

TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

Louder Than Words (Part 10) | Psalm 90:12

I want to reflect with you today on the subject of HUMILITY and how our lives can be filled with more of it.

HUMILITY is the fruit of the Spirit, the beautiful virtue, the aspect of Christlike character, the way of wisdom that comes from taking the reality of mortality seriously.

I'll say more about that last part in a moment, but I want to observe that in every environment I can imagine HUMBLE PEOPLE are usually the long-term winners and most enduring influencers. Whether it is in family life, work life, sports life, or social life, people who exhibit great humility are happier, more loved, and experienced as more keyed into what matters than those who are not humble.

The word HUMILITY is an interesting one. It derives from the Latin word, "Humus," which refers to the dust or soil that comes from the death and decomposition of organic things. Humus is the ground out of which new life grows and, I would contend, not just physically but also spiritually. To grow the fruit of humility, it helps to reckon with the fact that you and I will be HUMUS one day and, perhaps, sooner than we know. Happy Father's Day!!

I know that the subject of death is not a cheery one and, for this reason, we tend to push it away. When we're children, we tend to DISREGARD death almost entirely, don't we? *"Dying is for old people. You know, for people in their thirties."* When we're in our youth, we tend to DEFY the reality. We take all kinds of risks and behave as if we'll live forever. *"Death couldn't really happen to ME!"* In our young adult years, we tend to DISTRACT ourselves from even considering the end of the journey. *"Hey, I'm just trying to make a LIFE here!"* By our middle years, however, most of us have seen enough decay and loss to have started to work to DENY the reality. *"Honey, would you pick up some more of that face cream or hair stuff for me? How much does Botox or Lumineers cost?"* And then, in our latter years (if we get them), we're just trying to DELAY what we now know isn't going to make an exception for us. *"Doc, do you have anything else for this condition?"*

Despite of all our efforts to manage it, however, the death rate for human beings is still running at 100%! At some point, your heart and mine will stop. Our bodies will go through a process of decay. Like the cicadas around us and the leaves on our trees above us, we will eventually fall to the ground and dissolve. I submit to you that one of the most reliable ways to increase your **humility** is to reflect on how soon you will be **humus**.

If you've read the Bible much than you know that this is a common theme. God repeatedly challenges us to face the reality of our mortality. The Old Testament

describes our time on this earth as: *Swifter than a weaver's shuttle... a tale that is told... grass [that] withers, and the flower [that] fades. The Apostle James asks: For what is your life? It is a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.* As Christians, of course, we believe that THIS life is not all there is. Our grief at the passing nature of this life is always conditioned by our hope of the life that putting our trust in Christ makes possible beyond this one.

Nonetheless, knowing that all of the good that we experience here is both fleeting and fragile can be so good. When it comes to developing humility, death is our friend. For this reason, Philip of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great) hired a staff-person whose job it was to come stand before him each day and say: "*Philip, you will die.*" It was the frequent custom of ancient merchants to pen in large letters on the first page of their accounting books the words "*Memento mori*" ("Think of death") to remind them to settle accounts early rather than later.ⁱ King David of Israel famously wrote: **Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12)**

Why is that? In what sense or way does numbering our days help us gain a heart of wisdom? Well, for one thing...

Awareness of our mortality can awaken our wonder.

It's hard to feel much wonder when one is an immortal rampaging through the world. When we're at the TOP of our health or the PEAK of our performance game it can be difficult to be truly awake to our surroundings. Sometimes, to gain a higher vision, we need to be brought LOW.

When one of our children was about five years old I took him with me on a walk from our house downtown. I don't know how long we'd been walking before we were no longer "we," but I suddenly realized that I was walking really fast and that my child was no longer next to me. I turned around and to my horror saw my five-year old lying down on the sidewalk half-a-block behind me. At first, I thought he stumbled and hit his head. But it was actually me who had stumbled and had the head problem. So, I caught up with my child by going backwards. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Oh, hi Dad; I'm watching this roly-poly cross the sidewalk. He's got tiny little feet and this really little shadow. He's cool."

How long has it been since you got low enough to notice life's details, life's miniature miracles, life's little dramas? Is it possible that one of the reasons we live so discontented amidst so much is because we so rarely stop to see and enjoy the things that are so little? We fly along at 50,000 feet surveying all. A little child goes on hands and knees at 5 inches. Who sees more? Who has the more expansive life? Why are we so eager to make children just like us when Jesus says: **"Unless you change and become like them, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."**

Life has occasionally given me clarity about what truly matters and awoken in me a sense of wonder before the majesty and mystery and passing beauty of it all.

[Dan tells the story of having a heart attack when he was 52 years old and how, for a time after that, "Everything glowed."] Sometimes it takes being brought really LOW to gain a vision of all that is so truly GOOD.

Knowing of our mortality can grow our gratitude.

I've met people who are facing death who feel significant anger about it – as if they have been cheated.

