

How Will You Measure Your Life? – 3. By Who and How You Serve

Mark 10:35-45

November 19, 2023

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

We've spent the last couple of weeks wrestling with the question, how will you measure your life? How does the world measure our lives? And how will God measure our lives when we stand before God on our last day? In the first week, we talked about how the world measures our lives by our statistics and we looked at the Parable of the Sower and the condition of our hearts. And Jesus says our lives will be measured by how well we loved. This is a love that sees the need of another person and acts. Last week, we talked about how the world measures us by how much money and how many possessions we manage to acquire. But Jesus says, it's not about how much you have but how generous you are with all that God has given to you. And today, we look at another way that the world measures us and that is by how much *power* we have. We think about the power we have over others and how much power others have over us. We use phrases like power suit and power walking and power lunches and power foods. Many of us might have an initial impulse to say that we don't have any power. But we all have power. Power is the ability to do things, the ability to control things or people, the ability to direct or influence things. So, we all have some areas in our lives where we exercise power. And we also have a deep desire to *not* be under the power of others. It's a part of our national identity, in fact. We want to be self-determined people, always in control. The more power we have, the harder it is when others try to control it.

The 18th century historian, Lord Acton, said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." If you think about some of the most horrible acts against humanity over the course of history, were and still are being committed by tyrants who have absolute power. And that has led to things like the holocaust, genocides, and wars that continue to harm and kill millions of people. We see this in the business world too. In March of 2012, there was a quote Forbes magazine that said, "*some of the most famous and effective CEOs have been, let's face it, complete jerks. In fact, jerkiness seems to correlate well with strategic boldness.*" So, in other words, to be successful you have to boss people around, make people do what you want, make them feel small? In Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs, he says Jobs was a brilliant man. He had a huge impact on our lives in terms of electronics and how we use them. But if you read the biography, you will find that many times, Jobs treated the people who worked for him horribly. Yes, he left a legacy of tools and gadgets that we use every day, and we are thankful for those, but he also left a wake of people who were harmed by what he'd done.

What price does your character have? The world teaches us to seek after power, but we shouldn't measure our life by how often we get our own way, or how often we get to be in charge, or by how many people we get to boss around. Jesus calls us to something other than a quest for power, which, when you think about it, is amazing, because Jesus is God-in-the-flesh, the son of the Creator of the Universe! Jesus has the ultimate power! But again, and again he astonishes his disciples, and he astonishes us by showing that *true* power, *true* strength is not found in being served, but in serving. We are not the first generation to wrestle with these

things. We see it in the lives of his disciples. There are actually three different times in the gospels where we read about the disciples, who spent three years of their lives with Jesus, arguing over this very question, which one of us is the greatest?

Can you imagine? These are the people that Jesus chose to be his disciples. They watched him minister to the last, the least, the lost, the outcasts, outlaws, and outsiders. And yet, they continually argue among themselves about which one is the greatest. See, they believed that Jesus was going to Jerusalem where he finally claim the Jewish throne and become King of a New Israel, casting the Romans out of Palestine and leading Israel into a new golden age. This is what they thought the Messiah had come to do. And so, they are wondering, who gets to sit on his right and left? Do you recall who actually ended up on Jesus' right and left sides in the end? It was the two thieves that hung beside him on the cross.

If we back up just one chapter to Mark, chapter 9, we read about the first time that they are arguing about this, walking on the road on their way Jerusalem. And Jesus stops and says, look here. Then he gets a small child, puts the child on his knee and says, greatness in the kingdom of God looks like this. Someone who is humble and trusts. It is not about power, it's about serving. And it is in Luke's gospel where we read about the last time the disciples argue about who's the greatest while they are at the last supper. Jesus has just broken bread and passed the cup. And as soon as they are done eating supper, some of the disciples down at the other end of the table are arguing about who's in charge. In John's gospel, we read that Jesus upon hearing this, gets up and walks to the door. You may recall that in the first century, everyone wore sandals. And when you came into a house, there was a servant, the lowest of the servants in fact, who would wash your feet. It was an act of good hospitality, it was refreshing, it felt good to your feet and made the dining experience more pleasing to everyone.

But this night, there was no servant and so Jesus walked to the door where there was a basin of water and a towel that all the disciples had walked past when they entered. They all saw it, but no one picked it up. Why? Because if they had done that, it would indicate that they recognized they were servants and none of them were going to do that. So, while they were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus got up, went to the door and picked up the basin of water and the towel and got down on his knees in front of the disciples and one by one he washed their feet. They were horrified to see this, but Jesus replied, do you get it now? This is what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. This is what power looks like in the kingdom of God. It's the power to serve so that you influence and change things.

