes wrong. But the potter determines the form and substance of the vessel after the redemption, not the clay. This idea carries into the New Testament in Roman 9:19-24, where Paul teaches that God can make whatever sort of vessel He chooses, and the thing formed has no basis for calling God into account.

God is the Potter, expertly working with the clay to fashion it into what He desires. But His work with us is a process, and we need to evaluate from time to time whether we are still yielding to His work.

Sometimes it feels like we are just going in circles. Well, Jeremiah mentions the potter's wheel, so, as clay, we may indeed be going 'round and 'round. But because of God's workmanship, we can also trust that with each revolution on the wheel under God's hands, we are taking on a little more of the image that He desires for us.

Working with clay requires a lot of pounding and kneading and great pressure. We can identify with that. We don't always understand the reasons for the pressure and the pounding, but we can know it is part of His working with us to make us pliable and ready to respond to Him without any resistance or hesitation. If we are prone to resisting and determined to have things our way, then we can expect more pressure and kneading until we surrender and become pliable in His hands.

We can add another reality to this picture, which is what the clay must undergo once it has been shaped into its final form. That is, it must be heated with extreme temperatures, baking the form into permanence. So, even after God has developed His character within us and has engraved His laws on our hearts so they are our first nature, we can still expect high heat to make the finished form permanent—to make it eternal.

So, if we feel like our lives are spinning, or the pressure is agonizing, or the heat seems unbearable, it doesn't have to mean that God has cursed us. Of course, if we are sinning or otherwise turning away from Him, He may respond with merciful chastening. So, when adverse events happen to us, it certainly is appropriate to consider our ways, and to seek God to see if He is bringing something to our attention.

But as with Job, the presence of adversity may also just be an indicator that the Master Potter is shaping and perfecting us. Once we have sought God and determined that He is not chastening because of sin, our response should be to yield in patience. As James says, we must let patience have its perfect work.

We should also recognize that the carnal man is satisfied with his present spiritual image and doesn't see the need for any changes. The carnal man says there is no good reason for us to endure pressure or adversity or high heat. He is the one that says, "This *shouldn't* be happening to *me*." He may whisper to us that we are above hardship because we are so spiritual. This is the essence of the attitude in Laodicea, which says, "I am in need of nothing." Likewise, Babylon says in her heart, "I sit as queen ... and will not see sorrow."

Hopefully, we are not foolish enough to say those quiet parts out loud, but those attitudes show up in how we live and respond to events and circumstances—that is, whether we acknowledge and welcome God’s turning of us on His potter’s wheel, or whether we recoil at the thought that we need it.

So, in the face of adverse events or circumstances, it is appropriate to ask God, “Why is this happening?” In fact, we should do this. God fired warning shots like famine, drought, flooding, pestilence, and burning to get ancient Israel’s attention, but Israel brushed them off, and continued on without considering why. The modern nations of Israel are doing the same thing. So, it is always wise to seek to understand what God is doing, but never to question whether He is justified. A major lesson of the book of Job is that the Creator is always right in whatever He does with any part of His creation—because it is *His*.

Similarly, we tread on dangerous ground if we start pondering, “Why is this happening to *me*, and not to that *other* jar of clay, who is *worse* than I am?” God’s evaluation and judgment of each vessel is individual. Only He knows what pressure is needed and when it is needed for His work to move forward. If we are offended by what God is doing (or seemingly not doing) with another, it indicates we are not of the same mind as God.

It has been said that comparison is the thief of joy. Comparing God’s work in our lives with His work in another person’s life has the great potential to rob us of peace. Maybe you have not thought of this, but if we allow someone else’s circumstances to dictate whether we experience peace and joy, then those circumstances have power over us. We become a slave to somebody else’s life instead of a slave of God and righteousness.

Think about Peter’s concern that John might have a longer life and easier death. Christ’s response was, “. . . what is that to you? You follow Me.” Peter was troubled that God’s work among the disciples wasn’t going to be “fair” (as Peter saw it), and Christ basically told him he had far more important things to focus on, such as his own spiritual walk.

At times, being clay in the hands of the Potter involves incomprehensible challenges to our sense of justice—challenges that may stretch our idea of fairness to its breaking point or beyond. But this just means that our senses and ideas are out of alignment with God’s perspective, which then also means that He has more work to do on us. So, the wisest thing we can do is to let go and to yield, trusting that God will make things right in His time.

At the end of this process is the hope of being a vessel of honor, prepared for and receiving divine glory. Every second of the process and all the pain will be worth it. But again, we must ask whether we still desire to be shaped and molded by Him—whether we want His hands all over our lives, smoothing out all our rough edges and thoroughly working us over. We must ask whether we still believe that the discomfort is worth what it will produce.

