



# How Should One

# *Live!*

*In a moment sharpened by crisis, Jean had defined the question that drives the human search for wisdom: how best to live out the time each of us has left on earth.*

A few years ago as I sat in my office, I received a phone call from Jean. Jean was a parishioner who, after her mastectomy and bone marrow transplant last year, had gotten the results of a liver biopsy back that morning. “My liver is riddled with tumors. The doctor says a new drug offers only a 30 percent chance of shrinking them. Could you come right over?” she asked with tears in her voice. As I sat across from her in her living room, she told me, “I’m not angry with God. I know these things happen. I don’t think it’s a punishment. But it doesn’t seem right that I should die before I’ve completed my task of raising Anna. She’s only eleven. I guess my task now is to figure out how best to live out whatever time I have left.”

In a moment sharpened by crisis, Jean had defined the question that drives the human search for wisdom: how best to live out the time each of us has left on earth. What should we choose as our

goal in life and what actions and attitudes will help us attain it? Socrates, gadfly of Athens, many centuries before, asked, “How should one live?” It is a crucial, risky question to ask and to answer.

On any given Sunday people sit in the pews because the quest for wisdom has taken them by the hand or the scruff of the neck and propelled them to a place of worship. They sit before us as we stand to preach, and in their eyes is the unspoken question: “Tell me, preacher, in this town, in this family, in this job, in this predicament, what is the best way to live?”

I, for one, am delighted to see them. For they have had to wrench themselves free from some powerful cultural clutches to sit before us. An acquisitive, radically individualistic culture has a ready answer to the question “What is the best way to live?” The best way to live is to cultivate drive, initiative, positive mental attitude, self-esteem, and personal appeal toward the goal of being well-off.

Being well-off means being prosperous, well thought of, healthy, and in control of one’s life and future.

This answer to the question of wisdom for living constitutes a uniquely American “gospel of success,” represented by Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, Zig Ziglar, Norman Vincent Peale, and Robert Schuller. While these authors sound the theme of helping others, it is quite often as a means to feeling better about ourselves.

This secular gospel has not arisen in a social vacuum. The virtues it commends are tailor-made for success in a competitive, acquisitive culture. Its context is a nation that has seen a gradual suppression of its founders’ definition of virtue in civic terms as public involvement for the common good. In its place we have elevated a trinity of national virtues: individualism, personal initiative, and self-reliance. “If you want a helping hand, look on the end of your arm!” says the contemporary admonition.

## Signs of the Times

A tip-off that our culture is seeking direction is the proliferation of self-help manuals over the past decade. All *I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff . . . And It's All Small Stuff*, *Life 101*, *Life's Little Instruction Book* and *First Things First* are all examples of this genre. This rapid growth of collections of "do's" and "don'ts" is an example of the "popcorn phenomenon," when the increasing heat and pressure of the culture create a rapidly exploding body of literature to address a pressing concern.<sup>1</sup>

The pressing concern is the fear that, as a nation, we have lost the answer to the question "How best to live?" Some blame changing family patterns. Others cite the corrupting influence of television and the behavior of public officials, or parents abdicating their roles as wisdom teachers. Some Generation Xers blame their boomer parents for having been too preoccupied with pursuing their careers to be home long enough to teach about how best to live.<sup>2</sup> Much of the self-help material on bookstore shelves has been written by baby boomers. Perhaps the frantic proliferation of self-help manuals stems from a parental fear that we have missed an opportunity to inculcate wisdom in a generation of our young.

Another sign that people are searching for guidance in living wisely is the explosion of the memoir genre over the past five years. From *Angela's Ashes* to *Tuesdays with Morrie*; from *The Color of Water* to *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, the memoir is overtaking the novel as the rising star of the literary world. *The New York Times* bestseller list regularly includes memoirs in its ranks. A websearch using the keyword *memoir* revealed over twenty-one hundred sites related to the topic. Biography sites allow anyone with a modem to upload his or her life story without the help of a big New York publishing firm. Multiple sites offer advice on how to write and publish one's own memoirs.<sup>3</sup> We are more eager than ever to comb the life experiences of others for answers to our driving question.

