



“The Good Life: A Life of Meaning”

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Galatians 5:22-24

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One of my favorite Christmas movies is *It's a Wonderful Life*. Frank Capra's 1946 film chronicles the life of George Bailey who, despite his ambition and giftedness, ends up entrenched in the ordinary life of his small hometown. One year, just before Christmas, a series of misfortunes remind him how far his life is from the life he imagined he'd have. Faced with the failure he feels his life has become, George begins to wonder if the world would be better off if he'd never been born. Thanks to a cheerful but bumbling guardian angel Clarence, he gets to discover what the world would be like if, in fact, he hadn't been born. A series of encounters reveal that his goodness and generosity had profoundly shaped the lives of his community and his family. George comes to realize how much his life has meant to the people around him. More importantly, he discovers how much their love means to him.

You and I aren't George Bailey. We don't live in a Frank Capra movie. And we're unlikely to be visited by a guardian angel eager to earn his wings. But we all want our lives to make a difference. How can we know if they do? Is a life of meaning something we can only discover in hindsight, years later? Or are there things we can do now to bring meaning to our lives?

In his 2002 best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Pastor Rick Warren says that the way most people try to determine the right course for their life is through speculation. Give it your best guess and hope things turn out okay. Warren suggests an alternative: seek direction for your life from God through the witness and guidance of scripture. Though Warren and I have different ideas about how that works, I think he's on the right track.

My goal today is not to identify the Meaning of Life. That's too big a question for me. Instead, what I want to do in our time together is to explore what the Bible tells us about how to have *a life of meaning*. And I've selected for our text today a familiar passage from Paul's Letter to the Galatians: the fruit of the Spirit. There are nine of them, which I memorized as a child and can still remember: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I could make this a very short sermon by just telling you that having those things brings a life of meaning. But that wouldn't be very helpful. It's important to know *why* these nine, *where* they come from, and *how* they lead to a life of meaning.

Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit a few verses earlier with an attention-grabbing list of things to *avoid*: sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying. Paul doesn't just say those are bad things we should avoid. But just so we're clear: *don't do those things*. Paul describes these as “actions that are produced by *selfish motives*.” A major theme for Paul throughout his letters is differentiating between the “flesh” and the “Spirit.” Now, Paul wasn't establishing a hard and fast dualism where the physical is bad and the spiritual is good, though sometimes people misread him that way. (He also taught that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and should be cared for accordingly.) When Paul speaks of flesh in this context, he is referring to *selfish desires* and our attempts to satisfy them. The Spirit is God's presence that guides our interior life in God, the result of our rebirth through Christ.

For Paul, the problem with the physical is not that it has desires, but that those desires are misplaced – our physical nature wants the wrong things or it wants them in the wrong way. Seeking sexual intimacy, it devolves into pursuing promiscuity or pornography. Seeking transcendence, it becomes addicted. Seeking contact with the Divine, it pursues idols. Seeking joy, it carouses.¹ Those physical desires can never be fully satisfied; our appetite always increases even as the experience of pleasure diminishes. But Paul insists that we have been set free from bondage to those physical desires through Christ. And the freedom we have allows us to experience life the way God intended it all along.

¹ Mark Douglas. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Volume 3. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2010), 188.

In a 2017 *New York Times* op-ed, David Brooks compared two models of human development. One is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Anyone who's taken a psychology course in college or even high school is familiar with Maslow's work. In his theory, each stage of need must be met before moving up to the next level. First come physiological needs like hunger and shelter, then safety and security, then belonging and love. Once those have been achieved, we can move up to self-esteem, before reaching the pinnacle of self-actualization. In contrast, Brooks offers instead "The Four Kinds of Happiness." The lowest level is material pleasure – satisfying desires. Next is personal achievement – making our mark. That's followed by generativity or giving back to others. Ultimately, the goal is to rise to moral joy, the satisfaction that comes from unconditional love or devotion to a higher cause. Brooks, who has become as much a Christian moralist as a political commentator, notes that Maslow's model has dominated Western thought since the mid-20th Century. Yet it runs counter to the kind of development offered by most religions and moral systems, including Christianity. Rather than *elevating* the self as the pinnacle of human development, the Bible guides us to *quiet* the self and transcend self-oriented motives in order to live more like Jesus, to care for one another in service to Christ's mission. To be fair to Maslow, the actualized self is not necessarily an end to itself, but that which allows us to have genuine relationships with others. Nevertheless, it does so by focusing on the self, *first*. Brooks notes, however, that "Most people experience their deepest sense of meaning not when they have placidly met their (own) needs, but when they come together in crisis."² I know that to be true. Many of you do, too, from direct experience.

