

Developing Your Dream

You can choose whatever you want for your dream. Some people would say a true dream chooses you. It seeks you out and seduces you. It inflames your primal desire for security and/or significance. It wells up from within you. Any dream that drives you this way will consume all of your time, energy, and imagination. It will motivate you in such a way that it marshals everything you say and do towards attaining it. Some dreams are small, like being able to pay the bills each month, buy a new stereo, or give a gift. Some are large, like changing the destiny of a nation, the path of science, or the course of history. Some things that seem small to one person will seem large to another. Whether small or large, an effective dream will become a matter of life and death to the dreamer. Dreams may change with time, circumstance, experience, and opportunity. Therefore, your dream must fit this season of your life. Always be willing to give up who you are for who you can become.

Dreams in the Bible

The words “dream” and “vision” are used interchangeably in common speech. In the Bible, however, dreams tend to be personal in nature, something affecting the dreamer directly, or something he intends to accomplish. Visions, on the other hand, tend to be messages from God to all his people, revealed and spoken through his prophets.¹ A dream can be ordinary, or it can have prophetic meaning. In that sense, we could say that *a dream is a personal vision*. A dream may be shared with others as Joseph did with his brothers (Gen 37:9), or pondered quietly in the heart as Mary did (Lk 2:19). Here’s an insight: all dreams come from God. If you don’t have a dream, a “personal vision” of what he has called you to do, then ask him for one. The hardest part is recognizing it when it comes. It may not be what you were expecting. That’s because God uses the dream to take you to unfamiliar and challenging places where you completely depend on him to accomplish what he has set before you. He gives you a dream to stretch and to purify you on your journey. He forces you to exercise your faith, learn your limits, and discover your potential. Achieving your dream is how you learn to cooperate with the Holy Spirit who lives in you. He will supply you with the power you need to accomplish God’s ends if you will only be humbled under his mighty hand (1Pet 5:6). Remember to stay within the boundaries: “Do not love the world or anything in the world.” (1Joh 2:15) The things of this earth are means to end; and that end is to glorify God in all things (1Pet 4:11; Heb 13:18; Rev 4:11). Don’t make an idol of anything (Exo 20:4).

Dreams are living and dynamic things. They must be cultivated and nourished. Dreams are revealed, not constructed – as with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are progressively defined and clarified rather than being static and obvious. They unfold over time. You are given only the seed to begin with. If you don’t develop, direct, and care for it, then your dream will perish along with your soul (Prov 29:18). If through inaction the seeds of your dream dry up, or if through neglect the fruits of your dream die on the vine, you will not reap its intended harvest (Gal 6:9). God gives you a dream to motivate and to *bless* you. Properly understood, your dream is your *hope*. It is God’s *promise* of what is to come (Rom 15:13; Eph 1:18-19). His promise is the most precious gift you possess after salvation itself (2Pet 1:3-4).

Dare to dream. Commit yourself to identifying and pursuing God’s vision for your life. He intends to bless you by it. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jer 29:11)

¹ If you want to do a word-study, “vision” in Hebrew is *machazeh* [OT:4236]. It is a vibrant **image** received in an ecstatic state. A second Hebrew word *mar’ah* [OT:4759] also means a vision, but it speaks of the **mode** of revelation (“mirror”) in which we see the things of God. Finally, there is *chazown* [OT:2377], which is the **revelation** of a mystery that has been hidden or veiled. The Hebrew noun for “dream” is *chalown* [OT:2472], or the verb is *chalam* [OT:2492]. It can be sleeping Gen 20:3, or waking Gen 31:10.

Creating A Dream Environment

Let's talk about how to develop a dream. It involves creating an environment in which you are free to imagine the life you want, the life God intends you to have. As your will is increasingly conformed to God's will, what you dream will increasingly become what God wants for you. Dreaming is not a choice between a head game and an emotional roller coaster. You need both your mind and your heart engaged in the pursuit. Effective dreaming can draw on your doubts and fears as well as your confidence and aspirations. You can create an effective dream from what you don't want, as well as from what you do want. It can be a nightmare as well as a dream. That is, you can choose a horror or an enticement to drive you. These are two sides of the same coin. *What you must not do is make it a fantasy.* "What the mind can conceive *and believe*, it can achieve." (*Master Key to Riches* by Napoleon Hill)

Imagining (i.e. imaging in your mind) is an intentional activity. It is an imperative, like saying to a pet dog, "Speak! Roll-over!" You command yourself to focus your thoughts on what you believe will meet your greatest needs. You don't just let your mind wander. You direct it. You are going to need self-control, concentration, effort, and humor. This ought to be fun. You are going to imagine something that does not exist for you yet, but definitely will exist for you in the future. In your mind, you are going to create the world in which you want to live, in fact, the world in which you were called to live. Then you will conceive how it will happen. Once you are convinced that what you want is **possible and plausible**, and that it is **within the will of God**, you are going to identify the steps necessary to make it a reality. When the image in your mind becomes clear enough, and you become passionate enough, you have reached the point at which your dream becomes feasible to you, even if you don't know *when* it will become real. You need to keep imagining your dream until you have that kind of clarity and passion.

Don't confuse clarity of ends with clarity of means. Clearly knowing what you want doesn't mean you clearly know how to get it. That's where the seed, progressively nurtured, begins to take shape. Think of an acorn planted in the soil. You feed it, water it, and dig around it to loosen the soil. Then you hope for rain but not flood, warmth but not heat, and breezes but not gales. As adverse weather and circumstances arise, as they inevitably do, you take the steps necessary to ensure the seedling is protected and nurtured. You cannot forecast what may come, or what adjustments you may need to make. All you know is that you have a mighty oak in the making. You carry that vision in your mind even though it won't become a reality for many years. You long for the acorn to sprout. You imagine the oak full-grown with stout trunk, massive limbs, and lush foliage. You anticipate children playing in its shade, swinging from its branches with glee. You can see its silhouette in your mind at sunrise. That's your dream-to-be. Ask God for what you wish to be. He's the only one who can make it happen. That's to his glory.

Prerequisites: Dreaming and the Will of God

God's promise that we may ask whatever we wish is not a blank check. Don't fall into the "name it and claim it" trap. Jesus said, "***If*** you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask what you desire,² and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; in this way you will be My disciples." The context of the promise is that we are to bear much fruit, thus identifying ourselves as Christ's disciples. "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." John 15:7-10 NKJV. Therefore, obedience is a prerequisite to obtaining our dream.

² It is clear that we are being told that our will must be aligned with God's will. This is a conditional promise that God will give us our heart's desire, but it also promises that our heart's desire will become his desire for us, *if we abide in him*. To confirm this interpretation, we read in 1 John 5:14, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears us." ^{NIV}

There is also this blessing from Psalms, “May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed” Ps 20:4^{NIV}. But the blessing involves being cleansed of our sins before we will be heard from Zion. Here’s Psalm 20 in its entirety so that we understand its message and its plea correctly:

1. May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. 2. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. 3. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. Selah

4. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. 5. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests.

6. Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand.

7. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. 8. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.

9. O LORD, save the king! Answer us when we call!^{NIV}

Who is the focus of the psalm? It’s the *king*, the leader of God’s people (v9). It is a specific prayer for David by his people. David has been placed over them to ensure they will be the beneficiaries of this blessing (v. 5). That’s why we’re commanded to pray for our leaders, even if they are secular (1Tim 2:2; Rom 13:1-5). The “desires of your heart” in verse 4 refers to the desires of *David’s* heart. But as we know, David was a man after God’s own heart (1Sam 13:14). His will was aligned with God’s will, even though his deeds often belied that fact – just as our own behavior often belies our identity as children of God. And so contrition and purification are necessary components of achieving our dreams, as we see in verse 3. If we want this prayer to be our own promise, then we need to be like David and have a contrite heart (Ps 51:17), a heart that conforms (or is “transformed”) to God’s will:

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form [i.e. pattern] of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. Rom 6:17-18^{NIV}

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Rom 12:2^{NIV}

Let’s look at another promise. “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven,” Mt. 18:19^{NIV}. And so we go looking for someone to hear our dream and pray with us in agreement so that God will honor our request – as if we could bind God in the matter. But what’s the context? Begin reading at verse 15. It’s a *court* case! The two in agreement are called as witnesses to the offense of a third party. There can be no discipline unless the offense has been established by two or more witnesses who are in agreement. Where two or more are gathered *in regard to a controversy*, Christ is there with them as witness, intercessor, and Judge. “Anything you ask for” is the cause of the dispute. What we’re asking for is justice, fairness, and reconciliation. This verse has nothing to do with seeking our dream, but everything to do with seeking unity between believers.