In today's passage, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem and James and John get Jesus off to themselves and make this bold request; We were just thinking it might a good idea for you to let everyone else know that we should be on your right and on your left you come into power." Now, this isn't really that startling of a request considering their place in Jesus's inner circle. In fact, his nickname for them was "Sons of Thunder" because they were the sons of Zebedee, a very successful businessman. Here is an example of just how successful he was in today's world. He lives in Wayzata and has a really nice house, a boat on Lake Minnetonka, a couple of nice cars and he runs a very successful business. James and John are his right hand-

men, being primed to take over the family business someday. So, it seemed only natural that they would be number two and three in Jesus' organization when he takes power. But Jesus stops and calls everyone together and tells them what James and John have just suggested and the all the other disciples get really angry because they all wanted to be in charge. To which Jesus says, *You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. Mark 10:38*

What Jesus is saying here is, this is not what power looks like. It is not being the boss of everyone or getting your own way. I don't want you to be like the tyrants and rulers you see in the world, Jesus says. I am asking you for something different of you if you going to follow me. Then he says this *Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate my people. Mark 10:43-45*

Once again, Jesus is flipping over the whole idea of what the world says it means to have power. So, what does greatness mean? Jesus teaches this repeatedly. He said the first shall be last and the last shall be first. It's like when you go to a wedding banquet and even if there is a seat near the guest of honor, don't sit there, always take the lowest seat. And maybe the guest of honor will invite you to sit in a higher seat. But if you sit yourself in the higher seat, it's likely that the host will say, I'm sorry but I need you to move down here. I have someone else who is more important to sit here. Always pursue humility. Ask the Lord every day, Lord, *what do you want me to do today? Lord, I offer myself to you. Use me. Send me. And help me to pay attention to where you need me today.* Jesus, the most influential and powerful human being who ever walked the face of the earth, who had the power to command legions of angels, and someone who was dead to come back to life, this man, washed his disciples' feet. And we who claim to be his followers are called to do the same. This is how our lives will be measured.

Last week we talked about the Parable of the Talents and how it doesn't matter to God how much you've been given but what you do with all that God has given you. Today, I want you to remember the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Here Jesus is saying that on the last day, the Son of Man will come in all his glory. He's going to gather all the people of all the nations before him, just like a shepherd gathers his sheep and goats, he will separate them, and the goats will be sent away. He will say to the sheep: *Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began.*

The question that you are meant to ask when you read this parable is, am I a sheep or a goat? If you're wondering how that will be decided, Jesus tells us. And you might feel like this goes against our protestant theology that says we are saved by the grace of God through faith alone and not by our good works. But in this parable, he tells us that our actions are important. I don't think he's disagreeing with this idea of being saved by grace through faith alone but instead our actions are a demonstration about what's going on in our heart. He says to the sheep.

“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.” Matthew 25:35-36

And to the goats who say, Lord, why are we being sent away? We followed you. We went to church every Sunday. But Jesus says, I was hungry, and you didn't give me anything to eat. I was thirsty and you didn't give me something to drink, and I was naked, and you didn't give me anything to wear. I was a stranger, and you didn't welcome me. I was sick and in prison and you didn't visit me. **Both the sheep and the goats are surprised.** The sheep said, Lord we don't remember seeing you. And the goats say, we don't know what you're talking about. Of course, we would have fed you if we'd seen you. Jesus says, as much as you've done this to the least of these, you've done it unto me. Or in the ways that you've failed to do it to the least of these, you've failed to do it to me. Greatness is measured by how well we served, how well we paid attention to people who needed us and how well we've offered ourselves to God and to them. Which is why love, generosity and serving all go hand in hand as the true measures of a human being. Let me give you a couple of pictures of what this looks like.

For as long as I can remember, you have been packing shoeboxes for children on Native American reservations for whom this may be the only gift they receive this Christmas. This year you packed 151 boxes. You shopped, you wrapped the boxes, you sorted and packed them, and then you brought them here to church. And just this past week, Kevin delivered to a local collection point with other boxes from other churches. I remember last year; I had a meeting at the local collection point and half the room that we were meeting in was filled with shoeboxes waiting to be delivered to the reservation. In fact, when one of our mission team members, Jess, took the Messiah boxes, about 150 last year again last year, when she inquired at the desk where she was to leave the boxes. They pointed to a table that was about 2'x3' and said, “you can put them here.” To which Jess said, “Um, I have 150 boxes.” To which they asked, “What church are you from?” To which Jess proudly replied, “Messiah Church!”

