

How to Wreck Your Life Week 1

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

Several times a year, my wife and I will pack up the car and travel to visit her family, who live in Tennessee. Unfailingly, when we are about to drive back to Maryland, my father-in-law says the exact same thing to me: keep the car in-between the ditches. In other words, keep the car on the road. Be sure to keep the car in-between the lines. Make sure you keep from wrecking the car.

[Q] What are some of the precautions people take to make sure their car's don't get wrecked?

He's not the only one who takes particular care in how they drive and how other people drive to ensure that they prevent from wrecking their cars. Yet, we sometimes live with careless inattention to the path and course of our lives that we find ourselves in a ditch in life. But what if at the start of 2011 we began to live our lives in such a way that we can keep it on the road, that we can avoid the pitfalls and snares that can wreck our lives.

That's exactly what our current series is all about, learning "How to Wreck You Life," and ways to avoid it. We are going to spend the next several weeks looking at different ways in which we can keep from destroying our life. It's our hope 2011 will be a year where we live between the ditches.

To open this series we'll look at something we're all at risk of, something I guarantee everyone has wrestled with at one time or another.

If you want to wreck your life, make it all about you.

If you want to be sure you have a life filled with heartache, frustration, and loneliness and that your life lacks purpose, make your life all about you. It's really not that difficult, to be honest. We live in a culture that would completely support your decision. Self-centeredness is something that's not only tolerated in our culture, it's often celebrated.

[Q] Give examples of how our culture celebrates self-centeredness or pride?

While our culture has raised the attention and status given to people who place themselves at the center of their own lives, this is not a new phenomenon, but a thread that runs throughout all human history. It's a thread that runs through you and me.

You see, when a person lives with themselves at the very center of their lives, it's the same thing as making themselves the god of their world, the god of their lives.

But I don't want anyone to get the idea that what I'm talking about only applies to the extremely self-delusional or for the most self-indulgent celebrities. This is about all of us. And we see this mindset play out in many different ways. When people turn the spotlight of their lives inward onto themselves, there are some symptoms that develop.

The first symptom that develops is the constant need to manage how other people see us.

There's an interesting story in the Bible that describes when God wanted the nation of Israel to have a new king and so he sent out Samuel to find and appoint this new king. When Samuel got to his destination, he saw a man named Eliab. Samuel was impressed. Here was a man who looked strong, inspiring, and powerful. Think tall, dark and handsome. If anyone was a king, this is him, Samuel thought. But God interrupted his thoughts and told Samuel this:

“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

Samuel thought he'd found the new king because Eliab looked right. He had all of the right outward appearances. Yet, God wasn't concerned with outward appearances, but with the reality of the heart. God still isn't worried about what is seen on the outside, but about what is happening inside of us.

When we shine the spotlight of our lives on ourselves, when I make it all about me, I ignore what God pays attention to most and instead I focus on the external, the things I can fake and tweak and manipulate to alter what other people think about me.

[Q] How often do you find yourself acting as your own press secretary, spinning life to make sure you look good, or at least better than those around you?

A second symptom to placing ourselves first in our life is that it causes us to shun correction or advice. A person who puts themselves first normally lives in a world where the smartest person they know is the one they see in the mirror. So, who are they going to take advice from? Who is in a position to correct them?

The Bible warns us:

A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy.

Proverbs 29:1

Someone who is prideful and who doesn't take advice will wreck their life beyond healing. This is not something trivial; this is central to what it means to wreck our lives. When we take advice only from ourselves and when we take correction from no one at all, we are in peril of driving our lives off the side of the road.

I think the key sign that we shun advice or correction is how we react when we receive advice or correction. If we've placed ourselves first in our lives, we will most often react to either with defensiveness. A person who is the center of their own life will fight and argue in defense of themselves whenever someone else tries to offer counsel or correction.

[Q] The last time you were advised or corrected, how did you respond? Did you receive it or did you become defensive?

Possibly the most dangerous symptom of putting yourself first in your life is it leads us to exclude other people from our lives.

Putting ourselves first leads to exclusion, to keeping people and God from having a rightful place in our hearts and our lives. Putting ourselves first leads to us looking down on other people. Putting ourselves first begins to destroy our ability to love others.

To emphasize this very point, Jesus once told a story about two men praying. One man was a tax collector, a Jewish traitor to his people, a man whose sin, greed, dishonesty, corruption, and disloyalty, were openly apparent for everyone to see. The second man was a Pharisee, a professional religious person and a scholar of the Bible. In his prayer, the Pharisee thanks God that he's in a different category than the tax-collector, on whom he obviously looks down.

'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

What is Jesus' reaction to this prayer?

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Luke 18:11-12, 14

The Pharisee thought he was being humble, but what he was doing was exalting himself above the tax collector. He was placing himself in a position where he could look down on the other man. Because of this, the Pharisee was absolutely noxious in God's eyes. He had ignored God's command to love people and instead decided to exclude anyone he looked down on. You see, it was all about the Pharisee. It was about how good he was and how glad he was to be better than the people around him. In the process he not only excluded people from his life, but also God, because his prayer clearly shows that he feels no need for God's help.

