

The Ordinary Abundant Life

by Steve Zeisier

I think one of the best-known verses in Scripture is Jesus' statement, recorded in John 10, verse 10, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly." Our Lord suggests at least two things in that statement, it seems to me. The first is that there are people in the world who do not know anything at all about life. They are cut-off and broken and darkened. They need to know that it is possible to be alive spiritually, and responsive to the world God has made. The second thing suggested by that verse is that there are people who are acquainted with life, but who are not acquainted with abundance. "I have come, not just to bring life, but to bring life abundantly," the Lord said. Many of us here have been in that situation. We have known the Lord, we have gone to church, we are aware of what the gospel says, but our life has little overflow in it, little of deep fulfillment. We are going to spend the next two weeks addressing ourselves to these issues, but in reverse order. Next week we are going to talk about hope for the hopeless- those who know nothing at all about life- but this week we are going to talk about abundance for those who have lived in restriction.

There are a lot of ways to approach the question, "What is abundant living?" Those of you who have done any counseling, even on an informal basis, know that people come with different kinds of problems hurting them, and oftentimes they need to be supported, held up, encouraged and loved. That is one way of indicating that God wants to make life delightful to us. Hundreds of books have been written on various aspects of the subject, telling us how to live excited, valuable, godly, abundant Christian lives.

But there is another approach that is often necessary as well. Another statement needs to be made to people on what constitutes abundant living. We find that our Lord made this statement frequently in his ministry. He said that many will be kept from genuinely enjoying what God has for us and believing that God can accomplish his will in us, because we have settled for something less. Many of us need to be stabbed by God's Word. Many of us have grown proud of our Christian lives, of our sacrificial life-style, the way we obey God and the things we do for him. We have learned to think of ourselves as terrific in God's service. Or else we have learned to see the obstacles that surround us as being so awesome, so overwhelming that they cannot be dealt with. As a result, we have disbelieved that God can do anything with us.

There is a saying in financial circles that nothing succeeds like success. But in spiritual terms, I think there is a form of success that may very well be the worst thing that can happen to us. We learn to pat ourselves on the back, and cheer ourselves on. As a result, we lose sight of what God can do. We settle for something much less than he desires to give us. In Luke 11, verses 29 through 44, Jesus indicts the Pharisees at exactly this point. The Pharisees had determined that they were God's greatest accomplishment, the pinnacle of human development. They had separated themselves from everything. That is what the word "Pharisee" means, by the way, "a separated one." They had separated themselves from everything base and sinful and lowly, and had created a society which they felt reflected the greatness of God more significantly than ever before.

But what Jesus said to them is different than what we often think. We accuse the Pharisees of hypocrisy, and the Lord did use that word of them, but they were not hypocrites in the classical sense- for example, claiming to tithe when they really were not. We think of hypocrites as people who say something about themselves which they secretly know is not true. But Pharisees really sat out in their garden and literally counted every radish and weighed every bean, so they could be precise in giving a tenth of everything they had to the Lord. So they were not hypocritical in that sense. They were hypocritical in that they said, "The best God can do is to make radish counters out of us." They trivialized the gospel beyond recognition. The Lord said of them, "Woe to you! You've tithed mint and rue and every garden herb, but you've neglected justice and the love of God. Your hearts are barren of love towards God, the widows and orphans in your community are barefoot and starving, and you say, 'We are the epitome of what God can do with men,' because you give away the things you grow in your garden !"

The Lord describes exactly that same kind of problem in talking to his disciples. We are going to study the first ten verses of Luke 17 this morning, and we will see that Jesus has the same penetrating, gripping, stabbing ministry with his own men. The same principle is being violated, and he is saying to his disciples, "You can't be trivial in your understanding of the gospel. If you are going to live the abundant life, you have got to believe God can do great things. Because if you settle for something less, you will never know abundance." It's as if he were addressing adults who were taken up with the racing of tricycles, while he tried to teach them about space flight. They had settled for something less. The first two verses record these words:

And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him If a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown Into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble."

