



“The Good Life: Success” ***September 12, 2021***

Deuteronomy 8:6-18; Matthew 6:19-21
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We all want to experience The Good Life. But what exactly is it? And how do we achieve it? There are many ways our secular world defines The Good Life. We’re constantly bombarded with messages about what makes life worth living. Take note of the commercials during a football game this afternoon and what they’re pushing, and you’ll have a pretty good idea at least how the advertising world influences our concept of The Good Life.

Before we begin this series on The Good Life and dig into our first topic, I feel compelled to tell you something. It’s something you won’t want to hear. In fact, it probably will make you angry. It’s something so upsetting, it may make you want to drag me out of this pulpit and push me right out the door. Why would I risk saying something to you that would evoke such strong resistance? Because I love you too much not to tell you the truth. Are you ready to hear it? Are you sure? Okay, here it is:

You are not in control of your life.

If that doesn’t upset you, it should. Because the myth of self-determination is a deceit in which we all participate, whether we acknowledge it or not. In the context of a sermon, it might not sound all that shocking to hear me say you’re not in control of your life. It’s one of those “churchy” things we tend to say but don’t really live. And let’s face it – we do that all the time.

But let’s cut through the unpracticed theoretical religiosity and speak the truth. If you grew up in this country, you inherited a worldview that says you can be whatever you want. In essence, you get to write your own story. In fact, you are *supposed* to write your own story. And your life was constructed with that concept in mind. Now, you didn’t choose your family of origin or where you grew up, but pretty much the rest of your life has been a series of choices: who to be friends with, which school to attend, whether or not to go to college, what to study, what jobs to apply for, where to live, who to marry or not, whether to go to church and become a Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist...or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or nothing at all, what to buy, what to eat, what to wear, where to hang out, who to associate with, whether to have kids and how many and what to name them and how to raise them, and, well, you get the picture. And that sounds very much like control, like freedom.

So why are so many people so unsatisfied with their lives?

Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says that the promise of self-control is part of the deception of growing up in North American culture. He notes:

People are encouraged to believe that the purpose of being born is to be free to self-construct your life as you please. (But) eventually, the burden of self-fabrication becomes unbearable. They find it impossible to choose their way into a life worth living.¹

And that’s the goal, isn’t it – a life worth living? Trying to choose our way into a life worth living is so unbearable because it isn’t possible. It never will be. Trying to construct your own version of a meaningful life is like running a race on a track that keeps getting longer as you’re running on it; you will never reach the goal, no matter how hard you try.

If we can’t achieve The Good Life through our own choices, can we ever experience it? Our faith says we can. We begin this series with the notion of success. The first reading this morning came from the Hebrew Scriptures book of Deuteronomy. On the surface, that passage sounds like a promise that good fortune will come to those who follow God’s commandments. That’s both true and untrue. A life of faith doesn’t shield us from calamity nor does it bring material prosperity. But it does set us in right relationship with God, which provides us with tools to deal with life’s ups and downs, a source of strength greater than our own, and the perspective to see things from God’s point of view. Of

¹ Stanley Hauerwas. “The Dangers of Providing Pastoral Care: in Conversation with William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.” *The Christian Century*. Volume 138, Number 15. August 11, 2021.

course, there are those who peddle what we call the Prosperity Gospel, which claims that if we are faithful in following God's ways, we'll prosper in our worldly affairs. Hogwash. The Bible doesn't say that. Or, when it appears to say that, the words are taken out of context and their meaning is distorted.

Certainly for the Hebrew people emerging out of captivity in Egypt, it was essential to follow God's commandments in order to establish national identity and to live the life for which God had brought them to freedom in the first place. If everyone had chosen their own path and ignored God's instructions, it would have been disastrous. They would never have emerged as a coherent people inheriting the land God had promised. But it is a dangerous misreading to equate material prosperity with simple obedience or strength of faith.

Jesus does say in the tenth chapter of John that the reason he came into this world was so that we could "live life to the fullest." He wasn't exactly clear about what he meant by that. Or, at least, he didn't offer a tidy description of what a full life would look like in a way recognizable by worldly standards. Instead, he said things like "follow me," "go and do likewise," and "sin no more." When he says abundant life, we're looking for promises of recreation and comfort, and instead we get an about-face and a summons to a mission. It seems Jesus has a very different idea than we do about living life to the fullest.

Look in scripture for verses about success sometime. You'll find that the Bible gives very little attention to the things we equate with success, much less naming what we call success as a marker of The Good Life. We think about success in terms of workplace advancement, profitable businesses, good grades, financial stability, good standing in our communities – things the Bible doesn't give a fig about. The Gospel doesn't care whether you're the assistant vice president of managerial affairs or a file clerk. It doesn't concern itself with whether your kids go to an Ivy League school or a state university or a trade school. It spends no time whatsoever offering accolades based on your address or whether you get a new car every four years or how many boards you're on. Sorry. It doesn't.

While the Bible doesn't give much airtime to individual achievement, it does say quite a bit about our *responsibility* in lifting one another up:

Deuteronomy 24:17-18 – "Don't obstruct the legal rights of an immigrant or orphan. Don't take a widow's coat as pledge for a loan. Remember how you were a slave in Egypt but how the Lord your God saved you from that. That's why I'm commanding you to do this thing."

Isaiah 58:6 – "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose – the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"

James 1:27 – "True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us."

Matthew 25:34-35, 40b – "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me...I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me."

Experiencing life by following Jesus is a paradox – we find our life by giving it up. The Good Life does await us in Christ, but not on our terms. We have to surrender our desire for control if we're ever going to experience the life Jesus has in mind for us. And we have to trust that some of the things we think we want or need are not ultimately in our best interest.

We live in a world of self-help, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. And let's face it, there isn't a material need you and I face that we can't solve with the swipe of a credit card or the stroke of a key. But one thing we cannot do is save our own soul. It can't be done. But here's the good news: we don't have to, because Christ already did it for us. The world tries to tell us that who we are and what we have isn't enough. But Christ says to us, "You are enough." And he gave his life and rose again so we can live The Good Life God intends.

So, what are we well-meaning suburbanites to do? Should we surrender our homes and our jobs, forsake our financial investments and our family's future? The Bible doesn't say that success in career or investments or personal achievement is bad – unless they're accomplished by harming or depriving others. But if we make those things the focus of our life, we'll find our existence totally inadequate to meet the yearnings of our heart. It will never be enough. Jesus warned us about becoming overly attached to material success:

Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and

rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, CEB)

Instead of chasing the marks of worldly success, Jesus invites us to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. He gives his life for us, his body and blood the sign of God's limitless love and forgiveness. In his Resurrection, he defeats forever our fantasies that life is ours to control. And then he offers us an outrageous assignment: to bear witness to his cross and resurrection so all will know God's love for them. And to join him at the table in the kingdom of God – a reign that begins not in some future afterlife, but right here, right now. You want a life of meaning? Get behind that cause.

Whatever your vocation, don't look to worldly measures to provide validation or affirmation. Our true identity can only be found in Christ. Let's exchange our human-sized aspirations for a God-sized mission. When we learn to surrender our illusion of control, we become part of something so much bigger, a life full of meaning and purpose the way God intends. Let's respond joyfully to God's invitation. When we do, we *will* experience The Good Life that only comes through Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.