

# “Life’s Other Question”

Mark 8:27-30, 10:46-52 <sup>1</sup>

I was forty-five years old. She was thirty-five. We both had Ph.D.s, and we were both members of the Psychology of Religion faculty at Southern Seminary in Louisville. I had recently announced that I was leaving the full-time faculty to return to congregational ministry, having finally concluded, after doing ministry in half a dozen different settings, that my heart is in the local church. “I hope that by the time I’m as old as you are,” she said wistfully, “I’ll know what I want to be when I grow up.”

I suppose that “What do you want to be when you grow up” may be the number one question we ask persons younger than twenty-one; and yet we’re really not done with the question even then, are we? At the tender age of nearly fifty-nine, there’s no denying that I’m now experiencing the life situation of “being grown-up”; but with the life changes of what we call “retirement” now only a decade or so away, I sometimes find myself wondering “So what do I want to be when I grow up?” Do you ever wonder such things?

What’s life about, anyway? I was in the Emergency Room not long ago with a man who was watching a member of his family die. He was wearing a t-shirt that said, “It’s all about the money.” I don’t know whether he really believed that when he put the shirt on or not, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t believe it in the ER.

Tom Brady, quarterback for the New England Patriots, has played in four Super Bowls, winning three of them and being selected as Most Valuable Player in two of them. He holds the NFL record for the most touchdown passes in a regular season, has been MVP for the whole NFL, and helped set the record for the longest consecutive winning streak in NFL history. Tom Brady is a very wealthy man, and few would argue with the conclusion that he is among the very best quarterbacks of all time.

But despite all this, when Tom Brady was interviewed on *60 Minutes* a couple of years ago, he said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what [it’s all about].’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, ‘It’s got to be more than this.’ I mean this isn’t—this can’t be—all it’s cracked up to be.”<sup>2</sup>

Our nation’s *Declaration of Independence* states that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But what is “happiness”? And what does it mean to “be happy”?

I submit to you that “happiness” gives its own case away. “Happiness” is derived from the root “hap,” which has to do with luck or chance, as in “happenstance.” Happiness is dependent on the chances and the changes of life. Happiness is something that life may give and that life may also destroy. A change in fortune, a collapse in health, the failure of a plan, the disappointment of an ambition, even a change in the weather can steal happiness away.

According to *U.S. News & World Report*, although the U.S. standard of living has improved in astounding ways since World War II, there has been no increase in the number of people who consider themselves happy. *U.S. News* reported that, “Once income provides basic needs, it doesn’t correlate to

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on July 26, 2009

<sup>2</sup> [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com), 2007.

happiness. Nor does intelligence, prestige, or sunny weather. People grow used to new climates, higher salaries, and better cars.”<sup>3</sup>

In our efforts to “be happy,” we collect money, we collect marriages, we collect children, we collect houses and lands, we collect honors and degrees, but none of these can fill our emptiness or heal our souls. In fact, they tend to do more harm than good. Dr. Ed Diener, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, has written that “materialism is toxic for happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

Graduation addresses frequently encourage young adults to yearn for, to hunger for, to crave “success.” But unfortunately, there is very little happiness to be found in “success,” and few things are more disappointing than climbing to the top of the ladder of “success” only to discover that there’s not much up there.

God intends for your life to be more than that. God wants you to experience a joy that is deep and unquenchable, a joy that pain and sorrow, grief and loss are powerless to destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away. That’s what God wants for you.

The city of Jericho has been continuously inhabited for more than 10,000 years, which makes it the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world. Located about sixteen miles east of Jerusalem, Jericho is 853 feet below sea level, making it also the lowest town on earth.

Pottery was invented in Jericho a thousand years before that happened in Mesopotamia, and the famous walls of Jericho were standing 4,000 years before Egypt’s pyramids were built. Jericho is mentioned sixty-five times in the Bible, and Jesus probably went there a number of times, but only one of these visits is recorded. Our second text this morning tells the story of that visit.

Jesus surely did many things while he was in Jericho, but only two things were recorded—two rather extraordinary encounters along the road—one with a poor blind man named Bartimaeus and the other with a rich crook named Zacchaeus. Hear the first conversation again: *And so they reached Jericho. Later, as Jesus and his disciples left town, a great crowd was following. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (Son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road as Jesus was going by. When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus from Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”*

*“Be quiet!” some of the people yelled at him.*

*But he only shouted louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”*

*When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, “Tell him to come here.”*

*So they called the blind man. “Cheer up,” they said. “Come on, he’s calling you!”*

*Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus.*

*“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked.*

*“Teacher,” the blind man said, “I want to see!”*

*And Jesus said to him, “Go your way. Your faith has healed you.” And instantly the blind man could see! Then he followed Jesus down the road (Mark 10:46-52).*

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<sup>3</sup> Holly J. Morris, “Happiness Explained,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 3, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Elias, “Psychologists Now Know What Makes People Happy,” *USA Today*, December 9, 2002.

