

The Future of Your Body *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*

Will You Make an Eternal Impact? *1 Corinthians 7:17 – 35*

Introduction: A Good Purpose is Hard to Find

For me, for many years, my sense of purpose was built around swimming and water polo. I loved those sports, and from an early age and through high school, I thought that swimming and water polo would be my ticket to Stanford but also my ticket to fame and glory. So I totally got into it. I swam on the same competitive club team as Janet Evans, the triple gold medalist at the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. Later on, I set her up on a blind date with a friend of mine, but it didn't work out – oh well. But I would get up at 4:30am almost every morning, drive 30 minutes, swim for 2 hours or do weight-lifting, then go to school, then go swim again for 2.5 hours in the afternoon. Then I'd go home and try to do all of my homework. At school, I was so tired almost all the time that I learned to fall asleep in really good postures (example postures). In college I met a guy who could fall asleep with his eyes open – that was amazing. And there was a sweet combination of speed, strength, and endurance that intoxicated me. It was intoxicating. Was it really worth it if my hair turned green because of the chlorine? Yes, it was. Was it really worth it if I had shoulder and knee problems later on in life? Yes, it was. Or so I thought. Because as focused as I was, I was also short-sighted. People asked me, 'So if you get to swim in college, great – but after that, then what?' And I didn't know. Is it really just for myself? Is that satisfying? That was hard to answer. So, in fact, I decided not to think about it. Because if I looked too far ahead, it would ruin everything. And when I finally faced up to reality, it did. My motivation was gone. Not only did it not make sense to me anymore, but it didn't matter. Whatever records I set will be broken by someone else. Whatever impact I make will be overcome or just plain forgotten.

Relevance: What's Eternally Valuable?

It's really important to me and to you, I hope, that when Jesus says we can have an eternal impact, we believe him. There are so many other things we can do that just don't matter. But if we had a clear sense of what will last forever, it will help us. I noticed that having a purpose clarified things and helped me make decisions. For example, in high school, during junior and senior year, all the guys started weight lifting. Some of my friends would ask me, 'When you lift weights, are you going for bulk or definition?' I would say, 'I'm going for strength, not appearances – that's my goal!' I was that focused. Similarly, if you understand the purpose for which you are here, that will really help you be focused. You won't have a lot of anxieties. You'll know better how to treat people.

The Commission: 1 Corinthians 15:58

^{15:58}With all this going for us, my dear, dear friends, stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into **the work of the Master**, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort. **What is the work of the Master?**

Jesus was and is about transforming people. People are eternal. Therefore if you want to make any kind of eternal impact, anything that will last forever, you have to be relational. You have to care about people in the way Jesus cares about people. Secondly, Jesus is about transforming people. He does this by coming into their lives and then loving on them and turning them into agents of his love for the world. In fact, it's very telling that Paul speaks of the work of the Master as an ongoing thing. Jesus stepped into the world once in one human body. But now he is in the world by his Spirit in many bodies, in every person who believes in him. He is doing an ongoing thing. What he started, he continues. And what he does will last forever. That is why nothing we do for him is a waste of time or effort.

What Is Not Eternally Valuable: 1 Corinthians 7:17 – 35

Back in chapter 7, Paul talked about what is a waste of time or effort. I'm going to read from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of the Bible.

^{7:17}And don't be wishing you were someplace else or with someone else. Where you are right now is God's place for you. Live and obey and love and believe right there. ¹⁹The really important thing is obeying God's call, following his commands. ²⁰Stay where you were when God called your name. ²¹Were you a slave?

Slavery is no roadblock to obeying and believing. I don't mean you're stuck and can't leave. If you have a chance at freedom, go ahead and take it. ²²I'm simply trying to point out that under your new Master you're going to experience a marvelous freedom you would never have dreamed of. On the other hand, if you were free when Christ called you, you'll experience a delightful 'enslavement to God' you would never have dreamed of. ²³All of you, slave and free both, were once held hostage in a sinful society. Then a huge sum was paid out for your ransom. So please don't, out of old habit, slip back into being or doing what everyone else tells you. ²⁴Friends, stay where you were called to be. God is there. Hold the high ground with him at your side. ²⁶Because of the current pressures on us from all sides, I think it would probably be best to stay just as you are. ²⁷Are you married? Stay married. Are you unmarried? Don't get married. ²⁸But there's certainly no sin in getting married. All I am saying is that [if and] when you marry, you take on additional stress in an already stressful time, and I want to spare you if possible. ²⁹I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple--in marriage, ³⁰grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things--your daily routines of shopping, and so on. ³¹Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out. ³²I want you to live as free of complications as possible. When you're unmarried, you're free to concentrate on simply pleasing the Master. ³³Marriage involves you in all the nuts and bolts of domestic life and in wanting to please your spouse, ³⁴leading to so many more demands on your attention. The time and energy that married people spend on caring for and nurturing each other, the unmarried can spend in becoming whole and holy instruments of God. ³⁵I'm trying to be helpful and make it as easy as possible for you, not make things harder. All I want is for you to be able to develop a way of life in which you can spend plenty of time together with the Master without a lot of distractions.

