

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 7, 2007**

DON'T WASTE YOUR LIFE

Psalm 90:1-12

Perhaps you have a plaque on the wall in your kitchen at home, or had one in your kitchen when you were growing up, with this saying:

Only one life 'Twill soon be past
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life. That is all any of us gets. Life is a gift from God. A precious gift. But each of us is given only one. In the course of your life you may have the opportunity to travel to many different places and to many different countries. You may move many times and live in many different houses. You may attend schools in several different communities. You may work for a number of different companies or organizations. You may attend and be a member of a number of different churches. You may drive several different makes and models of vehicles. Your life may be a constant whirlwind of activity, challenge, and change. But still, you get only one life. Your life is a gift from God. What you do with it is your gift to God. And each of us will one day have to give an account to God for the use we make of the gift of life He has given us.

Only one life. 'Twill soon be past.

“The length of our days,” as Moses says in Psalm 90:10, “is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”

It is quite possible that Moses wrote Psalm 90 during the time of Israel's wilderness experience – that is, during the 40-year period after the Exodus, when God brought the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, and before they entered the Promised Land. The reason they spent those 40 years in the wilderness was because of their disobedience and their lack of faith, their unwillingness to take God at His word, their stubborn refusal to believe God and obey Him by going forward in faith to take possession of the Promised Land. As a result, God decreed that that entire generation of Israel – with the exception of Caleb and Joshua – would die in the wilderness, and would never enter the Promised Land. During that 40-year period in the wilderness, approximately 1.2 million Israelites died (some 600,000 men and their wives).

If you do the math, it works out to an average of 30,000 deaths (and funerals) a year for 40 years. That is about 82 a day, or one death and funeral about every 18 minutes, 24 hours a day for 40 years.

It's no wonder that Moses was seized with an acute awareness of the shortness of human life and the stark reality of human mortality. Life is short. Even for those who, by the grace of God, live to a ripe old age. In the scope of history – even more, in the scope of eternity – this life is short. But it is as precious as it is fleeting and fragile.

As a nation we said good-bye this past week to former President Gerald Ford, who died the day after Christmas at the age of 93. He was the longest-living president in our nation's history.

Other notable figures who died in 2006 include:

- James Brown, the “Godfather of Soul,” who was 73.
- Actor Peter Boyle, best known as the obnoxious father of TV's “Everybody Loves Raymond.” He was 71.
- Actor Don Knotts, who played Barney Fife on “The Andy Griffith Show.” He was 81.
- CBS newsman Ed Bradley and “Jaws” author Peter Benchley, both just 65.
- Former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, a member of our sister church, Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, who died at the age of 80.
- Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, Jr. She was 78.
- Betty Friedan, who more than 40 years ago wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. She was 85.
- Lillian Gertrud Asplund. Do you know who she was? She was the last remaining survivor of the Titanic who remembered its sinking in April 1912. Six years old at the time, she died last year at the age of 99.
- Dana Reeve, widow of “Superman” Christopher Reeve. She was only 44.
- So too was famed crocodile hunter Steve Irwin, killed when he was stabbed by a stingray during the filming of a TV program.

Life is short. Death is no respecter of persons. “Only one life ‘Twill soon be past.” So how crucial it is for each of us to recognize the finiteness of this life. How crucial it is for us, as Moses prays in verse 12, to learn to number our days – that is, to make the most of our time so that we may grow in wisdom, so that we may live wisely and not waste our lives.

The people of Israel wasted nearly 40 years in the wilderness after God brought them out of Egypt because they refused to believe and follow God. They refused to trust and obey God. Even though God had done amazing things in liberating them from their bondage to Pharaoh and bringing them out of Egypt, still they persisted in their unbelief when Caleb and Joshua urged them to go forward in faith to take possession of the Promised Land. Because they would not trust God, because they would not obey God's leading, they wasted nearly 40 years and hundreds of thousands of lives – all those who died in the wilderness.

Only one life ‘Twill soon be past
Only what's done for Christ will last.

“Only what’s done for Christ.”

There are some who take issue with the theology of this line, arguing that it is not quite correct. Ray Stedman, for example, says it would be better to say: “Only what Christ does through me will last.” His point, of course, is that on our own, you and I can do nothing of any lasting value or significance for Christ. Only by the power of Christ at work in us and through us can we hope to accomplish anything of lasting value. God is the One who does it. He gives us the blessed privilege of being the instruments through whom He works. Stedman’s point is well taken.

Another critic, Donald Bell, contends it should really say: “Only what Christ has done for us will last.” With respect to our salvation and our hope of salvation, Bell is absolutely right. There is nothing we can ever add to what Christ has done for us. Nor is there a need to add anything to it. What Christ has done for us in His once-for-all offering of Himself on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins is absolutely, perfectly, wholly sufficient to pay the penalty for our sins and to reconcile us to God our heavenly Father. Bell is right. Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, and what no one else could do. Only what He has done for us and for our salvation will last. Nothing in our hands we bring, simply to the cross we cling.

