

Title: WestPark: Life Lessons.

Speaker: Charles Stone

Passage: Multiple

Big idea: 10 life lessons that shaped my life for the better and could shape yours as well.



This is a pretty momentous milestone in my life. It is the last full sermon I will bring as a full-time lead pastor. Most of you know that our lead pastor transition has been public for the past few months and the board is doing a fabulous job coordinating with Steve Adams, their transition consultant, the succession plan.

Next week will be my final Sunday on staff. God graciously allowed us to sell our house within two weeks and we close and move to Laurel, MS, Sherryl's childhood home city, the end of April. Our daughter Tiffany will stay here to live and work. I am not retiring from ministry, but re-focusing on seminary teaching, church consulting, writing, and coaching leaders.

As my last full sermon, I'm going to give you 10 convictions or values that have shaped my life for the better and could shape yours.



This list I'm sharing is not in order of priority. And the most important assumed value that supersedes all the rest is to keep Jesus first in your life. If you envision these ten as pearls on a necklace the strand that keeps them all together is the person and work of Jesus. That is the given I'm starting with. But these 10 are nuanced values and life lessons that God has used to shape me.

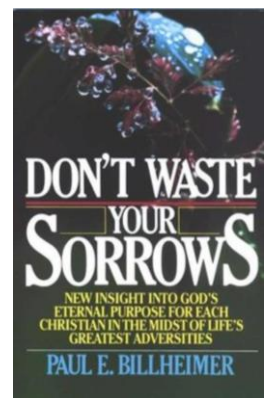
Lesson 1: Don't waste your sorrows.

I got that phrase from the title of this little book.

It is a fact of life that you will experience pain, disappointment, hurt, broken dreams, betrayal and the list goes on and on. What we do with it is our choice. We can become bitter or allow God to redeem that pain and bring good out of it.

Unfortunately, many choose the first option and choose to become bitter. Bitterness rots our soul, and it is a very non-private sin, although we may think it is just inside us.

Hebrews 12:15, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."



Bitterness is a devastating sin. It permeates and infects every aspect of life, and it infects others as well. When you experience pain, disappointment, and sorrow, don't get bitter at God or others. It hurts you and those you love the most.

The way you avoid bitterness is to forgive, refuse to hold grudges, and simply trust God's heart when you don't see His hand.

Don't waste your sorrows. Become better not bitter when you face them.

Lesson 2: Live with integrity.

Make sure your private life matches your public life. Don't be a pretender around other people where you are one person in private and another in public.

I encourage you to find a verse or two that is your life verse. Here is one of mine.

Isaiah 32:8, "But the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands."

A simple test to gauge your integrity would be answering this question. How confident could you say this to your children or grandchildren, "Watch my life and do as I do"?

1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

When you live an integrous life, you don't have to cover, put on, pretend and you will sleep well at night. One of the US great presidents was Abraham Lincoln, he said, "When I lay down the reigns of this administration, I want to have one friend left. And that friend is inside myself."

So, live with integrity.

Lesson 3: Be faithful in the small stuff.

Most of life is pretty mundane, average, and routine, isn't it? Daily life is not life or death or real exciting. Rarely will you or I face major, life changing choices. They will come, but most of life is a series of small choices we make each day. Those small decisions and what we do with them profoundly affect how we decide and what we do when the big decisions do come.

You don't have to worry about whether or not you will make the right choice in the big decisions of life when you have been faithful in the little ones. Jesus said these words.

Luke 16:10, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."

Oswald Chambers is one of my favorite devotional writers. "The test of a person's life and character is not what they do in the exceptional moments of life, but what they do in the ordinary times, when nothing tremendous or exciting is going on." (Oswald Chambers)

Be faithful in the small stuff.

Lesson 4: Be a generous giver.

Sherryl and I have found that you cannot outgive God. You give, he gives back. We have faithfully and joyfully given our tithes and offerings to WestPark.

Paul wrote these words to remind us of this truth.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Lesson 5: Be known as a grace-filled person.

What is grace? Fundamentally it is God’s unmerited favor toward us. And when we truly experience God’s grace, we will relate to others with that same grace, treating other people how they should be treated, even if they are underserving. Grace is seeing and relating to others not based on how they act, but on the basis of who they can become through a relationship with Jesus.

Four practical ways we live out a grace filled life included these.

Practice 1: Say thank-you a lot.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Sherryl has taught me that. Her mother taught her that.

So, I want to practice this now. I want to thank the board, the staff, and you for loving us, for supporting us, for taking care of us, for following my leadership. It has truly been a privilege serving these last 9.5 years at WestPark.

So, a grace filled person says thanks a lot. Today, go thank someone for something.

Practice 2: Look for the good in people and tell them what you see.

Use the power of your tongue to bring grace to people’s lives. Be an affirming cheerleader. Point out the good in them. I am not saying that you flatter them or that you are disingenuous. Let me give you a simple example.