I hope you see that we need to become students of God’s word, workmen approved of God who have no need to be ashamed. We are to rightly divide his word of truth and correctly understand his will

for us (2Tim 2:15). We don't treat the Word of God as a book of incantations and magic. We don't rip verses out of their proper context. We don't practice divination or sorcery (Lev 19:26). We cannot bind or manipulate God. We are not sovereign but subordinate. We are not masters but servants. We are not the source of spiritual power for personal gain, but conduits of power for God's glory. Therefore, obedience to the will of God and conformity to the love of Christ are prerequisites to receive the fruit of God's promises, and to attain the desires of our heart.

Clarity: Wrapping Your Mind Around It

A dream has to be clear enough for you to begin to take action in the direction of your dream. You cannot successfully pursue a vague concept. If you cannot reach clarity in your mind's eye after prolonged and concentrated effort, it doesn't mean you have no dream, or that your dream is mistaken. What it does mean is that you need to envision a smaller component of your dream until you have clarity and passion about that component. Let me give you an example:

John Kennedy painted a dream for the nation that we would put a man on the moon before the decade was out. That was not a goal. It was a dream with a deadline.³ And it was inspirational. It caused our scientists to marshal their resources. They needed to figure out what they needed to learn and what had to be developed to turn the dream into a reality. It was way too big to pursue directly. First, they needed to develop better rocket fuel, stronger and yet lighter materials, new technologies, new mathematics, and new computers. They needed to know what it would take to survive in space, the lowest speed needed to break out of orbit, when the best time to launch would be, and where to put the launch platform. They needed new manufacturing skills, space suits, oxygen replenishment systems, recycling technology, self-sealing hulls, guidance systems, and a failsafe in case something went wrong. And they needed a group of courageous men to staff the flight. Once they got to the moon, they needed to be able to return safely to earth without all the bulky technology that got them to the moon in the first place. The scope and depth of the dream was simply too complex, too big, and too unimaginable. The scientists and engineers had to break it down into its component dreams until they could clearly see their way to making the larger dream a reality.

Here's the key: they believed they could do it. They just didn't know how. Once the dream was defined, and the deadline determined, they could analyze it and create a master plan. Then they could define, clarify, and pursue the individual pieces. With each component in place, the overall dream became feasible. And once it was feasible, only time and effort kept them from achieving it. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

The Preparation and Development Process

Before NASA could put a man on the moon in the long-term, they had to be willing to fail in the short-term. Tests began. Failures were encountered. Lessons were learned. Corrections were made. And then they tried again, just like real life. This process of trial and error was repeated over and over until each component part of the overall plan was successful. Failure in the final product was not an option, but it was absolutely essential in the development process. The development process only became dependable *because* they overcame their failures. You must not fear failure more than success, nor success more than security (the familiarity of what you now have).

You must want your dream badly enough that it drives you to overcome all obstacles in your path. That's why it's got to be *your* dream. Only you can believe that your dream is true *for you*; then you can find others to teach you how to do it. That will increase your belief. You can look for success stories

³ **Key Point:** Any dream or goal without a deadline is just a wish.

in line with your dream. That will also increase your belief. You can fail as often as necessary until you learn to succeed. And that will increase your belief. You should obtain all the facts, figures, and encouragement you need. And that will increase your belief level. But in the end, it's going to be your dream itself that will sustain you, and drive you.

You've got to be committed to the *process* of obtaining your dream, not to the results! The process is gathering the resources and taking the steps necessary to obtain your dream. It's an *Action Plan*. You've got to believe that the process you've devised is the best chance you have to obtain your dream, or you won't commit to it. You've heard the old adage not to burn your bridges behind you. That's so you always have a line of retreat, a fallback. Renaissance explorers used to burn their ships so their crews were forced to continue the exploration. The Bible teaches us that there is no going back to Egypt. That's why those who advocated it were swallowed up (Num 16:32). If you believe and don't doubt, you can move mountains (Mt. 21:21). You must be thoroughly convinced that if you stick to the process, the results will come in time.

What you need to understand right now is this: you need to create an *environment* in which to define your dream; and then devise the process that will move you towards it. If you passionately want that dream, then you will commit to the process. If you have no dream, you cannot commit to the process. But the process itself will not and cannot define your dream for you. What will? Let's lay down some foundational truths for dreaming.

Dreaming is Conditional

That is, if your dream doesn't meet all these conditions, it won't drive you to action – and that's the whole purpose of a dream. What are the conditions?

1. *What you want has to be objectively achievable.* Wanting to turn into a butterfly is conceivable but not achievable. If your mind won't accept it, your heart won't either.
2. *You have to believe that **you** can achieve it.* You can't just believe that it is possible for someone else. It must be possible for you in particular. This has a lot to do with your self-image. You have to be as devoted to equipping, preparing, and improving yourself as you are to achieving your dream. They are inseparably linked.
3. *You have to be willing to sacrifice to achieve it.* If you are not willing to put time, money, and effort into it, then it will never happen. What are you willing to give up to get it? Every venture has a cost; every dream has a price-tag.
4. *You must be willing to commit to your dream consistently, and persistently, long-term.* Your dream isn't something that you pursue every now and then like a hobby. It isn't something you pursue when you have some spare time. And it isn't something that you want for the next 60-90 days. It must become the focus of your life. You are going to order your life around it.
5. *Your dream must stimulate your passion.* If you aren't passionate about what you want, you won't pursue it. It has to engage your heart as well as your mind. Here's an example: If your dream is to get a drink of water and you are standing next to a working faucet with a cup, your motivation is marginal. But if you have been in a desert for 3 days without any water, and you see the oasis ahead, you can get pretty passionate about that drink of water. It has to be a need, not just a want.
6. *Your dream must be greater than your current assets and capabilities can achieve.* If that's not true, you'll feel like you can reach out and get it anytime you want. There won't be any urgency to your

dream. Worse, you won't grow or change in pursuit of it. You won't feel like you've spent yourself in pursuit of something worthwhile.

7. *Your dream has to be quantifiable.* Normally we say this about goals, but it is true for dreams as well. If you can't measure it, how will you know if you are gaining ground on it, or whether you have achieved it? If your dream is to have world peace, will a single conflict arising somewhere in the world defeat your dream? Be specific when you develop your dream.

As you are developing your dream, compare it against these conditions. If it meets all the conditions, then you have an effective dream (again, assuming it doesn't violate the laws of God or Man). Now let's construct a framework to help you identify your dream.

Dreams Can Be Identified

Your dream is already inside you. It has always been there in one form or another. It may be perfectly clear to you, or it may be hiding among a lifetime of experiences and disappointments. Maybe you've achieved extraordinary things. Maybe you hurt people. Perhaps you were the one who got hurt. Maybe you took advantage of every opportunity. Maybe you squandered them all. It doesn't matter. You can't let past relationships, past successes or failures, past gains or losses, past glory or regret, distort your dream.

Ultimately your dream will revolve around,

- *Your* expectations, not someone else's;
- Who you *are*, not what you do;
- The legacy you *leave*, not the things you have;
- Your *relationships*, not your circumstances;
- Finding *true* security and significance, not artificial substitutes.