Another manifestation of interest in the question of "How best to live?" is the rising interest in spiritual direction, *lectio divina*, and other classic Christian spiritual disciplines, especially among Generation Xers. New York publishers are tripping over one another to turn out prayerbooks. Generation Xers are increasingly open to the notion of spiritual direction and denominational rootedness.<sup>4</sup>

Another sign that the question "How best to live?" is on people's minds is the

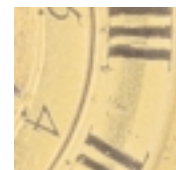
*Christina Hoff Sommers observes a "cognitive moral confusion" among the young people she works with. They may perform kind, fair actions, but they have no idea why.*

rise of New Age spirituality over the past thirty years. Its popularity is often attributed to the failure of organized religions to address the spiritual needs of their followers.<sup>5</sup>

New Age spirituality offers adherents an appealing answer to "How best to live?" Live realizing your oneness with God and your ability to create your own reality by your own thoughts. By living in such a way, one achieves personal transformation and contributes to the transformation of the planet into an era of peace and unprecedented spiritual awareness. Many New Agers believe that, in our human search for direction, we are guided by angelic messengers from the other side. New Age spirituality offers a positive view of the human being and a respect for nature, as well as methods of meditative visualization designed to bring about positive outcomes. Its promise is that we can gain control over our lives and futures and eliminate the negative experiences threatened by a changing, unstable world. Because of its blurring the distinction between human and divine, New Age advice can fairly be categorized as a form of self-help wisdom.

Educators and philosophers urge us to answer the "How best to live?" question. Philosophy professor and author

Christina Hoff Sommers observes a "cognitive moral confusion" among the young people she works with. They may perform kind, fair actions, but they have no idea why. She calls for a "Great Relearning" among children and youth of our moral history and its core values of civility, honesty, consideration, and self-discipline.<sup>6</sup>



Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre believes our society has trouble answering the question "How best to live?" because we have no consistent, shared moral tradition. We are radical individualists, feeding on fragments of philosophies, isolated from the larger systems of moral thought and life to which we originally belonged.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most famous evangelists of the gospel of personal success of the twentieth century admitted:

- ♦ The ideas I stand for are not mine.
- ♦ I borrowed them from Socrates.
- ♦ I swiped them from Chesterfield.
- ♦ I stole them from Jesus.
- ♦ And I put them in a book.
- ♦ If you don't like their rules, whose would you use?<sup>8</sup>

How about the Bible's guidelines for answering the question "How best to live?" Biblical wisdom is, after all, a genre focused on how to live in the present in alignment with the divine order of nature and human relationships. What if we pastors reclaimed our role as wisdom teachers? What if we preached the themes of the Bible's wisdom literature as an antidote to superficial, secular answers to the question "How best to live?"

*How Best to Live When You're Young and Reckless (or Just Reckless)? Trust God and Walk in the Way of Wisdom*

### Proverbs

Proverbs offers a wisdom that on the surface sounds like secular advice about how to be your own best friend. But it advocates industry, moderation, and integrity

in the context of acknowledging that all moral guidance comes from God. It has as its goal not self-advancement but the good of the community. Unlike secular wisdom, it also acknowledges the limitations of our human ability to control the outcomes of our actions (Prov. 19:21; 20:24). As such, it is invaluable in preaching godly avoidance to the young and the not so young. How can I avoid taking unnecessary risks and yielding to destructive temptations in life? How can I order my habits and relationships to benefit the community? Proverbs presents the life of wisdom-seeking as a daily process of trusting in God and allowing God to govern our thoughts and actions, rather than following our own impulses for self-gratification. Wisdom is a divine gift before it is a lifelong search. Wisdom is a Person who guides us in ethical living. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5, 6).