Why did Jesus tell this story? To whom did Jesus tell it?

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else . . .

Luke 18:9

When we put ourselves first, when we make life all about us, it causes us to look down on people and to exclude both God and people from our lives.

[Q] When was the last time you found yourself thinking "I'm glad I'm not like him or her or them?" When was the last time you let the focus of your attention exclude other people from your life?

If you want to wreck your life, if you want to run your life right off the tracks, then put yourself first. But if you don't, if you want to live the life God desires for you and for me, then what do we do? The answer is we need to cultivate humility in our lives.

I think this is complicated by the fact we are tangled up about what humility means. I think we get the idea humility is something it's not. Let me first tell you what humility isn't. Humility isn't an attractive person pretending they're ugly. Humility isn't a smart person pretending they're dumb. Humility isn't self-deprecation or where you downplay all of your gifts and talents and abilities. All of these are a sort of make-believe game, and God has no desire that we play make-believe. That's not what humility means at all.

As John Ortberg puts it, humility is a healthy self-forgetfulness.

But its hard, isn't it? Of all the virtues and areas of growth, humility contains an inherent catch 22. The problem is when I'm being humble, I'm completely aware that I'm being humble. This means I'm constantly at risk of taking pride in my humility, of thinking, "Oh look what a good boy I am, look at how humble I'm being."

Then I start noticing people who aren't putting in the same amount effort as I am and it gets easy to start comparing myself to them and slipping right back into pride, into putting myself first.

[Q] Why do you think humility is such a hard virtue to cultivate in our lives? Have you ever experienced the catch-22 described above?

So what are we to do? The way to humility, the way to avoiding wrecking our lives by putting ourselves first, is by serving others. When we serve others, we begin to gain a heart of humility and to break away from putting ourselves first. This is the exact model Jesus shows with his own life.

Being a servant was not a disguise that Jesus slipped on for a little while, it is the very nature of God. As followers of Jesus, it's the very thing we are called to as well. It was the plan Jesus had for his followers in the first place: to follow his footsteps and serve. It's how we cultivate humility and it's how we take ourselves from the center of our lives. If we're going to avoid wrecking our lives, we need to serve other people.

When we serve others, we begin to see the truth about ourselves. We see that we aren't god. We see the need to stop managing our image and to be genuine. We see the need to receive counsel and advice. We see the need to avoid excluding people from our lives and our hearts. That's what serving does.

[Q] In what ways do you think serving other people can develop humility?

I think there are a lot of people who want this in their lives, but the real truth is, unless we are very intentional and very purposeful in our serving, it just doesn't happen. What we need to develop is the practice of servanthood. When we do, we'll find that humility is being developed in us as well.

The truth of life is that we are, in a very large part, what we do. If I want to know what is really important to you, if I want to know what matters most in your life, all I really need to do is peak at your day planner or your calendar. Because we make time for the important stuff. The stuff that really matters to us, it fits into our schedule because our schedule bends around it, not the other way around.

If we want to avoid wrecking our lives, we need to become people for whom serving is a vital and intentional part of our lives.

[Q] How intentional are you about serving other people? Do you have a regular time and place to serve others? What would it look like for you to live a life more and more characterized by servanthood?

How to Wreck Your Life Week 2

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

There are so many things we attempt to keep in good condition: our houses, our cars, our credit scores. We know, sometimes from painful experience, how much trouble it can be when we wreck these important things. But how much effort do we put into avoiding creating a wreck of our lives?

[Q] What are some of the things you put effort into keeping in good condition?

We are in the second week of “How to Wreck Your Life,” a series where we’ve been looking at ways to avoid wrecking our lives in 2011 by turning toward God’s wisdom on how to live.

Jesus once taught his followers about what it meant to follow God fully with their lives when he said:

Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:34

I love the way Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, *The Message*, puts this verse:

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get all worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow.

Jesus was teaching today has enough problems and issues of its own. Tomorrow will come and bring along its own problems and worries. Jesus was saying there’s no need to borrow worry or troubles from tomorrow. Let tomorrow worry about itself. Instead, focus on today.

[Q] What are ways the worries of tomorrow can press into our todays?

In the book of James in the Bible, we find James speaking about people who brag about their future plans and their upcoming journeys.

He writes:

Now listen, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

James 4:13-15

James says we don't have tomorrow yet and we have no guarantees we will. We don't know what's coming with tomorrow's sunrise. All we have is today.

In the book of Psalms from the Bible, we read:

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalms 118:24

What is the day that the Lord has made? This is the day. We teach this truth to small children in the form of a song, one I bet most of us could sing. Yet, is this truth something we think about and live out in our lives?

[Q] What do you think it means that today is the day the Lord has made? Why is this important to remember?

All of these passages have something in common: Today.

Which brings us to the second installment of How to Wreck Your Life:

If you want to wreck your life, focus on any time but today.