Like the Count of Monte Cristo, when you reach your dream, your mask will be removed to reveal your true identity. That may make you nervous. Don't be. Your true identity will always bring you pride, not shame. If you don't like who you are, it's because you are living under a false identity. No matter how deeply your dream is buried, you can resurrect and identify it in a step-by-step process. Here are six steps to help you identify your deepest longing:

1. Examine Your Past

Preserve the lessons of your past and flush the rest. You cannot be who you were in the past. You can only be who you are in the present. You can't live in the past and you can't change it. Most of all, you must not be chained to it, good or bad. Remember this: *nothing in your life has been wasted.* Everything has been used to shape your character and bring you to this crossroad. "And who knows but that you have come to this place for such a time as this?" (Est 4:14).

God is sovereign. God has brought everything in your life to you, good and bad (Isa.45:7). Everything that you will accomplish and the time it will take are subject to God's sovereign will. Keep that in mind as you plan your future. "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk.12:15-20). And yet, "With God, all things are possible" (Mt.19:26). "All things are permissible, but I will not be mastered by any of them" (1Cor.6:12). "All things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial or constructive" (1Cor.10:23). "I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances: well-fed or hungry, rich or poor. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil.4:11,13).

If you haven't learned to be content with what you have, and to exercise self-control in your current circumstances, and to desire what is pleasing in God's sight, you will continue to have trouble even if you attain your heart's desire (*Parable of the Talents* - Mat 25:21).

- a. Write down every major event and life-changing moment you've had, good or bad.
- b. What did you learn from each one?
- c. How have they shaped who you are today?
- d. Are any of the lessons you learned negative?
- e. Write down another way to look at each of the negative lessons you learned. Describe a strength you gained from it. Here's a fact: every negative experience you had in the past can become a strength in the present.
- f. Each morning for the next 30 days, apply one of the positive strengths you just wrote down, to the circumstances and relationships of your day. You are going to practice erasing your past hurts and begin building yourself up to serve others.

Caution: don't blindly assume that the trends of your life are indicators of what God has in mind for you. It may be that you've been off his intended path, out of alignment, and lost in the brambles. Be willing to cash it all in if necessary. After Jacob learned how to give instead of steal, and to trust God instead of doubting, he left his father-in-law's house and returned home to stand on his own two feet. (Gen 29-32)

2. Inventory Your Present

Keep a time sheet for the next 30 days. This is going to help you build a profile of who you are according to your actual behavior. List what you did during each hour, what things you spent money on, and how you responded to other people. In other words, were they or you better off as a result of the time and money you spent? Here's another fact: *where and how you spend most of your time and money is a measure of what you value the most.*

Once you identify where and how you spent your time and money, ask yourself why you spent it there. Did you enjoy it? Was it an investment? Did it make you feel better about who you are? Did you gain something by it? Did it replenish you? Did it improve your relationships? Did it bring you true security and significance? If so, it was time well spent. If not, it may have been time wasted. Keep in mind that what we do is usually nothing more than a habit. Repetition and familiarity are comforting, but they may not be beneficial. Learn to seek a return on investment (ROI) in all you do.

Determine the Value of Your Activities

Everything you do has a value. Everything you do takes time, and often money. Therefore, *how you spend your time and money reveals the value you place on what you do.* It is also a reflection of who you are. If you don't like who you are, it's because you don't like your values. You can "evaluate" your current identity based on your demonstrated values. Here's the good news: that means you can change who you are by changing your values. Once you assign a proper value to the things on which you spend your time and money, you'll find you like yourself a lot more.

Look at the time-sheet you made. What time value did you assign to the things you did? What monetary value did you assign to the things you obtained (what cost the most)? To which things did you assign the most value? Are things missing that you would rather spend your time and money on? Are there things you are currently doing or buying that you want to assign greater value to (recreation, family time, bigger house, better car, more friends, deeper relationships)?

Consider major efforts, accomplishments, or experiences you've had during the past five years of your life. These can include what you did in sports, at work, around the home, trips, projects, hobbies, volunteer work, missions, sickness, accidents, etc. They could have been enjoyable or not. What was it that you most liked or disliked about them? Why do you think that is? Would you go through them again? Why or why not? Get to know yourself.

3. Discover Your Personality

Take time to read *The Personality Tree* by Florence Littauer. Your personality affects your values and determines what you enjoy doing. Identify your own personality type. Sanguines value unstructured fun. They are happiest at a party with other people. Phlegmatics value peace. They are happiest when they can settle arguments and establish a quiet environment. Choleric value control. They are happiest when they are leading a team. Melancholies value order. They are happiest when they are setting up procedures to ensure success.

What you want to do here is to take the time to consider who you are. What do you really enjoy doing? What gets you excited? What do you care about most? What do you hate? What bores you? What kind of books do you like to read? Why those? What kind of movies do you enjoy? Why those? Did you identify with the leading character or one of the others? Do you fantasize that you'd like to be involved in what they did? Is it the excitement? Is it the challenge? Is it the relationship between the leading characters?

Here's a little exercise: Imagine you've got the next 4 weeks off from work and you've got a good replacement to stand in for you. You've saved \$10,000 for a vacation with no other expenses that you need the money for. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do? Who are you going to take with you? Who will you be glad to leave behind? Why?

These are the interests that you're going to build your dream around. Consider that a vacation is not a vocation. We take vacations to vacate what we normally do. We enjoy recreation because we need to re-create ourselves by doing something different, something exhilarating. Vacations and recreation help us recharge our batteries and regain our focus for what we normally do. But they are not always what we want to do for the rest of our life. They are a temporary refuge or an escape from something ordinary and routine, something that may be numbing us to death.

A dream, by comparison, is a destination. We move toward it, not away from it. We pursue it. It excites us. It makes our imagination soar. It makes us get up and out the door. It fills us with a sense of adventure. It usually isn't easy. It challenges us to become greater than we are, and it makes obstacles in our path seem smaller. Dreams drive us onward. They never settle into routine or become ordinary. If a dream begins to numb us that way, it's time for a new dream.

4. Choose the Values by which You Want to Live

Define who you want to be based on the values you want to have. If you don't dream, it is *not* because you cannot dream. It's because you *will* not dream. It's because you don't think you deserve to have what you want, or you don't believe that you can realize it. Either way, it shows lack of faith in yourself. That only means you need to change. Look at the strengths in Florence Littauer's list of values for your personality type. Select the strengths you want to have and the characteristics you want to exhibit.

Each personality type spends his or her time differently based on these values. You can't change your basic personality, but you can change your behavior. Your personality only means that you have tendencies. You aren't a slave to it. You can change your behavior by changing how you think. And you can change how you think by changing what you value. You're going to value things that align with your

basic personality. What you are looking for is something that makes you cry out in anger or despair, or that makes you giggle with delight. These are the types of things that you are passionate about. These are your motivators.

Write down what you want regarding your intellect, physical appearance, emotions, spirituality, moral values, and the impact you want to have on others. We're not talking about image management here. We're not talking about building a false façade, or what the Bible describes as white-washed walls (Mt. 23:27). We want to establish what the image of Christ looks like, the mold to which we are called to conform, our *true* identity.

³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

¹⁰ **For we are God's workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Eph 2:3-10 ^{NIV}

With your values or attributes selected, you can begin to determine how to express them through your activities and relationships. Mark or add which values you want. Which ones do you already show, and which ones do you need to grow in? Determine *how* to grow in them. You're probably going to have to place yourself in unfamiliar circumstances to force you to develop the values you want. That's all part of your dream.

5. Change Your Habits

You can't head down a new path if you continue to walk down an old one. If necessary, begin to change how you spend your time and money. Use them to express more and more of the values by which you want to live. This ensures that each hour is primarily invested in improving yourself and your relationships. Become intentional about how you live.

