

**Lord Change My Attitude before it's too late #4**  
**Perhaps Next Summer Matthew 25:1-13      Luke 14:15-23**  
**February 22, 2009**

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

The poet said it well describing the last days of summer: "*The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year.*"

Especially here in Western NY, summer has a way of escaping us. The precious days of summer have a way of slipping through our fingers. Somehow, the days quickly go by and we don't savor them like we should.

We think of all the promises that we made ourselves about the things we were going to do in the summer.

- \* This summer we were going to relax and enjoy the sun.
- \* This summer we were going to do some bike riding.
- \* This summer we were going to read some good books.
- \* This summer we were really going to spend some time with our families for a change.
- \* This summer we were going to take a decent vacation and see something.
- \* This summer we were going to entertain all of our friends at outdoor barbecues.
- \* This summer we were going to work in the garden.

But then summer is over and the leaves begin to change. We prepare for winter. "Well," we can only lamely say, "*perhaps next summer, perhaps next summer ...*"

It seems like we are always living for next summer.

- \* *Next summer, I'll be the father I've always intended to be.*
- \* *Next summer, I'll quit complaining and learn to be grateful.*
- \* *Next summer I'll get in shape.*
- \* *Next summer I'll slow down and start enjoying my children or maybe it's my grandchildren.*
- \* *Next summer I'll get really serious about prayer.*
- \* *Next summer I'll learn the Bible.*
- \* *Next summer I'm going to get organized.*
- \* *Next summer I'll take more risks.*
- \* *Next summer I'll be generous.*

People just live their whole lives waiting for next summer.

This morning is the last of the series, *Lord, Change My Attitude before it's too late.* The attitude that I'm going to challenge you today is in the area of Procrastination.

*Procrastination is the failure to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.*

We all procrastinate. If procrastination is a capital crime, we'd all be dead several times over.

When we look at our Lord's teaching you discover that he was concerned about people taking the wrong bus in life. We fail to realize that he was just as concerned about not taking any bus at all.

He warned us against the fallacy of thinking, *There will always be another one to catch.*

The parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins showed that half of them missed the wedding and the feast that followed, because they POSTPONED getting oil for their lamps.

In another narrative of the Gospel, you see a great supper ready and the invitations all out. But those who were invited were all tied up -

- \* the one looking at a piece of ground,
- \* another looking at a yoke of oxen,
- \* another taking care of a new bride.

They missed the feast. They apparently thought that there would be another one that they

could go to.

Edgar Howe said: "Most people put off til tomorrow what they should have done yesterday."

Mark Twain put it: "Don't put off til tomorrow what you can put off til the day after tomorrow just as easily."

But perhaps Henry George Bohn was more truthful when he said: "*One of these days - ONE OF THESE DAYS' - is none of these days.*"

There is a painting in the Art Institute in Chicago. It showed a simple composition of a door - a battered, weather-beaten, paint-peeling door - and on the door was an old-fashioned funeral crepe, a black piece of material that people used to hang on their doors to show that they were mourning. (Before funeral parlors and mortuaries were known.) The title of the painting was: "*The things that I should have done, I did not.*" How many funeral crepes speak the same lines as the summary of human life?

You remember the story of the old recluse who had a bad leak in his roof. When he was asked why he didn't repair the leak, he always said: "*Well, when the sun is shining, I don't need it repaired, and when it is raining, it's too wet to work on it.*"

The story of so many lives. The moments that come and go.

I believe the biggest problem with this procrastination someday syndrome is that it robs you of living right now. You spend your whole life obsessing about what you should have done or what you ought to do in the future. The sad reality is you don't hear God's voice in this moment, you don't feel God's touch in this moment. You don't see God's grace in this moment and the great danger is you will never become what God intends you to be. Procrastinating is ultimately a sneaky subtle way of saying NO to God's call on your life.

No, I will not be what you want me to be today.

No, I will not receive this moment as a gift from you and surrender it back to you right now.

Frederick Beechner writes in "The Last Analysis," "*All moments are key moments and life itself is grace.*"

### **What steps can I take to stop being a procrastinator?**

You have the bulletin. Take out a pencil. Some of you might want to think about it and do it tomorrow.

#### **1. If I want to learn to live in the now I must stop excusing procrastination in my life.**

Chronic procrastinators, you see, are quick to rationalize their behaviors on the grounds that there's just nothing they can do about it.

"*That's just the way I am,*" people will say, as if there is some gene for procrastinating that just causes me to do it. Chronic procrastinators will look for any pretext to excuse putting off something they don't want to do.

How many of us are as stubborn in our procrastination as the alcoholic who was always going to reform and stop drinking but he never quite found a convenient season to do it.