Protect the Bigness of Your Commitment to Jesus

How do you feel about Paul's advice about life choices? Kind of crazy huh? Paul says in 7:35, 'I'm trying to be helpful and make it as easy as possible for you, not make things harder. All I want is for you to be able to develop a way of life in which you can spend plenty of time together with the Master without a lot of distractions.' In 7:32, 'I want you to live as free of complications as possible.'

So often we think of God's will as about your major, your career, your dating life. And those things are important, I agree. But we tend to assume that the way we think about our decisions is the same way God thinks about our decisions. Instead, we need to define God's will the same way the New Testament defines it. God's will is the mission of Jesus. It's bigger than your major, your career, and your dating life. Bigger in the sense that it will impact all those choices. But bigger in the sense that it will keep all those other choices from becoming too big. It will contain your other choices and constrain them.

Paul even throws up concerns about getting married. You could live a fairly fulfilled life as a single person. But if you get married, you need to prevent the narcissism that could result. Especially if your significant other just wants to keep up with the Joneses. Listen: If you have a materialistic boyfriend or girlfriend, just dump them right after this large group. Because if you marry him or her, you'll be stuck in a relationship that's as inward focused as an ingrown toenail. It'll be sick and festering.

Illus: Here's an example of how the will of God found in the mission of Jesus ought to shape your lives and mine more and more. In college, I started to care more about other people knowing Jesus and experiencing him. So my junior year, I invited my friend Greg to church and he came to Jesus a few months later. When I was a senior, I was a small group leader for a bible study and I decided to lead these studies in the Gospel of John in a way that was relevant not just to Christians but to everyone. My friend Sharon came to Jesus that year. And one other person did too because another small group leader was using my material. And a third person did, too, and he wasn't even a student! His name was Matt, and he was the co-worker of a volunteer staff person named Ken; they both worked in an electronics company. Ken had been sharing his spiritual life with Matt at work. That day, Ken left his office, and Matt came in to wait for him. Matt looked at Ken's computer screen (the nosy guy!). On the screen was one of my emails. I emailed out my notes and questions to the other small group leaders, and Ken had been reading through it. Matt read it and God used it to convict him, and he gave his life to Jesus right there! Later that year, my friend Irene came to hear me share in LG and it was one of three things that God used to bring her to Jesus. I invested a lot of myself, and sure my grades went down a bit. But I still graduated. I still got a job at Intel. Then when I met Ming, I knew that she would help me help other people grow, because we debated how to do it. That was one of our first real discussions!

Major, Career: Shoot for Competence, Not Excellence

Paul says in 7:29 – 30, ‘I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don’t complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple--in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things--your daily routines of shopping, and so on.’

Sometimes we ask God what His will is for us, assuming that it *primarily* means who to marry and what job to take, what to major in. But Paul says that we have to leave those questions aside in order to do the work of Jesus, in his mission. God’s will is somehow bigger than that. You don’t need to get good grades. You don’t need to go to a great grad school. You don’t need to go to grad school at all. In fact, Paul says, ‘Don’t be ambitious in that sense.’ Just stay as you are. If you’re a slave and you want upward mobility, you can buy yourself out, but you can also just stay as you are. A slave back then probably had more discretionary time and energy than a free person who has to work really hard for a living, like in a modern family small business. Granted you can’t be a student forever. You do need to finish school and stop accumulating debt. But once you do, you need to be careful. Yes, we are called to do justice and love mercy. Yes, you should look for jobs that display those values. But ambition can be dangerous and striving is definitely not okay. Another way of saying this is: Competence, not excellence.