But while both Bell and Stedman have a point, there is still value in the saying: “Only what’s done for Christ will last.” If we are willing, it can help us to focus our priorities and see what is really important in life. It can remind us of Christ’s proper place in our lives and help us to assess or reassess our true values or priorities in life.

There is never a bad time to take stock of your life and the direction you’re heading, to examine what you’re really living for. There is never a bad time. The beginning of a new year can be an especially good time, an opportune time, to do it.

“Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Is this the principle that guides your life? Is it the philosophy by which you live?

What if we were to remove the word Christ from the sentence and replace it with other words or things? Would it more accurately reflect how you – and many other people – really live today?

What if we said:

- Only what’s done for... the accumulation of wealth?
- Only what’s done for... the pursuit of happiness? (to make me happy)
- Only what’s done for... a good time?
- Only what’s done for... my self-interest?
- Only what’s done for... my family’s security and well-being?
- Only what’s done for... my reputation or fame?
- Only what’s done for... the pursuit of knowledge?

Only what's done for... my personal comfort and convenience?

There is no question these describe the way a lot of people live their lives. The question is: Do any of these describe the way you're living your life?

None of these, as virtuous or valuable as some may be, have any inherent lasting power. And the truth is that millions and millions of people are wasting the one life God has given them because they are pursuing a life or they are pursuing goals that are not worthy of the God who made them, the God who loves them with an everlasting love, the God whose grace daily sustains and strengthens them, the God who is supremely sovereign over everything that is or ever was or ever will be.

Too many college students and young adults, and high school students, too – including many professing Christians – have bought into the lie that life is a party, and that drinking, maybe getting drunk, maybe smoking marijuana, and having sex before marriage, is just normal and expected. It's what life is about. It is just what everybody does.

Well, it is not what everybody does. And it is not what life is about. It is not what God expects of those who belong to Him. Don't waste your life. God has something better – far better – for you. God's way may not always be easier, but it is far better. Don't waste your life with that stuff when you can be growing in the grace and knowledge and wisdom and service of God.

Too many adults think that life is about getting and getting ahead, about achieving financial security so they can live well and retire early and really begin to enjoy life. Is that how the Westminster Catechism defines the chief end of man? I don't think so. Is the chief end of life to be successful and enjoy ourselves forever? No. Is it to retire early and go off and play until we die? It may be the American dream but I don't find it in the Bible.

Maybe your aspirations are not as grandiose as others. Maybe you're not out to do something dramatic or big. Maybe, as John Piper suggests, you just want people to like you. If people would just like being around you, you would be satisfied. Or if you could just have a good job, a good marriage and a couple good kids, a nice house, long weekends and a few really good friends, a fun retirement, and a quick and easy death, and no hell, either in this life or in the life to come – if you could have all that, you would be satisfied. But that, says Piper, is a tragedy in the making. And it would be a wasted life.

The title of this message is taken from a book by John Piper that is itself entitled *Don't Waste Your Life*. In the very beginning of the book Piper recounts a story he heard from his father. His father was a traveling evangelist. There was a man in the community for whom a particular church where Piper's father was invited to preach had been praying for years. For decades, even. He was an old man now, still hard and resistant to the gospel. But for some reason he showed up when John Piper's father was preaching. At the end of the service, to everyone's amazement, he came forward during a hymn and took the

preacher's hand. They sat down together on the front pew of the church as the people were dismissed. That night God opened his heart to the gospel, and he received Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. But that did not stop him from sobbing and crying out, as the tears ran down his wrinkled face: "I've wasted it! I've wasted it!"

Though he was grateful for the gift of salvation and the blessing of forgiveness, still he was filled with regret at the thought of all the years – a virtual lifetime – he had wasted in his rebellion against God.

Praise God for His tender mercies and His redeeming grace. But do not, I implore you, do not waste the life God has given you. And do not miss the truth that even we who profess to be followers of Christ can waste our lives if we do not follow Him wholeheartedly, devoting ourselves to serving His purposes in this generation.

Do not waste your life, or whatever remains of your life, by pursuing any goal or taking any road in life that would distract you from your chief end or primary purpose in life, which is to promote the glory of God in the work He has given you to do, in all the relationships and responsibilities of your life, in your labor and leisure, at worship and prayer and rest and study, in every sphere of life. For there is no corner of life where God is not sovereign, and there is no higher purpose or calling in life than to let others see and know how great and glorious, how awesome and good, how wonderful and magnificent God really is.

Life is short. Don't waste it.

Whether you're 8 or 82, 16 or 65, whether you're just starting out on your own or heading toward retirement, whether you're in a time of transition or in a season of stability, don't waste your life.

Only one life 'Twill soon be past
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Give Him your life, your heart, your service. Nothing you give to God, for His glory, will ever be wasted.

May it be so in your life and mine, to the glory of God. Amen.

Let us pray.
Lord, teach us to number our days aright,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Help us not to waste our lives,
but to make the most of our time on this earth,
living to glorify You in all we do.
We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.