

***The Dot or the Line?***  
1 Corinthians 15:50-58

You and I can live our lives in two very different ways. Allow me to sketch out these two options using broad generalities. One option is to have a very self-centered and this-world-centered orientation. Paul articulated the motto of this approach in 1 Corinthians 15:32, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” If this life is all there is, such an approach makes total sense. When Lowell preached on this passage he called it “a gross failure of vision.”

People who live solely for this life aren’t necessarily evil or destructive to others. Such people may do a lot of good in this world and may be wonderful friends to a lot of people. But from a biblical world view, they aren’t experiencing very much life; they are limiting themselves to the most superficial realities (what you can taste and touch and smell and see).

The other option is a much grander and more expansive vision for life. This person understands that this life is NOT all that there is. This person understands that if a timeline stretched from eternity past to eternity future that his/her life is a dot on that line. That’s why the Scriptures say that we are like grass that withers (Isaiah 40:7) and that we are a vapor (James 4:14). This person says, “I am not living for the dot. I am living for the line. I am living in light of what God has done, is doing, and will do. I am living in light of who and what I will one day become.”

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul advocates that all believers – every single one – should have this second way of life. Paul says that in light of the fact that we’ll be raised immortal, we should “abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” You may or may not have ever considered yourself a candidate for such a life – a life that matters for eternity. I’d simply invite you to catch a glimpse of what you’ll one day become in Christ Jesus. Understanding our future existence changes everything about this life. When we understand the line, we see the dot differently.

***The Line: In Christ we will “put on immortality.” (15:50-57)*** Beginning in verse 50 Paul emphasizes that a radical transformation has to take place in order for us to experience the kingdom of God in all its fullness.

50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

“Flesh and blood” is a classic way biblical authors referred to our earthly humanity. For example, in Ephesians 6 Paul writes that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood . . .” but against hostile spiritual forces. In Hebrews 2:14 we read that “since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same.” Flesh and blood simply refers to our earthly humanity. When Paul writes that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” he is pointing out here in verse 50 that in our earthly existence we cannot fully experience God’s reign in our lives. We can experience God’s reign to a degree, but not in all its fullness.

Paul expresses a similar thing when he writes, “nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” We live in bodies that “go bad”: we get tired and worn out; our bodies eventually give out completely. God and His kingdom, of course, are imperishable; they are immune to decay and

death. And so there is a fundamental incompatibility between our flesh-and-blood, perishable existence and life in the presence of God. But here's the good news:

51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,

In calling this truth a “mystery” Paul is saying that it is something that was previously unknown but that God has revealed. Paul tells us that when Christ returns some believers will still be alive (they will not have “fallen asleep” – see 15:6). Since Paul has been assuring the Corinthians that believers who have already died will be resurrected, he senses the need to assure them that those who are still alive won't be left out. He says, “we will *all* be changed.” Just as those who have died will be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ – in both soul and body – so too those who are alive when Christ returns will be changed/transformed. And this transformation will happen instantaneously:

52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

We get our English word “atom” from the term translated “moment.” It referred to the “smallest conceivable moment in time” (Thiselton, p. 1295). “In the twinkling of an eye” had a similar connotation. This transformation will be instantaneous. Paul adds “at the last trumpet.” Throughout the Scriptures, God's actions were announced by the blast of a trumpet (see Zech. 9:14, Exodus 19:16, Rev. 11:15). The last trumpet signifies God's final actions in this world, including the final transformation of believers into the image of Jesus.

Notice Paul's precision in the second half of verse 52 in speaking both of those who've died and those who remain alive at Christ's return. The dead will be raised imperishable. Technically speaking, only the dead will be raised/resurrected. By definition, you cannot be resurrected unless you've first died. Those who haven't yet died “will be changed” – not resurrected; but the end result is the same. Whether you're living or dead when Christ returns, if you're a believer you'll experience a complete transformation.

[Interestingly, in 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul addresses the concern that those who've already died might miss out when Christ returns; here Paul addresses the concern that those who are still alive might miss out when Christ returns.]

Verse 53 emphasizes the necessity of this transformation:

53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Paul speaks about our bodies like a change of clothes. Our earthly perishable bodies will need to be transformed into imperishable bodies (bodies that don't go bad). Our earthly mortal bodies will need to be transformed into immortal bodies. Mortal refers to something that is dying. Immortal refers to that which never dies. The Greeks spoke about the immortality of the soul; they understood rightly that everybody lives forever somewhere. But the biblical concept of immortality is very different. Immortality isn't something we inherently have. Immortality is given to us by Jesus Christ at His return.

In verses 54 and 55 Paul makes allusion to a couple of passages in the OT to show that our transformation fits into God's larger plan to conquer death altogether:

54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. 55 "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?"

In verse 54 Paul makes reference to Isaiah 25:8 in which God promises to swallow up death forever. Here the idea isn't merely that there's no more death; it is wholly overwhelmed by the victory of Jesus Christ. Similarly, in verse 55 Paul refers to Hosea 13:14 in which God is **mocking** death for being so weak compared to His power. As Paul suggests here, death is normally victorious; from the vantage point of this world, death always wins. We have proverbs that reflect this truth: "Two things are certain in this life: death and taxes."

