Making the Most of Every Opportunity

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[0:00] Bill Gates, in a public interview, allegedly, I don't know how accurate this story actually is, but it's a good story. He was asked what was the secret to his success.

And he pulled out his checkbook and said to the lady interviewing him, how much would you like? She was a little bit embarrassed by that. She said, no, it's not what I meant.
She said, what's the secret behind your success? So he started to write her name on the blank check, tore it out and handed it over to her.
He said, put whatever, ever sum you like on that check right now. She batted the check away and tried to ask the question from a different angle.
At which point Bill Gates apparently shrugged his shoulders, ripped up the check, said, the secret to my success is I'd never, ever pass up opportunities in the way that you just did.
[1:07] Now, I'm not sure whether that is a true story or if it is, there's lots of versions of it on the internet, which one is the most accurate. The point is this. It points us to something really fundamental about our human nature.

And it's this. There's something in us that craves opportunity. It's as though we're hardwired to seek out opportunity. Now, we might not consider ourselves opportunists, but flip that truth claim on its head, what I've just said about there's been something in us about being opportunist.
Flip that on its head and think of it the other way around. How often in your life have you either said or at least thought to yourself, if only I'd done that.
If only. If only. Those two simple words that we either say or think to ourselves, which incidentally are pretty pointless words, and yet probably two of the most frequently said or thought words in our language, if only.
We apply them to relationships, to financial decisions, to jobs, to all sorts of life choices, if only. Now, they are utterly pointless words, but every time those words pass our lips or pass through our minds, surely we are reminded of something deep within us that is always, always seeking out opportunity, because we don't like to miss it.
[2:52] So what are you opportunist about? What sort of opportunities do you rise most readily for?

The deeper we get into our lives, the further on we are on our journey through life, the more heightened perhaps that becomes, because time is running out. The average human being lives for about a thousand months.
Now, bearing in mind a third of that we're asleep, takes it down to about six or seven hundred. Subtract from that the amount that you've already had, that's what you're left with.
So even more sobering thought is to rewind what were you doing a week ago exactly. Because in that time, you've just lost, or used, however you want to look at it, 1,080 minutes.
Actually, it's probably slightly more because the clocks have changed, but you get the point. Time's running out. We only have a limited amount of time on this planet. And Paul knew that, which is why he really presses in on this question to his readership, the letter to the Colossians.
[4:14] Make the most of the time that you've got. Seize every opportunity to point towards that life where time will not run out.

Take every opportunity to be ready to share the gospel of eternal life. Everywhere. Now, I hear you think to yourself, that's all very well, but Paul is Paul, and I'm not Paul, I'm me.
It's all very well for Paul to talk about living your life poised for every single opportunity to point to eternity. But Paul's experience was a very different spiritual one from mine.
After all, he met with the risen Jesus, literally on the road to Damascus. He had a whole range of spiritual experiences that I could never dream to have.

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But let's not be so ready to dismiss what Paul has to say. Because for all the experiences that Paul did have, life was no walk in the park for him as a Christian.
[5:24] Let's remember that these very words, along with many of the other letters that Paul wrote in the New Testament, were written from a place of being in chains. It was either under house arrest or in prison. Right at the end of his letter to the Colossians, Paul reels off a whole list of people that he's referring to by way of greeting.

Send my greeting to so-and-so, so-and-so sends their greeting. One of those people that he mentions, as a friend and a confidant, only later on in the New Testament, is listed as somebody who has betrayed him.
Paul was no stranger to the nitty-gritty of hardship as a Christian. So when we read these words, as somebody who urges us to seize every opportunity to share the gospel, let's not think for one moment, this is somebody who had it easy, and therefore it is all very well for him to talk like that. Just the opposite. So what in practical terms can we do? Well, this is where Paul is really, really down to earth and very practical.
And the advice he gives, in terms of how to be about, go about the business, of being on the lookout for every opportunity, is as profound and as powerful as it is simple.
[6:46] Pray. That's what he says. To pray. Those words are disarmingly simple. Yet, for all their simplicity, they're very powerful.