I had a good experience with some company I don’t recall the exact experience, but I do remember calling their 800 number and when the receptionist answered, I began my conversation with, “I’d like to speak to someone in the compliment department.” There was silence on the other end. “Uh, sir, we don’t have one of those departments.” I then explained that I called to compliment the company on great service.

Live life like a compliment department rather than a gripe department. I am not implying that you overlook sin or overlook that which is wrong and needs fixing. But let that be your default mode.

Ephesians 4:29, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Practice 3: Give others the benefit of the doubt.

We do not understand the heart motive or intent of others. When you tend to assume the negative about them, don’t. Don’t assume wrong or assume ill motives. Only God truly knows what is in our hearts. Sometimes we don’t even know what our own motives are. And don’t believe everything you hear about somebody else. Just because someone else says something about another person does not make it true.

1 Peter 4:8, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

Here’s a great little acronym to help you remember this.



Practice 4: Don't gossip.

Lesson 6: Seek understanding before being understood.

We would avoid so much worry, rumination, and conflict if we really took the time to understand others before making judgments or reacting.

We get so busy trying to tell others what we think and want that often we don't really listen to others and seek to understand them.

James 1:19, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Seek understanding before being understood.

Lesson 7 Laugh a lot.

Did you know that in the bible the words or concepts for joy, happiness, laugh, and laughter occur over 275 times.

Jesus modeled this.

Matthew 11:19, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

Jesus never compromised his integrity or his morality for He was perfect. But I believe that Jesus was the life of the party and could tell jokes that kept everybody in stitches, never off-color, dirty or cutting, but hilarious. Jesus was the epitome of joy and that involves a lot of laughing.

I have this picture on my wall in my office.

I love to laugh but not at the painful expense of others. We must never laugh at others to cut them down, ridicule them, or make them feel small. Put the joke on yourself. And were you goof up, laugh at yourself.

Did you know that laughing is good for your health and that smiling, even a forced smile, is good for your health. And it takes 43 muscles to frown and 17 to smile. Frowning will just wear you out.

I want to just be frank with you on this point. As you know I possess such a highly honed and developed sense of humor that when I tell a joke, most people don't get it. I get my joke and laugh at it. I think my jokes are so funny I could go on the comedy club circuit. Most people do not agree on that because their sense of humor is not as highly developed as mine.

As my son has reminded me in the past. "Dad, when people laugh at your jokes, they are giving you a courtesy laugh." You know what a courtesy laugh is, don't you? It's when someone tells you a joke that is not funny, but you don't want to let them know that. You go EH-Eh and then straight face. That's a courtesy laugh.

It's ok. I enjoy courtesy laughs. I appreciate those.

Here's my point, please don't put the expectation on the next guy to have jokes as good as mine. Ok?

Laugh a lot.

Lesson 8. Trust God's heart even when you don't see His hand.

Sometimes in the difficulties of life it seems that God is not around and that he does not care. Somebody called this the betrayal barrier, when we feel betrayed by God. Most never pass beyond this barrier to a deeper walk with him.

David Brainard was a missionary to Native Americans in the mid 1700's. In his short three-year ministry, he died of tuberculosis at age 29, he traveled 15,000 miles on horseback. The first 24 months of his ministry he had no converts. Throughout his entire life he suffered from severe depression. He wrote, "It is impossible for any rational creature to be happy without acting all for God." He wrote in his diary that he had, "little appearance of success to comfort me."

Galatians 6:9, "So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time."

Another quote from Oswald Chambers:

"We can all see God in exceptional things, but it requires the culture of spiritual discipline to see God in every detail. God's still at work even though we don't see him at work." (Oswald Chambers)

Trust God's heart even when you don't see his hand.

Lesson 9: Never quit learning.

Read often and widely. Be inquisitive. Ask questions. Most of all, never quit learning from the Bible. I am defending my PhD dissertation next week. Why get a PhD at age 68? Because I never want to quit learning.

Lesson 10: Finish well.

Don't burn your bridges.

We all face various finish lines, transitions, time to leave something. It might be a job, where you live, a relationship, ministry, a church. We all have exits and endings we must experience.

Leaving WestPark is one of those for Sherryl and I. I have sought to leave well at every church I've transitioned from.

On July 26, 1981, Bill Broadhurst ran in the 10 km Pepsi challenge race in Omaha, Nebraska. In this race, along with 1200 runners, was the greatest middle-distance runner at the time, Bill Rogers. Rogers would end up winning the race in less than 30 minutes.

However, Bill Broadhurst was not of that running caliber for at the age of 18 he had a brain aneurism that left him with a left leg that wouldn't work which he had to drag behind himself.

During the race Broadhurst got so far behind that he got lost. As he ran the kids laughed at him. Everyone had finished except Broadhurst.

At the finish line they were just about to close up when someone yelled "there's one more runner". It was Bill Broadhurst coming in 6 hours later. As he crossed the finish line, Bill Rogers was being interviewed by the paper as the winner. He was not too far away, and he saw this limping runner finish.

