

This week's Core is about determining what you will live for. There is a statement I heard a long time ago that went something like this: "You will never live life to the fullest until you commit yourself to something you are willing to die for." I believe that something to live and die for is the proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world around us.

Not only are we called to share the gospel with those around us but we are also called to develop them into disciples.

As we think about these two vital purposes of the church - Evangelism and Discipleship - we need to see them are commands not options. Every single person who has been called out of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ has these two commands before them. It is not the pastor's job only. We need to see ourselves as ministers - one and all!

As I was researching this weeks Core I came across a message given in 1986 by John Piper. Dr. Piper is one of the most respected pastor's of our day. He has written extensively on the person of God and the awesome privilege we have to be a part of His plan. Obviously he is speaking to his congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but his teaching is certainly applicable to our city as well. As you read his words think about Nowata and the surrounding area: How can we take what he is teaching and apply it to our situation - especially his teaching on the change in the Apostle Paul and his purpose. How does God want you to respond to your culture here? How can you begin to make a difference? I hope you enjoy the message.

Pastor Todd

SECTION 1

Read the following message from John Piper and take down any thoughts that come to you as you read. Look for application points and then come up with some ways to implement them in your life and family.

A CAUSE TO LIVE FOR

John Piper, Pastor

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Acts 20:24 - "I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

This morning I want to tell you why I feel hopeful and optimistic in the midst of an American culture that seems to be collapsing under the weight of its unprincipled and God-ignoring ways of thought and life.

Christmas morning, the lead editorial in the Minneapolis Tribune went like this: It's drab in Minnesota this Christmas -- as is fitting, perhaps. Peace and goodwill? Washington is paralyzed by scandal. The Libyans use napalm on Chad. The Iranians and Iraqis continue their bloodbath. Eugene Hasenfus is out of Nicaragua but the contras aren't. Soviet troops remain in Afghanistan. SALT II is a memory, and the promise of the Iceland summit grows stale. The Air Force announces that the first 10 MX missiles are operational. News pages are filled with stories of hunger. The night isn't silent in the soup kitchens and sleeping rooms for the homeless. Toys for Tots, Santa Anonymous and food shelves accent the gulf between haves and have-nots. (James Boyd, Associate Editor, Editorial Page.)

And they could have gone on to tell of the scourge of AIDS and the million teenagers who got pregnant this year, 40% of whom tried to solve the problem by getting rid of the babies through abortion. They could have told how over 40% of the high schoolers in the suburbs of Minneapolis binged on alcohol in the past two weeks -- that means had five or more drinks in a row. They could give middle- and upper-class statistics on the multi-million dollar business of marijuana and cocaine and crack. They could talk about a year of increases of serious crimes in Minneapolis. And they would perhaps just be scratching the surface of the deterioration in our American society.

Now why am I optimistic and hopeful in the midst of all this? I could say that I am going to kiss it all good bye some day and go to a better place when I die. That would be true. But it probably wouldn't be helpful if that is all I said.

The kind of optimism I am talking about this morning is the kind that says: There are signs that even here on this earth in Minneapolis God may yet have a saving and reforming work to do, not just in a few scattered individual lives, but in the larger social fabric of this city and beyond.

I still have ringing in my ears from the fall of 1985 the words of Ralph Winter as he looked out over the city from my kitchen window late one night: "After all, John, maybe the most important thing you could do for missions would be to remake Minneapolis." In other words, how much more authentic it would be for Americans to carry a life-changing gospel message to other cultures if they came from a place that was not committing social suicide by its own undisciplined and God-ignoring ways of life!

But don't get me wrong. I am not about to resurrect the naive, idealistic, social dogmas of the 19th century that prophesied continual evolutionary ascent until we attain utopia. Marxism is a social failure around the world. And America is perhaps within a generation or two of proving that secular, God-ignoring capitalism is a social failure as well. I have no social theory to propose this morning.