If we want to mess up our lives, if we want to miss the point of why we're here on earth, than we should lose focus on today. The life God desires for us, the life we were made for, is a life that comes at us one day at a time. God wants us to be fully present in today. When we lose focus on today, we run the risk of wrecking our lives.

[Q] What do you think it looks like to lose focus on living in today? What do you think it look like for a person to be fully present in their lives?

I think we all know what its like to be with someone who's not fully present, don't we? When someone is not paying attention to us, when their mind is somewhere very far from their bodies, we can tell. Maybe we've been the one who has not been fully present. Maybe we've had our minds wander to the point where we realize we haven't been paying attention at all.

If we aren't careful, we can go through this whole year, even our whole lives, missing what's right before us.

[Q] Have you ever experiences a time when you had a conversations with someone who wasn't fully present? Describe that experience.

Maybe you're thinking to yourself: Am I supposed to pretend the past hasn't happened? If the past doesn't matter, am I supposed to just play make-believe about yesterday?

Or am I supposed to neglect planning for retirement or college or the future? Am I to "wing it" and not schedule out my week? Is that what it means to not think about the future?

I think these are good questions, but they miss the point. Here's the real truth: healing from and moving on from the past, and planning for the future are the work of today. **The past and the future are the work of today.** You can't step back into yesterday in order to do things differently and you can't jump into tomorrow in order to plan. You and I only have today, and healing from yesterday and planning for tomorrow are the work of today.

I think one way we live in yesterday instead of today is by focusing on what's been done to us. All of us bear scars from the past. We've all been hurt and injured during our yesterdays. All of us.

I'm not trying to downplay our wounds. Yet, at some point we all need to come to the realization that our yesterdays can steal away our todays. What we need in our lives is forgiveness.

We sometimes get the idea forgiving others is all about what we're doing for them, but in a very real way the act of forgiveness is about what's happening inside of us as well.

Jesus is really clear on this topic, that our ability to forgive others is tied to God's forgiveness toward us.

Jesus taught:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Matthew 6:14

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Mark 11:25

Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Luke 6:37

At first glance, this seems to be an odd exchange, almost as if we need to buy our ticket at the gate before we're allowed in the park. It appears like God is withholding forgiveness if we don't forgive others.

Yet, that's not what's happening. There's something that changes in our hearts when we don't forgive others, something that makes receiving forgiveness impossible. This isn't a spiteful withholding on God's part, this is simply a

statement of truth; when we withhold forgiveness, we make ourselves unable to receive forgiveness from God.

It'd be like having a cup full of mud. God tells us if we empty our cup, he'll fill it up with something good, something we really want. Realize, this good thing isn't being withheld from me, it's just a statement of truth that if our cup is filled with something, it can't be filled with something else until it is first emptied. There is something better waiting for us, God's forgiveness, if only we could empty our cup first.

God wants to fill us with his forgiveness, but he can't unless we give forgiveness to others.

Lewis Smedes once wrote, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you." There's a lot of truth in that statement. Maybe it's time in our lives to work toward forgiving people in our yesterdays, so that God can fill our todays.

[Q] If your life is the metaphor of a cup described above, how would you describe the state of what's inside and how much room do you have for God's forgiveness?

Yesterday isn't the only thing that can pull our attention off of today. Tomorrow can as well. One of the things that pulls our focus toward tomorrow is our pace of life. In our culture, especially in the northeast, we live at break neck speeds. It's just frenetic.

What's on our Palm Pilot or iPhone or Droid waiting for you right now? What's at the office for you on Monday? What does your calendar look like? When's the next game or exam or rehearsal? What events and tasks and responsibilities do we keep putting on our to-do lists that's pressing in on today?

[Q] How would you answer the above questions?

For a whole host of reasons, we can be here, but we're really somewhere else.

If we don't begin embracing and understanding what it means to live today, to be fully present, then we can become fractured people. I'm here, but I'm really thinking about tomorrow.

Here's the secret: the work's never done. There's always another meeting or event or project. Many of us are living in that pattern; the pattern of over committing ourselves and spreading ourselves so thin today becomes a casualty of tomorrow.

We read in the Bible in the book of James

What is your life? It's a mist that is here today and gone tomorrow.

James 4:14

For some of us, the dominant image that sums up our life is a treadmill. We're moving fast. We go and we go and we go but there never seems to be enough hours in the day. We push and we push but we never seem to get anywhere. The people in our life, our relationships, and our connection with God constantly gets put on hold.

How many of us would love to have one day each week where we didn't have anything pressing in on us, a day where we could step off the treadmill of life? What would it look like if you had one day a week where you didn't have to go to work or take care of the house or do the laundry, a day where you could just catch your breath and renew your body and just be fully present for a day.

[Q]Does it surprise you how refreshing that sounds?

It shouldn't be a surprise because that's the way God designed us. It's woven in to the very fabric of how the entire universe was created, including you and me. It's found in the very beginning. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God created everything and he does it in six days. Then on the seventh day, God rested.

And in the 20th chapter of Exodus, when God's teaching about how he wants people to live, God says:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.

