

How Will You Measure Your Life? – 1. By Who and How You Love

Matthew 13:1-9

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If I were to ask you, who is the most significant person who ever lived in all of human history, who would you say? When *TIME* magazine tackled this question, they used a computer to aggregate millions of traces of opinions, the way Google ranks web pages. The top results were not terribly surprising:

1. Jesus.
2. Napoleon.
3. Muhammad.
4. William Shakespeare.
5. Abraham Lincoln.

Going down the list, things got a bit more controversial. For example, Ronald Reagan ranked at number 32 beating out the Apostle Paul at number 34. And they both crushed Saint Peter coming in at number 65. It is interesting to note that John Calvin is number 99 out of 100 on this list of how the world measured their lives.

Over the next 3 weeks, I invite you to wrestle with me to answer the question, ***how will you measure your life?*** I am going to invite us to think about Jesus answers that question.

So, to find the answers to these questions, today we will turn to two different resources. The first is a book written several years ago by Harvard Business school professor, Clayton Christenson, by the same title as this sermon series, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* In it, he has important observations about how we rightly and wrongly measure our lives. And the second, and most important, are the parables of Jesus and what he has to say about how we measure our lives.

And so we start off with the first parable that Jesus tells in his ministry. Now, parables are allegories, stories drawn from everyday life to illustrate spiritual principles. This particular parable ends with “Everyone who has ears should pay attention.” This is Jesus’ way of saying, “Listen up, guys! This is important stuff. This is how we should be measuring our lives and how God measures our lives.”

The Holy Land, in the first century, was an agrarian society. Most people were farmers but if they were not, they knew someone close to them who was. So, everybody understood farming metaphors. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like this: there was a certain sower/farmer who went out to scatter seed. Farmers carried a basket, and they would scatter the seeds around as they walked. Jesus says that some seed fell on this kind of soil and some seed fell on that kind of soil and he goes on to describe four different kinds of soils. Jesus is using this metaphor to describe four different types of people and the conditions of their hearts. So when you read this parable, you’re meant to ask the question, which soil type am I?

Jesus says, the farmer scattered some seeds that fell on **the path**. The path has been walked and trodden over on for a long time. It is hard and compacted so much so that no seed could possible take root and grow there. The seed is just going to sit on top of the soil until the birds come and eat it.

The kind of person he is describing here is somebody whose heart is harden and closed off. Maybe it's someone whose experienced a really difficult, heart-breaking situation in their life. They prayed and prayed but their situation didn't get better and they feel like God let them down. Sometimes people whose hearts are hard are those who are arrogant and think they're smarter or better than everybody else. Or it could be someone who has something in their past that led them to shut off all possibilities that there is a God who loves them, knows them by name, and cares for them. And if we're being totally honest, at least at some point in our lives, I think we have all been like the harden soil. What Jesus is saying here is, I see people who are not listening, who can't listen or won't hear.

And then he says the **next soil**. This type of soil is found in the northern part of the Holy Land. It is about an inch deep but right underneath it is a layer of limestone. And so when you scatter the seed on this soil, it will take root. But because its roots can't go deep enough to get to a source of water, when the sun comes and beats down on it, it withers and dies.

The type of people Jesus is talking about here are those with a very superficial faith; people who start off well intentioned, excited and passionate about their faith, but they don't grow deep roots and consequently, they easily lose their faith. Like youth who goes on a mission trip or church camp, or an adult who goes on a spiritual retreat weekend like an Emmaus. And they have a mountain top experience and give their life to Christ, only to return to their daily life and regular routine. They don't get involved in youth group or an adult small group so that they could understand how to grow deep roots and grow closer to God and their faith withers away.

And then he moves on to describe the **next type of soil**. This soil actually looks pretty good when you first look at it, like it should grow good, healthy crops. But what you can't see is that mixed in with that soil, there are also **seeds of thistle and weeds**. So as your seeds starts to grow, it is over run by the weeds and it is choked out and dies. Jesus says, the weeds and the thistles **represent the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth**.

And so, somewhere along the way, we have to decide what really most important in life, putting Christ first or that deep desire for success, affirmation and wealth. It's okay to have all those things, but at some point, you have to decide. Matthew 6:24 says, *No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.* For some, what comes first is the pursuit of wealth and somehow, and they expect God to help with that process. But God says, I'm not going to be number two. But if we put God first, our wealth will help us do good things in this world and take care of others.