[Dan tells the story of a friend's experience of facing his death through multiple myeloma and how he came to see it as an "ironic grace" because of the way it heightened his gratitude for the substance and people of his life]

Author Annie Dillard says: When it comes my time to die, I don't want to go out grumbling or raging that my life is ending too soon. As I go out the door, I want to thank the host for even inviting me to the party.

How grateful do you feel to be alive? Consider the miracle of life in this universe. Consider the miracle of all the convergences over millions of years that were necessary for the genetic combination that led to your conception. Does this in any way grow your gratitude at the privilege of being here at the party?

Consciousness of our mortality can focus our energies.

Leo Buscaglia, the author and college professor, used to assign his students at USC each year the task of writing a paper on this simple query: "What would you do if you found out that you only had 5 more days to live?"

Some of the students always come back with the predictable answers:

- "I'd run away with my boyfriend for a few final days of conjugal bliss..."
- I'd fly to Hawaii for a wild week in the sun...
- I'd tear this assignment up and go out and get drunk!"

And yet the fascinating thing is that the majority of the class comes up with answers that say a great deal more about the ultimate priorities that lurk beneath the surface of most of our lives:

- I'd go to the people that I love and tell them what they mean to me.
- I'd seek out a person I've wronged in the past and ask their forgiveness.
- I'd find someone in desperate need and give them a helping hand.
- I'd thank my parents and my mentors for all that they've done for me.

- I'd sell my car and give the money to an agency that cares for third-world kids.
- I'd go to a hospital and visit with someone who never gets visitors...
- I'd find a poor family and give them my extra clothes.
- I'd talk to a friend about Christ.
- I'd spend my time with someone dying.
- I'd love... I'd strive... I'd serve..." and the answers go on and on!

But what I want you to understand, is that Professor Buscaglia doesn't grade or correct these papers; he simply hands them back to his students, with these words scrawled across the top in great red letters: *"Why Don't You Do These Things Now?!"*

"What would YOU do if you found out that you only had 5 more days to live?" And how should that focus of your energies inform your life NOW?

Awareness of our mortality can also help crucify our pride.

[Experience of seeing a white-haired man standing by himself in the Narthex, with people rushing by him.]

- No one knows that he was the one who started the Bible study...
- who began the worship service...
- who raised the money...
- and built the buildings...
- and pastored thousands of people...
- and spoke with such courage, clarity and compassion to the issues of his day.
- Almost no one still celebrates this figure who founded Christ Church and led it for 32 years.

I made a Note to Self: Your days are numbered, Dan. You are going to be forgotten here too.

- Don't white-knuckle so many decisions.
- Don't take yourself overly seriously.
- Don't work for the adulation of people or the thought of your legacy.
- Do your best because it's the right thing to do.
- Give your heart to people because scripture promises that somehow faith, hope and love abide when everything else is gone.

One of the best things about being a father is you get to be around children and you see that they are not very PRIDEFUL.

- They know they are not the Masters of the Universe.
- They know it's OK to make mistakes.
- They know that they are dependent on others.
- How would your way of interacting with people or handling conflict or pursuing your agenda be different if you could keep at the forefront of your mind the

knowledge that you are just passing through – that it will likely be only your faith, hope and love that abides?

Facing our mortality can assist us in taking actions that reduce our regrets

REGRETS OF THE DYING - From a Long-Time Palliative Care Nurse (Bronnie Ware)

When questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, some common themes surfaced. Here are the most common five:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I didn't work so hard
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

What changes might God be calling you to humbly make now, so that at the end of your journey, you have fewer regrets?

Experiencing our mortality can release our grip on this world.

[My wife, Amy's analogy of crossing the monkey bars on the school playground, getting only so far and losing our grip, and fearing the drop below]

Maybe you are experiencing God prying up one of the fingers with which you are holding on to the bar.

We are not made to live in these bodies or hold onto this life forever. One day, we'll need to let go and the experiences of pain and loss you and I have right now could be preparing us for this. But underneath us stands the Heavenly Father.

Knowledge of our mortality can renew our discipleship.

At its core, discipleship is simply imitation. There is probably no place where Jesus teaches us more about living that is worth our imitating than in his process of dying. In his last hours...

Jesus offered grace to others – especially those who had failed him in life.
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

He openly confessed the questions that come in anyone's life. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)*

Jesus did his best to form a new level of community for those he would leave behind. *"Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26-27)*

He acknowledged his physical needs and dared to accept help from others. *"I thirst!" (John 19:28)*

Even in his last hours, Jesus offered hope of redemption and renewal to faulty people. *"Today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)*

Jesus accepted the end of his life's mission. *"It is finished!" (John 19:30)*

And, then, he finally let go of the bar of this life. He released his grip and dropped into the everlasting arms. *"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)*

We can learn from and imitate this. Jesus is the ultimate standard for the life-changing power of humility and the beautiful life that flows from it. This is why St. Paul writes in Philippians 2...

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled** himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Friends, the way UP involves a movement DOWN. So, let's learn *to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up. (James 4:10)*

ⁱ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, xix.