

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

By Bob Buford

Two big things were competing for my primary loyalty, and in order for me to live a life of purpose I had to choose between them. A dollar sign or a cross. I had to choose which was the primary loyalty of my life.

I was in my thirties and I had already fulfilled my teenage dream. I was president and chairman of my cable company, I had a vital marriage to my wife, Linda, and my son, Ross, was exactly what every father hoped for. I was active in my church and I even found time to grow intellectually and culturally. Add to that the Jaguar, the great looking house, the exotic vacations...I had made it! Or so I thought.

Like a thief in the night, the quiet intruder began disturbing my peace of mind, picking at the trappings of my life. I had long since arrived at—indeed surpassed—my goals for the accumulation of wealth. But now I began questioning where all this success was leading me. I had perfected “the art of the deal,” and took great pleasure in acquiring new assets. But how much was enough? And more importantly, what was I passing up in the process?

The increasing turmoil over the direction my life was heading brought me to a strategic business consultant. This guy works with some of the leading companies in the country, and I thought he could help me figure out what to do.

Ignoring all my spreadsheets, lists of future projects and notes about my strengths and weaknesses, this high-priced consultant asked me one simple question: “What’s in the box?” He explained that before he could help set my compass for the second half of my life, he had to know what was absolutely the most important thing in my life. He asked me to envision a box in which I would place my life’s richest treasure.

Earning a lot of money and growing my business did not give me the satisfaction it once did. I wondered out loud if maybe I should quit the business and head in a completely different direction. I tried to explain how I believed in God but didn’t really know what to do with that belief. I had developed the habit of going to church from my earliest days, and was quite active in it despite a busy career. As a youngster, I even toyed with the idea of becoming a minister, but opted for the family business. Now that I had done so well in business, I thought that maybe I should be doing more service-oriented things.

He led me back to “the box,” only this time he got more specific. He asked me to draw a “square” in the middle of my legal pad. Then he gave me an assignment: “I’ve been listening to you for two hours, and I can’t help you unless you put one thing in the box. For you, it is either money or Jesus Christ.” He then instructed me to draw a symbol inside the box that represented my life’s central passion. One symbol. One passion. I had to choose.

Talk about stunned! I had never really had it put to me so bluntly, yet I had to admit he was absolutely right. Two big things were competing for my primary loyalty, and in order for me to live a

life of purpose I had to choose between them. A dollar sign or a cross. My consultant was telling me to choose God or wealth!

I thought hard about what to put in the box. I wasn't sure what I wanted to commit my life to. What if God asked me to sell my business, give all the money away, and go live in a monastery or something? I felt God was a pretty good deal if He didn't get in the way too much. But it was precisely my keeping Him at arm's length that was causing the turmoil in my life. I had plenty of success, but what I really needed was significance.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for my pen, and drew a little cross in the middle of the box I had sketched on my legal pad. By doing that I was saying to God, "I'm yours. Nothing will be as important to me from now on as you."

It is never easy to say such a complete "yes" to Christ. I admit that drawing the little cross in the box was scary. Most of us really cling to our lives of property and privilege. We want to be in control. To "let go and let God" is filled with risk (What might God do?) and adventure.

But in His great wisdom, God did not turn me into a preacher. Instead, he did what he does with most people who give themselves completely to Him. He let me be exactly what He had created me to be: an entrepreneur. I did not sell my business, but I turned the day-to-day operation of it over to some very talented executives. I still enjoy the thrill of doing deals, but now it's in another context—instead of buying cable television systems, I am creating new ventures to help other successful people turn their faith into action.

When Tragedy Strikes

You might think that putting God first assures a charmed life. It doesn't. Just as I was gaining significance through a meaningful second half of life, I lost something of even greater importance to me. My son, Ross, a robust adventurer, and two of his friends decided one day to swim across the Rio Grande. They wanted to experience what it was like for illegal aliens to cross the watery border into a land of promise. Tragically, only one of them made it across, and it wasn't my son.

I cannot explain why God would lead me into complete submission to His will and then allow such a horrible tragedy. But I do know that losing Ross also provided me with the greatest moments of insight and grandest gestures of grace that I ever hope to experience. I was forced as never before to lean entirely on God during those dark weeks after Ross' death. I learned that God alone truly is sufficient and that His strength was made perfect in weakness.

A Message to Christians

I am convinced that there is a lot of latent energy in America's churches today. Good, decent men and women with enormous talent are trying to fit too many things in the box. Many believe in God and go to church, but deep down inside they know something is more important. They've been able to cram a lot in the box during the first half of their lives. That's what it usually takes to become successful. But somewhere along the way—usually during their third or fourth decade—they begin to sense something's missing.

If that sounds familiar, that quiet discontent is the still, small voice of God inviting you to an enormous adventure that will be more fulfilling than any worldly success. I cannot tell you where it will lead. I can only tell you the first step of this journey begins with making your life available to God. When you make Him the center of your life—when you put Him in your life's box—you will have begun the wonderful transition from success to significance.

At the end of our lives, I believe each of us will face a final exam from our divine creator. The exam will have two questions: 1) What did you do about Jesus? 2) What did you do with what I gave you to work with?

These are the questions which measure the two parts of a vibrant faith. How would you measure yourself on those two questions today? An old phrase says, "Let go and let God." You can do that today and you will be amazed at the results. If you wish to do this, here's a simple prayer I use:

Extend your left hand with open palm up and say, "I accept." This means you simply accept the promises of God as expressed in Jesus. Now extend your right hand with open palm up and simply say, "I'm available," by which you mean that even though you may be able to see clearly the road ahead, you are available to join with God in His purposes for your life. It's really that simple. God will do the rest.

Bob Buford is the founder of Leadership Network and FaithWorks. He is also the author of Half Time – Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance and Game Plan – Winning Strategies for the Second Half of Your Life, which are both available at your local bookstore or at