Finally, his family, in desperation, decided to frighten him into it. One night he came home dead drunk, and they picked him up and carried him out to the cemetery. They buried him there, with only his head protruding from the ground.

Well, when he finally came to, it was already morning. The birds were singing and the sun was

shining. With his customary lack of concern, he looked all around at the forest of tombstones about him and said: "*Well, imagine that! Resurrection Day, and I'm the first one up.*"

We can think of all kinds of excuses for postponing any kind of reform that concerns us.

If there's one important unpleasant thing that needs to be done, we'll find 15 other things that need to be done prior to that. We'll look for any excuse to avoid the inevitable.

The Bible talks about this also. The writer of Proverbs says, "*The lazy man is full of excuses. 'I can't go to work,' he says. 'If I go outside I might meet a lion in the street and be killed.'*"

Now, that's a real likely one, don't you think? Try that one on your boss sometime this week: "*Well, I wanted to come in, but, you know, the lion thing is going on. Everyone is talking about it. It's right there, Proverbs 22:13*" -- *better stay home and be safe. Don't risk it.*

The Bible has some humor here. It's saying this is part of the human condition. We'll latch on to any excuse not to do what needs to be done. "*I'll do it when I get inspired; I'll do it when things settle down.*"

Okay, first step is to stop all of that.

Say, "*I'm going to take responsibility now for my time, my action, my life. I will own it. It's not up to somebody else. This is between God and me, and I'll need his help. The ball is in my court.*"

That's the first step. You have to say you're going to cut yourself off now from all the rationalizations and excuses that are keeping you from accomplishing what you need to accomplish.

## **2. Second practice involves a commitment to action that I'll summarize in this little phrase: Start today.**

Commit yourself to taking action in areas where you've been procrastinating, today.

The writer of Proverbs puts it this way: "*Do not boast about tomorrow for you don't know what a day may bring forth.*" He says don't casually assume you can get around to it tomorrow or some point in the future. You don't know. You have this moment; this is it.

For some of you in this room procrastination has become a way of life, and you live in what might be called your own personal culture of delay.

In the "Los Angeles Times" newspaper several years ago, A guy returns to the house where he grew up. He'd been away for 20 years. He comes back and visits it.

He goes up into the attic and he finds his jacket. It had not gone with him in the move. It had been there for 20 years. He puts it on and puts his hand in the pocket and he pulls out a receipt for a pair of shoes that he had taken in to be repaired 20 years ago and forgotten to pick up.

So on a whim, he goes to where the shoe repair shop used to be in his old neighborhood, and it's still there. The same guy is still working behind the counter that worked there 20 years ago. So this guy reaches into his jacket, pulls out the receipt and hands it to the man behind the counter.

The man goes back to the work area and returns to the counter and says to the guy in the jacket, "*They'll be ready next Friday.*"

Just a culture of delay. You just get so used to it you don't even notice it anymore -- you know, 20 years, "*They'll be ready Friday.*" You get used to it after a while. You get desensitized. You don't

even notice that you failed to live now.

So you need to make a commitment to action -- start today. My challenge here is to pick one task you've been putting off. Maybe a project around the house, it might be a financial task, it might be something relating to your spiritual life, something at work.

Divide it up into small steps -- don't do the whole thing. Take one small step because procrastinators tend to think in all or nothing terms: "Either I've got to do the whole thing or I can't do anything at all." It has to be done perfectly.

Take one small step and start today. At least start the project. Here's what you'll discover: motivation follows action. If I wait to do something until I feel like doing it, until I'm motivated, I will wait a real long time. But if I take an action step even before I feel like it, I'll discover that I begin to get energized.

First thing you've got to do is ruthlessly cut yourself off from any excuses or rationalizations. Second thing is make a commitment to action -- start today.

### **3. The third thing is You must ruthlessly prioritize your life.**

You've got to decide what matters and what doesn't. You must ruthlessly prioritize your life.

This is a choice of the heart. You've got to decide. *"I'm going to be serious about this, I'm going to live so that my life reflects my values so that if somebody just looks at the way that I live, they will be able to discern what matters to me or not."*

Now, if someone were to look at your life the way you've been living it for this past week, for the last month, what would they discern about your values? What would your activities, the way you spend your time tell them about what matters to you and what doesn't?

The truth about us is we get so rushed, we're behind so much, we have so little time that we don't have time to love, for kindness, for serving because we're just rushing through our days.

We violate basic values. That's the society in which we live. People are so rushed they violate the values that they say they hold.

A woman is in a car at a stoplight and her engine stalls and she's tying up traffic. She gets out to look at the engine. The light is green and the guy behind her is real impatient, as most of us would be, so he's just laying on the horn. She doesn't know what else to do.

