



**FREE
BOOK
EXCERPT**

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Discover joy through serving others

LIVING BEYOND MYSELF

BILL HYBELS

first
SERVE™

1
Week

THE GREAT GAMBLE

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10:10 (NASB)

Introduction

It's tempting to make "self" the center of everything, isn't it? To fall into a pattern of living to create comfort for yourself, focused primarily on self-soothing strategies for today and self-securing tactics for the days ahead. It's easy to become distracted by tending to your own needs and pursuits; but eventually, if you are like most people, you come to a point where you ask, "Is this *really* all there is to life?"

Even in the midst of our sometimes-selfish pursuits, something in us recognizes there must be more. Can you relate to the woman who confesses, "I've pursued satisfaction in so many ways, but I keep coming up empty"? Or the man who says, "I hear that I can have it all—so I go after it, only to find I'm longing for more, but more of what?" Or the student who asks, "I know that in the Bible Jesus promises an 'abundant life,' but what does that really mean?"

Do you ever wonder if anyone is living above the ordinary—living a life of *real* meaning and fulfillment? Do you long to live a life like that yourself? In the coming week, you're invited to explore this reality: You were built for something extraordinary! And you can live a life that is extraordinarily *fulfilling* as you take part in world-changing activity every day that you're alive.

Abundant Life

In John 10:10, Jesus said that he came for the purpose of giving us *abundant* life. The original Greek word for abundant is *perissos*, meaning superior, or beyond measure. Christ came so that you would experience this type of above-the-ordinary lifestyle—the lifestyle of a world changer! Write your name in the verse below, remembering these words of Jesus are for you:

“I came that _____ may have life, and have it **abundantly**.” John 10:10 (NASB)

What do you think it would look like for you to have *abundant* life?

Solomon is referred to in the Bible as the wisest man to ever live, but even he struggled with how to live a fulfilling, abundant life. A quick read through Ecclesiastes shows us that he “started by accumulating a vast sum of money, only to discover that it didn’t provide the meaning he had hoped for. Then he sought power, attained it, and discovered that it too failed to satisfy. Next came a scandalous pursuit of pleasure. Then fame and celebrity. Finally, at the end of all his efforts, he uttered his famous words: ‘All of this is like chasing the wind.’”¹

Have you ever “chased the wind”—pursued things you thought would bring great satisfaction but only led to emptiness? If so, what did this look like for you?

¹ Bill Hybels, *The Volunteer Revolution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 9.

Accurately assessing how satisfied you are can be tough. In today’s culture, you are bombarded daily with media and marketplace messages that say you can have it all, you should do it all and you deserve the high life. What are a few of these messages that you have heard?

Why do you think these particular messages stuck with you? Do they reveal anything about where you tend to look for satisfaction?

Think about the ways you pursue satisfaction in your life today. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well are these ways working for you? Explain your answer.

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Really well

If there were a surefire way to live a satisfying, extraordinarily fulfilling life, would you be willing to give it a try? Why or why not?

Yes No Maybe



The reality is this: Whatever you think of Christ's claim about the path to abundant living, you're invited to test it for yourself. You can take action now—just as you are—and experiment with the idea of living beyond yourself. Of changing this world, one small step at a time. If you've never thought of yourself as a world-changer, it's important to recognize that world-changers come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes their contributions are large and noticeable, and sometimes they are quiet, behind-the-scenes steps of service. World-changers might look like:

- A high school student who teams up with a work team one Saturday to help build a home in an under-resourced neighborhood.
- A woman who takes the time to drop a note in the mail to encourage a friend recovering from surgery.
- A child who stands beside her mom on Sunday morning, grinning from ear to ear as she hands out service bulletins to church-goers.
- A plumber who offers his expertise one night to a family in need, free of charge.

Sound too simple? It may seem so, but Christ's legacy includes simple acts of service like washing dirty feet, feeding hungry crowds, hugging boisterous children and enfolding folks who were marginalized.

At its core, living a fulfilled life means living out the reflection of this type of service—living *beyond* yourself and your needs. It means volunteering your time, gifts, talents, abilities, resources and passions to meet the needs you see around you.

You Won't Be Disappointed!

In Mark 10:28, a well-known follower of Christ named Peter unabashedly asked Jesus whether or not this “others-first” plan would really pay off: “Hey!” he said, “We left everything to follow you! What's going to be in this for *us*?”