Here's a principle to guide your use of time: *You can do anything you want, but you can't do everything you want.* You have to choose what you do, every day, every hour. Take control of your time. Get yourself a time management system that works for you like a Franklin Planner, Day-Timer, pocket calendar, PDA, etc. Begin to plan your day in the morning: what are your goals for today? Review your day at night: did I reach my goals? If not, what did I learn? Learn to schedule your events so that they are in line with your goals. Drop anything that doesn't move you in the direction of your dream. Add anything that does. Don't disdain what you do for a living. It's a gift from God. It's how you are providing for your family right now. It may need to change, but while you're there, give it everything you've got within the hours required. Your dream, and who you are, do not depend on *where* you are.

6. Imagine Yourself Living Your Dream

Now you're going to begin to paint a mind-picture of yourself. You're going to imagine who you want to be, and how you want to behave in various settings. Keep your list of values and attributes nearby. Everyone has intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. If you've never thought about your

spiritual needs, these are the things that will give you meaning and purpose in life: *why are you here?* These needs are met or frustrated by how we feel about ourselves, how we relate to our Creator, and what kind of relationships we have with our family, friends, co-workers, and community. Our personal integrity and our relationships with others are part of what define us.

We do not and we cannot live in isolation. Babies who are completely neglected after birth never acquire adequate social skills, never respond appropriately to affection, and never develop a conscience. This is the lesson of the Russian orphans you may have read about in the news over the past few years. Any crippled relationship with a mother or father will produce adverse effects in future relationships. Trust and meaning are established in the home and are carried into the community. Where the home life fails to properly nurture a child, the community suffers its effects. Neglect in the home results in more crimes, thefts, drug-abuse, murders, isolation, guilt, and suicides in the community.

Where a child has not been completely neglected, there is always the hope of change. We are human beings, not dogs. We are supposed to be trained in the way we should go by our parents. But when we are not, *we can still find the path*. No one is a victim! We take ownership of who we are. We *choose* how to respond to the world in which we find ourselves. We move forward instead of wallowing in self-pity. The hand of God, and the clasp of friendship, can heal us. Your future is so bright you'll have to wear sunglasses!

THE DREAM

OK. Now we're ready to set our sights on where we want to be five years from now. We're going to move from where we are to a specific destination. We're going to begin to imagine where we want to live, how we want to live, what we do to earn money, who we associate with, and how we spend our time and money. These are all expressions of our underlying identity. Many people make the mistake of thinking that these things *are* their identity. That's why if they lose one of them, they lose their identity. When our identity fails to find appropriate expression, we feel trapped and frustrated. If you don't believe that where you live, how you live, what you do, who you know, or the size of your income, are accurate reflections of who you are, then you need to change them. You need to pursue a dream that allows you to accurately express who you really are. That's who you want to become, in fact as well as in thought.

Your physical appearance, intellect, emotions, spiritual walk, and relationships add up to your sense of self-worth. An identity isn't created. It is discovered. If your identity is in Jesus Christ, then nothing in this world can alter that identity. However, the way you express that identity through your behavior will have a positive or negative impact on your *estimation* of your worth. The truth is, your worth in God's eyes never varies. It is always based on the worth of his son. That's what it means to be "in Christ." When you think you are measuring your "worth," you may actually be measuring your level of commitment to the kingdom or to those around you. You can control those levels. That means you can control your sense of self-worth. *In your dream, you are going to determine how you want to exercise that control in each area of your life.*

I have a plaque on my wall that sums this up nicely. It's titled, **Strive for Greatness**. It says,

Use every letter you write, every conversation you have, every meeting you attend, to express your fundamental beliefs and dreams. Affirm to others the vision of the world you want. You are a free, immensely powerful source of life and goodness. Affirm it; spread it; radiate it; think night and day about it. And you will see a miracle happen: The Greatness of Your Own Life.

One last caution before you begin. If you are married or engaged, your dream is going to be a mutual dream. That doesn't necessarily mean it will be the same for you both. Most women want to be protected, provided for, and fought for. Most men want to be the hero, to conquer and overcome. Those are not mutually exclusive desires. If a man pursues his dream, he will usually satisfy his wife's desires as well. However, many relationships are co-dependent. The one partner is dependent on the other partner's approval, or the one is dependent on the other to take action before they will come alongside. And those expectations are not necessarily male or female. This is a dangerous situation. If the one depended on fails to meet the other's expectations, there is guilt, blame, accusations, frustration, disappointment, silence, and defeat.

Marriage must be a union between two givers or it will fail to build. If you have a giver and taker, the taker will continue to take until the giver has nothing left to give. If you have two takers, they'll bleed each other dry. Only when you have two givers does a marriage or any other relationship grow and prosper. If one has unstated expectations, the other will fail to meet them. This is a form of passive manipulation. "You should have known what I wanted." If they are stated as demands, then the other will always feel inadequate or under pressure to perform. Your dream cannot be what you think your partner wants. It has to be *your* dream. But your dream will not satisfy either of you if it isn't directed toward meeting the needs of the other. Nor can the pursuit of that dream be the sole responsibility of one or the other. Your dream, like your marriage, is a mutual endeavor. You've got to get it out in the open, negotiate it, tailor it, refine it, and commit to it as a couple. That being said, in any marriage, only one can be the leader. God has assigned that role to the man (Gen. 3:16). A leader is someone who assumes responsibility and takes action.

Now, begin to paint in your mind a picture of the world you want to exist, and the person you want to be in that world.

SEVEN MOTIVATIONS to consider as you develop the components of your dream:

1. Your Physical Appearance

You were born with certain gene-based strengths and weaknesses. Maybe your upbringing damaged your body. You may have allergies or deformities of some kind. You may have limitations in speech or hearing, eyesight or mobility. You may have suffered disease or been in an accident. You may be naturally beautiful or plain. You may be strong or weak, fast or slow, energetic or lethargic, small or large. The result of all this is your physical appearance. Body styles vary. Faces vary. Ears and noses vary. One isn't better than another. But psychologically, one is more attractive than another. And that attraction is not just subjective (your opinion), but it is objective (factually true). Some people are more attractive than others.

What makes them attractive? Here's the hopeful part. Only a little of the attraction has to do with body-style and facial structure. Attractiveness is balance and proportion. You may want to physically change your appearance surgically. That can be a dream of yours. People who have been born with deformities tend to suffer from a poor self-image. Others often reject them. Their physical appearance interferes not only with how they feel about themselves, but with their relationships. That can be changed if necessary. And that can be a valid and compelling dream: to have enough money to have corrective surgery.

For others, the balance and proportion issue can be handled cosmetically without surgery. Cosmetics in this sense are not just make-up, but how you dress, how you style your hair, the glasses you wear, or the jewelry you choose. If you have two different colored eyes, and that bothers you, then you can get colored contacts so your eyes match. Your dream can be to have a whole new wardrobe custom tailored to your body style, or to be able to have your hair done professionally.

Apart from cosmetics, there are physical appearance issues that can be altered through exercise. This involves effort. But if your dream is to have a six-pack or broad shoulders, longer-looking and leaner legs, narrower hips or a larger bust, then your dream may be to have a personal trainer and a cook to help you stay in shape physically. It may be to buy a home gym because you'd never go the YMCA or World Gym to work out. Or maybe you do have the self-discipline to do that.

Your dream may be to drop 20-30 pounds. Be cautious. Your health can affect your weight. You may have a thyroid condition, or a lupus-type condition. Perhaps you aren't processing food effectively because your digestive enzymes are dwindling as you age (50+). Maybe you can't exercise because of a physical disability like a bad back. If you have no control over your weight because of an underlying condition, you're going to have to be content. You can't let your unalterable physical appearance dictate how you feel about yourself. It's out of your hands. Trust God. Do what you can: learn how to dress and groom yourself, and then learn how to become winsome (see below – "Being Attractive").

