

# Don't Waste Your Life

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 19 November 2023

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, my wife's grandfather passed away this week. That's why she's not here. She had to fly home to be at the memorial service. He was...he had just at the beginning of this month turned 100 years old, and so they were reflecting back on the hundred years of life that Alan had before passing away.

And as this has been happening over this past week, it just got me thinking, as things like this do, it got me thinking about life and about what it means to live a successful life. I began to think if I knew the date that I was going to pass away as that date approached and I look back on my life, what would I think about my life? What would other people think about my life, right? What does it mean to have a life well lived? And what kinds of things should one celebrate after someone passes? And I realized even as I was thinking about that this week that I most often don't think about this kind of thing. And I think that probably most people would agree that very often we are so pulled into the weeds of our lives. We are...the tyranny of the urgent and the day-to-day demands that confront us mean that it's hard to step back and think big picture about our lives as a whole and how we're living them and what we're prioritizing. And yet, as we read the lectionary this morning, all of these readings are essentially pointing us to this fact. That is a question we should be asking. That is something that we should reflect on because the day will come when we will all be called to give an account for the life that we have lived. And we're going to focus on the Gospel reading this morning, Matthew 25, what we just read. And what we'll see is that this is a parable that Jesus is sharing with His disciples, and it's part of a series of parables. Jesus tells one parable after another, and all of them are designed to provoke these same questions about life. Jesus is pointing to the fact that He is going to leave, and then one day, nobody knows when, He's going to return. So, after His life and death and resurrection and ascension, there'll be an undisclosed period of time, but one day He will return. And the question that Jesus is provoking us to ask is, how shall we live until Christ comes again? How are we to live? And if I could summarize the point of this parable in one sentence, it would be this, don't waste your life. Don't waste your life. We're going to answer three questions this morning. What is God's purpose for our lives? What keeps us from living for God's purposes? And then finally, what can we do about it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and sometimes it delights, and sometimes it comforts, sometimes it confuses, sometimes it challenges or even offends us. Lord, in whatever way we receive Your Word this morning, we know that You are giving us what we need, whether we need comfort or whether we need to be challenged and provoked. And we know that

You do Your work through Your Word because You love us, and we pray simply that we would have hearts that are open to receiving the words that You speak, and that even as we open Your written Word, we would come face to face with Your living Word, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

[ 4 : 0 1 ] So first of all, what is God's purpose for our lives? Jesus tells a parable about a rich master who goes away on a long journey, and before He leaves, He entrusts His wealth to three of His servants in the form of talents. And a talent is a unit of monetary value. It's equivalent to about 20 years' earnings.

So one talent is the equivalent of about 20 years' earnings for the average laborer in this time. And so, the first servant gets five talents. That's a lifetime's worth of earnings. The second servant gets two talents, and the third servant gets one talent. And the first thing that we need to see is that this is not just about money, right? It's a parable. The master represents God, and each servant represents a human life. So think of each servant as representing a human life. And the talents represent everything that God entrusts to us over the course of our lives. So from the moment that you are conceived, from the moment that you are conceived, everything that you have is a gift.

And it's been given to you by God. Your DNA, your temperament, your body, your mind, the breath in your lungs, your family that you're born into, your friends along the way, your formative childhood experiences, your education, your aptitudes, your skills, your spiritual gifts, your money, your career, your home, your kids, your networks and associations, all of it comes from God. All of it has been provided to you.

And God gives us all of these things for a reason. Think of it as God's capital investment in the world. It's God's capital investment in creation. God is the owner of all of these things, things, and then we are the brokers, and God has entrusted His capital to us. And the single overarching purpose of our lives is this, to invest God's capital into God's kingdom, to take what has been entrusted to us and to invest it into God's kingdom. And we say, well, what does that mean? Well, God's vision for the world, God's vision for creation is summed up in the word shalom. And shalom is a big word. It means wholeness. It means peace. It means flourishing. Shalom means people loving and serving God and one another. Shalom means an interdependent community full of justice and righteousness and righteousness and peace where people are relying on one another and blessing one another and spending what they have into making the world better. That's shalom. [7:20] And when human beings rebelled against God, everything was broken, and shalom was lost. It came crashing down. But Jesus is now at this very moment leading a revolution to restore shalom. And this is what He means when He says at the beginning and throughout His ministry, He says, the kingdom of God has drawn near. The kingdom of God is coming, but this isn't a military revolution. It's not a political upheaval. This is a spiritual revolution that will then have massive implications for the physical world and the social and the political. But it's a spiritual revolution. And at the heart of it is Jesus who is the rightful King who has come to take back the world that turned against Him. He's the rightful King who has come to offer salvation to all people to restore all that has been broken and to renew all things. This is the kingdom.