Illus: Tony Campolo tells a story of a friend of his. This friend was a professor of literature. He had tenure. But he said, ‘I don’t think this is what I want to do. I feel overwhelmed with work, I feel like I can’t really connect with people. I think I’m going to quit my job.’ Tony asked him, ‘What do you want to do?’ This friend said, ‘Well, ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be a mailman.’ ‘A mailman?!?’ ‘Yeah, a mailman.’ So Tony, being in a state of shock, said the only thing he could think of: ‘Well, if you’re going to be a mailman, be the best mailman you can be.’ About a year later, the two met up again. Sure enough, this friend had become a mailman. Tony asked, ‘Well, are you a good mailman?’ The friend said, ‘No. I’m one of the worst mail carriers I know of. Most mail carriers get done with their route at around 2pm. I get done at 5pm. Why? Because I stop to talk to people. I pray with them. If they invite me in, I say sure. I’m not irresponsible – I finish my route every day, but I’m not the best mail carrier in the world.’

Focus on Jesus’ Mission, Not on Your Potential

God is not obligated to use all the skills you have. A lot of the time, as you look over your life, you think that every little thing could be significant. Since you’re paying thousands of dollars to be here at BC, you’re tempted to think that God has to use your degree. But come on. The reality is that you may pick up skills and talents and even degrees that you will never use again. That’s even true in general. Doctors will tell you that if they had to take the MCAT over, they’d get a low score. Why? Because all of this test taking and striving is part of a sorting mechanism in society. School is educational, true. But it is also part of system in society where you have to know more things than you’ll ever use just to prove you know more than someone else.

Illus: So the way God uses you and your skills and knowledge might surprise you. Like God surprised my friend Scott. Back in the early 2000’s, my friend Scott Schuh was a panelist at a conference for college students. He was and is a research economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. He came expecting to talk about how his faith helps him not steal paper from the office, and maybe share about Jesus sometimes. But one student asked him how the Holy Spirit informs his research projects. He didn’t know what to say, because he had never prayed about that before. He resolved to. The next opportunity he had, he felt God leading him to study the impact of credit cards and late fees on lower income people. He found that credit card companies know they will get to charge outrageously high rates on mostly poor people. Meanwhile, they give perks to wealthy people like points for rental cars and hotels and vacations. So credit card companies and ATM fees and such are a wealth transfer mechanism from the poor to the rich. It was a stunning report. That report landed on Obama’s desk, and led to the CFPB, the Consumer Financial Protections Bureau! Now does everything have such a nice result? No. But the point is not that we always get heard by the President. The point is that we are listening to God.

Illus: Maybe you’ll have the experience of my wife Ming. Ming went to Harvard as an undergrad. She missed one on the LSAT, and got into Harvard Law. But she felt like she was wired to do other things, and the Lord eventually led her to do campus ministry, then be a full time mom, then get her Masters in Social Work, then became a therapist trying to help families not lose their kids to the foster care system. The point is not that we go to Harvard Law School. The point is that we are listening to God.

So if you have notions like God has to use every skill that you've ever developed, or help you make the most money and status, let go of that. The point is not that you get fame and fortune. The point is that you are listening to God.

Friendships: Look for Partners in Ministry

Look at friendship this way, too. We usually look for friendships based on how our senses of humor line up, whether we play the same sports, whether we can talk about hair and clothes, and whether a person can keep their mouth shut when we want them to keep a secret. But what will have an eternal impact? What if we also made friends based on Jesus' mission and let Jesus frame everything? He'll stretch us in certain directions, to go wide, and to go deep. We'll have friends at different points of the spiritual spectrum, from loving Jesus and his mission all the way to those who fear and dislike him. The person who loves Jesus and his mission will help push you and keep you sharp. The person who fears or dislikes him will keep you compassionate.

Don't Make Your Home Here

What reasons does Paul give for his advice? He says that this world order is passing away. If I told you that in a matter of days, the dining plan system at BC was going to change, what would you do? You'd get very interested, right? If I told you that in a matter of days, a new system was going to be put in place of the old one, and that all the points you've stockpiled this semester would no longer count for anything, what would you do? You'd ask questions about how you're going to eat when the new system comes, right? Well, you will get a new dining plan if you give food to the homeless, if you show hospitality, if you are generous. Somehow BU will know. If I told you that the U.S. government would be overthrown, what would you do? If I told you that someone else was coming to replace the whole system, what would you do? If I told you that I actually know this person, that I'm part of a movement that is inviting people to be a part of this new order, what would you do? In a few days, all the dollars you have will be worthless. They'll be replaced by an entirely new currency. If you give dollars away in the name of this new ruler, he will give you the new currency. Somehow he will know. That gets us into the flip side of the work of Jesus.

Imagine lavishly decorating a hotel room when you know you're not going to stay there long. Why would you do that? You wouldn't.

Jesus is mobilizing a movement. He wants to involve us. He has already lived out and shone what is valuable in eternity, in his own life. That's why we must imitate him, and not just imitate him, but participate in what he did and is doing. Will you make an eternal impact? That's really up to you.