Paul is saying that if you are in Christ, even if you die death doesn't get the victory – Jesus does. The "sting" of death has been removed. The term "sting" was used of bees and scorpions and serpents. For the believer in Christ, death is like a bee with the stinger removed; it really can't harm you. Verses 56 and 57 explain why this is so. Verse 56 reads:

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;

Sin is what gives death its power. "The wages of sin is death": we have earned death (both spiritual and physical death) by our sin. And "the law" is what makes sin so powerful. The commands of God set a standard that we cannot meet. The law is holy and good, but it reveals (and even stimulates) our sinfulness (see Romans 7). Without the command, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house or wife or anything that belongs to him," you might have been able to plead ignorance. "I didn't know it was wrong to covet what my neighbor has." But now that we've heard the command, we're without excuse; "the law/commandment" is powerful that way – it confirms our sinfulness.

Paul bursts out into thanksgiving when he thinks of how the power of sin in our lives has been broken:

57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God defeated sin and death. Our sin and guilt was laid upon Jesus on the cross. More than that, "God . . . **gives us** the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Not only will God transform us when Christ returns; in the meantime God continually gives us the victory through Jesus. We don't have to wait until heaven to experience our victory in Christ. Day by day God gives us freedom from the power of sin and death. Our day by day experience anticipates the day when we are permanently changed/transformed – when we receive the gift of immortality. That's "**the line**": ***In Christ we will "put on immortality."***

A couple of weeks ago Lowell quoted C.S. Lewis' comment in *The Weight of Glory* about how "we are far too easily pleased" with the things this world has to offer. In that same essay Lewis makes this point about what we will eventually become:

It is a serious thing to . . . remember that the dulllest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, HarperOne, pp. 14-15.)

Lewis is advocating that we live in light of “the line” – in light of who and what we’ll one day become. How should we live in light of the fact that we have never talked to a mere mortal?

***The Dot: We can “abound in the work of the Lord.” (15:58)*** Paul begins with the word “therefore” indicating that he’s explaining the implication of knowing that God has won our victory and that we’ll be raised immortal:

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

There’s an element of stability: be steadfast and immovable. There’s no reason to move away from a God who has promised immortality and incorruptibility. No, we should be steadfast and immovable when it comes to our faith and our commitment to God. Paul adds, “always abounding in the work of the Lord.” Paul uses the term he commonly uses for “good works” – those things we do as an expression of the will of God. Abounding has the connotation of excess and extravagance. Some people ask the question, “What is the bare minimum I *have* to do to please God?” That’s the mindset of a person who is thinking small and cheap and poor. That’s the mindset of a person who isn’t convinced that being God-centered is superior to being self-centered.

But the believer is a person who will one day be someone others would now be tempted to fall down and worship! Instead of asking, “What do I have to do?” we can afford to ask the question, “By the power and victory of God what am I able to do?” This person dreams big dreams and attempts big things for God because s/he knows that “our toil is not in vain in the Lord.” Doing the will of God from the heart – even if it’s costly – is never wasted. Extravagant faith and extravagant effort are a joy, not a burden. This person understands this and looks at the dot in the context of the line. Jim Elliot captured this mentality when he said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

What might this look like in our lives? I’d like to give some specific examples, but I don’t want to give the impression that I’m talking about “getting busy” doing more and more things for God. It may or may not involve doing more things. It might be a matter of doing the same things you’re already doing in faith – really trusting God to do the things that only He can do.

For example, you might have a friendship that isn’t what it should be. Perhaps you’ve forgotten what a gift friendship really is; maybe you’ve taken the other person for granted and not valued him/her in your life. Perhaps “abounding in the work of the Lord” involves recommitting

yourself to that friendship and simply saying, “God I am willing to be used in my friend’s life in whatever way you desire: prayer, encouragement, listening, confronting, whatever . . .” You may be an instrument of God in the life of your friend.

Another example might involve VBS this coming week. Let’s say you’ve agreed to serve in some way. One option is to simply show up and do the bare minimum all week; but life is too short to go through the motions. The other option is to show up trusting that God might want to use you in the life of the children and adults alike. And so you pray, “God, these children are precious in your sight. Give me Your heart to encourage and teach these kids. Give me eyes to see needs. Make me sensitive to what You are doing. God, I want to show extravagant love and hospitality the whole week long.” We can afford to have this attitude because of “the line” – because we’ll one day be raised immortal!

How might we “abound in the work of the Lord” here on Sunday mornings? “Loving God” and “loving our neighbor” go hand in hand; they both rise or fall together. We love God in worship by entering in and singing, praying, giving, and listening from the heart. Again, instead of going through the motions, we seek to pour out our love for God. But we also notice our “neighbor.” We are not only friendly; we actually befriend others. We take them seriously and consider the possibility of letting them into our lives and into our fellowship. We even look for extravagant, costly ways to befriend people.

I received a letter a while back from someone who went to this church during college and has since moved away. One of the things he wrote was, “Please don’t ever underestimate God’s ability to reach people through you and via seemingly small gestures like those you and others extended to me.” At the time it didn’t seem like much, but to him it meant the world and helped him open up and trust Christ.

Again, we don’t *have* to be extravagant in doing the work of the Lord; we *get* to be extravagant because God gives us the victory in Christ and because we will one day be raised immortal.