And so, Jesus calls His followers to join in that work. And that's what we mean when we talk about investing God's capital into God's kingdom. It means pouring your life and pouring your resources into the work of the kingdom. This means living as a radical counterculture that displays God's character to the world. This means sharing the gospel. This means seeking the common good. This means extending the rule and the reign of Christ into all of life. It means that whatever your vocation is, whether it's business or education or policy making or hospitality or home making, whatever your vocation is, it means that in that vocation, you are aiming at the values and the priorities of the kingdom. It means that you are continually asking, how can I advance the kingdom through my work? Now, the first implication for us to realize is that there is a purpose that is meant to give meaning and direction to your life. And that if you're here, and especially if you're not a Christian or if this is the first time that you've come to Church of the Advent, and maybe one of the questions you're asking is, is there more to life? Is there more behind my existence? Is there a reason that I'm here beyond biological happenstance? And what this tells us is that God made you the way He did for a reason. You know, our culture says you should be free to make your own meaning in life, determine your own purpose. And technically that is true in our society. No one's going to stop you if you want to make your own meaning of your life. We live in a free society where you are allowed to do that. You can make whatever meaning you want. But I have a hunch, I have a hunch that that's not really what we want.

I mean, you can do it. You can go out and do it. But I actually think that deep down, regardless of what religion you claim, I think that deep down as human beings, we know that that's ultimately unsatisfying. Right? We don't really want to have to make it up. I think that deep down we actually want someone to tell us our purpose. I mean, think of all of our favorite stories and movies. Right? Think of all of the most beloved stories that stand the test of time, that the best stories are not about someone who goes out and just makes up meaning. Right? Who says, you know, I think this will be my purpose. Those are not the stories that stand the test of time. The stories that we love are the stories where there's someone who discovers their purpose. They don't make it up, they discover it. They're living their normal life and then some old sage or ancient prophecy reveals to them that there is actually an objective purpose to their life. And it's something that they, once they discover it, they have to embrace it. They have to take on that responsibility and live into it. And through that journey, they become who they were always meant to be. Those are the stories that we love. And I think the reason is that we long for that to be true about us. I don't want to make it up. I want someone in authority to say, this is why you're here and this is what you're called to do.

[ 12 : 01 ] And Scripture says, the reason that we feel that way is because these stories all point to the truth, that there is a purpose and you can discover it. But God is the only one who can tell you what that is.

And until we realize that, our lives are really never going to make sense. And we can make our own meaning. Technically allowed to do that. But it's going to be very unsatisfying.

So what are some of the things that, that's the first point I want to make. Now we want to ask, what are some of the things that, assuming we come to begin to understand what that purpose is, what are some of the things that get in the way of us living for God's purposes?

What keeps us from doing this faithfully? Well, it's interesting in this parable, while the master's gone, the first two servants invest their talents and they make a return.

And then the third servant does something different. He buries his talent. And then the master returns and very interestingly, he rewards the first two servants saying, well done, good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. He says, you've shown me that you understand the purpose of the things that I've entrusted to you. You've done what I hoped you would do. You've shown me what you can do. And now, because I know that, I'm going to put you over so much more. I'm going to entrust so much more into your care, because I know that you know what to do with it. I know that you understand your purpose.

[ 13 : 34 ] But then when he finds out what the third servant has done, he calls him a wicked and slothful servant. And he casts that servant into the outer darkness. And we have to ask, okay, what's this all about? And look at what the master says to the servant in verses 26 and 27.

Basically, he says, you know, the servant claims that he's afraid of the master. And basically, he says, listen, if you were truly afraid of me, if you truly believed that I was the kind of person who would, who would, who would, you know, reap where I didn't sow, that you would have at least taken my money to the bank where I could earn some interest. But that's not what you did. And then we see the real reason behind this servant's choice to bury the talents. The master accuses this servant of being wicked and slothful. Sloth. Sloth is the reason. Now, what is sloth? A lot of people think of slothfulness as laziness. And you know, I used to, for years I would read this parable and I would think the servant just kind of wanted to sit around and play video games. He didn't want to work. And so, he just buried the talent, went and played video games until his master came back. That's not sloth.

