

Putting Time In Its Place  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and Mark 1:14-20  
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Let's start off with a riddle:

This thing all things devours:  
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;  
Gnaws iron, bites steel;  
Grinds hard stones to meal;  
Slays king, ruins town,  
And beats high mountain down.

I suppose this riddle came to mind because I took in the final installment of The Hobbit this weekend before it disappeared from the big screen. Bilbo Baggins' answer to the creature Gollum's riddle is of course, time, that ever-precious commodity we'd all like to have more of. Maybe you've found yourself wishing for one more hour in the day, or an eighth day in the week, or maybe just a few extra minutes to catch a few extra winks. Personally, I would like to have about an extra month a year for all the things I would like to get accomplished, and I am not even as ambitious as most people. Einstein may have believed that "Time is an illusion," but for the rest of us, it seems all too real as we look in the mirror. It flies by faster and faster with each passing year. It never changes, but we'd all like to slow it down at times, or speed it up at others. We'd like to control time, but time seems to have control of us.

Of course, because it seems to be in shorter and shorter supply, we want to get the most out of it, to squeeze each day for everything we can get out of it. It's

almost like a responsibility to not waste the time we have been given, especially because we're not even sure how much time that is. We could all be struck by that proverbial bus in the street at any moment. And so when someone can tell us how to maximize our use of time, we are ready to listen, whether it is a time management seminar, a new breathing technique, or, someone as compelling as the late Robin Williams. Maybe you remember this famous scene from the film, *The Dead Poets Society*, where his character, a new English teacher at an exclusive private school, is introducing himself to his class. (Watch video clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi0Lbjs5ECI>)

Carpe diem, seize the day. You don't want to just be fertilizing daffodils, do you? Make your life extraordinary. You've probably heard that Latin phrase before. It comes from the Roman philosopher Horace, around 23 BC, but there's more to the saying than just that more famous part. The whole thing reads, "Seize the day, trusting as little as possible in the next day," in other words, the future. You never know what might happen so live for today and don't miss any opportunity. It's really good advice, actually. It would be bad stewardship of the lives that God has given us not to use and enjoy those lives. You can say there is such a thing as a glorious waste of time, but you can't say that there is any such thing as a glorious waste of a life. Our lives are there to be lived. Yes, I think that God would indeed encourage us to "seize the day." Doing so can make your life "extraordinary," if that is what you are after, and aren't we all?

But on the other hand, what if there is something out there even more amazing than “extraordinary.” What if extraordinary paled in comparison with what is really available to us? How much would you pay for that? How far would you travel for that treasure? As far as Bilbo Baggins or Christopher Columbus or Marco Polo? What would you do for a life that surpassed extraordinary? Well, the good news of the Gospel is that all you have to do is change one word. One tiny word. One little letter, actually. Instead of *carpe diem*, all you have to do is *carpe deum*. *Carpe deum*, seize God.

Born just a generation or two after Horace, Jesus and Paul may have been familiar with his words. They didn’t speak Latin, but it’s quite possible that they’d heard the words “*carpe diem*” rendered into the Greek they spoke. In fact, there’s a very common Greek word that captures really well that sentiment. It’s the word *kairos*. It’s one of the Greek words used for time, the other being *chronos*, from which we get chronology, or time counted by a watch or clock. *Chronos* we know all too well. It’s the kind I described to begin tonight. *Kairos*, on the other hand has more to do with timing than time, something like a “decisive moment” or an opportunity that must be grasped, a kind of *carpe diem* moment ripe with possibilities for an extraordinary life. Now it may interest you to know that in both of our readings tonight, we find the word *kairos*. Jesus says, “The time, the *kairos*, is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Paul says, “Brothers and sisters, the appointed time, the *kairos*, has grown

short.” Could it be that Jesus and Paul are announcing the possibility of living an extraordinary life? Or could it be that they are leading us even deeper into the mystery of which Horace was just scratching the surface?

