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“The Game of Life”

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Luke 12:13-31

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In 1860, a New England educator and lithographer nearly bankrupted himself when he mass produced a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The problem was that he made the portrait just before Lincoln grew his trademark beard. No one wanted to buy it. Desperate to salvage his business, the man created a board game he called “The Checkered Game of Life,” hoping it would make a little money. Within a year, he’d sold over 45,000 copies. It became so popular that it made its way into the supply kits of many Union soldiers. In 1866, he patented the game, securing his fortune and making his name – Milton Bradley – an iconic brand.

In 1960, the company that bore his name commissioned inventor Reuben Klamer to develop a new game to celebrate its 100th anniversary. Drawing inspiration from Bradley’s original, Klamer created a completely new version: “The Game of Life.” A much more colorful and entertaining edition, it included a three-dimensional game board, convertibles for game pieces with little blue and pink people pegs (a little too binary for today) and an integrated plastic spinner [watch the 1960 commercial].

The game went through several iterations in the following years. (The version I grew up with was from the early 1970s.) Today, over 50 million copies have been sold in over 20 languages. It has been made into a video game and had a short stint as a really bad TV game show. Besides the classic, other editions include the Quarter-Life Crisis version (apparently people stop playing before they reach mid-life), and pop culture branded versions such as Star Wars, SpongeBob Squarepants, Indiana Jones, The Wizard of Oz, My Little Pony, and Despicable Me¹, to name a few.

Bradley set out in his original version to create a game with moral lessons about the benefits and the consequences of various life choices. Even the spinner had a moral motivation – Bradley believed the use of dice encouraged gambling. His version mirrored the ups and downs of his own career, but it was also rather dark by today’s standards. Players had to make choices at almost every turn – *lots* of choices. Those choices could lead to prosperity and to gaining positive attributes like honesty, bravery, and success. But they could also lead (through a combination of choices and luck) to poverty, idleness, and disgrace. New Yorker columnist Jill Lepore details what it was like to play the original version:

...even when you’re heading for Happiness you can end up at Ruin: passed out, drunk and drooling, on the floor of a seedy-looking tavern where Death darkens the door disguised as a debt collector straight out of “Bleak House” —the bulky black overcoat, the strangely sinister stovepipe hat.²

Most players ended up in Happy Old Age, but they could just as easily end up at Suicide. Hardly the sort of thing we’d find in toy aisles today.

The 1960 version, like Bradley’s original, sought to replicate things one might expect to encounter in real life, but on more of a practical scale than a metaphysical or philosophical one. Players would experience choosing a career path, buying a home, encountering unexpected car repairs, and managing income and debts along the way. More recent versions favor financial rewards far more than losses. In the 2017 version, “Action

¹ <https://www.ultraboardgames.com/the-game-of-life/editions.php>

² Jill Lepore. “The Game of Life: What Milton Bradley Started.” *The New Yorker*. May 21, 2007 issue. Online: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/21/the-meaning-of-life> (accessed June 3, 2021).

Cards” include big payouts for things like learning to play the bongos or winning a dance competition (players spin to see who “wins” the competition). The player who drew the card gets an additional bonus of \$100,000 upon retirement for “life experience.” Players receive \$20,000 for adopting a pet (though if you’ve ever been a pet owner, you know that’s backward from the way it really works.) And both pets and kids pay out \$50,000 each at retirement. (Apparently the kids get high paying jobs as adults and make generous gifts to their aging parents – pay attention, Wes, Eliot, and Mira!)

The object of the game is simple. As spelled out in the instructions, “The player with the most money at the end of the game wins!” with a jaunty exclamation point to underscore the pleasure of out-earning your fellow players.

In the version I grew up with, the game concludes with players retiring either to the Poor Farm or to Millionaire Acres. Today, the Poor Farm been replaced by the more cheerful destination of Countryside Acres, though the high rollers still go to the Millionaire Mansion. The goal remains the same: the player with the most money at retirement is the winner.

