

LIVING THE CONTROLLED LIFE

Controlling Our Perspective: Living in the Present

The person who lives solely for the present is always looking and never finding what they really want in life. Their past is full of brokenness and regret, and their future is limited from the consequences of their choices.

The old idiom, “There is no time like the present” is quite a profound thought. It could be profoundly good or it could be profoundly bad depending on where you go with it. If we hear in this statement “live for the present,” we will be heading down a dark road of self-indulgence and immediate gratification with no regard for either the past or the future. The person who lives solely for the present is always looking and never finding what they really want in life. And their past is full of brokenness and regret, and their future limited from the consequences of their choices.

If, however, we focus on living in the present, we will find a heightened sense of richness and satisfaction in life that will likely surpass anything we have experienced in our lives to date. So, let me elaborate on this idea of living in the present so we can better understand (1) its brevity, (2) its challenges and (3) its richness.

The Sobering Brevity of the Present

The thought of living in the present is a mind-boggling idea if you really understand what the present really is. Here’s why. Think of your life as a horizontal line. It has a starting point (your birth), but no ending point (eternity). The present is nothing more than a thin vertical line that moves slowly and inexorably across the continuum of your life timeline, converting your future into your past. The present is so brief that by the time you even say the word “present,” it is no longer in the present, it is now in the past.

It may be easier to grasp the sobering brevity of living in the present moment if we think about our lives in terms of seconds. Lord willing, we will all get to experience 86,400 present seconds in this upcoming day. So, as every second passes, a future second is immediately turned into a past second of our lives. When we calibrate living in the present into seconds – instead of hours, days, weeks, months or years, our appreciation of what it means to live in the present will be greatly magnified.

Maybe that is why God gave us hours, days, months and years as primary time measurements instead of seconds. He knew how difficult it would be to continuously attempt to live in the present when the present is so incredibly fleeting.

The Challenge of Living Fully in the Present

God is clearly a God of the present. Do you remember when Moses asked Him what His name was and God told him to say, “*I am that I am*” (Exodus 3:14)? He is – not He will be or He has been. He is now – perpetually in the present. Because God is outside the time/space continuum He is not bound by the past, the present and the future like we are. For Him, everything is in the present. We would all confess that no matter how hard we might try, we simply cannot get our minds around the enormity of this thought.

David reminds us to focus on the present in Psalm 118:24, “*This is the day which the Lord hath made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.*” Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:11, “*Give us this day...*” He also knew we would struggle with fears for the future so He told us in Matthew 6:34 to “*not worry about tomorrow...*” Paul did not want to be hindered by his past which is why he told us in Philippians 3:14 that he was “*forgetting what lies behind...*” It is all about living in the present.

How often do we miss fully living in the present moment because we are so busy *rehashing* the past or *rehearsing* the future?

All of us most likely can relate to his challenge. As one father honestly shared, “My family knows all too well that even though I may be physically in the room with them, it does not necessarily mean that I am also mentally and emotionally in the room. I am often thinking about something that has already happened or focused on something that is coming up. And I miss the sweetness of the present moment because I am simply not all there to share in it.” Can you relate?

Here is more from this same father.

When my oldest two daughters were still quite young, I had been sharing with them 1 John 3:17, which says, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” We were trying to teach them that how we respond to those in need shows whether we really love God or not.

As providence would have it, the next Sunday I happened to be preaching that morning and Pam, my wife, was playing the piano. As is often the case with families with small children, we were running late. We jumped into the car and hurried out of the driveway and sped off to church.

On the main street to the church that morning we happened to drive by a disheveled, elderly lady walking down the side of the road pulling a cart with a big bag. I crossed over into the left lane so as to not get too close to her and drove on by. Bethany, my oldest daughter, broke the silence and asked me, “Daddy, don’t you love God?” I said, “Of course I do, honey, why do you ask?” I can still remember 25 years later what she said next. She asked, “Daddy, that lady needs help and we have a car. If we really love God, shouldn’t we stop and help her?” My daughter was living in the present. I, on the other hand, was in too

big of a hurry to get to church to minister to the needs of the congregation to see anybody with needs along the way.

Jesus, unlike us, always lived in the present. One of the most well-known stories about Jesus is when in the middle of teaching, something threatens to interrupt Him. Here is what it actually says happened in Matthew 19:13-15, *“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.”*

Jesus was so in the present that right in the midst of his teaching, he saw a greater opportunity and He stopped right in the middle of his sermon, blessed and prayed for the children and then it says, *“he went on from there.”* He picked back up with His lesson right where He left off. Do you like the way Jesus handled His interruption better than how you handle yours? Which leads me to another very important thought. How we choose to live in the present creates the past we get to live with for the rest of our lives. A very sobering thought, isn't it?

The Richness of Living Fully in the Present

So, how do we fully live in the present moment? Here is a frame of mind that can do more to help you to live in the present than possibly anything else. It is so simple and yet so powerful. Here it is – “There is a first time and a last time for everything in life.” Here's why this thought is so powerful.

A person shared this idea this way:

There was the first time I ever went fishing with my Dad and there was the last time. There was the first time I got to hold each of my four, precious daughters in my arms and there will someday be a last time. There was the first time I got on the floor to play with my grandchildren and there will be a last time. There was the first time I tied my very own shoes. And there will someday be a last time. There was the first sermon I ever preached and there will someday be the last.

When our entire family is able to get together, I cannot help but be mindful that this could be the last time we will all be together as a family. When we would visit my wife's aging father who is not in good health, we were consciously aware that this time could be the last time we see him this side of eternity.

You see, it is this conscious recognition that there is a first time and a last time for everything that makes all the in-between times so much sweeter. Savor the small things that each day brings, because some day you just may discover that they were really the big things.

Keep in mind the old saying. “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is God's gift, and that's why we call it the present.”

Robert Brault pondered, “Why be saddled with this thing called life expectancy? Of what relevance to an individual is such a statistic? Am I to concern myself with an allotment of days I

never had and was never promised? Must I check off each day of my life as if I am subtracting from this imaginary hoard? No, on the contrary, I will add each day of my life to my treasure of days lived. And with each day, my treasure will grow, and not diminish.”

May I encourage you to let the past be your teacher. Let the future be your hope. But let the present be your life. Live in the present!

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How important is it to distinguish between living **for** the present and living **in** the present?
2. What is your greatest personal struggle with living in the present?
3. How would your daily schedule change if you were fully living in the present?
4. Share some common way you rehash the past.
5. In what ways might you find yourself rehearsing for the future (worry)?
6. How does I John 3:17 challenge you to live in the present? *“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”*
7. In what ways is it important to keep ever present in your mind the statement, *“There is a first time and a last time for everything in life.”* In what ways would doing so help you to more fully appreciate the present moment?
8. Is God challenging you to be more “people focused” or more “time focused” (i.e. “stop and smell the roses” or “stop wasting time”)?
9. What are some practical ways you can allow the past to be your teacher?
10. In what specific areas of your life do you see the need to be more fully living in the present?
11. Explain how embracing this statement could change your perspective on a typical day? *“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is God’s gift, and that’s why we call it the present.”*

12. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?