### How Best to Live When the Unexpected Strikes? *Face the Facts of Life, and Claim the Joy!*

#### **Ecclesiastes**

There is a large grain of truth in Proverbs’s notion that by wise living we can avoid unnecessary risks and live in a way that is conducive to health, prosperity, service to the community, and a good reputation. “The highway of the upright avoids evil; those who guard their way preserve their lives” (Prov. 16:17).

Except when an unexpected tragedy or illness leaps over the guardrail we have erected and blocked our prudent path. The book of Ecclesiastes offers a crucial reality check for our fond hopes that wise living will lead to good luck. It offers spiritual preparation for the unexpected occurrences in life.

Of course, when someone says that life is unpredictable, we all sagely nod our heads. But we don’t really believe it—until something unexpected hap-

pens to us! And it will. “Just live a little longer” advises an African American proverb.

Qohelet’s message is not the stuff of self-help manuals, but it is an invaluable pulpit theme in an age that equates wise living with being in control. The seasoned old sage who wrote Ecclesiastes reminds us of the three abilities of life to discombobulate our best-laid plans: the inscrutability of God, the unpredictability of life, and the inevitability of death.

We need these reminders in a culture that sets us up for low self-esteem

and disappointment by its refusal to admit our creaturely and contextual limitations. It prefers to exaggerate our ability to manage our lives to desired outcomes.

How best to live? For Qohelet, it is to face these harsh realities about death, life, and God. Only then can we claim the joy inherent in our portion in life: the joy of work, of love, of food, and of rest. Everybody’s portion contains irritation and sorrow. Everybody’s life teems with joy, precious, yet precarious. There is no point in envying anyone else or striving after wealth. The best way to live is to realize that God is God, distant and yet generous, the giver of the portion that we are to till with gratitude and joy. The past is behind us. The future is unfathomable. Death awaits us all, with no memory of us lingering after our demise. The present is the only realm that warrants our attention. A restless, competitive, youth-worshipping, death-denying culture needs this answer to the question: “How best to live?”

### How Best to Live in Times of Suffering? *Turn Toward, Not Away from God*

#### **Job**

The book of Job never answers the question, Why do good people suffer? It does affirm that our neat human categories of cause and effect that we apply to God and call “divine retribution” are not ade-

quate descriptions of reality. Good people suffer and it has nothing to do with some supposed hidden sin or flaw in their lives. The “why” question is never answered. The question “How best to live?” in times of deep and undeserved suffering is front and center. Our knee-jerk reaction is to blame God or ourselves. “It was God’s will.” “I don’t understand why this is happening to me. I have always tried to be a good person.” The preacher owes it to those suffering and those who most certainly will suffer to preach the difficult, but life-affirming answers of Job to the question “How best to live?” Clearly these answers are at odds with secular answers that emphasize self-advancement and control over one’s circumstances. That is why they demand and deserve to be preached.

Among the lessons that weave themselves through the beautiful but tangled tapestry of Job are the following:

Love God for God’s own sake, not for fear of punishment or hope of reward.

Don’t attempt to oversimplify God. Respect the Creator’s mystery and sovereignty.

Don’t take credit for all your good fortune, nor blame for all your misfortune.

Don’t blame others for their misfortune. Respond to their pain with loving presence, not judging words.

Give God the benefit of the doubt. When misfortune strikes, don’t assume God is the culprit and God is long gone. Jesus echoes the “no-fault” clause in Luke 13:1-5.

Don’t assume that the presence of suffering means the absence of God.

Don’t assume that, if you don’t feel God present, God is not present.

Be thankful that God has set a limit to the damage that life’s chaos and sorrow can inflict on our inward lives. No degree of suffering can destroy our relationship with God.



## How Best to Live? *Against the Grain!*

### **The Teachings of Jesus**

Jesus' answer to the question "How best to live?" is an answer that both guides and challenges preacher and people every week of the year. It goes against the grain of many secular and religious answers to the question, both in his day and ours.

