

“Life’s Other Question”

Luke 18:35-43 ¹

I was forty-five years old. She was thirty-five. We had earned our Ph.D.’s together, 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 really in the local church. There was wistfulness in her eyes as she said, “I hope that by the time I’m as old as you are, I’ll know what I want to be when I grow up.” (She is a seminary professor to this day.)

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 at twenty-one, are we? At the tender age of sixty-five, there’s no denying that I’m now experiencing the life situation of “being grown-up”; but even so, I still sometimes find myself wondering “So what do I want to be when I grow up?” Do you ever wonder such things?

What’s life all about, anyway? I was in the Emergency Room some years 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 or not he really believed that when he put the shirt on, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t believe it as he stood in the ER.

Tom Brady, quarterback for the New England Patriots, has played in six Super Bowls, winning four of them and being selected as Most Valuable Player in three of them. Brady has been selected to eleven Pro Bowls, has won more playoff games than any other quarterback, and has appeared in more playoff games than any player at any position.

He holds the NFL record for the most touchdown passes in a regular season, has twice been MVP for the whole NFL, and helped set the record for the longest consecutive winning streak in NFL history. The list of records set by Tom Brady goes on and on, and he is a very wealthy man. Few would argue with the conclusion that he is among the very best quarterbacks of all time.²

But despite all this, when Tom Brady was interviewed on *60 Minutes* a few years ago, he said, “Why do I have four 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.**”³

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.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 15, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Brady

³ www.cbsnews.com, 2007.

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 happiness. Nor does intelligence, prestige, or sunny weather. People grow used to new climates, higher salaries, and better cars.”⁴

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 often do more harm than good. Dr. Ed Diener, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, has written that “materialism is toxic for happiness.”⁵

We’re in “Graduation Season,” and 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 Tom Brady reminds us that 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 text this morning tells the story of that visit.⁶

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, this time as Mark recorded it:

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.*

⁴ Holly J. Morris, “Happiness Explained,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 3, 2001.

⁵ Marilyn Elias, “Psychologists Now Know What Makes People Happy,” *USA Today*, December 9, 2002.

⁶ This encounter is recorded in Luke 18:35-43, Matthew 20:29-34, and Mark 10:46-52.

“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).

Two weeks ago, we considered **Life’s Greatest Question**, the question Jesus asks of each of us, and that each of us must answer: **“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).⁷

How do you think you would answer that question? What if Jesus were right here, right now, 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 were in their thirties. They’d been living together for years, and they 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.

Sue and Amber demonstrate our first equation, which goes like this:

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

There’s still a great deal that we don’t know about Prince’s recent death, but it would seem from what we know, that he, like Tom Brady, was a stranger to such peace as this, as were Michael Jackson, Elvis, and countless other cultural icons before them. Money and fame are not the path to peace. Jesus is.

As we move to the second equation, let me remind you that the best-selling non-fiction hardback book in American history (apart from the Bible), with more than 60 million copies now in print, has as its subtitle, **“What on Earth Am I Here For?”**⁸ You’ll remember that we studied this book in our small groups earlier this year. The amazing global response to Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*⁹ 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. We humans were created to ask it.

⁷ Dr. Ben Davis pointed out that Jesus asked almost the same question to the mother of James and John shortly before the encounter with Bartimaeus. In that case, she was asking, inappropriately, that her two sons be elevated above all the other disciples, and in that case, Jesus said, “No” (In Mark’s account, James and John make this request on their own; Matthew 20:21; Mark 10:36).

⁸ http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2013/04/son_of_purpose-driven_life_aut.html

⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

Alongside the question of purpose, though, is the matter of power to carry it out. You and I 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 was purchased on Calvary's Cross, revealed at the Empty Tomb, and poured out on that first Pentecost morning. And because of these events, there is now "*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 our first equation is: **FORGIVENESS + HEALING = PEACE**,

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

Our third and final equation grows out of what God said about us when humans were first created: "*Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves*" (Genesis 1:26). I don't know whether we will understand the concept of the Divine Trinity even when we reach Heaven itself; but at the very least, Trinity has to do with relationship, and in being created to be in God's "image," you and I were created for relationship as well.

It was to that very point that Satan directed his first attack, and it remains central to his destructive strategy to this very day: to subvert and to destroy our relationship with God and our relationships with other people. 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, then, 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** as this, not the world's flimsy and fickle "happiness" . . . but I need to tell you that 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 find myself wondering whether people 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 can't pass through it with

anything in their hands, and so, like the rich young man who came to Jesus, they turn away (Matthew 19:22).

Tom Brady—and unsatisfied souls beyond numbering—can affirm that “it’s not about the money.” Jesus told us that “*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 blind 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, and have chosen to follow Jesus, He 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!*”