Right away you can tell he is not messing around. He is not dealing with things of little consequence. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that what he is saying is this: if your life has the impact of, driving men from Christ (that's what he means by stumbling; it is stumbling in terms of their relationship to God, their walk with God, stumbling with the implication that they might fall away altogether), then we are better off dead. We should wish for a violent and immediate death for ourselves rather than find ourselves in a position where we're causing people to lose their faith in God.

The tendency when we hear something like that is similar to our reaction to the Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out." The tendency is to say, "Well, Lord, you're obviously coming on strong for the sake of emphasis." If we apply it at all, we assume he is talking about people like dope pushers who hang around school yards. These are leading little ones astray, right? They're out there selling heroin to these innocent children. Or he's talking about the sophisticated prostitute described in Proverbs, who stands on the street corner and lures naive young men into her lair. Of course those are the kinds of people Jesus is talking about here. But just so we won't let ourselves off the hook, he goes on in verse 3 and 4 to apply it in a way most of us would never think of doing.

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and If he repents, forgive him. And If he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying 'I repent,' forgive him."

We tend to think of sin as something we commit, something we actively go out and do that is sinful. The Lord, however, will very often highlight, not sins of commission, but sins of omission, things we have failed to do. He is suggesting here that failure to get involved with people who are hurting, failure to go to a brother who is gripped by sin and to help him out of it, and failure to forgive again and again and again people who offend us, people who take advantage of us and hurt us- failure to do these things is putting stumbling blocks in people's way just as much as the prostitute or the dope pusher does. The things we fail to do can have the result of driving men from God as much as the things we actually do.

All of us are going to have a hard time with this. No one gets off the hook here. I had a neighbor one time who was one of the most emotionally needy people I had ever known in my life. He used to drive me crazy. He wanted time, time, and more time spent with him. He needed money. He needed all sorts of input in terms of energy and direction and attention, and I resented that guy. I felt that I was being used, taken advantage of, and I'd find myself hiding out, slipping out of our apartment under cover of darkness -- anything to avoid having to see this guy. I resented him, I wouldn't forgive him. If I had to spend time with him, I'd do it with gritted teeth. There was no way I could get rid of the feeling that I was being used, and I didn't like it.

Now the Lord isn't saying here that there are not good reasons for saying no to people. There are very good reasons for saying no to people. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is to say, "No, I won't help you." But resentment and bitterness and an unforgiving spirit are not good reasons. And if that is the thing that is keeping me from being involved with someone, then I need to go before my Lord and say there is no way I can justify it.

At this point, the disciples cried out in a way that seems entirely appropriate. When they understood the

implications of what Jesus was saying, first, that if you caused someone to sin, you were better off dead, and second, refusal to forgive someone again and again is what constituted causing someone to stumble- they looked at themselves and said, "Lord, increase our faith! (verse 5) We don't have a chance!" In fact, they may even have been saying something less godly than that. They may have been saying something like, "Lord, be realistic, for crying out loud! We appreciate the fact that you have a lot of insight from God, and there are all sorts of perfect ways of living that you can describe to us. But let's also talk about reality. Let's talk about real live human problems here. Let's not overdo it!" In any case, they were amazed at what he said. They couldn't believe that he said it.

So Jesus, in his typical wishy washy way, backs right down and says, "I'm sorry; I didn't mean it after all." Well, no, that isn't what he said. What he did was to sharpen the dagger even more, verse 6:

And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted In the sea'; and It would obey you."