Here's another example. Last Sunday, I shared with you the story of 15-year-old Messiah member and Scout, Landon Koster, who has been sleeping in a tent in his yard for 13 nights so far with a goal of raising \$10,000 for the Interfaith Outreach Community Partners November fundraiser to end homelessness. Last Sunday, Landon was barely at \$1,000 in his efforts. As of today, he's raised over \$7,500. And I'm told that much of this support has come from you, the Messiah Church family. Thank you! If you haven't had a chance to support Landon's efforts to help end homelessness and get him back in the house, you can do it on his GoFundMe page or if you prefer, you can write a check to directly to IOCP or to Messiah Church and put “Landon/IOCP” in the memo and we'll make sure those all get to Landon ASAP! These are just a couple of ways that you are serving God by serving others.

I have a lot of dreams for you. I want you to know Christ. I want you to follow him and live as his people. But I also want you to live a blessed life, a life that really matters. In the Bible, there are over 600 times where we

find the word bless, blessing or blessed. The Hebrew word that is usually translated as “blessed” or “blessing” also means translates to the verb “*to kneel*.”

So, what is the connection between God blessing us and kneeling? In scripture, the God of the heavens, the God who created everything, humbles God’s self, descends to our planet, kneels, and comes low to us. We see that in the beautiful image of Jesus washing his disciple’s feet, on his knees, taking to role of a servant to bless them. He hung on a cross and gave his life for us. This is what God has done for us. The God of the universe kneels and blesses us. In turn, we bless God and then God calls us to be a blessing to other people and when we live this rhythm, we find blessedness.

So let me ask you this question once more. How will your life be measured? In the end, it is what other people will say about you and what they experienced from you that is the measure of your life.

Today is the day that, if you consider Messiah Church your home, to return your Estimate of Giving cards for 2024. For those of you who are members of Messiah Church, you should have received a letter from me in the mail this week. Today, dedicate our gifts together as we say thank you to God for all the blessings in our lives and for the opportunity, we have to be a blessing to others. I invite you to hold your Estimate of Giving Card in your hand, I’m going to hold mine, as I offer this prayer.

Let’s pray. Lord, I offer my life to you. All I am and have I give to you. Use me, I pray. Help me to see the world as you see it. Use me as an instrument of healing as I use my life to serve you. Help me to honor you with all my gift using them for your glory. It is in the name of your son, our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ that I pray. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 19, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Thank you, God, for everything. Thank you for life, for relationships, for the resources I have received. Most of all, thank you for always being faithful and at work in my life. Help me to see my life and everything I have as a gift from you to be your hands and feet in this world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Monday, November 20

Scripture: Matthew 12:14-23

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;

no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice through to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope.”

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

Observation

Jesus enemies were plotting to destroy him. Jesus just moved elsewhere and continued to serve and heal. Matthew quoted Isaiah 42:1-4 to describe Jesus’ approach: “He won’t argue or shout, and nobody will hear his voice in the streets. He won’t break a bent stalk, and he won’t snuff out a smoldering wick, until he makes justice win.” We might think that’s no way to make justice win. But people respected Jesus, even asking if he might be “the Son of David,” a title for the Messiah.

Application

Just before today’s reading, Matthew showed the Pharisees criticizing Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, which they saw as work. How did Jesus’ way of dealing with his foes live out the attitude Isaiah said God’s servant would have? Have you ever seen a situation where it was more effective to withdraw or speak gently rather than trying to loudly prove a contentious point?

Prayer

O Jesus, you walked this earth, not as an arrogant, demanding ruler, but as a gentle, healing servant. Guide me as I seek to live into your brand of greatness. Amen.

Tuesday, November 21

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

“What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Observation

James and John (and probably their mom, though Mark left her out in his version of the story in Mark 10:35-45) thought they’d get their bid for power in before the other disciples. Jesus kept talking about his kingdom. Well, weren’t “kingdoms” about seeking places of power? “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. In the Kingdom of Heaven, there is no status seeking. In my Kingdom, we serve.

Application

We have a good idea (as James and John did) what power, privilege and importance look like. Down deep, most of us wish for some of the perks that go with power. But Jesus’ view was succinct and direct: “that’s not the way it will be with you.” Jesus said he didn’t come to be served, but to serve, and even give his life. In what specific ways does living like Jesus change your approach to life?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank you that your love’s transforming power can motivate me to live a servant life. Teach me how to treat others as you treat me. Amen.