Then eventually, Jesus gets to the **4th kind of soil**. And that soil is so **rich and fertile** that when you plant something in it the roots grow deep, the stalks grow strong and tall, and it produces a harvest. **This is the type of person who sows the good news** that there is a God of love who calls us to follow, to work to make the world right and to live like that so that a bountiful harvest of love is produced.

Jesus' listeners could not hear this passage without thinking about wheat. And they knew that when a single grain of wheat was planted, there would be 30, 60 or 100 grains produced from just that one seed. So even though $\frac{3}{4}$ of the people are not going to allow that word to take hold and change their lives, the $\frac{1}{4}$ who do are going to produce a bountiful harvest.

Everyone who has ears should pay attention. Jesus is teaching us about what really matters in our lives and how we're supposed to measure it. This is a challenging world in which we live.

Society tells us that the way we measure our lives is by our careers, our statistics, our income, our office, the car that we drive, the houses we live in, and the clothes that we wear. But Jesus says, that is not how you measure your life. **You measure your life by the harvest you produce.**

A few years ago, Clayton Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, wrote a book, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* It was prompted by the people he went to school with at Harvard. He writes about how five years after they graduated with their MBAs, they came back together for their 5th year class reunion. And it was great. They almost all had gotten married, they seemed prosperous and polished. They had jobs where they were on the fast track to the top of their companies, not there yet, but certainly on their way. Their lives seemed fantastic on every level.

And then 5 years later, they got together for their 10-year reunion. It was there that Christensen began to notice there was something not quite right. He found that many his classmates were on their 2nd or 3rd marriage. And in some cases, somebody else was raising their children half way across the country who had married their former spouse. Business wise, they all were doing well and earning enormous, life-changing amounts of money. But as they sat and talked together, he found that many of them were clearly unhappy.

And then they got together for their 25th reunion and that's where he really saw issues. One of his classmates was even in jail. You might remember the name Jeffrey Skilling. Skilling was the CEO of Enron. Christensen says, in school, Jeffrey was wonderful, bright, smart, the top 5% of the class. But in 2004, he was arrested on multiple felony charges and sentenced to 14 years in prison. And it made Christensen wonder what happened. And here's what he concluded:

My theory is that what happens with high achievers is they really want to achieve. And in the business world, you can easily measure achievement. You can measure sales, bonuses, pay increases and promotions within the company and getting that corner office. And for high achievers, every one of those things is like a hit is to an addict. When you have an addiction, you constantly need another hit of success. This part of your life is an area where you can easily measure success.

But then you go home, and in your head, you know your family is more important than your work, but how do you measure success when you have a 4 year old or worse yet, a teenager. My kids were in their teens when I heard for the first time, "You're a horrible parent. You're so unfair. No one else's parent does that. I hate you."

It is easier to focus our time and energy in the places where we are receiving accolades, affirmations, and successes than the places in our lives where it is much harder to figure out what success looks like. And so you find yourself focusing on the person that you want to be at work, rather than the person that you need to be at home. You forget that work will only last for a while. Someday, you are going to retire, and you'll suddenly realize that you still have a few decades of life remaining. Now what, when you've always measured your life on what you achieved at work?

The clear message of this scripture is that we are to measure our lives by how and who we love. The word LOVE shows up 540 times in scripture. In the Old Testament, the primary word used for love is CHESED, often translated as loving kindness. And in the New Testament, the Greek word used for love is AGAPE. It means a selfless, sacrificial love that puts the needs of someone else ahead of your own.

In the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the first definition for love is romantic feelings for another person. But that is not how the Bible defines love. Love can include affectionate feelings but the primary definition of love in the Bible is a love of actions and not of feelings. It looks to see the needs of another human being, puts those needs first and then puts those feelings into action. It is a love that says *I see you*. It's a love the love that recognizes the stranger, your neighbor or anyone else in need.

Love is God's strategic plan for changing the world. Jesus came to show us the way the truth and the life... to show us what sacrificial love looks like as he died on the cross, to redeem us from sin and then to send us out into the world to be agents of his love. So wherever there's hurt, pain and brokenness, you step in determined to act.

What we are meant to remember in the Parable of the Sower is how we are really going to measure our lives. How are your kids, grandkids, friends and family members going to remember how you measured your life? What will they say when the pastor shows up with their notepad and says, "tell me about your loved one." In all the funerals/celebration of life services I have done, I cannot remember a single time when I asked that question and people started by telling me about their mother or father's career, or how much money they made, what car they drove or the awards they received. What did they talk about? Their relationships and love they had for their family and friends. The way your life is measured is, did you love well?