Exodus 20:8-11

Why is this a big deal? Because God knows we will go and go and go and in the process we'll miss what is right before us.

This day off and day of rest is called the Sabbath. The word Sabbath in Hebrew means "to cease, to stop, or to come to rest." Maybe God expects us to honor the Sabbath so we can look around at what's happening in our life now, today.

What does it look like for your life and your family to live out the practice of honoring the Sabbath? Maybe it's not a full day, but are there intentional times when you cease, when the computer is off, when the email is left unchecked, when the TV is blank, and when the phone is on silent. Do you have the regular practice of set aside time for Sabbath, for rest? We set aside time for a multitude of things, but do we schedule time to rest, to cease, and to focus on today?

[Q] Do you think the pace of your life is sustainable?

Whether the pull is from yesterday or tomorrow, God desires that we live fully present in our todays. If we want to avoid wrecking our lives, we need to take steps to live fully in today.

How to Wreck Your Life Week 3

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

Over the last several weeks, we've been looking at what it means to live the way God desires for us. Yet, it is surprisingly easy to get off track, isn't it? Life slips past us in the blink of an eye and before we even know it, another year has passed and our lives aren't what we want them to be. We hope this series is tremendously helpful and allows us all to focus on how we're living.

If we want to wreck our lives, we should turn away from God and toward an idol. The word "idol" and "idolatry" have been used in such a variety of venues and places that it has become something of a cliché. Whether it's the show American Idol or the casual way we refer to people as being idols in their particular field, the word has come to meaning nothing more than someone to look up to or to be admired. But the word idol as it was used in the Bible meant something else entirely.

[Q] What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word idol? What are some of the contexts or places you've heard the word idol used before?

An idol was literally a physical representation of a god. Since there were so many different gods to worship and pay homage to, the people would carve out of stone or craft with gold an image of that god. Yet, it was more than just a

symbol. Many of these idols were considered the earthly dwelling or actual personage of the gods. Once these statues, alters, or poles (think something akin to a totem pole) were constructed, the people would bow down and worship the image.

Over and over again in the Bible we are warned against making idols. This is such a central part of what it means to follow God that he included warnings against it in the Ten Commandments.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Deuteronomy 5:7-10

(note the parallel passages in Exodus 20:3-6)

[Q] Why do you think avoiding idols is of such important that it makes it to the Ten Commandments?

As clear of an instruction as this is, the people of God struggled with the creation and worship of idols. God, known as Yahweh to the people of Israel, desired that peoples hearts would turn toward him alone. This key to what it means to follow God is a mistake made over and over again.

One specific situation revolves around a man named Gideon. Their neighbors, who had made a habit of invading their land and stealing all of their crops and livestock, were oppressing Gideon and the Israelites. The situation was so bad that Gideon would thresh wheat in a winepress. This is not a traditional place to thresh wheat, mostly because it doesn't really work that well. Threshing wheat takes a lot of space and is normally done, fittingly enough, on a threshing room floor. But a threshing room floor is made of wood and would have made

a lot of noise, alerting anyone nearby to his presence. So Gideon hides in a winepress, threshing just a handful of wheat at a time. Gideon wasn't trying to be efficient, he was trying to hide.

[Q] Have you ever felt like Gideon, attacked from all sides, afraid of what the future holds, and willing to trade living a full life for hiding from possible dangers?

God comes to Gideon, this man hiding in a winepress, and assures Gideon that he will be a mighty warrior who will free the Israelites from their enemies and the oppression of their neighbors. God then tells Gideon what it means to begin his mission to set Israel free.

The first task God gives to Gideon is not what you might expect. The Israelites are being harassed by their neighbors. Their crops and livestock are being stolen. The people are hiding for fear of being attacked.

With all of this external strife, the first job God gives Gideon is an internal one. We read in the book of Judges:

That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

Judges 6:25-26

The people of Israel had turned away from God and began worshiping the gods and idols of the surrounding culture. In the community where Gideon lived two gods were worshiped other than Yahweh, Baal and Asherah. Baal was worshipped as a high god, (something along the lines of Zeus or Jupiter) while Asherah was a fertility or earth goddess (think Aphrodite or Venus).

It was commonly understood that these gods had tangible and physical representations on earth, mostly through altars and statutes. In the land of Ophrah, the home of Gideon, there was an altar to Baal and a statute or pole

devoted to Asherah. These idols were the subject of worship from not only the surrounding people but also the people of Israel. In spite of the fact that God has made it abundantly clear that idols are an affront to him and that people should worship him alone, the Israelites had turned away from God and toward the idols. These idols were a direct insult to God.

The first task God gives Gideon is to tear down the idols and destroy them. And Gideon is afraid.

He might well be afraid. The people have turned away from God and now were more concerned with dead and lifeless representations of gods than with the living and powerful God. The people would rather worship and honor a wooden statue instead of the God who rescued them during their time of slavery in Egypt. The people would rather bow down before a stone god they crafted themselves instead of the God that guided them personally throughout history.