I mean, it can be sloth. Sloth can be a kind of laziness, but there's way more to it than that. A slothful person can actually be a very busy person. A slothful person can actually look like a very productive person. But here's the thing. A slothful person is very busy doing everything except the thing that they should be doing. They're busy doing everything except the thing that they should be doing. It's like, you know, when I know that I have to do something that I don't want to do. When I know, you know, there's a pile of dishes and I have to do the dishes and I really don't want to do the dishes. And so, I spend two hours reorganizing all the books on my shelf.

Right? What am I doing? Do the books need to be organized? Not really. The dishes need to get done. It stinks in there. But I'd rather reorganize the books. Right? That's a form of sloth. John Ortberg, I love. He says, sloth is the failure to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Like the kamikaze pilot who flew 17 missions. Right? It's, you're doing everything but the thing. And the thing is, sloth like this starts in one's mind. It starts by focusing on the wrong things instead of the right thing. There's a guy named Apollo Robbins, and I love him. He's the world's best pickpocket. You can go out and watch his TED Talk. It's just, I won't spoil it for you, but watch it. It's really, really cool. And people wonder how can he do this? He'll pull people up on stage and he's, as he's talking to them, he's taking their watch, he's taking their wallet, he's taking their, the rings off their fingers, and then he's putting it all back or putting it in different places.

And the entire time, the person has no idea it's happening. And you're like, well, how does somebody get to be that good at pickpocketing? And when they ask him, the answer is this. What a pickpocket really does is, it's not really about the dexterity, although that's part of it, it's really about attention.

He is a choreographer of attention. And he is really, really, really, really good at getting people to pay attention to exactly the wrong thing. Right? So, he gets your attention focused over here, and while you're focusing over here, he's robbing you blind over here. And you see the people's attention just, he's just kind of moving them around, and as he's doing it, he's just taking everything away from them. Right?

[ 17 : 08 ] That's what pickpocketing really is. And so, sloth, sloth in a way, is a condition whereby, because we are focusing on the wrong things, we are being pickpocketed. We're being robbed of one opportunity after another to do the thing that we should be doing. Right? So, what are the things that we spend our time focusing on that keep us from investing in God's kingdom? I'll give you a few examples that come from what I most often see in my life and in the lives of people that I care for.

Number one, we tend to focus on, some of us tend to focus on escaping rather than embracing the responsibilities that we have. You know, it's interesting that the real problem with the wicked servant is sloth, but notice what he says when the master first confronts him. The master says, okay, where's the money that I gave you? What'd you do with it? And he says, well, here's the thing, master, here's the thing, okay? I knew that you're a really scary guy, and I knew that you're really mean, and behind your back, everybody kind of knows that you're kind of a jerk, and so this is what I did.

And the master sees right through this, he recognizes this as a form of blame shifting. He doesn't want to take responsibility, and so he says, actually, I only did what I did because you're the kind of person that you are. It's kind of like a bit of like a gaslighting dynamic, although I doubt that Jesus would have used that term. And ultimately, he doesn't want to be held accountable, but the master sees right through it. And, you know, but some of us really do. We sort of live our lives avoiding having to take responsibility for things. You know, everything is somebody else's fault. So, we don't invest because that would mean having to actually step up and make something happen and take responsibility. But what we see in this parable is that you can only avoid responsibility for so long. You can only avoid accountability for so long. One of the points that Jesus is making in all of these parables and that we see in the Old Testament reading and all throughout the Bible is that the day will come when even if you've successfully avoided accountability all your life, the day will come when you have to stand before the Lord and you will be held accountable for your life.

Right? So, at some point, we have to be willing to step up and take responsibility for the things in our lives. So, that's the first thing, focusing on trying to escape rather than actually take responsibility for the things in our lives that demand our attention. Number two, we tend to focus on what we don't have instead of what we do have. We tend to focus on what we don't have rather than what we do have. You notice what we don't see in this parable, but, I mean, if it were me, it's probably one of the first questions I would ask. Like, hey, wait a second. Well, why does that guy get five talents and I only get two? Right? And then the person with one talent is kind of like, why do I only have one talent? And the first thing that you would do would be to start looking down that line of sermons and wondering, what the heck? This isn't fair. And, you know, this is something that we do all the time in our lives, right? Why is that person so much more athletic?