Jesus showed us the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross for our sins. Most likely, none of us will ever have to lay down our life for a friend or family members. But we are called to sacrifice something that will bless someone else. And for me, the most valuable commodity that I have is time. My time is pulled in so many different directions as a pastor, wife, mother, grandmother and friend. And so, if I am going to actually love somebody, it means that I am going to stop doing something so that instead, I can invest my time to bless or encourage someone else. Things like taking cookies to new neighbor, pausing to talk to your co-worker before leaving for the day, stopping to help the person on the side of the road with a flat tire, or the family right here in our neighborhood who doesn't have enough to buy a thanksgiving meal. There are a thousand ways you can practice love towards other people. You are God's strategic plan for changing the world.

If the measurement of your life, in the end, is how well you loved, here's what I'd like to do today. I want to challenge each of us to practice 100 acts of kindness between now and the next All Saints Day.

And as you walk out of church today, I'd like to give you something. This is what it looks like. It's a wooden, round token and on the front is Matthew 13, Parable of the Sower and on the back, 100 Acts of Kindness. (If you are worshipping with us online, email your name and address to office@messiahchurch.org and we'll mail you one.) And when you receive your token, I invite you to put it in your right-hand pocket every day for the next year. And at least once every 3 days, take the time to share an act of kindness, then move that token from your right pocket to your left.

So, let's do the math. On average we have about 750 folks who worship at Messiah Church on any given week. That includes our in person, online and you, the COTG podcast worshipers. 750 times, 3 acts of kindness/week, times 52 weeks equals..... 117,750 acts of kindness in one year. Do you see how this is God's strategic plan for changing the world and how you are a part of that plan?

This past Tuesday was Halloween. Two years ago, Jerry and I moved to so that we could be close to our 2 Minnesota grandkids, Oliver and Ames. We have this Luckhardt family tradition where the weekend before Halloween, we go to the apple orchard and bring home apples and pumpkins and then we carve them together. Here is a picture of us carving pumpkins with them last weekend. And here is one thing that I am pretty sure of. When Jerry and I die, these boys are not going to care one bit that I preach to 750 people a week or that Jerry has directed some of the biggest and best college marching bands in America. What is going to matter to them is that their Nana and Bapa actually showed up, did life with them and love them well.

Which kind of soil will you be?

Let's pray: Lord, how grateful we are for your love and grace, a love that is everlasting, deeper and greater than we can ever imagine. Help us to remember that you've called us to love you and abide in Jesus Christ: to put down roots deep in our faith and bear much fruit. But Lord, we need your help to do that. Would you help us to be the kinds of Christians that understand that we are on a mission to love well and heal a broken world. Our family, friends, co-workers, and even our enemies, lord. Help us to produce a great harvest, for you and for your kingdom. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 5, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God, as I read your holy word today, speak to me so I might listen and pay careful attention. Fill me with your holy generosity and grace. Make me ready to welcome Jesus into my life. Open my heart to those who are in need. On this day, I choose to serve you. Amen.

Monday, November 6

Scripture: Proverbs 3:9-10

Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the first of all your crops.
Then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will burst with wine.

Observation

The *first fruits* refers to the practice of giving to God's use the first and best portion of the harvest. This demonstrates that God, not possessions, have the first place in our lives and that our resources belong to God. We are only managers of God's resources. Giving God our firsts helps us conquer greed, helps us manage God's resources, and opens us up to receive God's special blessings.

Application

From the beginning, Christian churches have served not only as spiritual outposts but also as economic units. Wisdom in earning, saving, and giving money has allowed Christians to look after each other. These activities are part of our roots as the church. Though some people think the church is separate from the "real" world of finance and economics, the first Christians did not separate financial accountability from their call to be faithful disciples. Neither should we.

Prayer

Giver of all good gifts, grant us a share of our wisdom as we seek to witness in all we sing, pray, praise, and spend. Amen.

Tuesday, November 7

Scripture: Mark 4:1-9

Jesus began to teach beside the lake again. Such a large crowd gathered that he climbed into a boat there on the lake. He sat in the boat while the whole crowd was nearby on the shore. He said many things to them in parables. While teaching them, he said, "Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one." He said, "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!"

Observation

The parable of the soils, found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, is no exercise in gardening. When the farmer goes out to his field to sow, it is an act that could mean life or death for his family. Their economic well-being depends on how well he does his job. In this parable, Jesus tells us how seeds fall on various kinds of soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

Application

Jesus went on to explain how the word of God can be planted in different people. In some, it will wither and fail, while in others it will bring forth great fruit. Perhaps the reason this parable is so well remembered is that that's what life is like for so many people. Give thought and prayer as to how might you "scatter seeds" so that your work bears abundant fruit?