But what I know is that God has taken decadent, self-destroying societies and remade them by the power of his Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel of the grace of God, and through the social impact of thousands of remade men and women. Just think of 16th century Scotland under the influence of John Knox, and 18th century England under the influence of Whitefield and Wesley and Wilberforce, and Wales at the beginning of this century under the influence of Evan Roberts, and the Dani and Sawi and Yali peoples of Irian Jaya in more recent decades.

Anyone who is willing to read the story that God has written in history knows what God could do with Minneapolis if in his sovereign freedom he chose to send revival and reformation to this place.

Ultimately all realistic optimism for this world and the next is rooted in the sovereign freedom and grace of God. But the signs of hope may turn up even in the newspaper, even in the midst of the most depressingly bad news. For example: One of the most remarkable things of the month of December in Minneapolis is how the secular press has unwittingly served the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consider these four facts about the Minneapolis Tribune as a support for that statement:

1. It has publicly analyzed several extraordinarily difficult social problems (especially teen pregnancy and teen drug abuse).
2. It has documented, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication, the inadequacy of educational and governmental solutions to these problems.
3. It has in several instances openly admitted a sense of helplessness.
4. It has even hinted at the desperate and confused vacuum of the human heart apart from God, but then backed off from the full implications of such a vacuum.

Let me illustrate a couple of these points and then turn with you to a word of scripture that is so desperately needed at this hour.

From December 14 through 19 the Tribune ran a major analysis of teen drug abuse in the Twin Cities. What were the conclusions? The final article observes that Minnesota will get \$2.7 million from the new federal drug bill and then says, "The trouble with trying to attack the problem through education is that it never has proven successful."

Drug education, counseling and treatment. Law enforcement, border interdiction and urine testing. All of them put together won't eradicate teen-age drug use. They may not even make much of a dent. What will solve the problem? Probably nothing. Why do the researchers end up so pessimistic? Here's their answer: "The fundamental problem with [these efforts] is that they don't do anything about the reason a kid is using drugs." The question is not how to keep kids from getting drugs, but why do they want to use them?

Then they summarize the why's that they could discover. The two most penetrating quotes from teenagers were these: First from an 18 year old woman: "It's what makes everything fun ... and not boring." Life without drugs didn't "have an edge. It's not thrilling and it's not different, it's not daring." Then from an unidentified teen: "it is a prestige thing. A lot of 'in' people talk about drugs.... It's cool."

There are two deep cravings behind these two quotes: One is the craving not to be bored. Or to put it positively, the craving for adventure, and challenge and thrill of doing something daring. The same thing turned up in the analyses of the teen pregnancy problem. One sentence went like this: "Teenagers are far more likely to have babies when their lives begin to seem pointless and when the doors to the future seem closed." There is a very close connection between saying "life has no point" and saying "life has no edge".

The other craving is the craving for significance.

If we put these two deep longings together I think what the young people are saying is: I want my life to have a significance that is thrilling. I want my life to have a point that is admirable. I don't want my days to be dull; I want my life to have an edge to it. I want something that is worth walking along a precipice for.

And the whole upshot of the analyses in the media is that the effort to find this life in drugs and premarital sex is backfiring on the teenagers and on our society. The young people and the culture are being ruined. Why? Because the vacuum of significance and thrilling point and edge in life was not intended to be filled by drugs and illicit sex.

Not intended by whom? O, there's the question. THE question! For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the whole month of media attention has been a preparation for that question. And if you think God isn't mercifully at work in all this, serving the gospel, preparing thoughtful people all over this city to hear your witness, listen to the lead editorial of the Tribune from Christmas morning. The writer says that Malcolm Muggeridge, the Christian British journalist, has an answer for our world. Then listen to this paragraph:

"Looking for God," Muggeridge says, "means understanding that power in all of its forms -- wealth, fame, political or social position -- is a dangerous fantasy. It makes us brutal and blind, in his words to "our Creator's purposes for his creation," purposes that are "loving and not malign, creative and not destructive, universal and not particular."