Consider whether the means that you've chosen will be the only way to fulfill your dream of improving your physical appearance. If not, then your dream will not motivate you to pursue it. But don't discard your dream! Just understand that improving your physical appearance is only part of a larger dream to become more attractive in order to improve your relationships or your self-image. It is just one hurdle that you intend to remove to enable you to pursue that larger dream. On the other hand, if your only motive is to make other people happy, but you are actually content with your appearance, then you're just wasting time and energy. Remember, the dream has to be *yours*, not someone else's.

There are other things to know about being attractive. It has been shown over the years that there are several things that make someone attractive. They often override physical appearance. They are confidence, health, power, a brilliant smile, and charisma.

- **Charisma** - John C. Maxwell says that charisma is nothing more than putting other people first. It is focusing on them before you focus on yourself. That makes you attractive to them. They like to be around you because you make them feel good about themselves.⁴
- **Your smile** is what signals to others that you can be approached. You can practice your smile in a mirror. It has as much to do with your eye contact, eyebrows, and body language, as it does with your lips and teeth. If your teeth are crooked, or they're not as white as you'd like, perhaps you need dental care. Your dream can be getting that \$500 tooth-whitening treatment, caps, or braces.
- **Power** is an after-effect of knowledge and influence. You can learn to be influential by gaining knowledge and learning how to treat other people. There are two books that are especially helpful in this area: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*,⁵ and *Confidence and Power in Dealing with People*.⁶ Read, learn, inwardly digest, and then apply the principles that they teach.
- **Health** means having lots of energy, good skin, rosy cheeks, and a sparkle in the eyes. You may want to see a doctor, get more daylight, take vitamins, exercise, lose or gain weight, and develop a positive mental attitude. All of these will help produce a healthy appearance. Good health can cost money. Maybe you've been holding off visiting the doctor, dermatologist, dentist, or nutritionist because you don't have the money. There's a big motivation for embracing the process you've devised. You don't

⁴ John C. Maxwell, *Be a People Person* (Victor Books, Colorado Springs, 1994) pp. 25-34

⁵ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Simon & Schuster, NY, 1981)

⁶ Les Giblin, *How to Have Confidence and Power in Dealing with People* (Prentice Hall, Paramus NJ, 1956)

just want money. You want it to improve your health. That's a great reason to commit to the process. You can make these things the trophies that you want.

- **Confidence** is something that you can acquire too. The better you become at the tasks and skills which you need to realize your dream, the more confidence you will gain. Knowledge is power, and power brings confidence. Learning to *show* that confidence is another matter. Confidence is most reflected in your body language and tone of voice. Learn how to stand, alter your posture, use your hands effectively, and make eye contact without freaking out the other person. Conviction will magically appear in your voice and your face. You'll become confident and persuasive as others catch a glimpse of your personal vision.

These are all things that can be learned. Your dream may be to take a course, or to master the techniques I just described. The process itself may be your dream. If you dream of being a leader, then learning to build teams to achieve a goal will make you into that leader. What you acquire on your way to your dream can yield everything else you want.

2. Your Intellect

You were born with your IQ, not your intellect. For the most part, your IQ won't change but your intellect will. It can be affected by how you were fed as a child, environmental factors like alcohol and drug consumption, mercury or lead poisoning, access to a variety of experiences, etc. What you may not realize is that your IQ is not the only thing that governs your ability to gain knowledge. Your *desire* to learn is a much greater factor. You need to make learning a life-long passion. What you know is always changing. What you already know may no longer have value if circumstances change. If your present skills and knowledge are directed toward an obsolete sector of the economy, you're out of work and unemployed. You need to continue to learn new things.

What makes the difference in intellect is not how *capable* you are of learning, but how *willing* you are. If there is no desire to learn in the student, the finest teacher in the world cannot help him. His brilliance or IQ is irrelevant. The person who knows he isn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but is willing to work, is more likely to succeed than a lazy genius. Now, there are limits. A child with Down's Syndrome will never move beyond the mental capacity of a 3-5 year old, no matter how hard the child tries.

What can you do to improve your mental acuity? Your brain is like a muscle. It needs to be exercised. The more exercise it gets, the deeper the crevasses become on the surface of the brain. That increases the surface area of the brain and therefore its capacity. The more links your synapses make in the brain, and the more often they are fired, the faster you will be able to learn and recall. The greater the scope of your interests, the greater the number of associations you will be able to make. The greater the number of *new* experiences you have, the greater the number of synapses, links, and protein chains (storage banks) that are produced in your brain.

Conversely, the less exercise your brain gets, the fewer challenges you have, and the fewer new experiences you enjoy, the dumber you get. Your intellect is never static. You're either growin' or dyin' as the saying goes. It's absolutely true. You need to play challenging card and board games. You need to try things you've never done before. You need to read books on topics that you know nothing about. You need to compete to build up your adrenalin flow. Adrenalin is a primary component in intellectual capacity. You need to beat the clock in more endeavors. Be willing to fail and to be embarrassed if you want to grow. Children grow fastest mentally between birth and age 5. That's because nearly everything they experience is new. The brain records it explicitly because it doesn't know if what just happened is good or bad. It may need to recall it later as a matter of survival. As a result, there is greater clarity in a

child's mind than an adult's. Children play. That's how they learn. We need to play in order to learn too. It has to be *fun*.

Your dream can be to have the time to play, to find new adventures, and to learn new things. You can set goals to learn 3 new games, read 3 new books, or gain 3 new skills this month. Maybe you've never cooked like a chef. You've only "prepared" meals. Get a cookbook. Take a course. Go back to school. Buy some games. It's cheap and rewarding. Learn to have fun, in everything you do. Laugh more. Interact more. Challenge yourself more. Get adventurous. Savor life. It's short, you know.

3. Your Emotions

What many people lack is emotional balance. They're either so tightly wound they can't enjoy anything, or they're so loosely wound they can't accomplish anything. As mentioned earlier, a lot of that comes from your personality. You can see it in 2-year olds, so it isn't necessarily something that's learned. On the one end of the spectrum, you've got the serious, almost morbid, kind of person who is completely introverted and lacking in social graces. On the other end, you've got the social gadfly who can't be serious about anything, but usually can't be trusted with responsibility either.

Somewhere in-between is where we want to be. You may have problems with anger, or spontaneity. You may suffer from anxiety attacks, or you never finish your chores. You may be a perfectionist who makes life a misery for everyone around you. Or you may be so deeply depressed that no one will come near, as if you were contagious. *Balance!* How do you want to be? When people let you down, do you explode at them? Ignore them? Smile? Grimace? Throw things? Distrust them? Belittle them? Encourage them? Help them? Can you be assertive and say how you feel without judging them? How do you *want* to be?

Does your family like being around you? Or are they unsure what mood you're in and so they keep their distance? Mood swings can be devastating to your relationships. People like to know what to expect. Sometimes our emotions are affected by hormone balance, sickness, headaches, tension, tiredness, and stress. If you suspect your hormones are out of balance, see a doctor. But the most common causes of emotional instability are situational and relational. One bumper sticker reads, "Insanity is hereditary. You get it from your kids." If you are under stress at home or at work, if your finances are straining your relationships, then you need to take immediate action to remedy the situation. The best thing you can do is to devise an agreeable plan to get yourself out of debt, or to get yourself out of your current workplace. Once the plan is laid out, emotional relief can begin. Once action is taken, emotional relief will flower. It's the idea of being able to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Your dream can be to get one or both spouses home from work just to remove the stress and tension in the home. Children react to being ignored. If they believe that you don't care because you're more interested in work, or that you have no patience with them because you bring the stress home, then they're going to test you. They want to know which you love more: the money, or them; the title, or them. *How do you want to live?* What message do you want to give your family? Design your dream.

4. Your Spiritual Walk

This is not a separate area of your life. Your spiritual journey is what infuses every other area of your life with meaning and purpose. It limits your behavior and guides your steps. It conditions your attitude. It imposes humility and respect. It's the reason you make the choices that you do. It governs how you treat other people. And it tempers what you experience with an eternal perspective. If you've never considered eternity's impact on how you live today, then this is a good point in your life to do that.