They are saying, "Lord, here we are, men of God. We've followed you and we've gone a long way, and we're faithful men. We're interested in what God wants. Yet what you're asking of us is beyond what we can do. Increase our faith! " The implication is, "If we can't handle it, how can anyone handle it? We are men of faith, and yet we're unable to deal with this problem." But instead of saying, "You guys are pretty terrific after all!", the Lord says, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, which is not very big, you could yell at mulberry trees and they would bounce themselves into the ocean! You could accomplish things you had no idea you could accomplish, if you had just the smallest amount of faith." The implication is that not being able to deal with human resentment is less difficult than uprooting mulberry trees; and therefore their faith is even less significant than a mustard seed. He insists on seeing his children as capable of tremendous, significant impact on their world, and he refuses to let them settle for anything less. He refuses to let them believe that an on-going forgiveness is too much for them to handle.

This is reminiscent of the account of Jesus asleep in the boat when a storm came up. These fishermen, who knew enough about the lake to know when a storm was a bad one, said, "Our lives are forfeit; it's all over! The wind is up, the waves are up, the boat is swamped. We're going to die!" And they panicked. But when the Lord woke up, he didn't wipe their fevered brow, didn't pat them on the back and say, "That's really a tough situation you've been through here. Few great men could have handled this- you did a remarkable job!" He was somewhat upset with them, and he said, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith? Why do you give way to fear?" Then he calmed the wind and the waves and they found themselves crying out, "Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey? What have we gotten ourselves into?"

That same question, I think, is appropriate for us to ask at this point. Who is this man, anyway? How should we relate to him in our hearts? Does he really expect us to be the kinds of people whose lives can be on the very brink of destruction, and who can remain calm? Is that what he really expects of us? Does he really expect that we can forget the most odious, crummy thing that's been done to us, and forgive the person again and again when he comes to us, and not give way to resentment? Does he really believe that of us? The answer is yes. He goes on to tell us something about how to relate to him, by giving an illustration that ends this section, verses 7 through 10:

"But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

These men knew a great deal about slaves and servants, people who were in a position to be responsible to their employer. Jesus said it is never the case, when a slave has worked an ordinary shift out in the field, that the master goes to him and says, "That was overwhelming! You really did yourself in! Come in and let me serve you." Suppose a grocery clerk worked an ordinary number of hours pecking away at his machine and

bagging the groceries. Now we would not expect to see his employer stand by and catch him as he collapses at the end of his shift, with a medical team ready to bandage up his swollen fingers, calling reporters to say, "An incredible feat has been accomplished at our store today!" If we expect anything, it is that the employer will hand him a broom and say, "Please sweep out the back room before you leave tonight."

That is what the Lord is saying to us. He has made us to be the sort of people who can live amazing lives (amazing from our point of view), and treat them as ordinary. We can face the fear of death itself, and be calm- or we ought to. We are the sort of people who can deal with pressure and deprivation and pain and anxiety; we can be courageous, sensitive and thoughtful, just as a matter of course. He has made us that way; the power of God in our lives is that great. The point is, this is nothing out of the ordinary. You do not deserve special commendation because you finally got up enough courage to share the gospel with your neighbor, something you've been afraid to do up to now. God is pleased with that, but not because it is an heroic deed. You have not done something above and beyond the call of duty; that is merely the sort of people we ought to be.

I recently learned a hard lesson in this regard. Ned and Charyl Coleman, who are missionaries with Wycliffe, spent an evening in our home talking about the kind of life they live. Both spiritually and materially, they live in a deprived situation. Their home consists of poles and mud and a swimming pool cover. There is no electricity, no running water, and meager medical facilities. (And they do not consider themselves spiritual heroes, either. They are fully aware of their own shortcomings, their own inability to trust God, and they fight all the same battles that you and I fight.) They are ministering to an Indian village because God loves these people, and they're willing to sacrifice for his; sake. Yet they think of themselves as being weak and ineffective and hurting, as Christians. There are no other christians anywhere nearby, no regular fellowship, no regular teaching. And up to this point, there has been very little response among the Indians with whom they are working, not much encouragement from outward things.

