

Introduction

Since this is Memorial Day weekend, I'd like to give you a little assignment. Suppose you knew you were going to die tomorrow and had to write an epitaph for your tombstone today. What would it be? What epitaph would accurately define what your person and life are about? I obviously don't know what it would be. But I do know what it should be. It's the same one the unknown author of Hebrews chose for the dead people he wrote about in chapter 11 of his book. Let's turn there and learn what that is.

People of Whom the World Is Not Worthy

Hebrews 11 is a collection of memorials to 10 outstanding men and women of God: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. Verse 32 mentions but doesn't discuss several others: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.

All of these heroes of the faith were dead and the author of Hebrews eulogizes them in a parenthetical statement, in verse 38. He declares that they were "**people of whom the world was not worthy.**" That means just what it says. The world, human society, didn't deserve them. Their persons and lives transcended the best it could offer.

And so should ours. God calls us to be precisely what these heroes in chapter 11 were, men and women of whom the world is not worthy. I'm talking about men and women whose persons and lives transcend the best that human society can offer.

That's our call and verses 32-38 teach us how to answer it. We must be two things.

Willing To Die for Things

First, we must be willing to die for things

Many people aren't. In 1971, John Lennon released an empty song

titled *Imagine*. One of its stanzas goes like this: **“Imagine there’s no no countries. It isn’t hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too.”** Notice the sentiment – no countries and no religion and thus nothing to die for. After the Iraqi war started, I overheard two persons talking at the mall. The first said, **“I wouldn’t die for oil.”** To which the second replied, **“I wouldn’t die for anything.”** Lennon, that person at the mall, and many others believe the same thing. Staying alive on earth is more important than anything else is.

But Memorial Day, in its very origins, repudiates that belief. Memorial Day began on May 5, 1866 and its purpose was to honor soldiers who died in the Civil War. After World War I, Congress extended it to the dead of all American wars. It is, in other words, a day for honoring those who **“gave their last full measure of devotion,”** to quote Abraham Lincoln. It’s obvious what the soldiers we honor on Memorial Day believed. Some things are worth dying for.

These heroes in chapter 11 did too. Look at what is just a rousing verse, 37. It says about them, **“They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword.”** The words **“sawn in two”** likely refer to the prophet Isaiah. Tradition tells us that King Manasseh compelled him to worship but he refused. So, the king had him placed in a hollowed out log and literally sawn in two.

In her book *A Book of Saints*, Anne Gordon summarizes what we learn from these heroes in chapter 11, **“If the martyr saints teach us anything, it is that some things really are more valuable than life itself.”** That is what chapter 11 teaches us. We shouldn’t value staying alive on earth more than everything. There are some things we should be willing to die for (excuse the dangling preposition here and throughout).

Willing to Live for Things that We’re Willing to Die For

Being a person of whom the world is not worthy requires a second thing. We must be willing to live for things, specifically the things we’re willing to die for. If something is worth dying for, it’s certainly worth

living for. We see that in verses 33-34. These heroes in chapter 11 **“conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.”** They didn’t just die for God, in other words. They lived for Him as well.

And so should we. We should live for the things we’re willing to die for. You might think that’s a given – if we’re willing to die for it, we’re willing to live for it - but it isn’t.

Listen to what may be a surprising observation to you. In some ways, it’s easier to die for things than to live for them. Hear that again. In some ways, it’s easier to die for things than to live for them.

Abraham Lincoln, for instance, died for the Union and became our most beloved and remembered president as a result. But would he have become that if he had lived? He would have face the most perplexing and highly charged problem in America’s history, reconstructing the south. He would have faced the rancor his successor, Andrew Johnson, faced. In some ways, he dying for the Union was easier than living for it.

He illustrates that in some ways, it’s easier to die for things than to live for them. There are glory and finality in dying for things. There are obscurity and routine in living for them. Dying for things requires ultimate and one time sacrifice. Living for them requires continual sacrifice. Many people find the former easier than the latter.

That explains one of the curious truths of our existence. Many people don’t live for what they’re willing to die for. There are certain things they’ll die for. But they don’t live for those same things.

Years ago, I counseled a couple with serious marital problems. The wife in fact was on the verge of divorcing the husband because he was utterly consumed with his profession and golf. In an enlightening exchange between the two, the husband, who didn’t want the wife to leave him, said in desperation: **“I love you. I’m willing to die for you.”** To which his wife sarcastically replied, **“Yeah, you’re willing to**

die for me. The problem is you aren't willing to give up golf for me." She meant that he wasn't willing to give her the affection and time she needed and was probably right. He wasn't.

