

A Better Life: 3. Success
Matthew 22:35-40; Galatians 6:9-10
November 19, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

A better life. And isn't that what we all want? We have hopes and dreams for ourselves, our children and grandchildren. But how do we get there? We work hard, trying to attain it – but have we found it? A lot of people get to where they thought they were going only to discover it was not the life they thought it would be. Years ago, I was working on the staff of another church. We had a seminary intern who was part of our pastoral care team. She had gone through college and medical school. She completed her residency and was working as a doctor, only to realize it was not really the life she wanted. So she had returned to graduate school pursuing a path to ministry. So what is the path to a better life?

Two weeks ago, we looked at one path that a whole lot of people have chosen: maximize pleasure and minimize pain. And maybe that's been your goal: you only live once, grab everything you can. But two weeks ago, we heard from the writer of Ecclesiastes who told us he had filled his life with everything the world measures as success. He had fame and fortune. He had it all, but still he was empty. His life meaningless, it was like chasing the wind. And so, he reframed. He realized he was on the wrong the path. In this series, we are looking at keys to a better life. The first key is Give Thanks. Instead of wanting what you don't have, it's learning to want what you do have. We do that when we learn to give thanks – in all circumstances. The second key is to pursue a purpose bigger than self. Isn't that why there's more joy in raking someone else's yard than raking your own? Then last week, we reframed our understanding of money. It turns out that an insatiable desire for more doesn't lead to happiness. Dave Ramsey says that 70% of American live paycheck to paycheck. They have more month that money – and that's stress – the kind of stress that keeps you awake at night – the kind of stress that chips away at your relationships. The key to a better life is having a plan where we live on less than our income. It provides margin, frees us from a constant focus on our basic needs. And then the fourth key that we heard last week comes directly from Jesus who said: It is more blessed to give than to receive. At Christmas, what gives you greater joy? Receiving or giving. One family told me they no longer purchase gifts for each other at Christmas. Instead, they pass around a catalog for the Heifer Project and everyone picks out an animal that will be purchased and sent to a family in the developing world. Looking for a better life? It is more blessed to give than to receive.

This morning, I want to talk about success, because that's what we often consider to be the measure of a better life? But what is success? I found an article online from Entrepreneur Magazine written by Sarah Vermunt and she says: *“Success, when you boil it down, seems to be about the stuff we think will make us happy. It's a lure, shiny and seductive, but there's a hook: You can do everything right in the pursuit of attainment of traditional success, but happiness and personal fulfillment are not guaranteed. Personally, at the height of my “success” I was pretty miserable. I'm not saying there's an inverse relationship between success and happiness, just that... they are two different things.”* Success and happiness are not the same. Haven't we observed people who are wildly successful and yet unhappy?

Here's a couple of examples. He still holds the record for the most number of albums sold. Michael Jackson sold 68 million copies of “Thriller.” He had all the perks that go along with success – fame, fortune, his own estate with a private amusement park. And yet he lived a tortured life, constantly seeking what he could not find. Success didn't bring happiness. Do you recognize this person? Some of you are old enough to remember Howard Hughes. He was

once the richest man on Earth. He started movie studios, airplane manufacturing, and other businesses. He was wildly successful. People wanted to get close to him, but do you remember how he spent his final years? Secluded in a hotel room in Las Vegas, using mason jars to go to the bathroom. Broken and unhappy. Or some might recognize this person. Amy Winehouse won five Grammy Awards for her second album. But at the age of 29, she overdosed and died. Five Grammy Awards didn't bring her a life of happiness.

Last week, as I thought about success, I remembered that I have a box in the basement that I have not opened in more than 40 years. It contains all of the awards and the trophies that I received in high school. A few weeks after graduating from high school our family moved to another town and I remember carefully wrapping every object and putting each one in that box. They were the indications that I was somebody – that other people thought I was somebody. I was a big deal in my high school, but I've never opened that box. I very quickly learned that I could not live in the past, and when I got to college no one cared what I accomplished in high school. It wasn't the measure of success that I thought it was. There is an inner driver for success, but what is it? We may be chasing the wrong thing. Might be chasing the wind.

Do you follow the NBA? If you do, you might know the story of Jrue Holiday. He is the point guard for the New Orleans Pelicans. He was a celebrated player for UCLA who was selected as a first round draft pick by Philadelphia in 2009, named an NBA All Star in 2013, then traded to the New Orleans Pelicans. He's married to his wife, Lauren, who was a soccer star. But last year, six months pregnant, she discovers she has a brain tumor. What does Jrue do? He quits basketball. All the awards, the accomplishments, the multimillion dollar contract – he walks away from it all. His wife was sick and that was more important than his basketball career. The Pelicans didn't want to lose him so that gave him an indefinite leave of absence. A few months later she gave birth to a daughter and a few weeks after that, Lauren had surgery to remove the tumor – which turned out to be benign. Not everyone of us can quit our job. Nor should we need a medical crisis to force us to decide what's important.