A horrible thought began to occur to me as we spent this evening, together. I remembered a time when I patted myself on the back; because of my spiritual depth, for my great loving sacrifice to God, my steadfast obedience to him. I was proud of myself for what I'd done. When I was first married, we had an old black and white television set that didn't work too well. When the world series was on, or some special program, I thought to myself, "Boy, it would sure be terrific to have a nice new color TV! " But since there isn't anything in the universe less spiritual than a TV, I knew that to give in and pamper myself that way would not be a very mature thing to do. Certainly it would not be a very pastoral thing to do! So we just soughed it out, getting along with this black and white tube. Eventually we were given a color TV as a gift. I thought at the time, "The Lord must really have been impressed with our sacrifice, because look at how he's rewarded us!" Obviously it was a good deal as far as he was concerned, because he was responsible for giving us this gift. Therefore I thought it was pretty good that I had soughed it out and hadn't given in to temptation.

While I was sitting there listening to Ned and Charyl, I thought, "For the Lord's sake, you gave up one TV (inferior) in place of another (superior), and there they are without running water, and the child they are about to have may be born with an Indian midwife. " I have a terrible time trying to picture my wife and me in those circumstances! It began to occur to me that in effect, what I had said was that abundant living consists of giving up one TV for another, that that is a work of God. What a glorious and terrific God we have, that he can accomplish something so magnificent! I had really believed that. And I found myself saying, "Well, if that is all I can believe God for, if that is a good deal, if that is an impressive work of God, then how in the world would I ever handle it if he called me to work in that Indian village?" I thought he had done something magnificent in the TV situation. If my God is no bigger than that, how in the world can I believe he can make me alive and rejoicing and helpful and loving in a situation like the colemans are in. Furthermore, the Lord says to the Colemans, "You aren't heroes, either. You're no big deal. You've done no more than you ought to have done. The power of God is capable of that. What you've done is not so amazing." God is the amazing one and what he is capable of is the amazing thing.

I have counseled with people in this church who feel that PBC is a difficult place to get along in spiritually, that people aren't as friendly as they ought to be, that it's too big and we don't reach out and care for others as much as we should. I am not for a minute going to suggest that those things aren't true, to some extent. There are problems, and we ought never to apologize for them, nor rationalize them away. But as I listened to Ned and Charyl talk, it occurred to me that if what I see at this church are genuine obstacles to Christian fellowship,

then how in the world are the Colemans making it, where no other Christians are around? If I can live in a community like this and say the obstacles are insurmountable to spiritual growth, and the way people treat me is so uncaring that I have a right to sit here and not grow, then how in the world are Ned and Charyl making it?

Again, the question comes back to this: Can God overcome what I consider to be massive problems? Is God pleased with the great sacrifices I make, pleased in some special sense because I've knocked myself out? The Lord says the things he's given me to do are perfectly within his capability. I ought to have done them.

Now I would like to suggest some ways to apply this truth. Just to get yourself going on this subject of whether or not you believe God can do anything magnificent in your life, more than you are willing to let him accomplish, ask yourself what you think of Christian celebrities. Does it seem to you that God is really outdoing himself when he saves a famous quarterback? Did he really take a lot of extra time and effort, staying up late at night, to accomplish his salvation? Is God honored to hang around with people like that? Is God a sort of "groupie" because he feels good hanging out with movie stars? Obviously, the answer is no. But very often we appreciate such celebrities for the wrong reasons, and we think of God in those terms. We ought to be grateful that God saves anyone_ celebrities included. And we ought to be grateful that they have a special platform to speak from. God is no bigger because he's able to do these things.