Why do they have that and I don't? Why is that person such a good public speaker? And every time I get up in front of people, I just lock up, but it's so easy for that person. Why is that person so much more attractive and successful than I am? Even on my best day, I could never look like that.

[ 20 : 46 ] I could never fit into that, right? We start making comparisons. We start feeling insecure. We start feeling envy and jealousy. Or we start feeling superior. You know, if you're looking this way at the five-talent person, you're like, man, I'm so insecure. And sometimes it makes you feel better to look down at the one-talent person and be like, oh, I guess it's not that bad. And you feel better.

You know, this happens online all the time. We want to know kind of how we stack up. And I think this happens all the time when people move to D.C. I mean, maybe back home, you were a two-talent student in a school of one-talent students.

You know, and you were kind of a big deal. You were valedictorian. You were student class president. You were voted most likely to succeed. And then you move to D.C., and it's like you're surrounded by all of these five-talent Ivy League freaks. And they all...they're all Fulbright scholars and Rhodes scholars, and they all have, like, multiple graduate degrees, and they're only, like, 22, you know. And nobody's impressed by your measly two-talent resume. Nobody cares.

Right? And you're like, what do I do in a world like this? Well, a lot of people just say, well, I got to hustle, and I'm going to become a five-talent person. And so you have all of these people out there hustling, trying to up their game and improve their resume, right, to sharpen it, to make it better, to make it more impressive so that you'll be proud of it and so you'll feel better about yourself.

Because when you're making those comparisons and you're looking at all of these people and then you're looking...you feel very small and you feel very worthless.

And so when you feel like that, you don't invest because you say, well, what's the point? That person's so much better than me, why would I invest? Who cares? It doesn't make a difference. That's when you're focusing on what you don't have instead of what you do have. But what this parable does is if we understand how to apply this parable and how to apply what a talent represents in a human life, we have to understand that we all have different talents and abilities and gifts and resources. And nobody has five talents across the board. Nobody. So you might be a one-talent mathematician. You know, I really, really at one point in my life wanted to go into physics. I wanted to be...I loved physics and I took a couple of classes in it and then I ran into the math. [ 23 : 16 ] And I realized that to be a good physicist, you have to be good at math and I'm not good at math. I'm just not. I'm a one-talent mathematician. Maybe you're a one-talent mathematician, but you can throw a five-talent dinner party. That's what I tell myself. I love to cook.

Maybe you're a one-talent athlete, but maybe you have a five-talent ability to build relationships. Right? So the point is this. Who cares what God has given to other people? Your job, your responsibility is to figure out what has God entrusted to you? What has God put into your care? If we're focusing on ourselves, we're going to make those comparisons. If you're focusing on your master, focusing on your master, you're going to be asking, what has He entrusted to me? And then number three, we tend to focus on the world's definition of success rather than God's definition of success. I mean, some of us, with all due respect, are terrified of failure. We're terrified of failure. We think that if we try and fail, it will destroy us. We think that if I try and fail, it means I'm a failure. Some of us have a very all-or-nothing definition of success. [ 24 : 36 ] You start doing something, and you kind of think, unless I can be the best at this thing, it's not worth doing. Unless I can be the best, why try? And that's a very black-and-white way of thinking about success. So, a lot of people don't invest because we're just afraid of the risk. We're afraid of risking failure or risking not being the best, which in our minds equates to failure. But this parable shows us that God doesn't measure success at all the way we do. The first servants notice, they get the exact same reward, even though one servant returns more talents than the other. They get the exact same response from their master.