Finally, she walks back to his car and says to him, *"My car is stalled and I don't know what to do, but I'll make you a deal. If you go up and look at my engine, I'll stay here and honk your horn."*

We violate our own values. We say that we're committed to being people of love and civility and decency. If somebody looked at your life, what would they say matters to you?

If you're serious about living right now, you're going to have to ruthlessly prioritize your life and you're going to have to say no to a lot of things. You're going to need to live with a laser-like focus.

"USA Today" had a very interesting article a while ago. They surveyed experts in different fields and asked them, for an average person -- not a champion --

\* How much time did they need to spend sleeping?

They asked a person who was an expert on sleep.

\* How much time do they need to spend exercising? They asked somebody who was an expert on exercise.

\* How much time do they need to spend reading to their kids?

They asked someone that was an expert on reading.

\* Working on financial management, they asked an expert in finances -- Just all the different areas of life.

What's the average person, just someone who wants to do the minimum to get by okay and be healthy -- what do they need to do?

They took all that advice about how much time you need to spend on the key areas of your life and added it together and it came to 36 hours a day.

` In other words, experts are telling you all the time -- that you need to spend so much time reading, devotions, exercising, etc. Just doing the minimum is going to take 36 hours a day.

You're going to have to be real ruthless about saying, "*No, I'm not going to be doing lots of stuff that this world tells me I need to do.*"

Have you ever just sat down and looked at the activities you're engaged in and said, "*What matters?*" *Eating with my family? Prayer? How many hours a week do I spend in certain activities?*

See, no one's going to do this for you, friends. That's why I'm so passionate about this subject because I think for most of us in this room the danger isn't that we'll defy God, it's just that we'll float through and these moments will trickle away and our life just trickles away.

For many people, life ends as T.S. Eliot puts it, With a whimper, instead of with a bang.

As an author writes, (Louis H. Valbracht) *They allow life to dribble away, opportunities neglected, challenges unmet, inspiration stifled, potential allowed to deteriorate, talents undeveloped, - all due to this life-sucking parasite of procrastination.*

That brings me to the next step in the process of learning to live in the now. This is the step of understanding. This is the theological truth, now.

#### **4. You must understand that life, your life, is very short.**

You were made to live forever. You will be eternally alive. But your life on this earth is the prelude to what is to come.

C.S. Lewis puts it more eloquently by saying, *Our life on earth is only title and cover page. When we enter the kingdom of heaven we begin the greatest story of all.*

The Psalmist puts it like this in Psalm 103:

*15 As for man, his days are like grass,  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,  
and its place remembers it no more.*

*"For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it has passed or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away; they're like a dream. They're like grass that's renewed in the morning and in the morning it flourishes and is renewed and in the evening it fades and withers."*

Our life is like that, the Psalmist says. It's so short. What's ironic is that this comes as such a

surprise to every generation. For centuries, people grow up, they grow old and they all ask the same question: "*Where did the time go? How did this happen?*"

In the movie "*City Slickers*" with Billy Crystal, there's a wonderful scene when he's standing in front of a bunch of little kids in an elementary school class and he talks to them about time, and what he's learned about the passage of time. He says, "*Value this time, kids, because it's the time when you still have choices. It goes by so fast.*"

A famous quote regarding life which I'm sure most of you have read, either in Readers Digest or somewhere.

*"When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything and you do.*

*"Your twenties are a blur,*

*Thirties you raise your family, you make a little money, you think to yourself, 'What happened to my twenties?'*

*"Forties, you grow a little pot belly, you grow another chin,*

*the music starts to get too loud, one of your girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.*

*"Fifties, you have a minor surgery -- you call it a procedure, but it's a surgery.*

*"Sixties, you'll have a major surgery, the music is still loud, but that doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.*

*"Seventies, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale, you start eating dinner at two PM in the afternoon, you have lunch around ten, breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate soft yogurt muttering, 'How come the kids don't call?'*

*"Eighties, you'll have a major stroke and you end up babbling with some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand but who keep calling her 'Mama.' Any questions?"*

The Psalmist says our lives are like grass it grows up and it's just gone. So the Psalmist says in light of this truth that we're made for eternity but we're on this earth for such a brief time.

He goes on to say, "*So God, teach us to number our days so that we might gain a heart of wisdom.*" Teach us to number our days.

My prayer/your prayer, *God each day is the most precious gift from you that I have. I don't want to throw a single one away. I want to possess them thoroughly. I want them numbered.*

In this country in 1800, life expectancy was 35 years.

Indeed, as late as 1890, one could only expect to live for 43 years. But now, with the help of an easier life and modern medicine, we can expect to live well over 65 years.