To me, Christianity is not a Sunday social club with a floorshow, stand-up comic, and a book review. It's not a flavor of the month. It's not a philosophy, insight, or moral code. It's not something that I chose from a list of equally valid alternatives. It's not what I think or feel. For me, it is an objective fact. It is the source of all Truth. It is the result of an event that changed the course of history – for the better. Either Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again, or every Christian in history has been a fool, including me.

There's a line in the movie *Gladiator*: "What you do in life echoes in eternity!" That's absolutely true. *There is more to life than meets the eye, Horatio*. If you think that all you have is a set of circumstances, chance encounters, cruel fate, and a roll of the dice, then you're going to be a very frustrated individual. You're going to miss out on knowing that you aren't in this alone, and that something other than destiny is guiding you. Your spiritual walk is what tells you that the outcome has already been decided – in your favor.

Your spirituality is expressed in,

- the way you treat others,
- how you respond to your circumstances, and
- how you feel about yourself

This is really about your motives and your self-image. You can treat others nicely, earn their respect, and even contribute positively to your community. But if your motive is either to get something from others, or to feel good about yourself, then you are not living a principled life. Spirituality is conforming your thoughts and behaviors to a pre-determined set of principles or moral laws. When you are obedient to your principles, you don't really care what other people think. The principles are important in and of themselves. You are more concerned with what your Creator thinks than what anyone else thinks.

When you are greeted with adverse circumstances, you don't think you ran into some bad luck. Instead, you believe that your Creator has brought these circumstances to you to test and strengthen you. Adversity exposes your weaknesses so that you can deal with them. It offers opportunities far beyond today's win or loss; and so you embrace and accept your circumstances. This isn't fatalism. It is recognizing that a hidden and gracious hand is watching over you.

When we abide by this type of covenant relationship with our Creator, it stimulates two responses in us: the first is deep humility; the second is overwhelming peace. Living a principled life enables us to be content in all situations, and to feel good about ourselves. It leads to self-discipline, compassion, understanding, and sympathy. Without a spiritual vantage-point, life is pointless and directionless. It becomes a fruitless search for pleasure. You will never have enough because the more you have, the more desensitized you become to what you lust for. Nothing can satisfy you apart from knowing your Creator.

5. Your Finances

The secret to financial success is to spend less than you earn; period. If you can't live on what you earn now, you won't be able to live on twice what you earn later (Mat 25:21). Nonetheless, you may be sick and tired of having to settle for how you live. Roughly 54% of your income is paid out in visible and hidden taxes. Between those taxes, health care, insurance, housing, food, clothing, and transportation, there's not much left to live on. Investments? Savings? Hah! You've got to be kidding! You may be so frustrated by having to compromise between what you want and what you can afford, that you'll do anything to put an end to it. It's one thing to struggle to live within your means, and quite another to be forced to live a meager existence. The first financial challenge you encounter may bankrupt you. It could be an illness, an accident, a fire or a flood. You are living under such a burden of debt that if a feather hits, it will break your financial back and send you into ruin. You're spinning your bills on a lazy-Susan to see which ones to pay this month. Now *that's* stress.

Maybe that's not your situation. Maybe you're able to pay your bills. But you want something extra. Maybe the challenge is paying for a decent college education for your child. It costs \$20,000 a year for a good school; three times that for a quality school. What about sending your children to a private elementary or secondary school? That can cost upwards of \$6000 a year per child. Maybe you don't have a retirement fund, or your investments got wiped out in the Wall Street scandals of 2002. Maybe your wife is working and you've got two jobs. Maybe you need college yourself. You can't get a scholarship because you earn too much money. Meanwhile kids who don't work can get all the money they need. Not fair, is it? Does that *motivate* you?

Maybe the work environment for your wife is tearing her down, but you can't afford to let her quit. Your church is starting a building a program. It wants you to contribute an extra thousand or two this year, in addition to your tithe. Maybe you can't even pay the tithe because you need to pay the credit cards. Your child has a chance to go on a mission trip to Russia or Italy, but the plane fare just isn't in the budget. Your daughter needs a new prom dress but you can't pay for the one she wants. You buy her a Geo metro for her first car because it's all you can afford. You know she won't walk away from it if she has an accident; and the guilt of your inability to give her a better car is eating you up. You'd like to retire, but you can't live on half of what you can't live on now.

If your decisions are based on money instead of safety, on clearing debt instead of saving, on survival instead of doing what's right or desirable, then you've got a dream in the making. Get angry. Get scared. See your nightmare in living color with surround sound. Let that drive you to *action*. Consider this: we tell our kids to study hard in order to get a good job so that they can have a lifestyle based on whatever income that job yields. *That's not right!* We need to tell them to choose the lifestyle they want, find an appropriate means to obtain that lifestyle, and then pursue that means with all they've got. The same thing applies to you and to your own finances.

Finances as they relate to Contentment, Worry, Envy, and Greed – Money, like all of God's provisions, is only a means to an end.⁷ It must never become an end in itself. It must never become a substitute for our trust in God (Ps 4:8). We must not be impatient, trying to use money to avoid waiting on God's provision (Ps 27:14). We must not rely on it, or seek to be satisfied by it (Prov 30:8-9). We must not calm our fears with it, rather than turning to God for our assurance (Heb 10:19-23). We must not envy others for having it, for God allocates his gifts to each according to his own will (Heb 2:4).

“The Lord will Provide,” *Jehovah Jireh*. In Gen 22:14, God provided the ram for Abraham so that his son would be spared in the trial that God himself brought upon him. It's the same for us. Yet we boast in our prowess, in what we have or what we've done, as if God had not given it to us. “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1Cor 4:7). Listen to Christ's words in his sermon on the mount (Mat 6:19-34):

¹⁹Don't gather treasures for yourselves on earth where moth and rust consume, and where thieves dig through⁸ and steal. ²⁰But gather treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume, and where thieves do not dig through nor steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...

²⁴No man can serve two masters; for either *he* will hate the one, and love the other; or else *he* will cling to the one, and despise the other. **You cannot serve God and mammon.**⁹ ²⁵Through this I say to you, do not be troubled for your life, what you may eat, or what you may drink; nor even for your body, what you may put on. Isn't life better than food, and the body *better than* the clothing? ²⁶Consider the birds of the heaven, that they do not sow, reap, or gather into barns; but your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not borne

⁷ Bob Shank once said that the purpose of our worldly employment is to return resources for the use of the Kingdom.

⁸ Thieves would dig through the mud walls of the house to steal. The word for thief is *mud-digger*.

⁹ Mammon is the money-god (or devil). The slave of mammon will obey mammon while pretending to obey God.

higher than them? ²⁷Now which of you, *by* being troubled, can add one cubit onto his stature? ²⁸And why are you troubled about clothing? Consider how the lilies of the field grow. They do not toil, nor do they spin. ²⁹Yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰Now if God clothes the crops of the field this way, which are growing today and thrown into the oven tomorrow, *would he* not more readily *clothe* you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be troubled, saying, ‘What would we eat?’ or, ‘What would we drink?’ or, ‘How would we be clothed?’ ³²For the pagans crave all these. And your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴Therefore, do not be troubled for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be troubled for these itself. *Each* day has enough trouble of its own.

6. Your Relationships

Here is the center of your life. Your dream is built around who you want to be and your relationships with others. Who you want to be is nothing more than the reflection you want to see in other people’s eyes. They don’t define you; they recognize you. Therefore, if you are going to build a dream, you’re going to have to associate with other people. If you spend a lifetime saying, “Well, I’m not successful. I haven’t achieved. I’m not smart, I’m not pretty, I’m not talented, I’m not this or that,” then you will withdraw and become isolated. In your isolation you make it impossible to fulfill your dream. And so, if you’re going to pursue your dream, you need to get involved with other people. And that’s the main benefit of the dream: it forces you to involve yourself in the lives of other people. If you don’t want to do that, then you really don’t want to dream or to succeed in life. You won’t build your dream because you are content to be isolated. And you are content to be isolated because that affirms your lack of self-worth.