While Gideon understands the importance of destroying the idols the people have begun to worship, he's terrified to do so.

So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

Judges 6:27

Gideon takes some men during the middle of the night to tear down the altar to Baal and chop down the Asherah pole. In their place Gideon builds an altar dedicated to God.

This might seem like an odd first step for Gideon to take to rescue his people from the brutality of his marauding neighbors. Why not simply attack them directly?

[Q] Why would God make the first step in restoring the people of Israel tearing down the idols they had made?

God knew what the idols meant to the people who built them. These idols were more than an alter made of stone and a pole made of wood. They were an indication that God had taken a back seat in the hearts and minds of the people. In order for God to save his people, he needed first to do some housecleaning. God knew that he could rescue them from their neighbors, but first he needed to rescue their hearts from wandering away from him.

Often we have to clean up our own dark closets and cluttered attics before we can be fully used by God. It's easy in our lives to identify the "neighbors" that seem to attack us from all sides. What's harder is getting a clear picture of the idols our heart has turned toward. God's call for us has not changed from the time of Gideon: destroy the idols in your life.

[Q] What "internal work" needs to be done in your life before God can use you fully to change the "external?" In what ways does fear keep you from making these internal changes?

Let's not pretend this is easy. It's not. When we begin to tear down the idols in our life it's sure to cause waves. The consequences are real and can be difficult (Gideon's friends and neighbors wanted to kill him), but God assures us that He is near us and the effort is worth it.

Whether it's a person we put first in our lives or a hobby that takes precedent over everything else, idols can be destructive. It might be our career, our children, or something as simple as our car, but anything we place before God in our lives and that receives undue honor and attention (what might be called worship) is an idol. Only God is worthy of having the first place in our lives. Only God is worthy of our worship. If we want God to move in our lives and restore us to wholeness, we need to destroy the idols we've built.

[Q] What idols do you need to tear down in your life? What area of your life do you need to devote more fully to God?

How to Wreck Your Life Week 4

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

We are in the middle of a series called “How to Wreck Your Life,” where we’ve been looking at what it means to live the way God dreams for our lives to be. We hope this series is helpful and allows us all to focus on how to be the sorts of people wants us to be. Yet, it’s easy to steer our lives away from the road God calls us to, isn’t it? Each week we’ve looked at a way we can avoid wrecking our lives by following God’s desire for us.

Which brings us to the fourth installment of How to Wreck Your Life:

If you want to wreck your life, forget the eternal.

We all live with eternity inside of us. As we read in the Bible:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

God planted eternity in our hearts like a farmer plants a seed. As we live that seed grows and we long for eternity. We were created to long for eternity, to seek it and reach for it with our lives. It’s part of what it means to be human. Yet, just as the Bible states, we can’t fathom it, we can’t come to grips with

what it means to be eternal or to think about what it means for God to be eternal.

[Q] What do you think it means that God has set eternity in the human heart?

We see it all the time, people longing to be remembered beyond their years. We see people who will go to extraordinary measures attempting to make themselves immortal, or as close as we can get on earth.

Have you ever wondered why people are willing to do outrageous things to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records? Have you ever considered how many statues and busts have been made, not in the name of art, but so people can look upon the face of someone who died years before? Have you ever thought about why, throughout human history, people have recorded their actions and accomplishments so the generations that followed can read about them?

These are all attempts to reach for eternity.

[Q] How are the things listed about attempts to fulfill the longing for eternity set in the hearts of people? Can you list other ways people have reached for eternity in their lives?

We do the same things. Maybe not in extreme ways like these, but in more subtle ways we all try to find eternity for ourselves. We build up our bank accounts, work for promotions, buy a bigger house, and often in the back of our minds we think these will somehow impart meaning on us. Somehow these things will make our lives last and have more significance. We all reach for eternity.

It probably comes as no surprise that Jesus spends so much time talking about eternal life. Once, when Jesus was traveling the countryside in Samaria, he came to a well. Seeing a woman by the well, he asked her for a drink.

In the first century, Jewish people, like Jesus, didn't speak to Samaritans, much

less ask them for favors. But Jesus knew the desire for eternity isn't bound by race or nationality or religion, but is in all human hearts. We follow the encounter in the Bible book of John, chapter 4:

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

This is an interesting conversation, to be sure. Jesus is speaking about the condition of this Samaritan woman's heart, but she is focused on the literal, physical well of water. Jesus has something deeper to teach this Samaritan woman.

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

If only I didn't have to keep coming to this well to draw water, she thought. If only I could be satisfied.

Jesus knew she had sought her own little piece of eternity and satisfaction. Jesus knew it wasn't only the well of water she went to over and over again to fill herself.

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

For this woman, the search for eternity caused her to enter relationship after relationship. What was she looking for in each marriage that the last marriage didn't provide her? Why would a woman marry five times and then live with a man who isn't her husband? She was searching for meaning and significance and something to fulfill her need for eternity.

[Q] In this story the woman tries to satisfy her need for eternity through relationships. What are other ways that people try to satisfy themselves? How do you see this playing out in your life?

