

# Quantitative Hopelessness and the Immeasurable Moment

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes the significance of quality over quantity in spiritual teaching and the transformative power of brief, impactful moments in life.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 22:6, 2 Corinthians 13:10, Ephesians 4:29, Philippians 2:12, Philippians 4:8

**Topics:** "Spiritual Transformation", "Effective Teaching"

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## Description

John Piper emphasizes the importance of not assessing the influence of Sunday School quantitatively, highlighting how a single moment of truth can have a lasting, transformative impact. He challenges the notion of 'quantitative hopelessness' by illustrating how key sentences or paragraphs from reading, counseling, or teaching can change lives more significantly than hours of entertainment. Piper encourages Sunday School teachers and parents to prepare and pray diligently, as they have the potential to create 'immeasurable moments' that can shape the lives of their students forever.

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## Transcript

For the Encouragement of Sunday School Teachers

July 12, 1981

I have often heard the contrast made between spending one hour a week in Sunday School and twenty or more hours, a week watching T.V. The point is usually that we can scarcely counteract the secularist influence of twenty hours of T.V. with one hour of Sunday School. This sort of observation creates what you might call a "quantitative hopelessness." It gives the impression that life-changing impact is directly proportionate to the quantity of time spent with a particular influence.

I think this way of assessing the value of influences (whether T.V. or Sunday School) is wrong for two reasons. Thinking quantitatively like this obscures the problem with evil and obscures the power of a holy moment. First, it obscures the problem of evil. It gives the misleading impression that the approach to take toward harmful influences on T.V. is to balance them with good influences at church or at home. It assumes that the best or only way to counteract the hours in which we are taught to love the world and the things in the world is to spend a corresponding quantity of hours in which we are taught to love God and not the world. The underlying assumption is either that it is OK to entertain yourself with unedifying T.V.

programs or that it is inevitable. But neither of these assumptions is true. Paul taught that we ought only to do things that build up (2 Cor. 13:10; 1 Cor. 14:26,12); if any activity is impeding or hindering our growth in godliness we should simply avoid it. I would say this is true of most T.V. programs. A follower of Christ will only want to do things that make his faith in God more fervent and which improve or express his love for others. Therefore, it is not OK to entertain yourself with unedifying T.V. shows.

And the second assumption is wrong, too. It is not inevitable that we or our children must watch unedifying T.V. program. There are two possibilities: you can choose not to own one (which will probably involve turning down many gifts, since your relatives will hardly be able to stand it that you don't have one), or you can own one and set down clear guidelines for what will be watched by yourselves and your children. Responsible Christian parents will certainly not use the T.V. as a baby sitter to keep the kids occupied.

So the problem of evil is not how to entertain ourselves with some of it and then balance it with good. The problem of evil is how not to enjoy it at all and instead to fill our lives with "whatever is true, honorable, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent and worthy of praise" (Phil. 4:8). So the first reason it is wrong to think just quantitatively about Sunday School and T.V. is that it obscures the problem of evil in our lives and how to handle it.

The second reason it is wrong to assess the influence of Sunday School quantitatively is that this obscures the power of a holy moment. What I have in mind here is something tremendously encouraging to teachers. It is what I would call the "immeasurable moment." What the quantitative approach overlooks and obscures is the lasting, transforming power of insight which can and usually does happen in a moment. Let me try to illustrate this principle of the "immeasurable moment" from reading, counseling and classroom teaching.

What I have learned from about twenty-years of serious reading is this. It is sentences that change my life, not books. What changes my life is some new glimpse of truth, some powerful challenge, some resolution to a long-standing dilemma, and these usually come concentrated in a sentence or two. I do not remember 99% of what I read, but if the one percent of each book or article I do remember is a life-changing insight, then I don't begrudge the 99%. And that life-changing insight usually comes in a moment, a moment whose value is all out of proportion to its little size. That's why I call it an "immeasurable moment."

Here are some of the examples of the 1% that have gripped me and changed me. From Jonathan Edwards, his 6th life resolution written in college: "Resolved: To live with all my might while I do live." From his book the Religious Affections: "True Religion, in great part, consists in holy affections." From St. Paul a sentence hit me when I was about twenty-two that has shaped my theology ever since, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12f). From C.S. Lewis in his sermon, The Weight of Glory: "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mudpies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." From St. Augustine's Confessions, "I have not hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt." Also from his Confessions: "For he loves Thee too little who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake."

The list could go on but the point is this: In reading, more often than not, what grips you and gives you a new view of the world and changes you is not whole books but key sentences or paragraphs. You read them, the lights go on, the heart is strangely warmed, and you experience an "immeasurable moment." Such a moment can be more influential than months of T.V. and radio. So do not fall victim to "quantitative hopelessness."

Now let me illustrate the same principle from counseling. Teachers often wonder if the hours spent talking with students about their problems are worth it. The person who thinks quantitatively might question an hour's conversation with a troubled freshman; he might say, "It's too much; more important things are being left undone." Or he might say, "It's too little; what can be achieved in one hour with problems that have been years in the making?" So he creates a mood of "quantitative hopelessness" or "quantitative impatience." But I have learned an amazing thing. Whether the session is short or long it is often the "immeasurable moment" that makes the difference. Many times students have returned to me years later and said, "Do you remember what you said to me?" I say, "No," and they recite one sentence. Just one sentence. It may have determined their vocational choice or their choice of graduate schools. It may have caused them to break an engagement, or give up a habit. Usually I don't even recall saying what they remember. The point is this: There is no way to measure what power a word spoken in a single moment can have. It is an "immeasurable moment."

Parents, this applies to you. Do not begrudge conversations with your children. And do not measure their value solely by their quantity. I did not have much time with my dad but some of his counsel was brief and powerful. To this day one sentence is helpful in seeking God's will for my life: "Keep the room you are in clean and neat and God will open the door to the next one in time." And I remember this one with a sting during my college days, "If you are too busy to write to your mother, you are too busy." So teachers and parents, take heart, you never know when a sentence you utter may be remembered forever.

Finally, let me illustrate from my classroom experience. Scott Hafemann, who joined our church through the mail last fall while in Germany, took a class from me during January of 1976. The course lasted three weeks. There were about 25 students in the class. The others appreciated the class and their thinking was changed a little, some more, some less. But Scott experienced a Copernican revolution in his life and thought. He has told me how up to that time he was getting more and more sour on school in general and the Bible department in particular. But after that three-week class in Ephesians he was utterly new. His view of God was turned on its head as he discovered the majesty of God's sovereignty in chapter 1 of Ephesians. And the centrality, hope in the Christian life, exploded from chapter 2 verse 7. God's overarching purposes in all of history started to fall together. The place of Israel and its relation to the church fell into place. It was for Scott one of those experiences that creates, almost overnight, a new destiny. He had taken dozens of other courses, but from that course on his destiny was sealed: he had to be a theologian. The anthropologists tried to get him but he could not escape the vision and call of God he received in Ephesians, January, 1976.

The lesson I take from this and similar experiences is that we must never fall victim to "quantitative hopelessness." If nothing else at all had happened in my six years of teaching but what happened to Scott Hafemann, it would have all been worth it.

All this is meant for our encouragement. Do not think that your thirty-minute lesson on Sunday morning is nothing in relation to twenty hours of T.V. Prepare with all your heart, as if the truth you teach is astonishing and revolutionary. Pray with all your heart for those you teach and for yourself. And you will

create - perhaps unbeknown to you--you will create "immeasurable moments" for your students. Never underestimate the power of truth spoken in a single sentence.

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