

# Carving The Epitaph

“There goes the neighborhood.” ~ Comedian Rodney Dangerfield’s tombstone

Some time ago, while reading some comments by author Tim Urban on something called “The Epitaph Test,” I began thinking about how the world would or could be different if we all followed that same course.

Basically, it means that if we can justify the thing we are getting ready to do as a line on our tombstone, we will do it. IF we can’t, we don’t.

This way of zooming out from the daily moments of life, which can be quite confusing and ordinary, to look at the big picture, can be helpful for decisions both large and small. It also helps us use our time more wisely, as most of us have many choices in the day.

Each day we are “carving our epitaph” as we interact with people, as we choose our actions or non-actions. Every one of those choices changes the world.

Life is temporary, and passes all too quickly. TV host Merv Griffin, who lived from commercial to commercial, had put on his stone, “I will not be right back.”

Frank Sinatra, one of the greatest popular singers of all time, wrote, “The best is yet to come.” And at the bottom of the stone, “beloved husband and father.”

For Christians, we must always think, “What does God want me to do?” If we consciously live our lives in ways which honor God and show his love to others, our spiritual tombstone will have beautiful words.

It really has to do with love. Not the simplistic, everything is fine if we do it with love kind of action, but one which is well thought out, has perspective, and goes beyond selfish results.

Hannah Brecher puts it well when she says that the core prayer we should pray each day is “Reduce me to love.” “It’s me saying,” she writes, “I can’t actually do this reduction thing on my own, so come in and do the work. Have your way. I trust you.”

Brecher writes, “It’s beautiful because I went a really long time without ever trusting God. My prayers were prayers that I could handle things and that I could see with my own strength. Now I like to pray for impossible things because I want to get to the end of my life and be able to say, “I saw impossible things, and the fear didn’t win.”

If we aim for the impossible, we will move mountains and fill in valleys. We will do things that cannot be done without God. We will vanquish pettiness and embrace things which are eternal. We will understand the un-understandable and do the undoable by human standards.

The political discourse in our world has become one of three year olds jousting with one another. When did concepts such as honor, consideration, and humility go out the window? The Bible commands us to love God with our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Adults, whether leaders or followers, must return to these guidelines, for they and those who follow are carving out some bad things to leave those who follow in the next generation.

Charles Spurgeon, a great preacher of the last century, said “A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble.”

So let us make our choices as if someone were going to carve them in stone for others to see when they walk by long after we are gone. Let us lift up others in general, rather than putting them down. Let us never criticize, gossip, or not speak up when wrong is in its process of happening.

Of course, nobody’s perfect. We all make mistakes. We are sinners who cannot always do right. But God redeems and saves us from a life of folly.

Sometimes, in the heat of competition, and the daily rat race we can be just plain ugly. Earl Weaver, in writing about all out winning in the sport of baseball, said, “On my tombstone just write, 'The sorest loser that ever lived.’”

So do you want be a sore loser, or on the side which always wins? The way of God. The way of the One who can do anything, who created and is in charge of the world.

The most important words at the end of our lives are not the written ones, but the ones God will speak or not speak at the end of time. When God looks back at all we have done, will he feel good or bad about it?

Hopefully we will carve our epitaph day by day, one step at a time, with the tool of love. And God will be able to look at us when we enter the gates of heaven, and say the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”