

"MAKING LIFE COUNT"  
II Thessalonians 1:1-12

Text: "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfill every good resolve and work of faith by his power."  
II Thessalonians 1:11

When the ministry of Jesus was drawing to its dramatic close, St. John records that Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, the hour is come..." As Jesus came to the tragic end of a too brief career, part of that prayer contained these words, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." Surely each of us this morning would like to have such words said of us as the climax to our lives. We would like to say that our lives had counted, that they had been worthwhile. We would like to be able to say that life had been worth the living for we had finished the work that had been given us to do.

I would venture to say that there is not a person listening to my voice this morning who does not want his life to count for something. When the play is over and the curtain has fallen and the footlights have dimmed out, none of us would be content for life to have counted for zero, to have gone for naught. Each of us wants to leave behind us some work well done, some job accomplished, some task completed. Each of us wants to leave behind some stamp upon the world to show that we have passed this way, some sign to mark our passage. Lying in a hospital room can be a sobering experience. As one is confined there in illness, he hears outside his window the sounds of the bustling world, going unconcerned about its business. And as one hears those sounds he cannot help but wonder, "Does it matter to that world out there whether I live or die?"

The Roman Empire was the lengthened shadow of Caesar. The Reformation was the molding of the western world by Luther and Calvin. The Christian faith and the shape of the whole world is the lengthened shadow of a cross, the mark of a man named Jesus who made his life count. So it is that each of us--though perhaps in lesser degree--want our lives to count for something. How meaningless would be our existence if it served no purpose, accomplished no goal, reached no objective.

I would suggest first of all this morning, then, that it is terribly important to make life count. The very young are deeply conscious of this. With life before them as a golden promise, they burn with a vision such as a young girl had who wrote a magazine editor, "Dear sir: I am just getting ready to leave school and go out into the world. But as I look at my friends and relatives, their lives don't seem to count for much. Please tell me what I can do to make my life count." I think the very old are also deeply conscious of this, too. Not because life stretches before them as a golden promise, but because they see the end of the road just ahead. With the journey almost done, they want those last precious moments to be filled with meaning.

Most of us have read the story of Florence Nightingale who pioneered in the field of nursing. She once said, "I am a person of very ordinary ability." Yet, for all of that, she made her life count for something--she made an indelible impression upon the world. Or look at a person like Helen Keller. Blinded from her youth and unable to hear, in spite of that she had made a great contribution to the world. She has given hope to others who are blind and has put sight into their hearts instead. You would not have thought that a little blind girl who could not hear and who had not yet learned to talk would ever amount to much. Yet, out of a fierce determination to make her life count for something, Helen Keller has made a lasting mark upon the minds and spirits of men.

Most of us are persons of very ordinary ability--just average people--yet, for

all of that, we want to make our lives count for something, we want to leave our mark upon the world. But I would have you notice in the second place that while we want our lives to count for something, we must determine what that something will be. Let me illustrate. During and before World War II, a man rose to power in Germany--a man named Hitler. In the space of a few short years, he changed the course of human history and made a lasting and unforgettable impression upon the minds of men. Yet, the records of history will never honor the name of Hitler. He had made his life count for something, but he had made it count for the wrong thing. There are many other people whose names history will record--names like Benedict Arnold or Machine Gun Kelley or Christine Keeler. Yet, the mark that they have made on the world is not one of honor and esteem, but rather a mark of dishonor and shame. They made their lives count for something, but it was the wrong thing.

On the other hand, there are other names that we recognize--names like Louis Pasteur, Madame Currie, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington. Here, too, are men who have made their lives count--made them count in such a way that mankind has been better off; counted in such a way that all men rejoice and remember their names with a benediction of blessing.

Back during the early days of the history of the Greeks, the Persians invaded their homeland. A mere handful of Greek soldiers took their station at the mountain pass of Thermopylae. There, in the narrow pass, only a few soldiers at a time could go through. Though vastly outnumbered the Greek soldiers held a mighty army at bay long enough for defenses to be prepared. They were just ordinary soldiers, but they made their lives count dearly for their loved ones and homes. Down through history their deed of daring and valor has been remembered, for they made their lives not only count, they made them count for something worthwhile. So it must be with us. It is not enough to want life to count, we must also make it count for something that is good.