Jesus offers her a better way. Jesus tells her to look not toward human relationships to fulfill her and to satisfy her need for eternity, but to come to him.

The woman deflects Jesus' comment by asking a theological question. During the first century, the place where someone should worship God was in dispute. This woman, in the face of all that Jesus told her wants clarification on this topic. Yet, one can't help but wonder if she's simply trying to change the subject.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will

worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Jesus cuts to the chase and tells her what it means to worship God is to follow him and seek him with all of her heart and spirit. Notice how once again Jesus directed the conversation back to what it means to seek eternity by seeking God in Spirit and truth. She wanted to focus on details and logistics, but she was ignoring the issue at hand. Jesus wanted her to learn what it means to live a life that was fulfilled, not one consumed with satisfying our own need for eternity with things that don't last.

[Q] What are ways that people attempt to raise a theological question or objection simply to avoid responding to Jesus? What are some of these objections or questions?

She tries one more thing to defer the question. She tries to put it off until later.

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

One day, when the Messiah comes, when God's chosen one comes to earth, then maybe I'll take this seriously. One day, when the situation is different, then I might respond in a different way. But until that day comes, I'll just take care of things myself.

[Q] What are ways that people put off responding to Jesus until later? What are some of the “one day” excuses people make?

Jesus wants her to know that the day she was waiting for was today.

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

John 4:9-26

We see several ways this woman tried to deal with her own need for eternity. She tried to fulfill it on her own, but it didn't work, the feeling didn't last. And

like a person who needs to come to the well everyday for something to drink, she tried again and again to satisfy her need for eternity through relationship only to have them crumble.

Jesus tells her he is the living water she is looking for and that whoever comes to him will never be thirsty, but will be satisfied.

She tried to deflect the question with theological concerns and debates. To Jesus' direct statement that it is in him she will find satisfaction, she attempts to get more specific details on a topic that might be interesting but which has no bearing on her need for eternity. She tries, in other words, to change the topic to something that is interesting but ultimately not useful.

Jesus tell her again, in a different way, that people who want to satisfy their need for eternity seek after God with their lives.

Finally, the woman tries to defer the question by acknowledging it's importance, but putting off a decision until later. Someday, she says, someone will explain this all to me and then I'll respond. Someday, when things are different, when life changes for me, then I'll be willing to listen.

Jesus says the day has come.

What about us? How do we respond to our need for eternity? Do we seek to fulfill ourselves? Do we search for ways to find significance and meaning and to quiet the stirring for eternity in each of us apart from God?

I think we all do, in one way or another. What Jesus wants us to know is that all of our attempts, without him, are fruitless. It is through him we find eternity.

But maybe you've heard that before. Maybe you've been avoiding the question by focusing on some theological nit you can pick so you can dodge the question. What it all comes down to is seeking God fully in our lives.

Or maybe you've slipped into the mindset of "one day." One day, when things are different, then I'll make a choice and respond. Jesus tells us the time has come and the day is today.

[Q] How have you sought eternity in your life? How have you, or are you, responding to Jesus' invitation to find eternity by seeking him?

How to Wreck Your Life Week 5

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

There are so many ways to cause destruction. Sometimes a thing can be destroyed intentionally, like when a bored child begins to smash his toys. Other times, destruction comes by accident or from inattention, like when a red sock slips into the white load of laundry. The same is true of our lives. Sometimes we find our lives wrecked and when we look back to see why, we find it was a set of intentional choices we've made. Yet, more often than not, we wreck our lives by accident, because we couldn't predict the outcome of our decisions or we simply weren't paying enough attention.

We are in the fifth week of our series called "How to Wreck Your Life," where we've been shining the spotlight on ways we can wreck our lives. It's our dream

that because of this series we will be able to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes that can wreck a life.

This week we'll be looking at an area of our lives that is everywhere but seldom discussed in a healthy way, sexuality. **If you want to wreck your life, ignore God's plan for sexuality.**

It may surprise some people to learn how much the Bible has to say about sex. Since it's a topic we rarely expect to hear about at church, our basic assumption is that God doesn't have much to say about it. That's just not the case; the Bible has a lot to say about sex.

After all, God created it.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. Genesis 2: 24-25

Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. And when you say that they were made for each other, it's very literal. They were born to be together. A match made in heaven (I've got tons of 'em!). God created these two people with the intension they would live and love each other as they enjoyed their lives together with Him in divine peace.

Adam and Eve are in the garden enjoying the presence of God and each other. The first two people were living just as they were created to live. They were joined together as one flesh, one body. They enjoyed a perfect relationship; mental, emotional, spiritual and sexual. Notice verse 25, they were naked and felt no shame.

Sex is something in our culture that is ever present but rarely talked about. It's something we joked about, crudely or subtly, but it is not something that we talk about. It's used as a sales ploy to attract attention to a product or person, but it is not something we talk about. It's something we obsessed over and pursued, through reality and fantasy, but sex is not something we talk about.

And so we are left with a world full of people who do not know how to treat sex, how to view or understand this important part of life.

