



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **If You Could Write Your Epitaph**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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## If You Could Write Your Epitaph

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*Philippians 1:3-11*

*Acts 10:34-43*

Wouldn't you like to receive a letter, or let's update it, to receive an e-mail or text or Facebook comment, and the first line was like the one Paul wrote to the Philippian church, "I thank my God every time I remember you."

I think all of us would like to be remembered like that, the effect we have on the people we love, the people we meet, we work with, go to school with.

It's a fundamental question that we all ask: How will I be remembered? When all is said and done, what will people be saying about you?

Just look at the story in the Acts of the Apostles, what Peter says about Jesus as he introduces the gospel to Cornelius.

The gospel message had spread throughout Judea and think of all that Peter could have said from all that he had seen and heard in all the time he had spent with Jesus.

But Peter summarizes the life of Jesus with these few words in verse 38: *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*

Peter says he and the other disciples were witnesses of all this and he remembers Jesus: how he went about doing good.

I don't know about you, but I'll settle for that when my time on earth is finished. If it could be said about me when I'm gone, "Bruce Lancaster went about doing good, doing good things because he loved Jesus Christ and loved people!"

A summary of your life, if that was went into your obituary, or even more succinct, on your headstone; if you could write your epitaph, would you settle for that: Went about doing good.

Because I spend some time in cemeteries, I do read the headstones, you never know when you might find a relative; and it is interesting to read those that have epitaphs, tells a lot about the person.

Some are not so favorable, like the one of this lady: Beneath this silent stone is laid...A noisy, antiquated maid...Who from her cradle talked to death...And never before was out of breath.

What does this say to you? I hear some of you thinking, "I knew her!"

Will your epitaph talk about how you died, as this one: Here lays Butch...We planted him raw...He was quick on the trigger...But slow on the draw.

Or maybe you would write your epitaph that reveals your love of family as you planned for the future: When dear Papa went up to heaven...What grief Mamma endured...And yet that grief was softened... For Papa he was insured.

When you're gone, how will people remember you?

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Peter remembers Jesus went about doing good. Not just doing something, not just going about, but going about doing good.

You and I know there is no lack of opportunity for us to go about doing good, and what you and I remember about Jesus sets the example for our life.

Other people need us, and the other side of that truth is that we need other people.

It was a line from a movie; an older man is talking to two teenagers. He tells them that one person can do wonders, and two people can make a miracle.

I saw it happen at a small gathering at church, a Christmas party where gifts were given by church members to children visiting from a children's home.

One older lady, who had suffered the pains of a conflicted family, no contact with her son or grandchildren for nearly 35 years; she didn't have to be there, it hurt more than a little; but she wanted to help.

One of the little girls from the children's home, about 5 or 6 years old, opened her gift, and then walked over to the lady, crawled up in her lap, and just snuggled.

The lady told me later, "I hadn't held a child in over 30 years, and I really wasn't expecting it; but let me tell you, I couldn't cry in front of her, but my heart was bursting with tears of joy. It had been cold for so long."

Two people can make a miracle: the one who needs you, and you, the one who needs to help the other one.

There's no lack of opportunity for lifting lives, repairing the fractures in a broken world.

I want you to remember what Hans Habe wrote: "The world is 1% good, 1% bad, and 98% neutral."

It can go one way or the other, depending which side is pushing, which side is going about doing what.

Or as John Buchanan, the Presbyterian preacher and former editor of the *Christian Century* speaks to our day, "Silence is not an option."

We have to act. I know you believe in Jesus, but Jesus teaches us that believing is nothing until we act on that belief; it's not a matter of defining "who" my neighbor is, it's all about what we "do" for our neighbor.

Of course, we're involved with SHIM and Produce to People and World Vision and City Mission and Homewood, and more, and that's just in our community.

This church's letter-writing ministry seeks to make a difference for the better in critical issues of the day. We're involved worldwide in Haiti and Malawi and India and through our denomination, in every corner of the world.

Even though here is no way we can meet every need or support every organization, we must do everything we can because we are responsible to do our share of putting back together a very broken and bruised world.

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It's all about how we remember Jesus Christ: To look for daily opportunities to go about doing good.

Because that's how Jesus did, person to person to person: that neighbor standing next to you in the checkout line or passing by in a crosswalk, in the desk one row over in the classroom or at a dining table in our retirement complex, or maybe even one pew over in the sanctuary.

I know you want to leave a story that will not be forgotten, in the words of Mother Theresa, "...to do something beautiful for God."

We know what we're supposed to be doing, what is required of us: To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

These are not complicated instructions. It's much harder to put something together from IKEA than it is to understand these.

We know what we're here for, what we need to be remembered for. What is it you do now, that people will thank God for you when they remember you?

Maybe you have seen the video of an eight-year old boy holding the hand of a crying classmate on their first day of school. Christian Moore saw Connor Crites, also eight, crying as they started second grade earlier this month.

Connor is autistic and had been "overwhelmed" outside the school gates. He said, "[Christian] was kind to me. I started crying and then he helped me. And I was happy... He found me and held my hand and I got happy tears."



Courtney Moore, Christian's mother, said: "I saw [Christian] on the ground with Connor as Connor was crying in the corner and he was consoling him. He grabs his hand and walks him to the front door. The rest is history. They have an inseparable bond."

April Crites, Connor's mother, told Courtney: "I worry every day that he is going to get bullied for being different and your son just absolutely warmed my heart. If there were more children like him, I wouldn't worry about such things."

She went on to say, "It doesn't matter color, it doesn't matter gender, it doesn't matter disability, and it doesn't matter anything, just be kind, open your heart... it's what we need in this world."

I don't know about you, but I hear the echo of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in her words.

This past week was the anniversary of the march in Washington and those magnificent words that called us to reach for the best we can be as humans.

But did you know that's not what he said he wanted to be remembered for?

Just a few weeks before he was killed, he preached a sermon in which he shared with the people of Ebenezer Baptist Church what he hoped people would say about him when he was gone.

At his funeral, they played a part of the tape of the sermon, and this is what he said: *"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day...tell them not to talk about my Nobel*

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*Peace Prize...I want you to be able to say that I did try to feed the hungry...that I did try to clothe the naked...that I did try to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity...I just want to leave behind a committed life."*

We will be remembered, but for what kind of life?

It is yours to do, to write your epitaph now so that when all is said and done, they will say about you, "Here lies \_\_\_\_\_ who went about doing good."

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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