Wednesday, November 22

Scripture: Matthew 23:5-12

“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Observation

In Jesus’ day (and still today), many leaders (even religious ones) sought exalted, lofty titles. Scholar William Barclay wrote, “The Pharisees liked to be addressed as Rabbi and to be treated with the greatest respect. They even claimed ... greater respect than that given to parents, for, they said, a man’s parents give him ordinary, physical life, but a man’s teacher gives him eternal life.” By contrast, Jesus said his Kingdom was not about high-status titles, but about greatness in serving others.

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright noted that the Pharisees were not just religious, but also political and social leaders. He asked, “What are today’s equivalents? Some might be the leaders, elected or unelected, in our wider societies, who ... rejoice in their ‘celebrity’ status, make grand pronouncements about public values while running lucrative but shady businesses on the side, use their position to gain influence for their families and friends, and allow their private interests secretly to determine the public policy of their country ... What matters is the huge and humbling principle of verses 11 and 12.” How easy or hard do you find it to lay aside human ideas of greatness in favor of Jesus’ definition of greatness as service?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep purifying my motivations as I serve. May my meaning and sense of worth come more from you each day—until my service is about you, not me. Amen.

Thursday, November 23, Thanksgiving Day

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever.

to him who alone does great wonders,

His love endures forever.

who by his understanding made the heavens,

His love endures forever.

who spread out the earth upon the waters,

His love endures forever.

who made the great lights—

His love endures forever.

the sun to govern the day,

His love endures forever.

the moon and stars to govern the night;

His love endures forever.

Observation

The psalmist located the center of our gratitude to God in the refrain he repeated over and over in this psalm:

“God’s faithful love lasts forever!” Above all else, the grand story of the Bible is the story of a God who loves us with a tireless, durable, embracing, never-ending love. What a promise! “Give thanks to the Lord” indeed!

Application

The New Bible Commentary said God’s “status would by itself inspire awe; his creative works, marvel; his power evident in history, submission; his goodness, gratitude. But when we see that all these greatnesses spring from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision, then the Lord is truly acknowledged with wonder, love, and praise.” Savor those words, and how they apply to your walk with God: awe, marvel, submission, gratitude, wonder, love, and praise. What moments, events or relationships have made God’s unchanging, faithful love most real for you?

Have a joyous Thanksgiving Day! In whatever way you mark the day, and with whomever, consider reading this psalm, or singing a favorite thanksgiving song, as a way of deepening your sense of gratitude on this day.

Prayer

Lord God, in “wonder, love and praise” I thank you that all you do in my life springs “from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision.” Amen.

Friday, November 24

Scripture: Galatians 5:13-16

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Observation

The Apostle Paul started new churches in Galatia (modern day Turkey), but they had fallen into disagreement and struggle. False teachers came to the churches and began convincing them they still had to follow certain rules and laws in order for God to accept them. Paul’s letter resisted the false teachers. He urged his readers to claim their freedom in Christ, but to use that freedom to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Application

In verse 13 Paul bluntly stated a truth that can be painful to admit. We all have selfish impulses, especially when given the ability to choose freely. He pointed his readers to the one who can give us the ability to live out the Golden Rule: the Holy Spirit. Paul said, “Be guided by the Spirit and you won’t carry out your selfish desires” (verse 16). In what areas of your life do you want to invite the Spirit to empower you to deny your selfish desires and love your neighbor as yourself more fully? •

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you came to set me free. I like being free from other people's demands, and from bad things. Help me also value the times when you set me free from my own self-centeredness. Amen.

Saturday, November 25

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Observation

After talking about the Temple's destruction and the end of the world (in sometimes puzzling terms), Jesus gave a word picture of the final judgment. His story about the judgment clearly conveyed his Kingdom's priorities. Kingdom people, he said, care for the hungry and thirsty, the poorly-clothed and strangers, the prisoners and the sick—the people whom Jesus called "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine."

Application

There's a Christian song that begins, "I met Jesus today, and I really must tell you, he didn't look at all like the

pictures ... He was a hungry child, a sick friend of mine, a stranger who needed a coat." In Jesus' story, both those accepted and the ones who were turned away were surprised. They expected to meet Jesus in "religious" places, with choirs and lights, not in the streets among the needy and poor. But Jesus' story said we should notice all people in need of help and treat them as if it were Jesus himself in need. In what ways can you sense God reshaping your attitudes toward "the least of these" in your community and the wider world?

Prayer

King Jesus, show me the "least of these" in my wealthy neighbor who struggles emotionally or spiritually, my poor friend who suffers financially, my sick friend who needs your comfort while dying—and in myself, who needs more of you in my life. Amen.