Last week, we considered **Life's Greatest Question**, the question Jesus asks of each of us: "*Who do you say I am?*" (Mark 8:29). This morning we consider **Life's Other Question**, also from Jesus: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" (Mark 10:51).

Oh, my goodness! How do you think you would answer that question? What if Jesus were right here and asked you that? "*What do you want me to do for you?*" What might you say?

Bartimaeus answered Jesus' question by saying, "*I want to see!*" I'm going to be bold enough to suggest six things you might want to ask Jesus to give you, and three things that will happen if you do. I'm going to give them to you as three equations, and you may want to write them down.

Bill and Sue (pseudonyms; none from this area) were in their thirties. They'd been living together for years, and had several children together. They came to me because they'd finally decided to be married. When it became clear that they did not know what it means to be born again (John 3:3), I began to explain that Good News to them. As I moved from verse to verse, Sue began to cry. "I've always wanted to know what to do with my guilt," she said, as she invited God's Spirit into her heart.

Amber always carried a pistol in her purse, intending to use it either to kill herself or the man who had raped her years before, if she ever saw him again. After several years of pastoral psychotherapy—"soul healing"—Amber found that God's love was able to heal even so great a wound.

The first equation goes like this:

FORGIVENESS (for things I've done) + HEALING (of things others have done) = PEACE.

I don't know any more about Michael Jackson's situation than you do, but it would seem pretty clear that Michael Jackson was a stranger to such peace.

As we move to the second equation, let me remind you that the best-selling hardback book in American history (apart from the Bible), with more than 30 million copies now in print, has as its subtitle, "What on Earth Am I Here For?" The amazing global response to Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*<sup>5</sup> demonstrates that the search for the deep purpose of our lives—"what we're going to do when we're grown up"—is one to which none of us is a stranger.

Alongside the question of purpose, though, is the matter of sufficient power to carry it out. We need power to choose to follow God's purpose as it is revealed to us, and we need power to choose to resist the temptations that, like roadside bombs, daily try to knock us off the path. The only power able to get this job done is found at the foot of Calvary's cross. As Paul exclaimed, "*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death*" (Romans 8:1-2).

If the first equation is: FORGIVENESS + HEALING = PEACE,

the second equation is: PURPOSE + POWER = SIGNIFICANCE, or "A Life that Matters."

Third, when God said, "*Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves*" (Genesis 1:26), a key dimension of that *Imago Dei*, or Image of God, involves relationship: relationship between the Members of the Trinity; relationship between God and humanity; and relationship between ourselves and other persons

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<sup>5</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

created in that same Image. And Satan attacked at that very point, destroying the unique relationships that existed between God and us and between us and other people (Genesis 3). If we could listen deeply enough, we would discover that the deepest cries and longings of our hearts are to be reunited with our Creator and with each other. This longing is a longing for community, or “Relationships that Last.”

The Bible tells us that the curse that followed the entry of Sin into creation has affected even the very earth itself. Paul wrote that *“Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God’s curse. All creation anticipates the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. . . . waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are”* (Romans 8:19-22).

The word for such anticipation is hope, and so the third equation becomes **COMMUNITY + HOPE = JOY**— a joy that is deep and unquenchable, a joy that pain and sorrow, grief and loss are powerless to destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away.

So how shall we answer Jesus’ question? If we ask Jesus for forgiveness for our guilt and healing for our brokenness, He will give us PEACE. If we ask Jesus to show us His purpose for our lives and to give us the power to steadfastly choose to follow Him, He will give us SIGNIFICANCE. If we ask Jesus to restore our broken relationships and to help us lean into a divinely-renewed future, He will give us JOY.

My friends, God’s purpose for your life is just such JOY, not the world’s flimsy “happiness,” but there is a catch. Jesus said that *“You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it”* (Matthew 7:13-14).

I guess I wonder whether folks miss the gate because they can’t find it, or because when they get there they realize that the gateway is so small that they cannot pass through it with anything in their hands, and like the rich young man who came to Jesus, they turn away (Matthew 19:22).

Tom Brady—and countless others with him—can affirm that “it’s not about the money.” Jesus said, *“People soon become thirsty again after drinking [that] water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life”* (John 4:13-14).

Jesus told Bartimaeus, *“Your faith has healed you.”* “Having faith” means being willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend right now, taking Jesus at His word that such trust and obedience is the Way to eternal life.

Life’s Greatest Question is *“Who do you say that I am?”* Once we’ve resolved that one, Jesus then asks Life’s Other Question, *“What do you want me to do for you?”*

Perhaps our best response would be to join Bartimaeus in disregarding the crowd and shamelessly running to Jesus, crying out, *“Lord, I want to see!”*