

## **“Hallmarks of Christian Living”**

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When you look at these words on this page, it just jumps out how much God loves us and how important we are to God. When you look at this, [you see that] He chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world. You were not an afterthought. You were not an accident. You were chosen before the foundation of the world. When God created the heavens and the earth, God had you in mind. Think about what that means, and how sad it is when some people never really understand or realize their true potential; that when they are brought into this world are treated like dirt, humiliated, viewed as second class citizens, and are unacceptable in their minds and in the attitudes of others.

It is our task as Christian men and women to lift other people up so that they see themselves as valued, so that they understand themselves to be called before the very foundations of the world. We can't do that for other people until we see that within ourselves. When we do not see ourselves as worthy, we are incapable of viewing others with worthiness - with being acceptable, with being worthy of love. So it isn't selfish in one regard to build ourselves up, to see ourselves and focus on ourselves once in a while, as long as it isn't some narcissistic understanding - but is truly meant to be for our true understanding of who God wanted us to be. As long as that is our motivation, then it is important that we look upon ourselves and evaluate ourselves. What better time of the year than on New Year's Day, to sit down and have resolution, to think about who God wants us to be in this world.

In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul - or probably one of Paul's students - wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus, and probably to others, encouraging the people to reconsider who they were as people of faith. And, if they wrote this letter for that purpose, it meant that more than likely these Christian men and women in the early Church had lost their way - they had forgotten who they were. They were being influenced and pulled in different directions. They had forgotten that they were made and called before the foundations of the world. This writer, representing Paul, wanted to remind them of who they were and who God called them to be, so that they could live a life worthy of that calling.

So I set about, leading up to the new year, to start reading a book that would help me evaluate who God called me to be. Interestingly enough, this time it wasn't even a religious, per se, book, but I liked the title, and I get a whole bunch of books on my Kindle just because I like the titles, then half the time I finish reading them because they end up being good.

Well, I'm about three-fourths of the way through this one. So far it is pretty darn good, because it is helping me determine where my path is and is leading me to the path God wants me to take. The title of the book is called “Designing Your Life.” I will put it in my Daily Devotion this week, so if you forget the title or don't have the time to write it down, you can go to the devotion and find it. It is written by Bill Barnett and Dave Evans.

Bill and Dave sat down together to write a book about how we as human beings take back control of our lives. Their argument is that most of us have our lives taken away from us by

other people. We are living other people's lives and not our own. Our lives may have been taken over by our parents, who never let go. They had a plan for our lives. It didn't matter what our plan was. We were going to live our parents' lives. Our lives may have been taken over by our bosses at work, who had a plan for our lives and seemed to know better than we do about how we should be running our lives.

No matter who it is who has taken over responsibility for your life, a lot of us, according to Bill and Dave, gave away our lives to others. We are living their lives to please them, rather than living our lives to please us, and as a Christian I would say, [we should be] living our lives to please God. They go through these activities or exercises in order to bring yourself back to living the life you want to live: *your* life. And, my argument as a person of faith, is that you do that - not so you can be in charge of your life - but so you take back your life, so that you can turn around and give it to God.

But, especially as we get older, we have been doing it so long - running on auto-pilot, reacting to this issue, to that issue, to this situation - that we don't even remember how to live the life that God gave us and called us to, before the foundation of the world. The hallmarks of the faith, according to this letter of Ephesians was, that we are adopted, that we receive an inheritance, that we receive the grace of God, so that we can know the love of God and share that love with others. We need to get back to owning that so that we can give it to others to pass on.

Here is how they say we should be doing that: I love the subtitle in the book - remember the title is called "Designing Your Life." But the subtitle is "How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life." Do you feel you are living a well-lived, joyful life? If you are not sure you are, then it wouldn't hurt to put in a little work. Read this book and follow some of the exercises, and see if you can take back those parts of your life that are not being well-lived or are not feeling very joyful.

God did not intend us to be unhappy. God did not intend us to be overworked, slavishly despairing and frustrated all of the time. God made us to be joyful. God called us before the foundations of the earth to be joyful. So maybe we need to follow some of these exercises, to find out again how to be joyful. Somewhere along the line most of us lost it. They say you can go back and realize that the most intelligent people are 5-year-olds, because they are the only ones smart enough to be truly joyful.

If you were blessed enough to have a 5-year-old at Christmas whether they are your child, a grandchild, or somebody you just watched at a store, man they know it, in a God-like way that most of us aren't, because they know joy - they feel it in their toes and in their hands, and their whole bodies, because they live with their *whole* body. When they are joyful, they feel it *everywhere*, and most of us just don't quite remember how. This is how you remember joy.