I was born in February 1, 1956

Today I am 636 months old

\* 2,769 weeks old

\* 19,380 days old

\* 465,126 hours old

\* 27,907,599 minutes old

\* 1,674,455,998 seconds old.

Next year, being 54, I can boil 6.17 U.S. ounces of water with that many candles.

Yes, we've added years to the life, but I wonder if, correspondingly, we have added life to the years.

God will never measure our lives by the number of years that we have spent. He will measure

them by the way we spent ourselves IN those years.

There has been times when I have had to go to a family to get material for an obituary, I ask: "*What are the important things that have happened since he left school or since he was married? What should I mention? Are there any important events or accomplishments that should be noted?*"

How often the answer is "*No, nothing.*" *Again and again - nothing!* A person who never was, who apparently never lived a life. Make no mistake about it, lives can end up as nothing by the sheer peril of procrastination.

Whittier wrote: "*Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest of these - it might have been.*" Is "*it might have been*" the story of your life thus far?

I wonder, honestly, how many of you are working at something that you really love and are finding a challenge to your total capacities? How many of you are living up to the ideals and the aspirations that you set for yourself in your youth?

Or, on the other hand, how many of you are just eking out an existence, grubbing along until the day that you can retire and do all of those things that you have been postponing?

How many retired people do you know who are DOING those things?

The late George Burns, the famous comedian who lived to be a 100 years old, his friends always kidded him about his singing.

Burns, a master of self-deprecating humor, decided to take advantage of this and insure his voice for a million dollars. He thought it would be a wonderful publicity stunt.

"*I was so excited,*" said Burns, "*I couldn't wait to rush down to the insurance company. I took a cassette and a tape recorder with me so the insurance man could hear my voice. It was one of my best numbers -- a syncopated version of Yankee Doodle Blues with a yodeling finish. The insurance man listened patiently to the whole thing, then he just looked at me and said, 'Mr. Burns, you should have come to us before you had the accident.'*"

Don't wait until you have an accident before you realize how precious life is or before you surrender your heart fully to God.

You don't want to come to that point in life and realize how much of your life has slipped by your fingers. You failed to leave any room in your life for God.

In C. S. Lewis' story, The Screwtape Letters,

Satan is pictured as calling together all of his assistants and telling them that they are using the entirely wrong approach in refuting the Christian Gospel.

He told them: "*Tell the people that God is real. Tell them that they should have faith in Him. Tell them that the Gospel is true, that Jesus Christ died to save them from their sins. But tell them that THERE IS NO HURRY. There's no hurry. Any time is good enough to take care of such matters.*"

When Horace Bushnell started out as a young instructor at Yale University, he was plagued by all kinds of religious perplexities. He was unable to resolve his doubts. Very unsettled. But all the while, he was reading and studying religious issues incessantly, avidly. He would discuss them whenever and wherever and with whom ever he had the opportunity.

But all the while, one great question was forming in his mind:

*"Why am I postponing the inevitable? Why am I trying to gain more knowledge, when I have not even yielded myself to the knowledge that I already have?"*

Well, he started there, and he became one of the great prophets of the church and of the faith.

A truth seeker said to Pascal, a French mathematician, and religious philosopher.:

*"I wish I had your creed so that I could live your kind of life."*

Pascal snapped back: *"Start living my kind of life, and you will soon have my creed."*

Take a look and look closely at yourselves. What great moments of challenge and opportunity have you allowed to pass by in your lives? Is the potential of your life being frittered away?

The one and only life that God has given you, what are you using it for?

I pray that you are not using your life solely on satisfying your needs and taking a narcissistic approach to life like Lord Byron.

Lord Byron, the famous English poet and a leading figure in Romanticism. He was regarded as one of the greatest European poets and still many people read his works today. Lord Byron is also famous for the way he lived his life: extravagant living, many love affairs, sexual endeavors and debts.

Lady Caroline Lamb, who was his lover for a time, said that he was *"mad, bad, and dangerous to know."*

One of his biographers said of Lord Byron:

*This should have been a noble creature, instead there is only chaos.*

Don't live your life in chaos. Life is too short to live that kind of life. Live a noble life. Today you have the opportunity to live a honorable life for Jesus Christ. Do it!

There was a highly successful business executive who was struck down by a serious coronary. His wife, who was a member of a church asked her pastor to visit her husband in the hospital. As the pastor sat by his bedside, the business executive looked at the pastor and said,

*Pastor, you are looking at the guy who never had time for God. Well, now I've got time, all the time that's left - if there is any left. Pastor.*

Remember friends next summer may not come.

#### Resource Materials:

- \* John Ortberg: "Living With An Attitude" series
- \* James MacDonald, Lord, Change My Attitude
- \* John Maxwell, The Winning Attitude
- \* Louis H. Valbracht