In fact, Jesus and Paul use the word *kairos* quite a bit, and in the process do a little bit of redefining of it. In regular Greek use, it was more like *carpe diem* in that it applied to human initiative. The wise person seized the day to secure the best of whatever future they had left. But in the Bible, however, *kairos* is nearly always used to describe God’s initiative. God provides the decisive moment and it’s not just about the mundane. Everyday *kairos* is an unidentified suitcase filled with twenty-dollar bills that you find on the street. Biblical *kairos* is God redefining what “striking it rich” is all about. You can see how different this is in Jesus’ statement. I don’t think Horace, or anybody else in the Roman elite, would see repenting as seizing the day, as the starting point for an extraordinary life, but that is what Jesus comes offering. And Paul basically says the opposite of what Horace is saying. If *carpe diem* means not trusting that everything is going to fall into place for you and taking action for the future today, Paul is claiming a *carpe deum* attitude that says that the future is so certain that you don’t have to worry about today, at least not in the ways everybody else is worrying about them. The return of Christ in glory is so certain that there is no reason to store up anything, or to weigh yourself down with any attachments. “From now on,” he says, “let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though

they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.” Hold on to everything loosely, Paul is saying, except God. How hard is it to carpe deum, to grab hold of God, when the prevailing wisdom preached all around you is carpe diem, grab everything you can?

Each in their own way, both Jesus and Paul are announcing this carpe deum moment, this kairos moment, and even though Jesus is announcing its very clear beginning, and Paul its very indefinite end, it’s the same moment in God’s time, God’s kairos. Yes, the incarnation is a kairos moment, but let’s not allow the way we define “moment” to get in the way. You see, this whole chronological period of time between Bethlehem and the New Jerusalem is one big kairos “moment,” God’s gift to us to grab hold of, no matter in which historical period we live. We can call it a moment if we want to, but God’s moments are our whole lifetime, the church’s whole lifetime. The trick is to recognize it, to cooperate with it, to let our own lives be led more in tune with kairos, and less held captive to chronos. That’s what both Paul and Jesus are announcing, the possibility of living in a way that no longer marks time, but a way that glorifies God.

Why is kairos more amazing than extraordinary? Maybe it’s because there are no limits to kairos. You can seize every day by the throat and shake it down for all its goodies, but at the end of the day, the clock still strikes midnight. And then

you have to start all over again and no matter how hard you try to get the most out of every minute or every hour, there is always a limit, and you are always bumping up against it. There is no freedom in *chronos*. But when you seize God, all the rules change, in fact, all the rules go out the window. You know, Pharaoh invested a lot of hours and a lot of lives building those wonderful, awe-inspiring pyramids, dragging heavy stone across the desert, day by day for God knows how many years, but he couldn't stop the Israelites from leaving through waters suddenly parted by a man simply lifting a staff over his head. Old King Nebuchadnezzar may have built the great hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but all he could do was stick in the ground all the plants that God created. Pontius Pilate may have hammered some nails into the palms of Jesus, thinking that would bring Jesus' days to their end, but he couldn't keep the stone in front of the tomb. And the Birmingham bus company may have had the practice of limiting black people to riding the back of the bus, but it couldn't limit Rosa Parks from seizing God. From the outside, Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus looks like *carpe diem*, but it was really *carpe deum*. Rosa Parks didn't refuse to move because she was afraid of what tomorrow would bring. She refused to move because she was sure what her tomorrow held. She knew that there would be hell to pay, but that God had already paid the price. She cooperated with the *kairos* even though she'd spend some *chronos* in prison, missing out on the opportunity to seize whatever those days may have had to offer.

Friends, your whole life is a kairos moment, because your life is God's doing, God's gift to you and to the world. There are moments in our lives that seem to be pivotal, that are pivotal, like Rosa Parks' pivotal moment, like a conversion, a proposal of marriage or employment, a life changing decision. But there is also the sum total of our lives lived in concord with God. Our lives need to be more than stringing together moments; Paul isn't telling the Corinthians to sit around and just wait for God's next big moment in history, but to live freely and effectively until it comes. Every moment is a big moment in history for God. Every moment is one in which someone might experience grace or community or love, and be reconciled with God, and live no more with the terror that time represents. Every one of those moments is a crucially important moment in history. That's why our call is so important. Because God is not asking us to make just a one time commitment or just take advantage of a series of unconnected opportunities, but to knit together every moment of our lives into the kind of kairos life God offers us.

We cooperate by saying yes, like the disciples did when called. We cooperate by living lightly, as Paul instructs the Corinthians. We cooperate when we overcome our prejudices and let God be God for everyone, like Jonah. We cooperate as we surrender to kairos, the grace that puts time in its place. Carpe deum. Seize God, and put an end to the tyranny of time. Amen.