Have you ever struggled with this? Some of you quit your job and put your career on hold to stay at home with your children. You gave up income and the opportunity to climb the ladder of success. Some have told me about turning down what would have been a huge advancement in your career so that your children would not have to make another move. I've looked back with regret that I was slow to recognize this. I've mentioned before how I sacrificed summers with my own children while taking other children to camps and mission trips – all under the guise of doing the Lord's work. But overlooking my own family. I too, was after success.

The most successful man who ever lived teaches that life – true life – the better life is found in relationships. That's the heart of the words we hear this morning from Matthew 22. **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commands.** The sum total of the teaching of the Bible comes down to this – Love God; Love your neighbor. He's saying the Christian life is lived in relationship. What's the key to success? Investing in relationships. A better life is not a destination it is the road we travel. And that's happiness.

Two weeks ago, I began this series by looking at the promise we introduced a year ago. What is the promise that we are making to people in this community who don't know what we do here? Let's read this together: **At Messiah we make life better. By loving God, loving each other, and loving the world around us, we enrich lives of all who connect through worship, care, service and community.** It all about investing in relationships. That's what we do. Loving God. Loving each other. Loving the world. We have hundreds of adults who connect each week

through a Bible study, faith group or covenant discipleship group. Last week, I asked Hal what it means to be part of a group. His covenant discipleship group has been meeting since 2001. *“What we prefer about this group is our mutual accountability for nine covenants which include daily prayer and sharing acts of grace that we have participated in or witnessed.”* I asked Ann who has been part of a group that has been meeting almost as long and she said: *“Together we study, serve, encourage one other, and grow in our love of God. We are doing life together in Christ’s name.”* Connecting with other Christians deepens faith, strengthens faith and make you happier and healthier.

God called Abraham and said, I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. To be fully alive is to bless and care about other people. It’s what prompted this church to open a child care center 17 years ago to serve families that cannot afford child care. It’s what prompts you to travel near and far and give hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to bless children and mothers and fathers in Kenya, Haiti, Minneapolis, Plymouth. It’s what took a team to the Pine Ridge Reservation last summer and our youth to southern Minnesota and Appalachia. It’s why _____ youth and adults would sleep outside last night. It’s about relationships. It’s loving the world. I asked LeAnne Hobbs to put together a short video to provide a glimpse of what loving God, loving each other and loving world has looked like this year. Take a look: [video]

In John 14, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” There are three Greek words for life, but one used here is zoe. It is used 275 times in the New Testament. It means “absolute fullness of life.” Real life. Genuine life. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I have come that you might have zoe.” The New Testament shouts there is a better life. That life is found in relationship with God. And you can experience this kind of life even if your life is filled with challenges and uncertainty. You can have this when you are living in poverty. You can have this when you are going through divorce. You can have this when the foundation of your world is falling apart. You can have this when you have received a diagnosis and it’s not good. You can have this when you are facing death. You can have this when your spouse has died and you are facing each day all alone. It’s a relationship. It’s Loving God – that’s the glue that will hold your life together and give you hope.

It was six months ago that my Dad died. I often think about his final day on this earth. Alzheimer’s disease had taken over his brain and then he fell and was confined to bed, barely able to move, no longer able to speak. Did he know he was dying? I told him that he was and that the God he had loved and served throughout his life would not let go of him. He was in a room surrounded by reminders of a better life – there was a map on the wall of the island of Lathi where he served during WWII, his ordination certificate, photos of places and people he had served. He was surrounded by his family, and I read from the list of Bible passages he had memorized. And though he could not speak and only God knows what he could understand. His eyes gave every indication that he knew what was happening – and I believe he knew the one thing that could not be taken from him – that even Alzheimer’s disease could not take away – was Zoe – life. Full, complete, genuine, absolute. I want that for everyone – and not just for your final breath, but for your next breath. That’s what we do here. We want everyone to experience the way of life. That’s success. And that’s why we ask you today, would you invest in that for 2018?

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 19, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Most loving and generous God, everything we have comes from and belongs to you. We come to you filled with gratitude. We want to serve you and to invest in your work.

Guide us as we think through the details of how we live. Then, show us your ways that will bring about a better life for all, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, November 20

Scripture: Matthew 22:35-40

One of them, a legal expert, tested him. "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

Observation: In this series on finding A Better Life, we've looked at gratitude, purpose, and generosity. This week we focus on loving relationships as keys to a Better Life. Jesus said that loving God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and loving people (Leviticus 19:18) were the greatest commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures, pivotal expressions of how God defines a full or abundant life.