He was so moved that he went over to Broadhurst, a man he did not know, took the winner's medal off his neck, and place it on Bill Broadhurst.

Bill Broadhurst finished the race well and received the victor's crown.

I hope you are moved and motivated by these words from the Apostle Paul.

2 Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

I want to finish well here, and I plan on finishing well in life.

Why? Because I have the final finish line in view. One day when this life is over, I will stand before my savior and yearn to hear his words.

Matthew 25:21, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

So, finish well.

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**There is a trick to the Graceful Exit.
It begins with the vision to recognize when a job, a
life stage, a relationship is over, and let it go.
It means leaving what's over without denying its
validity or its past importance to our lives.
It involves a sense of future, a belief that every exit
line is an entry,
that we are moving on, rather than out.'**

Ellen Goodman

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You have left an incredible mark on my life and Sherryl's life and Tiffany's life. We hope we have done the same for you.

I want to read a short article written by a physician as he thinks about his past and influences on him from his past.

The cool breeze blows through the open window of Corinth Church. The simple building, nestled beside an unpaved country road in the woods of northern Florida, has no air conditioning except open windows, shaded by ancient oaks. For most of the year, the church sits quietly, her receding history her only companion. Corinth Church has occupied this plot of sandy soil for 100 years.

Every spring the Hudson family gathers on the grounds for a reunion. So tonight, the small one-room church is overflowing. Those who cannot find seats mill about outside, occasionally looking in the open windows as the gospel singing gets underway.

The music begins to quiet my rushed, tired heart, and I look about the packed room, noting the sparse interior constructed of unfinished yellow pine. Two of my great grandfathers helped construct this building as the 20th century dawned.

As I gaze about, something strange catches my eye. In the dim light, an irregular pattern of dark and light shadows stands out on the boards of the ceiling. Feathery splotches seem to pepper the boards.

My uncle, sitting next to me, notes my puzzled look. “Those are fingerprints,” he leans over and whispers.

The oils from the fingers of the original builders soaked into the bare pine wood. Over time, the oils discolored the bare lumber, leaving perfect copies of thousands of fingerprints scattered all over the ceiling. I realize those fingerprints were left by the caring hands of the many volunteers, including my great grandfathers, who built this church.

That’s when I know: I am Corinth Church. My soul, like the ceiling of this church, is patterned with myriad fingerprints. In fact, many of the same fingerprints that are on the church ceiling are also on my soul. As I ponder this, I realize a profound truth: I am who I am because of all those who have touched me.

The process of touching began in the womb as my mother nurtured me. It continued as my parents and other family members cared for me. Then friends, teachers and others moved in and out of my life, all leaving their marks. As the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson said, “I am a part of all I have met.” Each person I have encountered, each person who has touched me has left some kind of imprint on my life. As I gaze at the ceiling, I remember another truth.

I cannot repay the debt of love I owe.

I cannot repay God for loving me into existence. I certainly cannot repay him for redeeming me even when I forgot him and rebelled against his will.

I cannot repay my mother for birthing me.

I cannot repay my parents for the time and energy they spent on me when I was helpless and vulnerable.

I cannot repay my teachers and mentors for teaching me truth. My medical knowledge and skills, I realize, are gifts of many who gave of their own career, time and energy to teach me.

I cannot repay my friends who have nurtured me, affirmed me, pushed me; who have always been there when I needed encouragement and affirmation.

I certainly cannot go back and repay my great-grandparents, whose bodies rest in the graveyard nearby, for their sacrifice to this little church and to their posterity, including me.

Then I realize another truth.

I cannot repay. But I can pass on to others what I have been given.

God has placed me in a time with its own challenges and needs. I am gifted with personality traits, skills and resources that are a direct result of the fingers that have touched my life. Every day I come face to face with individuals with whom I can share these assets and, in so doing, touch their souls in an affirming way.

The apostle Paul illustrated our challenge to “pass it on” when he stated that the Father “comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

As I reach out to touch others, I am touched again myself. In fact, I cannot touch without being touched. It is one of God’s gifts of grace – that as we open ourselves up to each other and reach out in love, we continue to grow and find the ultimate reward for being.

I leave Corinth Church with a new resolve to leave my God-inspired fingerprints on the souls of each person I meet.

Wilson Wayne Grant, M.D.

That's powerful. I pray that our 9 ½ years with you will inspire you to leave your God-inspired fingerprints on the soul of every person you meet.

10 Life Lessons that shaped my life for the better and could shape yours as well.

1. Don't waste your sorrows.
2. Live with integrity.
3. Be faithful in the small stuff.
4. Be a generous giver.
5. Be known as a grace-filled person.
6. Seek understanding before being understood.
7. Laugh a lot.
8. Trust God's heart even when you don't see His hand.
9. Never quit learning.
10. Finish well.

And as I do at the end of each message, I challenge you to take something from it to apply next week. Which one of these stirred you the most? Do it next week and make an ongoing habit of it.