There it is, for the first time after weeks of God-ignoring social analysis -- the central question. What is God's purpose for his creation of sexuality? What is God's purpose for his creation of the longing for thrill and point and edge and significance? That is the central issue that we must keep at the center of all social discussion. And by the grace of God it was put at the center by the secular media on Christmas morning.

Not only that, they went on to say, perhaps we think so much about peace between nations that we think too little about peace within selves and families and neighborhoods. Perhaps the comity of nations cannot be bestowed top-down on fractious peoples by negotiators meeting in Geneva, but must percolate up from the power of individual, peace-filled lives. Perhaps the world is hard because we are hard, because we have made a Faustian bargain to purchase the fantasy of power.

Are you as an evangelical Christian guilty of putting your head in the sand when you say to a colleague or neighbor or friend that what this world needs is for individuals to seek and discover God's purposes for their lives -- for their money and job and family and sexuality and longing for significance?

No, you are not guilty of putting your head in the sand when you call people to center in on God and to give attention to his purposes for all of life. Instead you are beginning where the secular press, after months of dead end streets, has ended, in a pensive and very penetrating Christmas editorial.

Let me simply take it to its Biblical conclusion and encourage you to make it known all over this city in 1987. Could it be that God is preparing this city for a mighty and humble upsurge of confident penetrating Christian witness and reformation?

What the teenagers of our city need, and what everyone of us needs, is a cause to live for that accords with the purposes of our Creator. And because our Creator is breathtaking in Himself and gracious toward his creatures, we can know beyond any doubt that **his cause will satisfy our deepest longings for a life with thrilling significance.**

Where do we find that cause? We look to the word of God, and particularly to the testimony of one who had found such a cause himself, the apostle Paul. Acts 20:24 is a testimony of a life that is not boring, a life with an "edge" and with daring and with enormous significance.

I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Consider for just a few minutes what Paul was living for and what effect it had on his life. We can see this best if we simply read the text backwards, and notice four immense realities.

First, notice the immense reality of God. The verse ends with that great reality: "to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Since we come from God and are made for God you can mark it down as absolutely certain: Any constellation of goals that you choose to live for will leave a craving vacuum in your soul if GOD is not the pole star in that constellation guiding and shaping all your choices. God was the lodestar of Paul's life, and the glory of God was the light of that immense and blazing star, and all the other aims of his life were like moons whose only light and attraction were the light they reflected of that star.

Second, notice the immense reality of God's grace. The verse ends, "to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." The power of God's holiness and justice are like a great, violent hurricane, and the grace of God is like the eye of the hurricane where all is peace and calm. Grace is the center of God's reality. Grace, or love, is the essential calm at the center of the vortex of his infinite perfections. Paul had felt himself swept into the terror of that hurricane one day on the Damascus road. And then to his utter amazement he was drawn through it into the peace and beauty of the eye of grace even though he was the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:12-16).

Third, notice the immense reality of the gospel. The verse ends, "to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." First there is the immense reality of God himself, breathtaking in all his glory. Then there is the immense reality of God's grace, rescuing sinners from the hurricane of his holy wrath and giving them a place next to his heart forever in the eye of the storm. Then there is the immense message to all the world that these things are so. An awesome and holy God exists. And there is a way to safety and fellowship through the death and resurrection of his Son. All who submit to him and trust his grace, will be rescued and drawn into the place of peace and wonder at the eye of his storm. This is the gospel.

Fourth, notice the immense reality of the cause Paul lived for. ". . . to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." I say that the cause of testifying to the grace of God is immense for two reasons. First, because a cause is as big as its source and goal. And the source and goal of Paul's cause is God himself. He owes his life to God and he gives his life to God. And the second reason I call Paul's cause immense is that a cause is as big as the effects it has on its devotees.

This is what I want to close with. The great cause of embodying and testifying to the enormous grace of a breathtaking God will have revolutionizing effects on teenagers and adults. Look at the effect it had on Paul.