Can you relate to Peter's concern about whether

there would really be any benefit or payback for trusting Jesus and living beyond himself?

Read Jesus' response to Peter in Mark 19:29–30. Do you think people who serve Christ's purposes, who live beyond themselves, really receive “a hundred times as much” in return? Why or why not?

How hard do you think it might be to trust Jesus' approach of living with an “others-first” mindset instead of a “me-first” mindset? How would you feel about trying Jesus' approach? Excited, fearful, skeptical, curious? Why?

You In? Taking the Great Gamble

In *The Volunteer Revolution*, Bill Hybels describes a monumental day early in his ministry when his then-professor, Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, issued an invitation to the class.

“For six months,” he said, “take the great gamble. Follow the model of Jesus with reckless abandon. Take advantage of every opportunity to serve—even if it seems like something insignificant... And if you want to,” he said, “try it the other way. Every chance you have, put yourself in the center, be demanding, ask the world to revolve around you. Push your way to the front of the line. Disappear when it's time for



the dirty-work, the menial tasks. Bow low every morning in front of a full-length mirror. Then step back and honestly assess. Are you becoming closer to God and people or more isolated? Is your life fuller or emptier? Do you feel fulfilled or frustrated? Take the Great Gamble.”³

What do you think would happen if you actually accepted the **second** part of Dr. B’s gamble to live 100 percent for yourself? What might your life look like at the end of those six months?

In the spirit of Dr. B’s challenge, an invitation has arrived that is addressed to you...

*You are cordially invited
to take the Great Gamble,
to be held in your life
for the next 24 hours.*

RSVP God

Before you reply, realize that accepting this invitation means carving out one block of time this week to serve those around you. You might choose a ten minute slot, a full 24 hours, or something in between. What is critical in the Great Gamble is your willingness to serve, not the duration of your commitment.

Jot down a few ideas about how you might engage in the Great Gamble:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

³ Ibid, 43.

What might the Great Gamble look like? Consider simple things like taking care of a job around the house that your spouse normally does; helping the clerk gather the shopping carts in the grocery store parking lot; taking your neighbor’s dog for a walk. For additional thoughts on taking the Great Gamble, see pages 15–16.

Do you anticipate any risks in saying yes to the Great Gamble? If so, what are they?

How about the reward side? What experience, insight or pleasure do you think you might gain by saying yes to the Great Gamble?

In Mark 8:34–35, Jesus explains the path to abundant living. In verse 34 he says, “Those who would be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In the same way that Jesus beckoned his early followers, he beckons you:

- Let go of your own needs (deny yourself)!
- Be willing to sacrifice your resources for the sake of serving others (take up your cross)!
- Trust Christ to give you the extraordinary life you’ve always dreamed of (follow him)!

In the same way that he turned career fishermen into fishers of men, Jesus promises to use your experience, skill, ability, talent, desire and passion for his eternal purposes, purposes that will live well beyond your life!

What’s it going to be?

Will you accept the invitation to take the Great Gamble this week?

- Yes No



WEEK 1: THE GREAT GAMBLE

For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Mark 8:35

Summary

Most of us want to live lives of purpose and meaning. The world around us tells us how we can find that fulfillment: indulge your self-serving desires and appetites because in the end, it's all about you and what you can get. Yet the conventional wisdom fails to notice the emptiness and destructive consequences of such a life. Jesus' message is a radical departure from that majority opinion; he instead calls us to live a life of service and self-denial. By washing his disciples' feet when none of them were willing to do so, Jesus modeled the kind of life he was talking about. But we don't have to speculate. We can try an experiment to see if Jesus' words are true. First we can live totally self-centered and self-absorbed, and notice what happens. What does it get us—how do we feel about ourselves? Does that lifestyle lead to happiness and contentment? Then, we can adopt the role of a servant and live for the sake of God's work and others' needs. What is a day like when we live that way? How do we feel? Is there meaning and purpose in that way of life? The truth is, we're all doing one or the other of those things: either living ultimately for self, or reaching out beyond ourselves. Jesus invites us to take the "Great Gamble." He says to follow him and see if it isn't really true that the pathway to life in all its fullness is a life of willing servanthood.

