

Sermon for Sunday, February 1, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN THE WORK DAY ENDS--WHAT THEN?"

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

According to the Gospel of St. John, when the life of Jesus was drawing to its dramatic close, our Lord lifted up his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, the hour is come..." and then Jesus prayed, "I have finished the work which you gave me to do..." When you come to the end of your life, would you like to be able to look back across the years and make that prayer? Would you like to be able to say, "I have finished the work you gave me to do," to be able to say that life had been worthwhile, that life had counted?

Recently a young man whom I admire very much came to see me. He was deeply frustrated. He felt that his job was not meaningful or significant and in one sense his life was being wasted. He simply was not willing for life to count for zero, to be spent for nothing. I am sure his desire is one all of us share. Not many of us this morning would be willing to come to life's end with nothing to show for it. No, each of us wants to leave behind him some work well done, some job accomplished, some task completed.

The first suggestion I want to make this morning is this: it is 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 the young girl who wrote this letter to 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." Several years ago Sydney's high school class had a reunion and we went. Many in the class who could have been there were absent and one of Sydney's classmates explained it this way, "Some of them had such goals and ambitions for themselves," she said, "and since they haven't achieved them, they are ashamed to come." Yes, people want to feel that life is counting for something. I think older people are very conscious of this, too--not because life stretches before them as a golden promise, but because the end of the road has come in view. With life's journey growing shorter, it suddenly becomes very important to be able to look back across the miles and feel the journey has been worthwhile.

Most of us know of Florence Nightingale who pioneered in the field of nursing. She once said, "I am a person of very ordinary ability." Yet, a person of ordinary ability who had an extra-ordinary desire to make life count has made an indelible impression upon the world. Or look at someone like Helen Keller. In spite of being blind and deaf she has made an incredible contribution to the world. She has given hope to others who are blind and given them a vision in 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 life count, Helen Keller has made a tremendous mark upon the hearts and minds of men.

The second suggestion I would like to make this morning is this: not only is it important to make life count, it is more important to make it count for good. See how it works! Back in the 1930's a man rose to power in Germany. In the space of a few short years he changed the course of human history and made a lasting and unforgettable impression upon the annals of mankind. Yet, the records of history will never honor the name of Hitler. While he made his life count for something, he did not make it count for good. There are many other people whose names history will record--names like Benedict Arnold, Machine Gun Kelly, Pretty Boy Floyd--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. Yet, they made them count in such a way that mankind has been better off--counted in such a way that man revere the memory of their names.

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 pass. 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 valour has been remembered. They not only made their lives count, they made them count for something worthwhile.

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, over ran Belgium and routed the British armies. As the British pulled back to a place on the coast called 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. It was their task to hold off the Germans long enough to allow the rest of the army to escape. During those few hours of battle the 51st Division was lost. Yet, they held off the Panzer division long enough to allow the British and French soldiers to be taken safely off from Dunkirk. 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, it is important to make life count, but it is more important to make it count for good. Hope Friedmann tells the story of her doctor father. When he retired after 55 years of practice, she found him in his office one day going over his accounts. As he nodded toward the files lining the walls he said to her, "There's a good many thousands of dollars owed me among those records. I want your promise that you'll burn them all when I am gone. Then no one will owe me anything." Then, as if to himself, he added, "Except, I hope, a kindly remembrance."

The third thing I want to suggest to you this morning is this: it is important to make life count; it is more important to make life count for good; but for the Christian it is important above all to make life count for Jesus. See how it works! Down in Texas I have a dear friend who is an alcoholic. With the help of Alcoholics Anonymous and some Christian friends he gained sobriety. He had never joined the church and at his age it was embarrassing to be baptized and make a public profession of faith. Yet, one day at the conclusion of the service, he stood up and walked down the aisle to publicly give his life to Jesus. He explained it to me this way, "Everybody in town knew what I had been like as a drunk. I felt the Lord was saying to me, 'Now go show this town what Jesus can do for a poor alcoholic like you.'" You see, it was not enough for him to merely make his life count for good, he had to make it count for Jesus.

In our scripture for this morning St. Paul writes to some fellow Christians. As we read we become aware that these Christians are suffering terrible persecution. St. Paul tells them that he is praying for them that God will make them worthy and then he writes this, "...that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you". Yes, they were making life count, but most of all they were making it count for Jesus.

Let me share with you the story of the Ugly Little Shoes as told by Lillian Scott. She tells it this way: "When I was very young I didn't give much thought to the little leather shoes that always sat on the sideboard in our dining room. As I grew older, however, those two shabby, scuffed objects began to bother and irritate me. One day while I was dusting the furniture I took it upon my self to pick the shoes up and place them in a drawer, hoping mother wouldn't notice. She did, though. "Where are the shoes?" was the first thing she said to me when she entered the dining room. I was ordered to find them and put them back where they belonged. "Sometime," her mother said, "when the time is right and I feel that you will understand, I'll tell you about them." The years went by for Lillian and one day when she was in the 8th grade her class was studying how people raise money for business ventures. Stanley, a classmate, announced that he knew how a butcher shop in the neighborhood had been started and he looked right at Lillian as he said it, as though somehow she had something to do with it. She looked back at him blankly. "Lillian," said Stanley, "don't you know that your dad made it possible for that butcher to go into business?" She didn't. Stanley went on to tell the class how his father had told him that Lillian's father was always helping people in ways like that. He made it sound as though her dad were the most loved man in town.

When Lillian got home from school that day she told her mother what Stanley had said. "Think of our having a father who does things like that," she said. It was then her mother said to her, "I think now you'll understand, so I'll tell you about those little shoes. She led Lillian to the dining room and they stood in front of the sideboard. Then her mother told her that the ugly little shoes were her shoes that she had worn when she was two. At that time Lillian had been critically ill with pneumonia. "You were dying," said her mother. "Your father paced back and forth, all night, praying. The Doctor spent all night in this house, too, and there came a time when he said he'd done everything he could for you, that you were going, but your daddy wouldn't listen to him. When the doctor thought that you had breathed your last, he told your daddy that you were probably gone, but your father went right on pacing and praying and after what seemed a long, long time, you breathed again." Lillian was very quiet as she listened. Her mother went on, "After you were well, your daddy put those little scuffed shoes of yours here on the sideboard so that he would see them every time he ate or passed by, to remind him of the promise he had made to God that he would help people in every way he could if his little girl was spared." Yes, Lillian's dad was not only making life count for something worthwhile, most of all he was making it count for Jesus.

You and I are, for the most part, very ordinary people. The mark we make on history will be of little significance. Yet, even an ordinary life takes on extra-ordinary qualities when it is counting for Jesus. Simon Peter was just a simple fisherman--until he made his life count for Jesus; Matthew was just a tax collector whose name history would never have recorded--until he made his life count for Jesus; Martin Luther was just a simple priest whose name would have been forgotten--until he made his life count for Jesus.

When the play for you is over and the curtain has fallen and the footlights have dimmed out, will life have been worthwhile? Only if you have made life count for Jesus--only if you can--at the end--whisper with him, I have finished the work which you gave me to do." Well done, good and faithful servant.