

May 5, 2024

Thriv'era | We Are...Present

Pastor Paul Dean

What's your value? How do you determine your value? There are many ways. Whenever we think of value we can think of all our accumulated assets, as a monetary total value of what we own. Like a list in Forbes magazine. What's your value? Or we can determine our value as it relates to what we do or what we offer to a particular organization. Everything from being involved in group project at school to fixing fence on a ranch with a team of hardened cowboys. This value is measured by bringing something to the group or the team that impacts, in a positive or negative way, the end product. That grade that comes from that group presentation in class or that barbed wire fence is fixed so we keep the cattle where they need to be. What's your value?

A few months back my almost college grad son spent lots of time assessing his value. It's called getting your resume ready. His college has all kinds of resources to help their students answer the value questions as employers will be interviewing and ultimately find out what the value of that college's education really is.

All of these valuations are basically choices we make. We can choose to find our value through an education. We can choose to find our value in taking a job in an office or out on Texas cattle ranch. But what if you didn't have a choice. What if your value was determined by an oppressive system that whittled your value down to only what you can do for that system. This the reality that the Israelites who were used as slave labor in Egypt experienced.

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses,

for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exo 1:8-14 NRS)

And these supply cities called Pithom and Rameses were not supply cities for the Israelites, but supply cities for the Egyptians who then would make the Israelites farm and fill those supply cities so Egypt would remain in power which meant they could oppress the Israelites even longer.

So, for generations, the value of these people known as the Israelites was dependent on how many bricks they could make per minute, per hour, per day, per week, per month, per year. And add to that, not only was their life valued in that way, but their family's life was dependent on that value as well. If you can't make enough bricks, fast enough, there was no need for you. The oppressive pressure. Brick after brick after brick.

So, what does God do with a bunch of freed slaves whose only value is in how many bricks they can make? God turns the value equation on its head. God says your value now is not in your production but in your presence. God says, "I don't value your production, I value your presence."

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11 NRS)

And God goes on in this list of the Ten Commandments, to lay out that God values not only the people's presence with God but the people's presence with one another. Be present with one another in ways that bring hope and

healing. God says, "I don't command you to make bricks. I command you to be present, with me and one another."

Years ago, I heard a TED talk from a guy named David Brooks. Well known writer, journalist, and speaker. I've always respected his perspective on things. In that speech he spoke about resume values and eulogy values. We spend so much of our time trying to focus and develop our resume values. The achievements. How many bricks we can make in our lifetime. But at the end of our life, when someone gets up to speak at our funerals, to share the eulogy of our lives they don't end up spending very much time on our resume value, on how many bricks we made, but on the ways we are present with each other in this world. His call is for us to seek ways, to bring more focus, to spend more effort to live into our eulogy values and not our resume values. What do you want people to say about you at your eulogy? How many bricks you made or how present you were with one another?

To be present with God, to be present with one another takes effort. We are a distracted people. Our current culture pushes us at all ages, to find our value in how many bricks we can make. But to be present with God is to intentionally present. To slow down the brick making. The first step is to create space. Here is how that works in my life. Years ago, as my wife and I were in full brick building mode, basically coexisting and raising kids, wife came up with an idea. She called it the 20 second hug. Whenever we would see each other after work we would take 20 seconds for a hug. There were a couple of boundaries. It was a hug only, no frisky stuff. The second was to actually be present in the hug. It was a bit weird at first. 20 seconds... seemed like a long time. However, that simple practice changed the way we were present with each other. That 20 seconds turned into conversations that lasted minutes and minutes of presence.

Then that 20 seconds began to change how we were present with our kids. You see most of our conversation was about how many bricks they were making, like how was school? Have you done

your homework? Don't forget to put your cleats in your soccer bag. You know brick

building. 20 seconds of how you doing? What's something fun we can do? Let's play legos! Turning those 20 seconds into minutes and minutes more minutes. That's how we created space. And what we learned keep learning is if you create space for each other, guess who fills the space? We do with our presence with one another.

The same is true with creating space with God. If you create space for God, God will fill it. 20 seconds will turn into minutes and minutes and more minutes. If you don't already have a practice that helps you be present with God, that helps you create space, try a 20 second hug with God. Here is an idea. Write down a bible verse on a small piece of paper. Any bible verse that is short enough to say in 20 seconds and put that bible verse in a place that you can access it frequently throughout your day. Here is an idea.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff--they comfort me. Psa 23:1-4 NRS

I actually timed this out – it's 20 seconds. A really good 20 second hug with God. And it reminds you of your value. You are worth the shepherd's presence. You are worth restoring. You are worth the comfort of the shepherd. For sure you will make bricks, but your presence is your value.