God did not create sex as something dirty, shameful, or sinful. It can be those things, but it wasn't created that way. God's dream for all of us with regard to sexuality is the same dream he had for Adam and Even, for they were together, naked, and felt no shame. When sex is a part of our life the way God designed it, as a deeply fulfilling and intimate way for two people in a marriage relationship to share intimacy, sex is not shameful at all.

[Q] What do you think it means to be “naked and feeling no shame?” Do you normally view sex as something dirty and evil or as something created by God? What difference does it make when we view sex this way?

Yet, this isn't the place maybe of us find ourselves. It's all too rare for people to experience sexuality the way God designed it. Part of the reason why is because we've traded God's truth about sex for a lie.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Romans 1: 24-25

Have you ever gone to a flea market or a yard sale? In our culture we do not barter often when we buy things, normally there is a set price and that's what we pay. But at a yard sale, the prices are fluid, not set or determined like in a store. So people trade and barter for the things that they want, determining the value of what they have by what they are willing to give up for it.

How much value do we put on sex, if we use the same principle? What have we traded away? The book of Romans addresses this very question. There are people who treat sex like a god unto itself, something to be worshipped and served. And what is lost in all of this is the fact that sex is something created by God. People chase after the created thing instead of the Creator.

God, in his desire to give us the ability to choose, allows us to follow whatever path we choose. God allows us to exchange his truth for a lie, his path for any other path on which we let our feet walk. He desires for us to know and follow his truth, which makes it possible for us to enjoy all of the created things even more. And that includes sex.

It might not sound like something that you would hear from a church, but when we follow God's plan for sex it becomes better. God's plan for sex is that it would be enjoyed within a marriage relationship between a man and woman. It is the plan of God for sex to be something that is deeply physically, emotionally, and spiritually satisfying. In the end, this is what we all desire out of sex, even if we don't admit it out loud.

It is God's dream that you would follow him and his paths in the area of sex.

[Q] In what ways has our culture sold truth for a lie? How have you sold truth for a lie?

Have you ever gotten the impression that God is a killjoy that is really only concerned with squelching any fun you might want to have? There seems to be a sense that God is not interested in the things that interest you and me, but that these things are somehow below God's concern. And it seems that sex falls under both categories, something that God is inherently against. But read this poetry from the Bible about a husband and his wife.

May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife? For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly.

Proverbs 6: 18-23

Here in Proverbs, we get a view of what God wants out of sex and marriage. "May you be blessed by your spouse," Proverbs is saying. May you rejoice with

your spouse. May they satisfy you and may that satisfaction be complete. May you be captivated and fascinated and enraptured by your spouse. God wants us to enjoy our marriages and sex within our marriages.

But there are many paths available for us to walk. There is the path that God has made for us, a path of delighting in our spouses. But there are others. There are paths that lead us away from God's plan, paths that lead us to use sex in ways and times that are outside of His plan. The truth is we can be captivated by people other than our spouse and we can embrace people who are not ours to embrace.

Our ways and choices are in full view of God. God sees us in our sins and mistakes, he sees the paths we walk, whether they are the paths of God or otherwise. This might seem disheartening, but it can also be encouraging. God sees our mistakes, but when we are trapped and we can't move, when we are lost beyond all hope of finding our way, God knows where we are. And he comes to our rescue.

[Q] How do you normally imagine God's view of sex? What do you think it means to be captivated by your spouse? If you are married, how would your marriage change if you were captivated by your spouse?

For some people, hearing about God's plan for sex is a wonderful reminder of decisions they've made to remain faithful. For others, it is a reminder of mistakes made and missteps taken. To others still this is a reminder of things we've done or things that have been done to us.

If you've made a mistake it might be tempting to think it's too late for any of this to matter. Or maybe you're too entrenched and tangled in sexual sin to see any hope of getting out. Or maybe you have been so deeply wounded that you feel like you could never be whole again.

The promise of God is that it is never too late. We are called to be free and to be whole, and it is through the love and grace of God that we are able to be

alive and complete. Jesus came to earth to set us free and to give us true and complete freedom.

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8: 31-32

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8: 36

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Romans 6:18

We normally think of freedom as the ability to choose and do anything we want. This has carried over into the realm of sexuality as well. The height of freedom is often seen as sexual freedom. But it's this sort of "freedom" that leads to being enslaved to the bad choices and the mistakes we've made. God's freedom is not about doing whatever we choose in whatever way we decide, but it's about being fully alive. It's about breaking the chains that bind us. And if you are bound by chains and wounds in this area of sex, God offers forgiveness and healing.

[Q] How is it that sex can be enslaving? What does it mean to you that God forgives and heals all sins, including sexual sins?

How to Wreck Your Life Week 6

How to use this guide:

This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.

We all know what it looks like when something is wrecked. Whether it's a meal, a vacation, or a first date, we've all experienced something being ruined. We are in the last week of a series called "How to Wreck Your Life," where we've been looking at what it means for us to avoid wrecking our lives. This week we'll be looking at how anger can wreck our lives. If we want to wreck our lives, all we have to do is mishandle our anger.

We all feel anger during our lives. There are no exceptions. But how we handle our anger can make all the difference.

[Q] When was the last time you were really angry? What caused you to be angry?

There are two different reactions to anger that can lead to us to wreck our lives: Spewing or Stewing.

One reaction to anger is to vent our feelings. Some people live with the idea they have a right to express their anger in any and all situations. This person could be what we'd call a "spewer." This person expresses their anger by "spewing" their anger onto everyone around them.

In the Bible, we find plenty of advice of how to handle or not to handle our anger. The book of Proverbs is a book full of such advice and we read:

**Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.
Proverbs 29:11**

and

**An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.
Proverbs 29:22**

Spewing our emotions, letting it all out, giving full vent to our anger is a very

foolish thing to do. It far too easily leads us away from where God wants us to be and into sin. It also leaves those around us bearing the wounds and scars of our anger.

I'm sure all of us have said something we regret in the heat of the moment, when our anger was running hot. But what does such venting get us? Often it leads to pain, wounds, and possibly a broken relationship. Giving full vent to our anger really does make a fool out of us.

The Bible tells us a fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control and brings calm. How many of us would love to have a little more calm in our lives.

[Q] When are you tempted to be a “spewer” as a result of your anger? What are some of the effects of someone who is a “spewer?”
We also need to beware of the opposite extreme in the way we handle our anger. We are not to be “spewers,” but we are not to be “stewers” either.

A “stewer” is someone who bottles up his or her anger, trying to bury it away. A person who falls in this category often looks self-controlled on the outside, but in reality, they are smoldering on the inside.

The Bible has a warning for stewers as well. For the people who are tempted to simply ignore their anger the Bible tells us:

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

Ephesians 4:26-27

Anger rarely goes away by itself. It is not made better by ignoring it and stewing away on it. Stewing in our anger and nursing our grievances, will lead us into sin just as surely as venting our anger does. Both give the devil, our adversary, a foothold in our lives. And from that foothold, he is able attack us.

And when our thoughts linger on our anger and begin turning toward revenge, the devil really gets a foothold. My anger turns me into the opposite of

someone who loves, because, as we're taught in the Bible, love keeps no record of wrongs.

This is the danger of stewing in our anger. It poisons our relationships with unforgiveness, it leads us to hatred, and it can make us depressed as our internal worlds are disordered. These things are what happen when we give the devil a foothold in our lives.

[Q] When are you more likely to be a “stewer?” What effects does this reaction to anger bring?

So how do we handle our anger?

[Q] Are you more of a spewer or stewer?

First, the spewer needs to learn some self-control, how to avoid giving full vent to his or her anger. As Proverbs says:

Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.

Proverbs 16:32

Of all the virtues, I think we don't give much attention to self-control. Yet, if we want to get a handle on our anger, spewers must learn self-control.

How? Well, a spewer must practice the habit of thinking first and speaking later. In the book of James in the Bible we read:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James 1:19-20

Thinking first and speaking later is a good habit to have in our lives, but it is especially important for someone who struggles with spewing out their anger.

What would it look like in your life if you were much slower to speak? What would it look like if you spoke less and listened more?

[Q] On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 being turtle slow and 10 being lightning fast), how would you rank your normal pace for listening, speaking, and becoming angry?

Sometimes it will be appropriate to say something and to show and express our anger. But it will be clearer when these situations are because we've taken the time to think before we speak.

So, it's good to learn not to spew out our anger, but we must take care that this remedy doesn't turn us into a stewart.

What do we do if our tendency is to be a stewart? First, it's important to try to work out what has caused our anger. Why are we angry? Prayer will help us to do this. We do not need to be shy to bring our anger to God; to confess to him fully and frankly how we feel. It's important we do this. When you are angry, pray!

As we pray and try to understand what has caused our anger, God may show us we are right to be angry, or he might show us we have no right to be angry. God might show us we need to offer forgiveness or we need to seek forgiveness. When we take our anger to God, he helps show us the right way of expressing it.

[Q] How can praying help someone whose tendency is to be a “stewart?”

There are times and situations when our anger is justified and can be used by God. In fact, there are things that should make us angry. We should be angered when we witness injustice, when we see the strong taking advantage of the weak, and when we see people misusing the church or misrepresenting God.

Jesus himself was provoked to anger when he saw moneychangers and people selling goods in the temple instead of praying and worshipping God. He was

so angry he made a whip out of rope and chased them from the temple (John 2). This anger was not sinful and it didn't lead to sinful results.

On the other hand, when we get angry because we've been insulted or wronged or when we want something we don't have, we are much more likely to be lead into sin. Again, the anger itself is not a sin, but it is much easier to respond to this anger with resentment, bitterness, and revenge.

The more we pray to God and read the Bible, the more we will be able to identify when our anger is leading us to God honoring or sin inducing places.

[Q] How much of an issue is anger management in your life? What are specific and concrete ways you can begin working on this area of your life this week?