If you’re in that hole, which I completely understand, you’re going to have to climb out of it. Spend some time contemplating the kinds of friends you want, and how you can improve the relationships in your family. It may be that you have no family, or very few friends. You may not know what a normal relationship looks like, and you can’t imagine having one for yourself. You can spend a lifetime trying to find that one deep friendship you’ve heard about, but never experienced. Let me share a secret with you: ***friendships are built, not found.*** You’ll need to learn how to build them. Read. Study. Observe. Share a common vision with other people. That alone will knit lasting friendships.

Don’t let the amount of time you have available for someone determine the value of that relationship. Instead, determine the value of the relationship you want to have, and then allocate the time appropriate to that value. Otherwise you will destroy every relationship of value that you have. You should be putting God first, spouse second, children third, work fourth, church fifth, and then everything else. When we get out of this alignment, bad things happen to all our relationships. That’s because the order of the relationships is what feeds each subsequent relationship in the chain. If your relationship with God is lacking, your marriage will be lacking. If your marriage is lacking, your children will suffer. If you don’t know how to encourage and guide your children, how will you know how to encourage and guide your friends and associates? If you cannot contribute towards unity and direction at work to provide for your family, then how will you contribute towards unity and direction in the church to provide for God’s people? If our physical and spiritual families are suffering, how can our communities prosper?

If you value your relationship with your friends or family more than you value your relationship with God, then you may be able to live a good life, but you will not prosper. Friends and family are with us for this life. But God is with us for eternity.

If you value your relationship with your job more than your relationship with your wife, you may gain advancement at your job, but you’ll lose your marriage. Jobs change. Marriages remain.

If you value your relationships with your children more than you value your spouse, you will drive your spouse away. Children are with us for a season. Spouses are with us for a lifetime.

Can you see these dependencies between your relationships? Let's look a little closer.

Communion with God – The primary relationship in your life is with your Creator. If you don't have this one right, none of your other relationships will work. They won't be as fulfilling, stable, or fruitful as God intends them to be. That's because maintaining a correct vertical relationship is necessary to maintaining correct horizontal relationships. Coming to know God is how we come to know one another. Learning who he really is, and what his character is really like, is crucial to loving others as they ought to be loved. If we misperceive the nature of God, we take that broken image into every relationship we have; we will construct that relationship according to the broken image. That's because we were created in the image of God. We have a pre-existing identity in his sight. When we distort that image, or incorrectly reflect it in how we treat others, we hurt ourselves and we hurt others.

The most common way we distort our perception of God is by taking the relationship we have with our earthly parents and imposing it on our image of God. Even if our parental relationship is a good one, it cannot accurately and completely reflect God as he is. God reveals himself in his Word, the Bible, as evidenced in the life of Jesus Christ. If we are not familiar with the Scripture, we cannot be familiar with the One True God. The more we know about God and the relationship he intends us to have with him, the more we will prosper in every other relationship we have. The more we understand his character, the more we will reflect that character in how we live our own life. We are his children, dearly loved, highly valued, and deeply cherished by our Father in heaven. He cares for us in ways that our earthly parents can only imagine. But he has nonetheless given us a pattern of life that we ought to imitate. As we commune with God, we are shaped into his image, the image of Christ, more and more. We are transformed from our earthly forms into Christlike forms through the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). And our minds are renewed according to the pattern of teaching which Christ has given us. Our perception of everything around us is likewise transformed according to our perception of Christ. We begin to see and value the world as he sees it and values it. We begin to love what he loves, and hate what he hates. We are shaped more and more according to the will of our Father in Heaven so that his will becomes our will. And Christ was our example in this (Jn 13:15).

If our earthly father was absent, distant, indifferent, harsh, stern, unloving, critical, or abusive, we must not impose that image onto our Father in Heaven. He is the exact opposite of those things. He is ever-present, near to us, caring, compassionate, merciful, loving, accepting, and supportive. He's not mad at us, disappointed with us, or grudging in his affection toward us. If these are your images of God, you need to come to him and let him reveal himself to you as he really is. When we say that "God is good," we mean he is entirely good. He will never do anything to you, or allow anything to come to you in your circumstances or condition, that isn't for his glory and your ultimate good. He's not out to punish you cruelly, not matter what your circumstances may look like. He's not going to abandon you in the midst of your troubles. He will always be there with you to endure what you endure, and to celebrate what you celebrate. If you seek God, you will surely find him standing right there beside you. He's pleased with you, and he delights in you. You are his precious child. You can *trust* him. He isn't fickle. He doesn't change in his attitude toward you from moment to moment. His love isn't performance-based. It is grace-based. If you can embrace this image of God's love, you will find yourself passing it on to others in the form of your own compassion and love toward them. Why? Because you understand that God is compassionate and loving towards you. That's the firm foundation of every friendship you will ever enjoy in this world. Spread it abroad (Rom 5:5).

At Home – Do you want to be your wife's knight in shining armor? Your children's hero? Your husband's delight? Your parents' pride? Imagine having no stress at work so that you can focus on your family's needs when you're together. We can get so wrapped up in surviving, that the things that matter are forgotten. We can be under such a strain, that the least little comment or look can set us off. The

normal family expects everyone to pull his or her weight. There are chores to be done, meals to be cooked, yards to be kept, clothes to be washed, and bathrooms to be cleaned. But it's the rare family in which none of this is *expected*, where all of it is given graciously as a gift of service by each family member. What makes the difference? Compassion. Understanding. Trust. Love. Caring. Mutual respect. A sense of our unconditional acceptance – that we *belong* to each other.

Do you want your home to be like your workplace? At home, is there a boss, a supervisor, a workload, and a performance review? Every year do you have a company picnic called a vacation, complete with infighting and politics? Do you have to earn your relationships at home like you earn your paycheck at work? Is it a place you look forward to being at, or do you dread it as much as being at work? Maybe work is where you escape from home. Do you really want to live that way?

It's not going to change if you don't change. When you change, those around you will change. It begins with *you*, not them. Your happiness is not dependent on your circumstances or other people. It is dependent on having principles that are based on eternal truths, and living your life according to those principles. When you do that, you reflect those principles in your relationships. And the people around you are better off for knowing you. They become drawn to you. You will be driven to sacrifice yourself to serve their highest needs in all humility. The mutual bond you build and share with them this way is what we call friendship. You need that bond of friendship in your home more than you need it in any other area of your life. You need it with your spouse. You need it with your children. If you don't *like* each other, what good does it do to say you *love* each other?

Genuine love *produces* friendship. It is free of expectations and manipulation. It is free of superior-inferior distinctions. It is other-directed, not self-motivated. Teaching and exemplifying that to your children is the highest calling you can have. Experiencing it is the greatest pleasure you can have. Learn to be giving. And giving starts at home.

At Work – This is a reality check. It may be the nightmare portion of your dream: you are going to imagine what you do *not* want instead of what you *do* want. Work usually falls into one of three categories: it is worthwhile and rewarding; it is worthwhile but not very rewarding; it not worthwhile and not rewarding. If it is in the last category, then why are you doing it? Let's look at the workplace without any rose-colored glasses.

Do you find yourself having to lie, cheat, and steal because of the environment at work? Do you fudge numbers? Do you say you're sick when you're not? Do you blame others when things go wrong? Or do you try to make yourself look better than you really are? Do you do it out of fear? *Face it.* Your workplace is there to turn a profit, not to be a social club. If there are social activities, it's because the employer has decided it helps morale. Good morale means better production.