Because it's not always easy. Sometimes the type of prayer that Paul is talking about takes a huge amount of effort and discipline. But it's very simple.
Verse 2, he says, devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Now, the wider world would see prayer very often as quite pointless.
People would say it's just a... Do it if it makes you feel good, but it doesn't really do that much. If you're a Christian, prayer is the most important thing. It's not just an isolated activity.
It's a whole way of being. It's the way we live. It's the way we engage life. We do so knowing that there's this extra dimension, that we're not on our own. And that's what Paul points us towards.
[7:55] He said specifically, be watchful and thankful. Now, isn't it intriguing that Paul draws those two things together, being watchful and being thankful?

It's not the only place in the New Testament where Paul says that. To be watchful and to be thankful go hand in hand. Thankfulness takes us to a place where our sensitivities are more heightened spiritually.
We're more poised to spot the opportunity if we are thankful. If we're mindful and heartful of what God is doing in our lives, if our first thought is not what we haven't got, but what we have got, if our thoughts all the time are caught up with, this is what God's doing, I see it's there, I didn't know that God was going to do that, but he has done it.
If our minds are in that place, we will be poised in a place of watchfulness and ready to grab opportunity with confidence.
But, and here's the big but, that mindset of ever thankfulness takes an awful lot of hard work. It's not easy. And that's where we're called, to be disciplined.
[9:18] One last story, just to illustrate that point. There's a really old story about a king who lived many, many years ago in a country very, very, very far from here.

He was out hunting one day with his friend. As he was firing an arrow, his thumb came off. His friend said immediately, praise God.
The king looked at his friend. He said, what are you talking about? He said, praise God for being in control and looking after us. The king was furious.
He had him thrown into prison. A long time later, after the king had forgotten about his friend, he was out hunting again.
This time he was on his own. He went a long way, away from his territory. He found himself surrounded by cannibals. They took him, they bound him.
[10:22] They were about to kill and eat him. When one of their number noticed that this king was missing one thumb. said, you're not perfect.

We can't eat you. And released him. Well, the king then remembered his friend and his comments about how God was in control and was looking after him.
So he went back, released him from prison and apologised profoundly, having told him the story. And the friend said to him, praise the Lord, thank you God, that I've been in prison for so long.

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The king said, how can you possibly, possibly be so thankful about that? He said, if you'd not put me in prison and left me in prison, I probably would have been out with you hunting that day.
And look, two thumbs. Thankfulness takes a lot of effort at times. Sometimes we've really got to dig deep because it's not obvious.
[11:32] The things that are obvious are the things that are going wrong, the things that we're worrying about, the things that make us anxious and stressed. Those are the things that absorb and consume us, that take our interest. And yet Paul urges us at all times to be thankful.

Why? Because when we are thankful, it connects, it places in that place, that position of being connected, of being attuned spiritually. Sometimes, sometimes we've got to work hard.
Martin Lloyd-Jones once said that we spend too much time listening to ourselves and we need to spend more time talking to ourselves, preaching to ourselves, telling ourselves these truths, reminding ourselves, giving ourselves a wake-up call.
Look, see what God's doing. He is there. He is there. It might not feel like it at all times. It might not be apparent. There will be other things that will threaten to draw our attention away. But be watchful and thankful, Paul says.
let's be in that place of thankfulness, of watchfulness, of confidence, poised and ready to seize every opportunity.
[12:52] Time here is limited, but the gospel points us to a life which begins now, but which lasts forever. and we're called to point others towards that life.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you want us to live as people who are confident.
as we've been thinking about what the letter to the Colossians says about confidence over these last few weeks.
Thank you. Thank you that we can find confidence in you. Lord, help us when that confidence feels low.
Help us to be filled and renewed in that confidence in you. thank you that you give us opportunities to share our eternal hope with others.
[14:00] Forgive us for when we take our eye off the ball and overlook those opportunities. Help us to be tuned in to the opportunities that you open up each day.

Opportunities to share hope with others. Help us to be ever more prayerfully watchful. Help us to be thankful in our prayers and in our outlook so that we might always be expectant and on the lookout ready to seize every opportunity to point and lead others to you.
In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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