The story of the Greeks at Thermopylae is not without its modern counterpart. At the beginning of World War II the Maginot Line stood as France's first line of defense against Germany. But the Germans flanked that great defense, overran Belgium and routed the British armies. As the British pulled back to Dunkirk, every ship from England was brought into use in an effort to take the troops off the mainland. Far back down the road from Dunkirk at a place called St. Valerie the 51st Division of the British Army--the Scottish troops---took their stand in an effort to hold the Germans off long enough to allow the rest of the army to escape. During those few hours of battle the 51st was lost. Yet, they held off the Panzer divisions long enough to allow the British and French soldiers to be taken safely off from Dunkirk. They made their lives count--and they made them count for something that was worthwhile. Those same soldiers who escaped that day at last returned and swept to victory. But that victory would never have been possible without the 51st--a group of men who made their lives count for something good.

Yes, many men have made their lives count. But the question that each of us faces is the question of not only will we make life count, but will it count for good. Let me suggest, however, that in the third place the Christian must not only make his life count, not only must he make it count for good, he must also make it count for Jesus Christ.

See how it works! I have a friend who is an alcoholic. With the help of AA he gained sobriety. He had never joined the church and at his age he was embarrassed to be baptized and received on profession of faith. Yet, he gritted his teeth and one morning walked down the aisle to publically give his life for Christ. He explained it this way: "I read a story once about a man who graduated from Hampton Institute, a negro college. The last thing his favorite teacher said to him as he prepared to go out into the world was, 'Now go out and show the world what Hampton

can do for a poor colored boy like you.' Somehow I felt that the Lord was saying to me, 'Go out and show the world what Jesus Christ can do for a poor alcoholic like you!' It was not enough for him to merely make his life count for something good, he had also to make it count for Jesus Christ.

So it was that St. Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica who were making their lives count for Jesus Christ. He said, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren....(for) we ourselves glory in you...for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure." And then he adds this: "that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer..."

There are many epitaphs that great men might have written about them. Yet, I think when my days are over that most of all I would rather be able to say in the words of Jesus, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do."

How are we making life count for Jesus?

The story is told of an old sculptor who had in his shop the exact replica of a beautiful cathedral. However, it sat back in a corner and was covered with dust and dirt that had accumulated over the years. His customers hardly gave it more than a glance for there was nothing attractive about it. One day the old sculptor dusted off the gatherings of the years and placed a little light inside the cathedral. The soft light gleaming warmly through the tiny stained-glass windows was a breath-catching marvel and all who came into his shop stopped to wonder at its beauty. In a real sense of the word, so it is with us. We too are a replica--a temple made in God's very own image. Yet, we, like the cathedral, are off in the corner of life, covered with the dirt and filth that our own wickedness has heaped upon us. But when the light of Jesus Christ begins to shine in us--when the love of God is a warm beacon in our hearts--then that which was unnoticed moves out into the center of life and becomes a breath-catching thing of beauty and inspiration, a life that is counting for Jesus. No, it is not enough to merely make life count for good, it must also count for Jesus Christ.

This leads me to make a final observation. We are indeed for the most part very ordinary people. The mark we make on history will be of little note nor will it be of great significance. Yet, when even an ordinary life is counting for Jesus, it takes on extra-ordinary qualities. Simon Peter was just a simple fisherman--until he made his life count for Jesus; Matthew was just a simple tax collector whose name history would never have recorded, until he made his life count for Jesus; Martin Luther was just a simple priest, until he made his life count for Jesus. So it is with us, for though we be very ordinary people, life takes on extra-ordinary qualities life becomes worth living, when life is counting for Jesus Christ.

Yes, when the play is over and the curtain falls and the footlights have dimmed out, will life have been worthwhile? Only if life has been made to count for Jesus Christ, only if at the last we can whisper, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." Then, indeed, life will have been worthwhile.