Then there's a self-professed patriot who claims he'd die for America and probably would. But at the same time, he doesn't live for it. He doesn't fulfill his very first responsibility to it, always voting and always voting intelligently.

So many people are like that husband and patriot. They don't live for what they're willing to die for. But you and I should. If something is worth dying for, it's certainly worth living for. So let's do just that. Let's live for what we're willing to die for. That's what people of whom the world is not worthy do.

Satan's Strategy

What I've just shared helps us grasp one of Satan's most effective strategies for defeating us. That strategy is getting us to live for things that we aren't willing to die for.

Many people fall for that strategy of his. They give priority to lesser things. They invest the best and most of their thought, concern, time, energy, and money in less meaningful or even empty things.

Some years back, Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon starred in a movie titled *Fever Pitch*. In it, Barrymore's character falls in love with Fallon's character, who has a glaring flaw. He's obsessed with the Boston Red Sox. In one scene, a spring training reporter asks him, **"Where do the Red Sox rank in terms of importance in your life?"** To which he enthusiastically replies, **"I say the Red Sox, sex, and breathing."** Considering how much thought, concern, time, energy, and money he gave to the Red Sox, we'd think that was true. But in the end, it wasn't. If he were forced to choose either the Red Sox or breathing, he'd choose breathing. He was living for something he wouldn't die for.

But he isn't alone is he? Many people invest the best and most they have in things they wouldn't die for: bank accounts, homes, cars,

traveling, sports, entertainment, promotions, and fame to name a few.

What a decisive mistake that is. It plays right into Satan's hands. It's disintegrative to human personality and life. It makes people lesser persons living lesser lives.

Don't let that happen to you. Answer the call of Hebrews 11 instead. On the positive side, live for what you're willing to die for. On the negative side, don't live for what you aren't willing to die for.

Steps to Take

Let me suggest a four-step exercise that will help you achieve that.

The first step is to thoughtfully make a list of the things that *we should be willing to die for*. Scripture is our primary source for doing that. It reveals the ultimate priorities in life that we should be willing to die for. So, referencing Scripture, we make a list of those priorities. They would certainly include God, His gospel, and people. To those we would add things like country and freedom.

Years ago, five KGB agents burst into a secret house church of worshipping Christians. The agents said that those who were willing to renounce Jesus should leave. Those who weren't willing to renounce Him should remain to be shot and killed. Four left and the remaining ten were shot and killed.

Would you be one of the four or the ten? Or to ask it another way, are you willing to die for Jesus? I hope so because He's willing to die for you and me and did. He should be the very priority on our list.

The second step is to make a second list of the things that *we are living for*. We need to be reflective and brutally honest about this. What are the things to which we're giving priority – the things to which we're devoting the best and most of our thought, concern, time, energy, and money? We need to place whatever those things are on the second list.

I knew a Christian couple, for instance, who retired and spent the last ten years of their lives traveling in a \$200,000 RV. If they had been honest about it, they would have put traveling on their second list.

I had a family member who played over 100 games of slow-pitch softball from May through August every year to the neglect of God, his family, and his church. If he had been honest about it, he would have put playing ball on his second list.

The third step in our little exercise is to compare our two lists. We determine if the second list contains the very same things in the very same order as the first. You can see what we're doing here. We're discerning two things. #1 – Are we living for the things we're willing to die for. And #2 – Are we living for anything we aren't willing to die for?

So, the Christian couple would have put traveling on their second list but not on their first. Thus, they were living for what they weren't willing to die for. Or my family member would put God and family on his first list, but (from May through August of each year) not on his second. Thus, he wasn't living for what he was willing to die for.

The fourth and final step is to adjust our second list if we need to. If our second list isn't compatible with our first, we rearrange our priorities. We commit the best and most of our thought, concern, time, energy, and money to the things that are on the first list, in the right order. Simply put, we begin to do two things: (1) live for what we're willing to die for; and (2) not live for what we aren't willing to die for.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by reading the epitaphs of some celebrated people. Al Capone: **"My Jesus, mercy."** Frank Sinatra: **"The best is yet to come."** Mel Blanc: **"That's all folks."** Bette Davis: **"She did it the hard way."** Robert Frost: **"I had a lover's quarrel with the world."** Jim Morrison: **"Truth to your own spirit."** Studs Terkel: **"Curiosity did not kill this cat."** And finally H.G. Wells: **"I told you so, you darn fools."** Those epitaphs raise a question. What would yours be? What epitaph would accurately define what your person and life are about? I obviously don't know what that would be. But I do know what it should be, **"A person of whom the world is not worthy."**