First it made him utterly indifferent to earthly gain. The verse begins, "I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself." In other words he had found a cause to live for that was so profoundly satisfying that it was more valuable than life itself. And of course life is the basis of all sex, all drugs, all prestige, all coolness, all wealth. And so, if the lure of the cause surpasses the lure of life itself, then it surpasses all the things that this life sustains.

Or to put it another way Paul's Creator had given him a cause to live for that freed him for a kind of reckless abandon toward danger. Life for Paul was not dull. It had all the "edge" and "thrill" and "daring" and "differentness" that any 18 year old girl in Minneapolis could ever dream of bearing.

The second effect that Paul's cause to live for had on him was to give him an incredible discipline to stay on the assigned trail. The verse says that he valued one thing more than life: "if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus." He pictures himself as an athlete running a race. His coach, trainer, audience, and award is Jesus Christ. One thing matters: finishing the course the way he has been taught.

On the right he passes the temptation of extra-marital sex. He was a single man his whole ministry through! On the left he passes the temporary cheap thrill of drugs. But he is not a child any more. He reasons: My cause is the cause of God. My thrill is the power of grace. My "edge" is the risk of my life. My "point" is the honor of Christ. My "daring" is the measure of my love. And thus he fights his way along the narrow trail in the power and the glory of a disciplined and God-centered life.

What Minneapolis needs today is a cause to live for that comes from God. Teenagers, newspaper editors, housewives, businessmen, teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, salesmen, engineers, computer specialists, wage-earners of every level must ask the question posed in the Christmas editorial: What are the Creator's purposes for his creation? What is the cause that God wants me to live for?

So there are at least four reasons I feel optimistic as this year closes:

1. In God's providence even the secular media have been driven to the brink of this insight -- that God's purposes for sex and drugs and the human heart must be taken into account.
2. The Bible offers a profound and compelling answer to the question of God's purposes for these and all dimensions of life.
3. God is gracious and does not delight in the destruction of individuals or society; he may yet be pleased in his sovereign mercy to grant a day revival and reformation even in this secular city.
4. Finally, here in this church, not to mention hundreds of other churches, there are a thousand people who may, by God's grace, come out of the closet in 1987 and with clarity and boldness testify to the gospel of the grace of God, and make public the potential connections between the dead end streets of secularism and the truth of God.

I received a letter from John Jenstad on Christmas Eve from Suriname where he is supporting the missionary enterprise of Wycliffe by teaching high school students. He said in his first paragraph,

“I can't think of any greater movement to be involved in than bringing God's truth to the nations. It makes the UN, the environmentalist movement and MADD look like nursery school. It's like comparing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to a TV commercial. Given a real choice, why would someone want to dedicate his or her life to something with only temporary value when he or she could be involved with a cause with eternal significance?”

Amen!

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SECTION 2 -- Evangelism - Sharing the Message of Jesus

Read Colossians 4:2-6

1. Verse 2 says “Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving.”

What does it mean to devote yourself to prayer? What does that look like? When Paul says to “stay alert” what do you think he means?

2. Verse 3 says “pray also that God may open a door to us for the message”. Why is it important to pray that God would open doors for us to share the message of Jesus? How do you think this relates to the person's openness to hear the message? Are there times when the door is not open to share the message? Why or why not?

3. What does walking in wisdom have to do with being able to share the message of Christ with those around us?

4. “Gracious speech seasoned with salt” What does that mean to you? How you speak does matter therefore, what changes do you need to make in order to have “gracious speech”?

SECTION 3 -- Discipleship - Growing in Christ-likeness

Read Colossians 3:12-17

1. This passage is a call to discipleship - growing into the kind of people God desires for us to be. Identify some characteristics of a disciple found in this passage.

2. Of those characteristics, which ones do you need to work on the most? What about as a family?
3. Verse 16 tells us to let “the message of Christ dwell richly among” us. What does that mean to you? How can you obey this command in your life? Family? Church?
4. Verse 17 brings discipleship down to one key phrase, “in all you do...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God...” Ask God to help you live out that statement in your own life. In your family life and in your church.