If you died tomorrow, your co-workers would attend your funeral out of respect. But you know your employer would find a replacement for you within two weeks. And they'll be delighted to pay less to have someone do the same job you did. Your replacement might even be better at it than you. More likely, your employer would split everything you did between a couple of your co-workers and not hire a replacement at all. Then those folks who attended your funeral would laugh to find out how little you did, or they'd curse you for dying and dumping it on them! *That's* reality.

You aren't paid what *you're* worth. You're paid what the *job* is worth. That's all. The day your employer can hire someone to do the same job you do for less than what they're paying you, you're gone! Remember that. The question you have to ask yourself is this, "Where do your loyalties lie? With yourself and your family, or with your employer?" And in today's economy, your employer may have no choice. Public corporations are bound by law to pay their stockholders dividends. They are bound by law to turn a

profit. As a result, corporations have no loyalty to their employees or their managers. Their only loyalty is to their stockholders. That's why, if you can, you should own your own business. If you can't or won't do that, then you need to maintain your education, your skills, and your contacts, because few people keep a job longer than five years anymore. Consider that as you're laying out your dream.

How effective are you at work? Are people glad to see you coming? What about your boss? Are you his pride and joy? Do you feel like you're on a team that's making a difference? Does what you do meet all your needs for security and significance? Is it so important, and so vital to you, that you're willing to cripple your relationships at home for it? Everything has a price. The workplace is a type of altar. It requires blood sacrifices. What exactly are you worshipping? Even if you own your own business, it is more likely that it owns you instead. It demands your presence, your contributions, and your energy.

Now, it may be that what you do for a living is important and vital. Maybe you're a doctor, or you work for a ministry or a relief organization. Maybe you're a banker and you help people realize their dreams. Maybe you're in sales, and you look at what you do as a useful service. You may be a tradesman, and you meet people's needs with your knowledge and skill. You've got to balance where you are with where you *could* be. Are you living your dream doing what you're doing right now? Can it be made to be the vehicle of your dream? Is it everything you thought it would be when you got into it? Are you afraid that you can't do something else right now without jeopardizing yourself? Do you think you would be declaring yourself a failure if you gave up on it? Is it the best way to provide for your family long-term? Is it the best way to provide for your children when you're gone? Is it a viable means to attain the highest purpose to which you are called? *Is it an accurate reflection of who you are?*

You chose what you've been doing. Take ownership of that. But before you start feeling guilty, remember that you made the best choices you could, knowing what you did at the time you made them. Your dream should provide another option that you've never had before. How are you going to use it? Are you going to justify where you're at and what you're doing? Or are you going to look at yourself objectively, and give this dream the best shot you've got? What are you holding onto? And why? What is it you think that you are risking by changing course now? What do you hope to gain? Are the things you risk and the potential gain realistic? Does the gain outweigh the risk? If so, why would you even hesitate? If you aren't convinced that your dream is the best option you've got, you won't build it. If you aren't convinced of your need to move away from what you're currently doing, you won't build it. Get real!

With Neighbors – *Do you know their names?* Are you hospitable toward them? Would you like to entertain them for dinner, or go on trips with them? Would they take care of your home in your absence? Would they care for your children if necessary? Can you trust them with your house keys or to watch out for strangers? Would you do the same for them? Do you share similar interests? Or would you prefer the kind of neighbors that aren't nosy and keep their distance? *How do you want to live?*

Do you want a covenant neighborhood to control what people can do with their property? Or would you prefer to let your neighbors do what they want? Do you want commons with bike-paths and parks? Do you want to serve on neighborhood committees? Or would you prefer to live out in the country: if you can see your neighbor's smoke, are you too close? What does the term "neighbor" mean to you?

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37. "Neighbor" means the one who has mercy on the one in front of him who is in need. Consider how the Samaritan in the parable cared for a total stranger with his time, money, and compassion. Notice the Samaritan's follow-up and the provision he made for the stranger's future needs. This is what constitutes a good neighbor: loving care. Is your current neighborhood the place where you can be a good neighbor, and have good neighbors around you?

With Friends – *Do you have any true friends?* There's a vast difference between acquaintances and friends. You can know a lot about an acquaintance. You can know where they live, what kind of house and furniture they have, their kids names, where they go to school, what they do for a living, how they get along with their spouse, even their dog's name and whether they're on vacation. But that's not a friend. Friendship has to do with trust and transparency. You have mutual understanding and commitment. There is honesty and accountability, humor and unconditional acceptance. And yet, it is a different relationship than you have with your spouse or your family. The word "obligation" isn't found in a friendship. The freedom and independence that you can offer each other is beyond what you can find in any other relationship you have. There is no "tie that binds," like you might find in a religious community or marriage. There is no submission or oversight, no spying or gossip, no doubt or fear, no jealousy or hidden agenda. It is quite simply the most unique and extraordinary relationship you can have apart from the one you enjoy with your Creator. Who will bear your coffin? Those are your friends.

Can you imagine that kind of sharing? Can you fathom that mutual enjoyment of each other's company? Can you wrap your mind around that depth of knowing and being known? And can you contemplate that sense of liberty? Are you willing to offer it to someone else? Are you ready to build those types of friendships? Until you are, they will elude you.

7. YOUR LEGACY

In the final analysis, your impact on this world will not be what you have accumulated during your stay, but what you have given away. It won't be what you have, but what you leave behind. That's your legacy. If all you leave behind is a nice house and a shiny car, without love or compassion, without a heritage of caring and sharing, then who are you? If your dream is wrapped up in yourself, what statement are you making? Your legacy is going to be the sum total of all the components of the dream you just finished reading about, and that is what you should be contemplating for yourself. What legacy did Jimmy Stewart's character leave behind in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*? What impact did he have on others? What loyalty did he elicit in response to his many kindnesses to them?

Make your legacy count for something. Its measure is the impact you're going to have on other people during the course of your life, good or bad. *Are there other people in your dreams?* Are you having fun with them? Do you want to? Why? The wonderful thing is that you have absolute control over the impact you make on your world. It's *your* dream. God grants and establishes it. But you get to identify, design, and sculpt it. Take the time to nurture and build your dream every day. Become intentional about how you want to live, how you want to love, and how you want to be remembered.

What You Should Do: Do whatever you want and whatever you can. Just be sure that whatever you choose to do, it allows you to live the life to which you've been called, or better yet, that it facilitates the life to which you've been called. Make it into a vehicle for expressing who you are.

Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Where are the specifics in THAT??! What am I supposed to DO?? Should I work for somebody else? Should I start my own business? Should I climb the Corporate Ladder? Should I go back to school? Should I stay at home? **WHAT SHOULD I DO??**

Here's another secret: *It's not about what you do. It's all about who you are. What you do never EVER defines who you are.* Whatever you do, whether it's volunteer work, regular employment, or simply living out your life, it is merely a means to express who you really are apart from what you do. **Your values define who you are.** Find a way to live them out in whatever you choose to do, and do it with integrity. Don't compromise. Learn to live your life with no regrets. The easiest way to do that is to be who you are. There's nothing very profound in that, is there?

Here's the final secret: *It's not what you do, but how you do it.* And how you do it will always flow from *why* you do it. What motivates you? If you know who you are, which is what you've just learned how to discover, then you'll know why you do everything in life:

1 Cor 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or *whatever you do*, do it all for the glory of God.^{NIV}

Col 3:17 And *whatever you do*, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.^{NIV}

Col 3:23-24 *Whatever you do*, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.^{NIV}

ONE PURE AND HOLY PASSION

By Mark Altrogge

Give me one pure and holy passion,
Give me one magnificent obsession,
Jesus, give me one glorious ambition for my life:

To know and follow hard after You.
To know and follow hard after You,
To grow as Your disciple in the truth.

This world is empty, pale and poor,
Compared to knowing You, my Lord.

Lead me on, and I will run after You.
Lead me on, and I will run after You.¹⁰

May you have vast and pleasant dreams to carry you all the days of your life.

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