We’ll move on to another vivid metaphor as we continue to probe our own hearts:

**Psalm 23:1-3** The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

Psalm 23 is written from the perspective of a sheep. The very first phrase—“The LORD is my shepherd”—is a declaration that the sheep is overjoyed to have the LORD as his shepherd, and he is not ashamed to proclaim it.

We can contrast this with the wretched condition of other sheep, unmentioned here, who do not have the LORD as their shepherd. Those without the Good Shepherd suffer under the cruel authority of this world’s ruler. They do not have anyone taking care of them, so they are focused on survival. They compete for resources, pushing around other sheep, scared they won’t have enough, always striving and never at peace. It’s a terrible life.

But the sheep who are fed by, guided by, and protected by the LORD have confidence that they will not lack for anything of true significance as the Shepherd sees it, which could be a point of contention for any sheep that are

not fully submitted. But the LORD's sheep are led to green pastures and still waters. They are refreshed and restored. They are led in the paths of righteousness. It is an idyllic description, and it probably sounds pretty good to us, especially when compared to the stress and frantic busyness of modern life.

We can add to this picture what Jesus says in the Parable of the Good Shepherd. He says that He came so that His sheep could have life, and that we may have it more abundantly (John 10:10). The abundant life is quite different from the world's idea of abundance. What we see in the ads, in our feeds, and in the posturing of influencers is gloss without substance. The abundant life is a quality of life that develops as one seeks to be conformed to God, which means coming out of the world, and letting go of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Those things separate us from the Father and the life He desires to share with us.

Yet the carnal mind is unable to recognize pastures that are truly green, or value waters that are still—not when it has an exciting city nearby to distract and stimulate it. The carnal mind cannot see why life with God is better. It sees godliness as stifling, as boring, as unattractive because it cannot see past its present circumstances to the end result. It does not trust that the Creator knows what He is talking about when He tells us how to live.

While Psalm 23 describes peace and serenity—which are sorely lacking these days—we must evaluate how much we want those things, and further, what we are willing to do, or to sacrifice, for them. The green pastures and still waters are available to us through our relationship with God, but as with any relationship, it takes work on our part. If we are not earnestly seeking Him, it is not realistic to expect to have peace and a sense of well-being.

The world does not know the way to the green pastures and still waters, which is why there is constant running to and fro, and restlessness in people estranged from the King of Peace. We have the opportunity they do not, but we must still seek and yield to His guidance. We have to want Him to lead us, not just in some things, but in all things.

Verse 3 mentions God restoring the soul, meaning the life or the strength. Those in the world do not seek out the One who truly gives that inner

restoration. Instead, they pursue things like retail therapy, or binge watching, or cranking that song or playlist to 11 and putting it on repeat, or going to New Age retreats, or maybe the bottom of a bottle.

Those things may pacify for a time, but we must not mistake dopamine or distraction for God's restoration. True restoration can only come through the relationship with the Shepherd. That's what it says—the Shepherd restores us. Everything else is a counterfeit that not only cannot renew or restore, but could deplete our life even further. And yet at times, we resist seeking Him for what He will gladly give because it could mean we have to give up something we aren't ready to give up. It indicates we have not fully died yet.

Back in 2010, Richard wrote a series of essays called, "Beating the Rat Race." It was about the absolute spiritual need that we have for stillness and peace for the sake of tuning out the world and tuning into God. This is a formidable challenge for us as technology becomes enmeshed in every area of our lives. We are always connected, and thus always available to be pulled away from our own thoughts. Our phones, watches, ear buds, glasses and other wearable devices become leashes that somebody else holds. We are not truly free—we hand over our time and attention to something else.

Yet our minds are finite and our attention spans limited. Each notification has the power to pull us away from the things that are most important and to keep us from hearing the Shepherd's voice. God does not just speak through wind and fires and earthquakes. He more often speaks with a still, small voice—but we have to be still and quiet to hear it.

Please turn with me to Galatians 2:

**Galatians 2:20** I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

As Jesus said in Matthew 6, we cannot serve two masters. We can either pursue life on our terms and lose out on eternity, or we can give up our claim on our lives and trust God with what He does with them. This does not mean we become completely passive and expect Him to do everything, but it does

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mean that we seek Him continually regarding the life He is pleased for us to have.

And so, our question is not philosophical, but foundational: What kind of life do we truly want? And what are we willing to do—and to give up, if necessary—so that God is pleased to give it to us?

He has bidden us to come and die so that we can live with Him and for Him.