For the Leader

Introduce this week's study: Day after day advertising campaigns pound each of us with the message that "life is all about you"—satisfying your desires, having whatever you want whenever you want it. In this study we'll discover that Jesus calls us to travel a different path. He teaches and models that fulfillment is found in serving others.

Open in prayer, inviting God to lead your discussion.

The problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Discussion Starter

Describe the most self-obsessed, self-focused person you've seen in a movie (even if the person eventually changed; for example: Mr. Potter from *It's a Wonderful Life*, the Grinch who stole Christmas, Jerry McGuire).

A Self-Serving Life

We all have a natural human tendency towards self-gratification. Sometimes it's glaringly obvious; sometimes it's quite subtle and sly; it's *always* very powerful.

1. What qualities typically mark someone who is totally self-focused?
2. What cultural messages do we receive in everyday life that reinforce a self-serving attitude? Consider each of these areas:
 - Advertising
 - The marketplace
 - TV and movies
3. Growing up, what value did your family place on serving others? If you can, tell about a time when that value was expressed. Contrast that with your family's attitude towards the need to get ahead—to serve oneself at the expense of others (even if subtle)?
4. In what areas of your life today are you most prone to adopt a self-serving attitude (consider your family, neighborhood, vocation, community or even church)? Where is that self-focused tendency more overt? Where is it subtle and harder to detect?

Following Jesus

Jesus taught and lived a different way of life. He directly challenged any would-be followers to abandon a life of self-gratification and instead insisted they devote themselves to serving others. Actually absorbing this concept and living it out is no easy task—now or then.

5. As you think through the life of Jesus, what examples come to mind that demonstrate how he served others by putting their needs ahead of his own?

6. Read Philippians 2:3–8. What strikes you most about Jesus' example as a servant?
7. Read John 13:3–17. What is the significance of verse 3—how does “knowing where he came from” affect what he did? Compare that to your own situation: how does your identity as a Christian—one who is a “treasured child of the Most High God” (or possibly your lack of certainty about that status)—influence your willingness and ability to serve others?
8. Think very practically about your own life. What opportunities for everyday servanthood exist already? Who do you regularly encounter that you could serve in some way?

The Great Gamble

Whether we intend to or not, every day we place our wager in the Great Gamble: we bet on God and others, or we bet on ourselves. To put it differently, daily we have multiple opportunities to either serve others—willingly surrendering our love, time and resources—or selfishly serve ourselves.

9. Tell about someone you know who lived the Great Gamble—proving Jesus' point about where true life can be found. What was their motivation for living so selflessly? What sustained them over the long haul?
10. Read Matthew 16:25. What's hard about taking Jesus at his word? What do you stand to “lose” if you choose to serve Jesus and others?
11. Sometimes a small physical object can symbolize a spiritual concept and remind us of a commitment or value we take seriously (like a wedding ring). If you feel that you need some help staying mindful of taking the Great Gamble, identify something that symbolizes your desire to live as a servant. Share your idea with the group.

Activity

This week, take the Great Gamble seriously. Put it to the test in both directions.

First, pick a set period of time, like an hour, or an afternoon or a whole day. During that time, focus your energy on serving others. Be obsessed with finding opportunities to offer a helping hand, to listen attentively, to be actively concerned with other people's wellbeing. At the end of that time, do a gut-check with yourself. What have you lost? What have you gained?

Then, to heighten your learning experience, choose another time to focus your efforts on nothing but self-gratification (caution: steer clear of *major* destructive behavior!). In case this is hard for you, refer to the challenge issued on pages 9–10 for some examples.

Come prepared to discuss what you learn.

For additional thoughts on taking the Great Gamble, see page 10.

Closing Prayer

“God, please open our eyes to see that true life and fulfillment are found through serving others.”

Leader Tips

Self-serving Life: Be sensitive to the risk that is present in the last two questions of this section. Encourage sharing that is open and honest, with each person pointing out their own tendencies to at times be self-centered. Allow individuals the option to pass if sharing is too uncomfortable.

Following Jesus: For immediate application, encourage participants to think of one person and write down something specific they can do today or tomorrow to serve them.

The Great Gamble: Lead by example—Find the physical object you plan to use as a reminder of your desire to live as a servant this week. Bring your object to the group and share it with them.

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