All the modern versions are a far cry from Bradley’s 1860 original. Today’s versions aren’t meant to impart moral wisdom, but to serve as a diversion, a bit of family fun, quickly forgotten when the game is over. It would be silly to expect life lessons from a board game, at least in the way we’ve come to understand the function of games. We expect games to be lighthearted and frivolous. We shouldn’t read too much into the morality of our games. They’re just games. They don’t reflect the way we think about real life or the values we hold...do they?

Get the car of your choice. Choose the right job. Take the right risks. Compete for the best life experiences. Retire with the most money. That’s how you win The Game of Life. I am still talking about the board game...or am I?

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

How fitting that today is the day we celebrate high school graduates and commission them to embark on the next stage of their journey. Graduates, you’ve had choices and responsibility drilled into you for years. Many of you have been led to believe that choosing the path of college or career will determine the trajectory of your life, whether you end up a “winner” or a “loser.” And that choice comes at what feels like an excruciatingly early moment, only one or two moves into “the game of life.” While you probably aren’t thinking yet of retirement (I hope not!), you may already have some notion that the goal is to accumulate as much as you can over the next four decades or so; money, of course, but also “life experiences” that will make you interesting, well-rounded, marketable, or just plain accepted.

Life isn’t a board game. In fact, life isn’t a game at all, though we sometimes act as if it is. It’s a journey that will take you places you haven’t planned and never expect. It isn’t always filled with positive outcomes and big bonuses. There are many pitfalls along the way, and some of them will shake your very foundation. But that isn’t reason to fear. In fact, it can be a good thing, because those times can teach you not to rely too much on yourself. Life isn’t meant to be a solo act. You’re not setting out to compete against all others in a quest to finish on top. It’s about who you are in relationship to others – family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, even strangers. And it’s about the most important relationship of all – your relationship with the One who made you, the One who dreamed you up, the One whose in whose image you were created and whose breath gives you life, the One who knows you better than you know yourself, who loves you more than you will ever know or comprehend, even when you’re not sure you love yourself.

Psalm 139 expresses the depth of God’s knowledge of you. The psalmist writes:

You are the one who created my innermost parts;

you knit me together while I was still in my mother’s womb.

I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart.

Your works are wonderful—I know that very well.

My bones weren't hidden from you
when I was being put together in a secret place,
when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my embryo,
and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me,
before any one of them had yet happened.
God, your plans are incomprehensible to me!
Their total number is countless!
If I tried to count them—they outnumber grains of sand!
If I came to the very end—I'd still be with you. (Psalm 139:13-18)

Of course, this message isn't just for graduates. This isn't a commencement address or baccalaureate message. How many of us started out with good intentions but got sidetracked along the way? Yes, we believe it's important to be a good person, to live with good values, and to have at least a pretty good relationship with God. But how many of our goals are tied to our 401k, mutual funds, or stock portfolios? Have we invested as much into our relationship with Christ as we have into our financial well-being? Have we cultivated Christian faithfulness through worship, growing in our faith, serving others, giving generously to God's work, and inviting others to experience the joy of a life thoroughly grounded in God's presence? Why is it so hard for us to translate the faith we claim and celebrate on Sunday into our life and goals on Monday through Saturday? Are we so easily distracted by the games we play and the colorful tokens of success and happiness that our existence is reduced to mere net worth?

All the nations of the world long for these things. Your Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.

Life isn't a game. But thanks be to God, we aren't stuck with the choices we made in our first few spins of the wheel, with the green plastic car or the career as an inventor. Unlike the board game, we have access to grace, whether you're at the intersection of college and career or nearing Countryside Acres. We can step back from a life built on pursuing wealth and chasing after life experiences that improve our individual brand. By grounding our identity and our goals in Christ, we can take hold of the life that really is life.

So, let's rewrite the instructions, guided by a more timeless source of wisdom. Let's set our goals not based on how much we can accumulate, but how much we've invested in our faith and in others. God knows what we need. We may not end up in Millionaire Mansion, but if we strive first for the kingdom of God, we'll discover something much better – *eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him, we have everything we need. Thanks be to God. Amen.