Prayer

God, we are together around this great globe and are your servants. Bless the works of my hands and heart so that I might be a blessing to others. Amen.

Wednesday, November 8

Scripture: Proverbs 30:7-9

Two things I ask of you;
don't keep them from me before I die:
Fraud and lies—
keep far from me!
Don't give me either poverty or wealth;
give me just the food I need.
Or I'll be full and deny you,
and say, "Who is the LORD?"
Or I'll be poor and steal,
and dishonor my God's name.

Observation

A *marshal* is a term used in the Book of Proverbs for a saying that is self-evident, that means what it says. In the thirtieth chapter of Proverbs, we meet a sage named Agur who uses a marshal to make an important point about wisdom and economics. Everything about Agur is mysterious. His name and lineage suggest he might be a foreign-born official who had important duties in Israel. He is a masterful poet, a perceptive observer of human nature, and he offers a prayer that is striking because it encapsulates the contentment most of us ought to seek in having enough but not too much.

Application

Our culture is telling us that having enough is not enough. We need more. The result is that many of us believe we never have enough, even if we achieve more success than we ever dreamed possible. The way of the world is a fraud and a lie. If our choices about money are taken out of the realm of faith and wrestled with in only a worldly setting, we will never find the place Agur points to, neither very rich nor very poor. What changes might you make in your life to seek greater contentment with all that you have?

Prayer

Lord God of all days and all seasons, may we never forget you, whether rich or poor, in prosperity or adversity. You are with us always, even unto the end of the ages. Amen.

Thursday, November 9

Scripture: Luke 16:1-9

Jesus also said to the disciples, “A certain rich man heard that his household manager was wasting his estate. He called the manager in and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give me a report of your administration because you can no longer serve as my manager.’ “The household manager said to himself, What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager? I’m not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I’ll do so that, when I am removed from my management position, people will welcome me into their houses. “One by one, the manager sent for each person who owed his master money. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil.’ The manager said to him, ‘Take your contract, sit down quickly, and write four hundred fifty gallons.’ Then the manager said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ He said, ‘One thousand bushels of wheat.’ He said, ‘Take your contract and write eight hundred.’ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted cleverly. People who belong to this world are more clever in dealing with their peers than are people who belong to the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it’s gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes.

Observation

Before you condemn the unjust steward, consider this: the economic system in Jesus’ time made it very difficult for poor farmers to succeed. They knew what it was like to fall into spiraling debt, never to recover. Many were offered cheap credit on their family farms but were unable to keep up with the payments and lost their land. That’s one reason why day laborers appear so often in the parables. When Jesus told the story, these people may have found themselves cheering for what was done, even if it was dishonest.

Application

Jesus concluded the parable by challenging those of us who consider ourselves to be “children of the light” to treat each other as well as those who seem less than honest appear to do.

Consider how you might work hard and not cut corners or change reality to earn all you can. You can do it the way that's honest and long-lasting, through ambition, attitude, and action.

Prayer

Lord, grant me wisdom and patience as I seek to be responsible in all things. Amen.

Friday, November 10

Scripture: Proverbs 13:11

Riches gotten quickly will dwindle,
but those who acquire them gradually become wealthy.

Observation

If you go to Proverbs looking for soul-stretching theological insights or dramatic narratives about the way God intersects with the human existence, you'll be sorely disappointed. Proverbs' great gift to us is that it provides practical wisdom for making our way through the mundane places and ordinary relationships of life.

Application

As fun as it might be to dream of becoming rich quickly, today's scripture from Proverbs reminds us that when it comes to earning all we can, nothing is more certain to produce riches than hard work.

Prayer

God who bestows daily blessings, bless me and mine with the ability and opportunity to work, to save, and to give. Amen.

Saturday, November 11

Scripture: James 1:2-8

My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. People like that should never imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord. They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways.

Observation

Jesus redefines "family" as whoever does God's will. The identity of James' audience is taken from Israel's history; they are the people of God. And like us, they are restored and yet challenged by life in a world that does not follow God's ways.

Application

Wisdom is God's gift that supports us in our times of trial. God is the source of all wisdom. The gift of wisdom is more about enabling us to act insightfully than giving us information. Can you recall a time when the wisdom of God carried you through a difficult financial situation?

Prayer

God of life, whether I'm dealing with great amounts or small, I count on you to direct me in gaining, saving and giving. Amen.