Barnett and Evans provided a description of how to transform your life back to joy and live it well. They said, you begin by building your compass so that you know what direction you want to take. You begin by developing a work view and a life view. You begin with your work, by asking simple questions. Too often we get sidetracked by things that are far too difficult and we never get back to asking ourselves the basic simple questions about why we are doing the things that we do. When you stop asking simple questions, everyone else

will wrap you up in the difficult ones, sidetrack you, and lead you way far away from what God called you to be, before the foundation of the world.

So ask yourself, “What is work for? Is it to make a buck? Is it to provide my self-worth? My dignity? Is it to define who I am as a human being? What is work for? What makes good work good? Is it making the most money? Is it by providing the most respect? Is it having the most power? And, is it to do the best for other people?”

You have to answer those simple basic questions. The basic, simple questions will lead you back. Write down and articulate your philosophy of work. Now when I talk, or they talk, I’m not talking just about work. If you are retired, you are not off the hook, because work is not just what you get paid to do. I am so blessed to be in the midst of so many people who work in such marvelous ways.

I go to the hospital. If I’m going to visit someone who is having surgery, I run into Betty Gibson. You can’t get away from that woman. She does so much. [Laughter] I go visiting at the hospital there is Betty Gibson. I go home and eat lunch. I come back and there is Betty Gibson at church. She is everywhere. She is working and she is not even smart enough to get paid for it. [Laughter] She is up at 4:30 a.m. working for herself and her faith.

Now if you go to that same hospital and you go in the main floor, so that you can go up to a room, you run into Jo Peterson, or you can run into Linda Railey, who will tell you which room someone is in, and which building they are at. Are they in Younkers or in Powell, or are they in North? And they are working. It doesn’t matter whether [or not] they are getting paid. They are working. And I would bet you they could tell you why they are doing it. It’s because it enriches them more than what they give to others. They know where their true north is.

I’m preaching to the choir right now, because you all are here on New Year’s Day. You know where your true north is, or you wouldn’t be here today. So maybe you know it already and you can hand this book off to somebody else – but [let’s] go back to those questions about why you do the work that you do in your life.

Now life isn’t just about work, you also have a life view. They [Barnett and Evans] said to be able to design your life, rather than giving it away to the whims of other people, you have to take back your life so that you can give it back to God. In your life view, you need to ask these questions - and again your world view. Write it [a question] on one page. It doesn’t have to be a novel. And, with your life view take out one more page and write it [another question] on that one. It doesn’t take a lot of time. What gives life meaning? Ask that question? What makes your life worthwhile and valuable? How does your life relate to others in your family, in your community and in the world? And, I added “in my church?” What do money, fame and personal accomplishment have to do with a satisfying life? How important are your experiences, growth and fulfillment in your life?

When you have answered those [questions] you will find out that you are doing some things amazingly well. And, if you are like me, you find you have to let a few things slide. I have lost my true north from time to time. How do I get back to that true north so that when I answer that question, “How important are the experiences, growth and fulfillment in your

life?" I'm able to say, "Not that important when my true north is strong." There are other things that are more important than me, and my feelings, and my accomplishments.

The real question is again: How does your life relate to others in your family, your church, your community and your world? The closer you are to answering that is by saying, "It's really important, and here is how I'm living it out," the closer you are to your true north on your compass.

Paul was saying in Ephesians, "You are not finding your true north and you are unhappy. That's why you are not very joyful. So find a work-life coherency. Where do your views on work and your life complement one another? Where do they clash? Where does one drive one another? My work has often driven my life to a point where I sacrificed time with my wife and daughter, and now with that guy we call her husband. [Laughter] My true north evens those out, and even when I have to sacrifice for them, my wife, my daughter and that other guy, should know that they are still most important.

I haven't always been good at my true north. It isn't until I ask the big, simple questions, that I realized that, and I begin to think about what I have to do to get back to my true north. Then I can begin to ask after that. Where is God in my life? What am I doing? What am I leaving undone?

We make religion far too difficult, far too complex - and most of the time it becomes quite simple: Am I involving God in my decision-making? Is God in my heart on a weekly, daily basis, or not? Keep your faith simple this year. Focus on the simple things. Find your true north. I pray that you and I together will make that our New Year's resolution so that we can keep a reminder in our hearts: that God has adopted us, that God has provided an inheritance for us. We receive it through the grace of God. In that we receive love that keeps us joyful, hopeful and brings us back to our true north, so that we can renew the joy of a 5-year-old again. May that be our call for the foundations of the earth. Amen.