The Good Life isn't simply a matter of simply choosing the good things and avoiding the bad things. This orientation toward self is promoted by our modern therapeutic society and is utterly pervasive in our culture. And Paul says that our very physical nature is what leads us toward satisfying selfish desires. Now, if we are drawn by both culture and nature toward an orientation to the self, can we break free and move toward a higher calling and purpose? Paul says we can, but not without some help. Thankfully, God is eager to help us. Through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, we can bear the fruit of The Good Life.

What are the "fruits" of a life lived in the Spirit? Love – not the romantic, sentimental kind, but the selfless love for others that reflects God's love for us. Joy – not a passing feeling, but an enduring sense of fulfillment. Peace – not simply tranquility that comes from the absence of conflict, but a true peace that comes through reconciliation and justice. Patience – the ability to endure in anticipation of God's ultimate good. Kindness – a state that goes beyond being nice to genuine actions for the good of others. Goodness – characterized not by individual merit or virtue, but by reflecting the righteousness of God expressed in loving kindness. Faithfulness – the enduring trust in God's promises, even in the face of great odds. Gentleness – being caring and considerate in disposition, taking care not to cause harm but to act for the good of others. And self-control – demonstrating restraint and moderation, not self-indulgence. Did you notice how the list begins and how it ends? It starts with *love*. Love is the guiding force of God's action toward us and our response toward both God and one another. And it's concluded with *self-control*. Self-control keeps us from giving into the selfish desires so that we might be reoriented toward the things that bring true life.

These are good and admirable qualities, things that would be embraced by *any* faith tradition. Individually, they are wonderful attributes to have. Together, they paint a picture of The Good Life. For the most part, we wouldn't identify these characteristics as being uniquely Christian. But Paul says they are. Why? Paul supports that claim with three points. First of all, he refers to them as "fruit." Fruit cannot be made; it must be grown. You cannot conjure an orange or create a chemical reaction that produces a watermelon. Only the right plant in the right conditions can produce fruit. Secondly, where does this fruit come from? The Spirit – that is to say, the Holy Spirit, the part of God that breathes into us, sustaining life and keeping us in connection with God. Finally, how do we connect with the Spirit when so much in our nature is pulling us away toward selfish desires? Christ makes it possible. "Christ has set us free for freedom," Paul writes, a freedom that allows us to break away from the lure of selfish impulses toward genuine love for God and neighbor. That freedom is a gift to us, but it isn't free. Christ made it possible through his life, death, and resurrection. In his life, he taught us the way and demonstrated it in his encounters with those around him. In his death, he took upon his body the world's violent response to a God who invites us to a higher calling. In his resurrection, he defeated forever the power of death and sin and the obsession with self that keeps us from having the life God intends for us.

In turn, Paul says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires." That is to say, we put to death the endless cycle of pursuing self-gratification and self-orientation. When we "crucify"

² David Brooks. "When Life Asks for Everything." *New York Times*. September 19, 2017.

that selfish nature, we stop trying to elevate ourselves and focus instead on the good of those around us. Made in God's image, set free in Christ, and grounded in the Spirit, we produce fruit that constitutes The Good Life.

Over the past four weeks, we've been looking at how to live The Good Life. The Good Life isn't just something we all want to achieve; it's what God wants for us, too. But the way the secular world defines The Good Life is very different from what God has to say about it in the Bible. We considered what it means to be successful – how pursuing wealth, status, and power can lead us away from God's hope for us. We discovered that devoting ourselves to Christ's mission gives our lives lasting meaning and purpose. We looked at what brings us happiness – that often the things we think will bring us happiness don't, but that living like Jesus by investing ourselves in others can. We recognized that being in relationship is how we are wired and the value of relationships for keeping us grounded and connected to one another. Without them, we are isolated and cut off from love and support. Today, we've seen a clearer picture of the way God defines the good life in the fruit of the Spirit, qualities we experience in shared pursuits, connected to one another. The common thread in all of this is that The Good Life isn't about *mine, my, and me*; it's about *us, our, and we*.

Paul urges us in Philippians to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," who set aside privilege and status and willingly gave his life so that we could have life – abundant life, life to the fullest, The Good Life. He didn't just do it for me. He didn't just do it for you. He did it for all of us, for everyone alive, everyone who *has* ever lived, everyone who *will* ever live. We have been given an incredible gift; but we'll never receive its full value if we try to hoard it for ourselves. Only by giving it away can we truly receive it.

We have been set free, sisters and brothers. Let's not let the freedom Christ gives us be wasted by pursuing life on our terms. God knows what we need far better than we do ourselves. God created us for good. Christ gave his life so we could have it abundantly and forever. The Spirit breathes through us and sustains us, bringing forth the fruit we've been seeking all along. The Good Life is ours to live. Let's not miss it. Amen.