



Rethinking the Bottom Line

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What is your bottom line? What are your goals? What do you want from life? What do you want for your children? Perhaps you desire personal happiness for you and for your children. Or maybe you long for financial security so you can pay the bills and see your children well educated without a lifetime of debt. Perhaps your goal is a good name or good character, success in your line of work, success for your children in school, in their careers, or in developing their gifts.

Most Christians will respond to these questions, "Well, those are good goals. But they are not the bottom line." Financial security, to be thought well of, success in our callings...these are things we long for—both for us and our children—but for the Christian, the bottom line must be found in what the Bible teaches.

The "Untrue Life"

In 1 Timothy 6:17-19, Paul addresses one of the desires listed above—financial security. Paul says, "I command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant and not to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17). Paul says something beautifully positive about our need to have our needs met, and not just our needs but far more. God delights in "richly providing" everything for our enjoyment.

God is not against our being comfortable or happy. He delights to give us good gifts, but Scripture teaches us that we also are to keep something else in mind. 1 Timothy continues, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is life indeed" (1 Tim.6:18-19). Paul is urging us towards the life that is "life indeed" or "truly life," as the NIV puts it. He says that this life we are living is not really life—something else is!

Paul gives additional counsel on this subject in verses 6-10 of 1 Timothy 6, and these words are a little harder, "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Tim. 6:6-8). "Godliness with contentment is great gain," the Scripture says—to be content simply with food and clothing. Now that is a bit more difficult. I rather doubt that any of us are content simply to have the food and clothing we need to survive.

Then Paul continues with words which are particularly hard to hear in our society (which is why we need to pay them special attention): "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Should I really want to be wealthy? Do I want my children to be wealthy when Paul says that it might be rather dangerous to their eternal souls?

Most of us are aware of the dangers of wealth—even if the practical outworking of these commands in a consumption-driven society can be difficult. Yet what about cultivating our gifts and talents? Is this also dangerous? Would it not seem that Scripture calls this a Biblical goal for our children and us? The parable of the talents certainly provides Scriptural support of the cultivation of our gifts. It warns us not to let our gifts lie waste because we are going to have to give an accounting to God for them one day (Matt. 25:14-30).

But just as with the desire for financial security, there are snares to watch out for in the cultivation of gifts. Philippians 2:3 tells us, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.” If we are honest with ourselves, we know there is a very fine line between pursuing the godly development of our gifts and pursuing the success that comes because of those gifts—between godly ambition and “vain conceit.” Pride is something that every one of us, if we know ourselves at all (and we need to acknowledge that we do not know ourselves very well), has deeply embedded in our hearts.

It is the same for our children. It is so very important to encourage our children, and yet we have to be so careful when we do so. We have to be very careful not to encourage self-centered ambition and pride—the “vain conceit” of which Paul speaks.

Scripture provides us with ways to test our hearts regarding both the love of money and vain conceit. 1 John 3:17 says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (See also 1 Timothy 6:18.) Your generosity to others is a good test of whether you are living for the love of God or the love of money.

In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul gives us a similar test to apply to the development of gifts: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” A good test of whether I am using and developing my gifts to God’s glory rather than my own is how I think about myself in relationship to other people. Am I a servant of other people? Do I think more highly of others than I do of myself? As our children develop the gifts God has given them, are they also becoming humble servants of those around them? If not, our so-called “encouragement” has actually done them harm. If at the end of the day we have commended our children’s accomplishments so highly that they pursue personal ambition rather than the service of others, then the gifts God has given them will have become means to turn them from Him.

Psalms 147:10-11 tells us, “His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man, the LORD delights in those who fear him and put their hope in his unfailing love.” It is not that legs are unimportant. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner and missionary to China says, “When I run it pleases God.” It does delight God for us to use the gifts He has given. But what truly delights Him is those whose hope is not in their speed, beauty, strength or wisdom, but in His unfailing love.

The Life that is Life Indeed

Now that we have clearly established what is not the bottom line, what does Scripture teach about what is the bottom line? *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (a Scripture-based teaching tool) summarizes it nicely in its very first question and answer: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Jesus summarizes this teaching for us when He is asked what is the greatest commandment. He responds, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37). Micah 6:8 tells us to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God. Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek first

God's kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

Loving God and pursuing His justice, mercy and faithfulness, this is to be our bottom line. This is to be the vision for my life and those of my children. The hard part is, we have to do more than agree to this, we have to live it. We have to do more than tell it to our children, we have to be an example of it to them.

If somebody were to ask my sons, "What really matters to your dad? What does he live for?" What would they say? Would they say, "My father (or mother) is committed to doing what is just, to loving mercy, and to walking humbly before God?" The apostle John puts it very simply, "Little children," he says, "let us love in deed and truth, not just in words" (1 Jn. 3:18).

How do we speak to our children? How would our children respond if someone asked them, "For what do your parents praise you? Where do they commend you?" Would they think of grades or sports or musical abilities? Or would they say, "My Dad is thrilled when I am merciful to other kids at school, when I have really worked hard at trying to do what is just and right." I am not saying it is wrong to praise our children for their gifts and talents. But is that the first thing that comes to their minds? Are you communicating to your children what really matters about their lives?

This applies as well in the area of discipline. What do your children do that most grieves you? Do they draw more of a response when they are unmerciful, proud, and unloving or when they break the family rules? We know we should be more grieved when our children break the commands of God, but is this what we communicate in daily life?

Our children need to know that what is far more important than keeping the family rules is the longing for them to be righteous—to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly before God.

What Now?

These are very hard questions, and some of them cut me to the heart. I hope some of them cut you too. But God never takes us to our failures and leaves us there. Our comfort is found in the Psalm we looked at earlier, Psalm 147. As we consider our lives, we know we have often taken delight in strength, in wisdom, in success and in wealth. Our hearts are often secretly enticed to all these things, so what do we do now?

The first step is acknowledging that we often delight in our own strength. Acknowledge this to the Lord, acknowledge it to yourself, and acknowledge it to your children. It helps them to know that we struggle with these things—that we do not find this easy. It is easier and more natural for us to commend them for their abilities rather than for loving justice and mercy and walking humbly before our God. But it is when we acknowledge our struggle to them, to ourselves and to the Lord, that the words of the Psalmist can be a comfort to us. It is then that we can really seize the promise at the end of Psalm 147, for as the Psalmist turns us from trusting in our own power, he exhorts us to put our hope in "[God's] unfailing love" (Ps. 147:11).

God does not only provide His Word to wound us with an awareness of our sin. Our merciful God will never wound His children without providing a promise of healing. As we see the idolatry in our lives, our prayer is that He will keep us from idols. Our hope that He will answer that prayer is based on His promise of unfailing love.

Your heavenly Father loves you. Put your hope in Him.

This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing covenant@covenantseminary.edu. Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp.