



**New Year's Day**  
**Making Life Matter More**  
Pastor Ted Cunningham

How many of you have had a hard time adjusting even to the time change from the fall? I still have problems. I know we're gaining minutes every night, but... A few weeks ago, we were driving down the road and I was exhausted; I was ready for bed. Does anybody know what I'm talking about? I go, "Amy, let's get home and get to bed; I'm tired." She goes, "It's only 6:20." I have yet to adjust to it. There will be no napping in this service as we talk about the New Year's message: *Making Life Matter More*.

We're going to have a discussion today about life under the sun, which is true for every person whether they are a believer or non-believer, Christian or atheist, but then we are going to end the message by talking about life in the Son, Christ Jesus. We are going to look at the difference and making the most out of your life, making life matter more going into 2017.

**Reflection:** I love this time of year. There are really three things going on today. I saw it yesterday for the first time, but we have reflection. How many of you saw all the social media, all the Facebook, all the Instagram where people took nine pictures? I started to do that so many times yesterday. But then I thought about who I was going to leave out so I didn't do it because in reflection, there is so much to think about, so much to be grateful for.

I also know that in reflection, there is a lot of sorrow. I was thinking about it this week. How many of you, by a show of hands, moved to Branson in 2016? We welcome you to Branson; we're glad you're here. How many of you are questioning that move? How many of you took a new job in 2016? If you're questioning that decision, would you raise your hand? Did anybody get married in 2016? Anybody celebrating the birth of a new child into your family?

How many of you would say 2016 was the hardest year of your life? How many of you lost a loved one in 2016? This is kind of foreshadowing what we are going to do next Sunday as we talk about church vision and as we cast a vision for the new year. We're going to ask folks to be recognized for spiritual milestones and decisions that were made in their life in 2016, as we launch into 2017.

**Expectation:** I know today is a good day to just start thinking back on last year, making new decisions, and maybe creating new expectation. Last year, you may have had expectations that went unmet. You may look back now and realize they were completely and totally unmet because they were unrealistic.

One of the things I love doing... If you ever get a chance, Google Beloit College. They come out with a list every year for their professors and deans, and colleges all over the country use it to help an older generation kind of get in the mindset of the new generation. To kind of adjust the expectation going into a new school year, they do this every year. They list 50 things that a professor or a dean or a resident assistant needs to be thinking of.

One of my favorite lists is what's called The Class of 2019 List. These are students heading into their first year of college. They are mostly 18 and were born in 1997. Among those who were not alive in their lifetime are Princess Diana, Jacques Cousteau, and Mother Theresa. Then it lists 50 things to consider. I don't have time to share it all, but I just love this because it helps put us in a different frame of mind. Since these students have been on the planet, they have never licked a postage stamp. Think about that. Their parents have gone from encouraging them to use the internet to begging them to get off it. If you say "Around the turn of the century," they may well ask you which one. The Lion King has always been on Broadway.

Some of them are funny and some are very serious and I love this next one. First responders have always been heroes. Their proud parents recorded their first steps on camcorders mounted on their shoulders like bazookas. Does anybody remember that? It's a great list.

Now watch this. They have no idea how fortunate they were to enjoy the final four years of federal budget surpluses. We're not going political this morning, but just talk about all the expectations among all the different generations represented in here today. When you start reflecting, which is what we are going to do today...

**Resolution:** If you have your Bibles, turn to Ecclesiastes 9 and we are going to start with life under the sun for all of humankind. Solomon is reflecting and expectations are kind of put out there, but here's what we do after we reflect and look at our expectations. We're going to hear this word a lot on social media today: resolution. "I made a New Year's resolution." "I made a decision synonymous with a resolution." "I made a decision that I'm going to do this." And for most people, what word does resolution most fit with? Your health.

Amy and I have a great marriage. We've worked hard at our marriage over the last 20 years and we enjoy life together. You know that if you've been around here for any period of time. My wife decided that we are going to die like the couple in *The Notebook*. She's made this decision. That's the movie *The Notebook*. I asked my son if he had read the book yet and he said, "I'm not reading the book; I don't want to spoil the movie." It wasn't *The Notebook*. It was another book.

My wife wants to go out like that and I said, "Babe, if we're going to go out together, holding hands in bed, dying together at the same time, you've got to start taking seriously this idea of sabotaging your health because you are not keeping up with me. Maybe next time we go to Cracker Barrel, instead of judging me for chicken fried steak, you would join me." Does anybody know what I'm talking about?

My whole life, I've been told that you don't ever buy a woman anything to do with exercise for a present. But, my wife bought me a new watch for Christmas. It keeps track of my calorie burn, my

exercise minutes per day, and this one I love: the number of times I stand in a day. Some of them are factory settings, but I set my own goals. You're supposed to set your goals and then it keeps up with you all day. I love this watch. I'm going to make decisions, be healthier in 2017 and I've got a watch now to do it. So, I set my goal for calorie burn at 500 calories. I think that's a pretty good goal. Does anybody think it should be more than 500 calories? It's hard to burn 500 calories. I'm on that deal for 30 minutes and I've burned like 250 calories. So, I set the calorie goal for 500.

Then 30 minutes for exercise. Doctors say you should get 30 minutes of exercise a day, so I have it set for 30 minutes. How many think 30 minutes is a good goal? I went with the factory settings for the number of times that I stand. It says you should stand 12 times a day. I felt like I easily stand 12 times a day. No, I don't. On average, I stand up eight times a day. This was shocking to me that I only stand up eight times a day? And it tells you when you need to do something. So, it will tell me it's time for breathing. Whatever I'm doing, when it buzzes, I stop and take in deep breaths. But then, if I haven't stood up in a while... This is terrible that I'm even sharing this with you. If I haven't stood up in a while it tells me it's time to stand. So, if you saw me walking around my car in the Country Mart parking lot for one minute, it was to get credit on the watch.

Then, resting heart rate, right? You're supposed to have a resting heart rate somewhere under 80. Let's see where it is. Let's see what preaching does to me. My resting heart rate is 118. So, it's a little elevated, but that's your fault, not mine. You're not participating. If you would get with the program...

We're were driving through St. Louis yesterday and Amy asked what my heart rate was because she's convinced that if it's over 80, you're chances for heart disease... and all the doctors in here, shuttie. But, she asked me what my heart rate was and I looked at it and it was at 99. She said, "We are no way making it to the couple in The Notebook if you don't find a way." I said, "You're over there flipping through your Better Homes and Garden Magazine and I am competing with all these drivers in St. Louis and this is stress." So, I hate this thing. I hate everything about it, but I'm much healthier and happier because of it and that's why I'm keeping it. So, that's resolution. You're making decisions.

Can I just encourage you? As you do all of these three activities... Wouldn't it be great if your watch gave you all of this? "Hey, it's time to reflect on the past year." As you do all of these three activities, we want to give you a framework today. This morning we want to give you a framework for addressing these three. We're going to start in Ecclesiastes 9.

Solomon says, **1 So I reflected on all this...** We are going to start with a discussion about life under the sun, which is the same for all of us. If you are in here today and you are a believer, this is true for you. If you're not a believer, this is true for you. If you are Christian, it's true for you. If you're an atheist, it's true for you. If you are a Packers' fan, it's true for you. If you are a Cowboys' fan, it's true for you. This is life under the sun. We're going to have a discussion in these first six verses about life, the ordinary life span, the inequities of life, the uncertainty of life.

***...and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them.*** I love this. The idea here of love and hate. The idea here is divine favor and divine disfavor. Your life is in God's hands. If you are pursuing God, understand this

clearly this morning. Everything you do, every decision you make, every action you take goes through the hands of God. We believe here that God is sovereign; he is over all. He is in control. We don't ever have to question life out of God's hands. He's in control. It passes through his hands. And I love the next part. It says no one knows what awaits them.

Think about this in the discussion of life for just a second. Have you ever looked at someone who you felt had less talent than you and yet they were more successful? I'm seeing the nods. Let me give you a couple of examples. I get around my comedian friends and one of my comedian friends is always going off, talking about the guy who has the bus tour and is super successful and he's going, "I'm every bit as funny as this guy. I can write the material just as good as this guy. Why is he far more successful than I am?" And I love saying, "It's in God's hands." You've got to really understand this. You do what you are called to do. You pursue life. You make decisions and leave the results to God.

I love getting around other preachers. Preachers always love to start with the question: "How many you running?" That's the number one question a preacher asks another preacher. I'm like, "Well, it depends on what Sunday and what service. It's really hard to judge what's going on at Woodland Hills. But, we are constantly measuring ourselves against other people.

Do you want to know why I, 15 years later, am still in Branson, Missouri? It's in God's hands. This is important to understand because for those of you who just said, "I moved here and I don't know why," it's in God's hands. We really have to get a grip on this. When we talk about life and inequities, we think, *I work just as hard as Joe Smith. I'm every bit as talented and I work just as hard as she does. Why does she experience prosperity and I experience adversity?* It's in the hands of God's. We've got to start making good choices, right decisions, understanding who our life belongs to and understanding that we keep pursuing this thing called life, trusting that God is still in control and it's in his hands.

This is super important. If you've ever compared... Number one, we've got to stop comparing our lives to everybody else's life. You've got to get to a place where you understand where you are, what you're doing, what you're pursuing. You've got to rest in this idea that no matter what you do... If you work hard, there are some people that are going to be way more successful and there are going to be some people who experience way more adversity.

Solomon is just talking, he's having a discussion here about life and he's going to keep going in Verse 2. **2 All share a common destiny...** Now he's going to move away from the righteous and those who are pursuing God and talk about the common destiny that awaits us all. And just to encourage you on your New Year's Day, we are going to have a little talk about death, just to pick your spirits up. We all share a common destiny. Who shares the uncertainty of life, but the certainty of death? ...***the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.***

**3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun...** Please keep that in mind right now. We are not addressing the Christian. We are addressing all, sharing the common destiny under the sun. ***The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in***

***their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.*** Welcome to Woodland Hills family church. Happy New Year; we're glad that you're here. This is important because Verse 3 is where some of you are at right now. And there are many in here who stayed up late last night for all the wrong reasons. You were unable to sleep last night because you were medicating life on your own terms. You were trying to find what would help you get through another day, let alone another year. Some have given up on life. We can't get into this text without talking about the person who has ever had suicidal thoughts. You thought life wasn't worth living.

This is what I love about Verse 4. In the midst of this dark, pessimistic passage of life being the same for all, ending in death, look at what Solomon says. I love this. If you want a verse on a coffee mug, this is it right here. ***4 Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!*** In other words, the live dog... If you've visited countries around the world, you have experienced this. It's like the same dog in every country I go to around the world. It's a street dweller, a scavenger, something people fear like it's going to have rabies or something. You stay away from that dog. It's not the cuddly little Cockapoo you've got at home.

In this day, he's speaking of a lowly creature. But you are better off in that position than being a dead lion. The lion was the esteemed beast. The lion was one to be revered. Here's what Solomon is saying. You're better off to be in a lowly position, but alive, than to be in an esteemed position and dead. In other words, and this is true of every person in here, you have hope. Why? Because you're breathing. You have a shot at life turning around for you in 2017. You have a shot at your work getting better. You have a shot at your health improving or an illness being cured. You have that chance because you're alive. A relationship being reconciled. You've got that shot simply by the fact that you are breathing. If you're breathing, you have hope is what Solomon is saying. Then he's going to go back into the death scene.

***5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten.*** This is a terrible verse for people trying to make a name for themselves on YouTube. We go to great lengths to make sure that the name is remembered. If you go to college campuses, there are names on every building. They are either esteemed professors or people who have donated money. You go into the city, it's the same thing. And libraries and town halls, they have names on them. But, give it 10 or 20 years and the people walking through those buildings won't have a clue who that person is or what they did. We go to great lengths to make sure the name is not forgotten and Solomon is giving us a harsh reality of life. Even your name will one day be forgotten.

***6 Their love, their hate and their jealousy...*** I love that text because it's speaking there of the passion. Everything that made up this person – what they were excited about, what drove them in life, what they conquered, and their passions – is forgotten. ***...have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.*** But, I'm here to tell you this is not the end of the story. In the first service, a lady yelled out, "GOOD!" She was getting depressed by the first half of the message.

Let's recap what we've learned in the first six verses of Ecclesiastes 9 with this chart. We're talking about Life Under the Sun. This is for the good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the sinful. This is just life under the sun. The first thing we see it is **uncertain**. It's in God's hands; we

don't know. We don't know what inequities may await. We don't know what frustrations may hit you this year. We don't know any of that. Life is uncertain.

He goes on to say life is difficult, it's **challenging**. We know this from Psalm 90: 10. "Seventy years you have upon this earth, eighty if you're strong; yet those years are filled with sorrow and anguish." Meaning the typical ordinary life span is 70 to 80 years, but it's hard, difficult, painful.

Then the last thing we read is you're **forgotten**. I don't know if this is one of the cheeriest New Year's messages you've ever heard, but here's where we take the turn.

Today, we are not ending this message, discussing life under the sun. We are ending it talking about Life in the Son. We're talking about turning all of this around as we talk to the follower of Jesus. If you've not placed faith in Jesus... I would hope you're not reflecting and expecting and resolving based just on life under the sun. We want to invite you into a fully alive relationship with Jesus Christ so this doesn't have to be your story for all time. Life in the Son.

The first thing we see is how to address uncertainty and that's with **no worries**. Here's what Jesus says in the gospels, in Matthew 6. This is now the teachings of Jesus. **25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear."**

That's what I'm saying about this watch. We're done. Actually... I want credit for the calories I'm burning during this sermon. I found out in the first service that a sermon burns 125 calories, so I am keeping it on. I'm up to 230 calories burned this morning.

**"Is not life more than food..."** It's more than what we're talking about just under the sun." **...and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"** And the answer is no. Don't live in regret. Don't live in fear as we move in to the new year.

Let's go back to the chart. Yes, life may be difficult, but Jesus clearly said, "I didn't come to be a cosmic killjoy. I didn't come to steal, rob... I came to bring you life and life abundantly, life overflowing." This is John 10: **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."** Overflowing and **abundant**. Yes, we go through trials. Yes, we go through difficulties, but we should be seeing the Christian life, life in the Son as abundant. We should be taking on opportunities, we should be taking new risks, and be okay with the outcomes, knowing they are in God's hands.

With the last one, we think our life is forgotten. This is probably the hardest part of mourning. When someone is in deep mourning weeks and months after a loved one has passed on... You go into the deep mourning because you're afraid that the person you lost is forgotten, but Jesus says the, "In Christ Jesus, your life is **eternal**. He says this in John 3. **16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

There are only two things under the sun that are eternal: God's word and people. As you're making decisions for 2017, as you're reflecting, as you're expecting, as you're resolving, here's what I want to encourage you to do. Think with those two ends in mind: God's word and people. How can I get God's word into my children? How can I get God's word into my friends? How can I get God's word into my co-workers? These are the only two things in life that are eternal. This is important for us to understand. Under the sun is not the end of the story. We want to invite you, in 2017, to life in the Son.

I have a couple of thoughts as we close out this message and as we take the Lord's Supper together to kick off 2017. First of all, **be grateful you are still alive.** And all God's people said... Amen. **And God is still in control.** I hope you take that into 2017. If you're breathing, you should walk out of here today thinking things can turn around.

**Make every decision with confidence that God is sovereign, he's in control, he's on the throne over every aspect of your life.** We get so worked up over decisions. "Am I going to make the right decision or the wrong decision." Look what Proverbs 16 says about this big idea here. ***9 In their hearts humans plan their course...***

How many of you are planners? For how many of you the most exciting thing about today is a new calendar, a new Day Runner, and you are organizing your life and everything is coming together. Your family is going to fall in line underneath all these special things going on. Make your plans. You should plan. You should be organized. You should make decisions. You should take risks. You should pursue opportunities, but understand... ***but the Lord establishes their steps.*** I love this. This is like free will and God's sovereignty coming together and it freaks people out. Some people are just sitting around doing nothing, waiting for it all to come to them. We call them Presbyterians. I'm just kidding. That was a joke. But the Lord establishes their steps. What does this verse teach us? God's in control. Make your plans.

I love what one pastor said to me years ago when he was pastoring in Chicago and then he went to California to pastor. I asked him how he made the decision to leave one great ministry to go to another great ministry. He said, "Ted, I prayed and prayed and I'm convinced God said, 'Do whatever you want.'" This is freaking with some of your theology right now. He said he was convinced God said, "You're in a great place, doing a great work. You can go here to a great place doing a great work. Make your plans and I'll be there the entire time." Nothing you do from this point on... It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was like, "You mean I can leave Branson?" Just kidding. That was a joke. I love that three of you were really defensive over that. The rest of you are thinking it's time for change!

**Know the difference between an opportunity and a guarantee.** This is where some of you are fearful and you're holding back going into making decisions and into the new year because you're looking for a guarantee. Entrepreneurs love this because they pursue opportunities all the time; some work and some don't. I pursued things in 2016 that didn't work out. I have not received one call on my acting, asking me to come to... Forget it, Hollywood, I don't need you. But, I have new ideas for 2017. You've got new ideas for 2017. You've got things you want to do, things you want to accomplish. Pursue them. Make your plans. Know that what you do goes through the hands of God. Don't look at it as a guarantee. "I knew for sure that God was leading me to take this opportunity, but it didn't turn out like I

want.” And you act like you didn’t know about that? You act like the opportunity was more important than you? You’re the most important part of that equation. What’s going on between you and Lord. The opportunities come and go. We’ve got to stop always looking at them as a guarantee.

**A major change in life does not guarantee a changed life.** Here’s where we make the biggest mistake. Here’s where some of you will falter and fail in 2017. So, before you go looking for a new church, a new job, a new spouse... I’m kind of going through this little mid-life crisis thing. Some of you think you need to get a new car. You’ll be happy for about that long and then it will fade away. Some of you want a boat. That will make you happy for a very long time. I think you should pursue the boat. But you’ll make a major change... “I’m going to forget everything and I’m going to pursue this or buy that or go after this...” You make a major change in life and then a few months later you realize nothing has changed.

**Jesus changes everything.** Jesus is the only one still in the business of changing the human heart. It’s not your major change in life. It’s not a new watch to get you healthy. Although, this is great and we make great attempts. It’s Jesus and pursuing a life in the Son. I hope that’s guiding every single one of your decisions for 2017. Life in the Son, Christ Jesus.

With that, we are going to take the Lord’s Supper to be reminded. I’m going to ask that you bow your heads and close your eyes. The scripture calls us in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul says examine yourself before taking of the elements. If you didn’t receive the elements coming in, you can just raise your hand and one of the ushers will slip down and hand out the elements to you. I’m going to give you this opportunity to confess your sin and ask the Holy Spirit to call you by name in areas of your life that need examined.

If you’re not a believer in Christ Jesus, I would hope that this is the moment that you place faith in Jesus, that you confess your sins before him. If you become a Christian today, we encourage to participate with us as we take the Lord’s Supper together, remembering the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If you’re not a believer, I’m going to ask that you abstain from this part of the service so as not to drink judgment upon yourself. I’m going to give you a few moments to prepare your heart for the Lord’s Supper.