Application: Loving your neighbor as yourself can be challenging. God calls us to love others the way God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it very hard for us to fully love as God loves—unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake as much as for the sake of others. What has stopped you from loving someone relentlessly? How might you love that person more fully today and tomorrow?

Prayer: Lord, your love for me is always there, even when I forget it or try to tune it out. Help me to love you back, and to extend that same kind of love to all the people in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, November 21

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:3-8

By his divine power the Lord has given us everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of the one who called us by his own honor and glory. Through his honor and glory he has given us his precious and wonderful promises, that you may share the divine nature and escape from the world's immorality that sinful craving produces. This is why you must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they'll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Observation: Peter said that God's forgiveness and divine love give us the inner power we need to escape the world's immorality. Verses 5-7 listed the positive virtues God offers us. Let God build these things into your life, Peter said. They will bring you life, shielding you from an "inactive and unfruitful" existence.

Application: Peter called on us to have these positive qualities "growing in you." Which of these qualities do you find already present in your life? Thank God for them! Then ask God to guide you to see clearly which of the qualities are missing, or not growing. As you become aware of those places, work with God to grow an increasing measure of that virtue, making your life ever better.

Prayer: O God, please add your divine power to my efforts, so that my life may continually grow in the positive qualities that you have promised will give me the truly good life. Amen.

Wednesday, November 22

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:5-15

This is why I thought it was necessary to encourage the brothers to go to you ahead of time and arrange in advance the generous gift you have already promised. I want it to be a real gift from you. I don't want you to feel like you are being forced to give anything. What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever. The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ's gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!

Observation: The apostle Paul was gathering funds from Gentile believers, in Corinth and elsewhere, to take to Jerusalem, where the Christian community was impoverished and suffering. That traveling Christian preacher (who had, as far as we know, no real estate, life insurance or retirement plan) wrote: "God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace"! That heartfelt exclamation gave us a look at the heart of a man focused on what he did have much more than on what he did not have. It gave us reason to think about how he defined "more than enough."

Application: God-given love, the apostle said, leads all believers to care about each other. He told Christians in Corinth that the Jerusalem believers "will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you." He saw giving not as just a material act, but as a two-way street even if it took different forms. What helps you to think of your giving, whether you are able to give much or little, as participation in the life of God's big family, not just another bill to pay?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, guide my heart. Help my gratitude for your "outstanding grace" to overflow in my giving of whatever funds, time and talents I've received from your hand. Amen.

Thursday, November 23 (Thanksgiving Day)

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good. God's faithful love lasts forever!
Give thanks to the God of all gods— God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of all lords— God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the only one who makes great wonders— God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the one who made the skies with skill— God's faithful love lasts forever.

Give thanks to the one who shaped the earth on the water— God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the one who made the great lights— God's faithful love lasts forever.
The sun to rule the day— God's faithful love lasts forever.
The moon and the stars to rule the night— God's faithful love lasts 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”!

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from the scripture? Reflect on the greatness of God and the blessings you have experienced in the past year. 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 your unchanging love. Amen.

Friday, November 24

Scripture: Colossians 3:9-16

Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people. Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Observation: God offers us a new nature that changes the ways we relate for the better. God can help us relate to all the people we worship with, rub elbows with, see at the market or pass as we walk the dog with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” This letter calls us to forgive one another the same way God has forgiven us. That may be hard when you need to forgive someone else—but what a blessing it is when someone else extends that treatment to you!

Application: This is pretty radical language: take off the “old human nature,” put on a “new nature.” Can you see elements of your “old nature” that you and God are in the process of “taking off”? Which of the beautiful “new nature” qualities named in these verses do you see thriving? Which ones do you want to ask God to grow in your life in the next six months?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, I've learned the hard way that even when I manage to change an outward behavior, too often the inner struggle remains. Keep changing and growing me from the inside out. Amen.

Saturday, November 25

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-11; 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other.

We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out.

Observation: Loving God and other people is much more than just being “nice.” Loving one another (both in giving and receiving) aligns us, like nothing else, with the heart of the God of the universe. God loves us, John wrote—and that is the reason that we can love God and one another. The apostle Paul drew on a theme from Scripture passages like Psalm 13:5-6 and Psalm 40:1-2. God's loving presence, he affirmed, makes it possible for us to experience the good life even amid circumstances which, from a human perspective alone, might look like a terrible life.

Application: Most of us know the words: “God is love.” But are there life experiences and inner messages that make it hard for you to rely on God's love? In what ways do you perceive and experience God as loving? What helps you trust God's love more? Which people do you find it hardest to love as God loves them? In what ways has God's love, and the love of other people you know, helped you to keep living the good life even at times of trouble, confusion, harassment or being knocked down by life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the ultimate source of love, and the awe-inspiring model who shows me the lengths to which love went to reach me. Keep growing my ability to love you and others, to lead the truly good life in all circumstances. Amen.