Jesus' teaching includes several "don'ts." Do not judge, retaliate, pile up wealth, or make security and position your goal in life. There are an equal number of "do's." Love your neighbor, love your enemies, and live a life of radical trust that places faith on par with foresight.

Some years ago a book on the Beatitudes was published entitled *The Be Happy Attitudes*. A beatitude is a time-honored wisdom form that states what leads to blessedness. Jesus' Beatitudes are the centerpiece of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They can in no way be reduced to tips for cultural contentment.

We need to preach them in all their sharpness. People need to get the point that Jesus' answer to "how best to live" could not vary more from secular and even some religious advice. What follows is a point-counterpoint between Jesus' wisdom and secular wisdom.

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** (*Poor in spirit means those who know their need for God.*)

Blessed are the determined, the self-reliant, and the sturdy, for theirs is the realm of achievement.

**Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

Blessed are those who make lemonade out of lemons.

**Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

Blessed are the assertive, for they will get what is coming to them.

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

Blessed are those who have both talent and drive, for they are unstoppable.

**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**

Blessed are those who treat others well so that, when they need a favor, they can call in their chips.

**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

Blessed are the single-minded, for they shall conceive it, believe it, and achieve it!

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Blessed are those who, by their achievements and status, gain a good reputation among their peers, for they shall exercise influence.

How best to live? Living by Jesus' radical teachings, in some strange, sub-

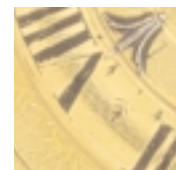
*Jesus' Beatitudes are the centerpiece of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They can in no way be reduced to tips for cultural contentment.*

versive way, leads to blessedness. This promised state inspires us to trust God, love our enemies, and sit loose to material goods and the good opinion even of our family. It requires both a confession and a journey of faith. It results in bearing the fruit that befits repentance.

Preaching to people whose question is "How best to live?" involves serving up a rich banquet of themes from biblical wisdom. It means preaching avoidance of shallow, reckless living, preparation for unavoidable events, theological instruction about the character of God, and instruction in Jesus' against-the-grain wisdom for daily living. Threading through every sermon is a fundamental favor we owe the questioning people who sit before us. We owe it to them to preach the key difference between secular answers to the question "How best to live?" and biblical answers from both Old and New Testaments. The secular answer to the question "How best to live?" is "Follow these rules." The biblical answer is "Enter into a lifelong relationship with this Person."

We owe it to our questioning people to preach better news than they'll ever find on the shelves at Barnes & Noble.

The search for wisdom begins with a gift from God, and Jesus the sage is now our Savior and Guide. □



1 Stephen Covey uses this term to refer to the proliferation of time management books and tools over the past several decades. See Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 21.

2 Such sentiments on the part of Generation Xers are what inspired William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi to entitle their study of the generation, *A Generation Alone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

3 Tim Wyatt, "Daze of Our Lives," *The Dallas Morning News*, Entertainment Section, July 27, 2000. Cable television's Biography Channel features a website [www.biography.com](http://www.biography.com)—as does [www.amillionlives.com](http://www.amillionlives.com)—that claims to be the largest guide to biographies on the Web and includes links to autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and oral histories.

4 Lauren Winner, "Gen X Revisited: A Return to Tradition?" *The Christian Century*, November 8, 2000.

5 According to Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah, New Age appeals largely to those in the younger ranks of the well-educated middle class, discontented with organized denominations and seeking a self-directed, self-fulfilling spiritual orientation. Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 24.

6 Christina Hoff Sommers, "What College Students Don't Know," in *The Power of Character*, ed. Wes Hanson and Michael Josephson (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

7 Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, ed., *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), 10.

8 Dale Carnegie, quoted on p. 41 of *The Portable LIFE 101: 179 Essential Lessons from LIFE 101* by Peter McWilliams (Los Angeles: Prelude Press, 1995).



**Alyce M. McKenzie is assistant professor of homiletics at Perkins School of Theology. She is the author of *Preaching Proverbs* (Westminster) and a book on preaching wisdom, forthcoming from Abingdon Press.**