Another question I think is worth asking is this: How do we evaluate our lives? What are the criteria we apply in deciding whether or not what we are living for is valuable? Two very gripping passages in the New Testament deal with this subject, both of which include Paul's analysis of his own ministry. There were at least two times when Paul very succinctly analyzed himself for us. Second Corinthians 11 and 12 is one of those, and Philippians 3 is another. After the section in Philippians 3 where he said, "I'm a Hebrew of the Hebrews; I was trained in the best schools; I was born to the best parents; I had all this great stuff going for me," then he says, in verse 7,

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Essentially, he is evaluating his life, not on the basis of what he has seen in the past, not on the basis of what he has done for God, not on the basis of his human ability or human background, hut on the basis of what is set before him. His evaluation is based on the kind of person Paul ought to be. He said in Romans, "that those whom God foreknew, he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." The thing he intends to do with us is to make us like his Son. Paul is like a bulldog with his teeth fixed tenaciously on that goal, and he says nothing will cause him to swerve from it. He won't turn around and say, "I did that real well, and I ought to feel happy about myself today; but tomorrow I probably won't do so well, and I'll feel crummy about myself then." What he says is, "I see where God has taken me. I know what he wants to do with me, and that is the criterion I'm going to use to evaluate myself. I'm going to press on for that. I'm going to lay everything else aside, and run as fast as I can in that direction." Paul would not settle for anything less than being like Jesus Christ himself, and he refused to evaluate himself on any other basis.

The third thing you might ask yourself is, "How do I deal with adversity and difficulty?" One option is to think of God's power in our lives as such that on a good day, when we're particularly pure in heart, and God isn't too busy elsewhere, we might have some temporary relief from this current difficulty. But if God has given us a good day any time this month, we shouldn't expect him back until next week at the earliest. Or, we can think of ourselves as people who are intended by God to rule the universe. Did you know that? Jesus is going to use

you and me in ruling the galaxies that he's made. If he is capable of doing that in us, is he capable of giving us victory over pressure on our job? Or is he capable of helping us deal with disappointments? Is he capable of taking away the sense that we're deprived and put upon when people don't recognize how good we are, or treat us the way we want to be treated? If he's capable of making us rulers, is he capable of getting us through the day?

I'm really looking forward to the time when I can wake up in the morning and start looking for mulberry trees. I'm ready to uproot a mulberry tree, just give me one! Bring on those storms! I really believe that my Lord is capable of making me live abundantly, that it's not too hard for him. And I'm not going to settle for being faithful some of the time, and at peace occasionally, and following him on good days. I am not going to say that is abundant living. I am not going to say that is what he intends. I want to be the kind of person who recognizes that I'm not there yet, but I want to press on to the goal. I want to get to the day when I can wake up and say, "I've got crummy problems in my life. There are all sorts of things I wish weren't there, and they're hard and difficult. But I'm so aware that my Lord is capable, that I'm not going to sit around and stew about them. I'm going to look for him to be at work there. I'm not going to give way to this horrible fear when the storm breaks, but I'm going to wait for him to do something about it, and count on him to do it."

One last thing I'd like to mention is that what we are talking about here is not the power of positive thinking. A lot of Christians in many places in the world are talking about that today. What we are not saying, and what the Lord is not saying, is that we ought to figure out what great things we can accomplish for God, what terrific good deals we'd like to see ourselves into, and then just batter God into submission so that he gives it to us. We may find, as Job did, that the thing he's called us to is to live with confusion and pain and unresponsive and sorrow. That may be what he has called us to. But whatever it is (and we need to determine what God is asking us to do), he is capable of doing it in us. He won't ask anything of us that he is not capable of performing.

I would like to finish with the statement from 1 John 3:2 (Living Bible).

Yes, dear friends, we are already God's children, right now, and we can't even imagine what it is going to be like later on. But we do know this, that when he comes we will be like him, as a result of seeing him as he really is.

Lord, I admit that I don't know how to respond very well to challenge, and when I hear from you that there are things in me that you can do something about, I tend either to run off and do them myself, or to cower in fear that it can't happen. I don't know how to respond. I want to pray for all who feel that way, that we won't respond in the flesh, and that we won't respond in fear, but that we will look for you to be the kind of Lord that you declare yourself to be, and that we will expect abundant living as something that ought to be there. It is not just on good days and heroic days that we're to be that way, but every day. We thank you that you love us, and we're grateful. that you've chosen us, that you care enough to know us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Luke 17:1-10
Steve Zeisler
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