In other words, listen, you can be a five-talent musician on an international stage, but that does not impress God. It's impressive in the world's eyes, but it does not impress God. You can sell...you can break all the records, have all the...you know, you can have the biggest selling sort of global music phenomenon. It does not impress God. And in fact, I believe God would be far more delighted by a one-talent singer belting it out in her bedroom if she's using that gift to glorify Him. That's how God defines success. What matters to God, what matters to the Master, is whether or not we are living for His purposes. Are you investing God's capital into God's kingdom? That's what He cares about. But, you know, the problem is even at our best, we're going to do this imperfectly. Even at our best, there are going to be times when we will avoid taking responsibility. There are going to be times when we struggle with envy, when we make comparisons. There are going to be times when we are duped by the world's definition of success. It's impossible for us to get it right. And so, we have to ask, okay, what ultimately can we do about it? Is this parable simply meant to point us to get your act together? And the answer is no. Ultimately, this parable is meant to point us to point us to Jesus. And this is why it's such good news that Jesus has come, because what we need to see in this parable is that Jesus is actually the true faithful servant. [ 27 : 04 ] Jesus is the one who not only fully devotes His life, He fully devotes His life to the purpose for which He was sent. And we see as we reflect on these reasons a moment ago that Jesus never fell into the traps that we fall into. Number one, Jesus fully embraced His God-given responsibility.

I mean, He never shied away from it, even though He was strongly tempted to do so. Even in the garden when He prayed, may this cup pass from my lips, He never once shied away from the purpose that God had given Him, to live the life that we should have lived, to take the sins of the world upon Himself, to give His life to redeem us. He never shied away from that. And number two, Jesus never compared Himself to others or gave in to envy because He was so singularly focused on the will of His Father. And because He was so secure in the love of His Father, not only did He not focus on what He had relative to other people, but He was willing to give up what He had. He was willing to give up everything for the sake of the world. And then thirdly, Jesus transforms the entire way that we think about failure and success. You know, at the end of this section of teaching in Matthew, after He tells these parables, it says this in Matthew 26 verse 1,

when Jesus had finished all of these sayings, He said to His disciples, you know that after two days, the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. And they realize all of a sudden, this is why Jesus is telling us these parables. It's because in just a few days' time, He's going to be executed. But what we see is that on the cross, Jesus offers the world an entirely new definition and picture of success. In the eyes of the world, the cross meant a total failure. The job, the design of the cross was not just to torture and kill, it was to humiliate. It was to show this person is the failure of all failures. You cannot fail worse than this. This means you have utterly screwed up in your life. And yet, in God's eyes on that cross, Jesus is achieving the greatest victory ever accomplished. He's giving Himself up for the love of the world. He's dying to overcome sin and salvation. He's accomplishing salvation for all people. He is vindicating and fulfilling promises that have been laid down throughout history. And so, the Christian definition of success is a person pouring out their life to love and to serve others. That's what we see on the cross. You know, I was listening to a podcast the other day about financial investing, and in my life, I've listened to maybe one podcast about financial investing, and this was it. And it was an interview with James Choi, who's a professor of finance at the Yale School of Management. And so, after an hour, the whole podcast for like an hour, is talking about, you know, high fee index funds and diversified portfolios. I actually learned quite a bit. But at the very end, the interviewer asks him, okay, he says, one final question. How do you define success? And this is an hour of talking about how to be a good, you know, money manager and invest well and make a good return. And here's what Choi says. He says this, well, I'm a Christian, so I think that ultimately, it's about being who God has created you to be and to have a relationship with Him and to love Him and to love your neighbor and to serve. He says, I think that I've been given certain talents and certain opportunities and certain platforms in which I can serve. So, it's about asking, how can I use these things to serve and to help people? And I just thought, that's it. That's it. This is a person who has been shaped by the cross. This is a person whose vision of success in life has been shaped by Jesus on the cross.

[ 31 : 32 ] And so, as Christians, that's our guiding image. And so, when we invest, we invest not hoping for an immediate return, although that's great. We invest hoping for an eternal ROI, right? We know that every investment we make in God's kingdom will yield a return. It may not be one that we can see. It may not be one in our lifetime. But one day, when the kingdom has fully come, all of those investments are going to pay off. And all of the other things that we've spent time and energy investing in, they're not going to matter at all. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for the cross. And we thank You that through the cross, we see what looks like failure emerge as great victory. And we pray that our lives would be guided by that vision.

Lord, that as has been written, we would not seek to build our resume virtues, but we would seek to build our eulogy virtues. We would prioritize those things that bless and serve the common good and that glorify You, Lord. We pray all of this in Jesus' name, that He would be our guide, even as He makes it possible for us to fulfill all that You call us to do and to be. We pray this in His name. Amen.