

## How Will You Measure Your Life? – 2. By How and What You Give

Matthew 25:14-19

November 12, 2023

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

We are in week two of a sermon series in which we are asking the question, how will you measure your life? The series title is taken from a book by Professor Clayton Christensen. He's not a preacher, but a Harvard Business school professor and he's asking people to evaluate how they are measuring their lives. So that is one of the resources we are using to answer this question but mostly, more importantly, we continue to look to the teachings of Jesus and ask how did Jesus tell us we should measure our lives and how will our lives be measured when we stand before God on the last day?

Last week we began by talking about one of the ways the world measures our lives is by our statistics, our sales figures, our profit margins, our touchdowns if we're a quarterback. But Jesus says that's not how you measure a life. Our lives will be measured by how well we loved. This is not a love of feelings but a love of action, a way of being where we put the needs of another person first to bless and encourage them.

So last week we looked at the parable of the Sower in which Jesus said there was a farmer who scattered seed. Those seeds represent the Word of God and God's will for our lives. And those seeds get planted into different types of soil which is a metaphor for the condition of our hearts. Some soil is hard and impenetrable. Some soil is shallow so the roots can never take hold and grow deep. Some soil that is filled with the seeds of weeds and thistles which represent the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth. And those weeds choke out the good seed.

But then there's that good soil that is rich and fertile. And when one grain of wheat is planted in good soil, it can produce a 30, 60 or even 100-fold harvest. And I challenged you to be the kind of people who produce a 100-fold harvest by joining in our 100 Acts of Kindness Challenge. I offered you one of these tokens as a reminder. You were to put this in your right pocket at the beginning of the day and hopefully, at least once every couple of days, it would remind you to take time to demonstrate loving kindness towards another person, and then you'd switch the token from your right pocket to your left. A reminder at the end of the day that you are a part of God's plan to change the world. So I'm just curious, how many of you have your token with you right now? If you didn't get one last week, we have a few extras and you can get one from an usher at the end of worship So last week, we talked about how well we love.

This week, we look at yet another way the world measures our lives and that is by how much money we make or how many possessions we have. We see this on displayed on several of the Forbes magazine covers over the years. Like, *America's Women Billionaires* and the *World's Billionaires* and *American's Richest Families*. Somehow, this seems like important information to us. We can't help but be curious about how we measure up to others. Money is the great measuring rod in our society. But it's not just about how much money we make, it is also what we buy with that money. And so, our possessions also become a measuring stick. Part of the challenge is that we live in a capital society, and we're grateful for the virtues of that, but at the same time, we recognize that there are some of the inherent problems with that as well.

For example, we live in a time where we can get what we want even if we can't afford it because we use credit cards. Right now, the average American has \$6,000 credit card debt, the highest in 10 years. The challenge with credit cards is that they support a lifestyle that we really can't afford, and we end up paying for yesterday's pleasures with tomorrow's money. And we keep living beyond our means because we are told that if we just have a little bit more, our lives will

be more fulfilled, and we'll measure up better. And so, we struggle with debt. And you know what increasing debt does? It causes increasing stress and one of the leading causes of divorce is finances. So this thing that was meant to be a blessing in our lives can ultimately end up destroying our lives if we aren't careful. And although we claim to be Christians, what can drive us throughout the week is our desire for more possessions or money.

Paul captures it this way in 1 Timothy, chapter 6, *Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.*

A few years ago, Pastor Adam Hamilton shared a conversation he had with a man who runs auctions, especially estate auctions, where a person's possessions, often a whole household of trinket, furniture, treasures, and collectibles, will be auctioned off at a special event. The auctioneer says he often talks to the family before the auction to give them a few words of warning about how this is going to feel. He tells them, *"We're going to take your life's work and dispose of it in 4 hours."* But that's only true if your entire life's work was acquiring stuff. If your life's work was pouring into other people and making the world a better place and investing in God's kingdom and loving people and giving to things that really matter, then you can't dispose of that in 4 hours. You can't take it with you. The only things you can take with you are the things that you give away.

So last week we talked about love. Today, we are going to talk about generosity, another measure of your life. Now, we are in our stewardship campaign here at Messiah Church, but I am not just talking about how much you give to the church or what those of you who call Messiah Church home, will write on your pledge card next week. I'm also talking about how you generally live your life. Are you generous towards servers when you go out to eat or do you calculate exactly how much of a tip you need to leave, down to the penny? Or with Christmas coming, do you wonder what's the minimum I can spend on my friends and family members this season? Or are you wondering how can I be as generous as I can be? How you use your time, your talent and your resources are all indicators of how generous of a person you are. So, in the end, when we think about that, the real measure of a person is not how much you had but what you did with what you had. And that's the point of today's parable, the Parable of the Talents.

This parable comes in the last week of Jesus' life. He is in the city of Jerusalem and it's Tuesday, and he knows by Thursday night he's going to be arrested and by Friday, he's going to be dead. And because he knows this, he's preaching with some urgency. These last five parables are called the Parables of Judgement. He's telling people, this is how your life will be measured when you get to the end.

A talent in Jesus' day was a monetary unit, equal to about 16 years of earnings for a common laborer. In today's market, it would be worth about \$680,000. So, it was a very large sum of money! And here, Jesus says that there was a wealthy man/a master who represents either God or Jesus and he's getting ready to leave on a trip. So, he calls 3 of his servants, now he's talking about you and me. And he says, I'm getting ready to leave but I'm going to entrust some of my wealth to you to manage while I'm gone. Then, when I return, I'm going to ask you what you did with what I trusted to you. And to one servant, he gives 5 talents which was in today's market about \$3.4 million. And to another 2 talents, which is about \$1.4 million and to the last, 1 talent which is about \$680,000 today.

Now part of what I love about this parable is its direct relations to things that many of us deal with with our financial planners. And what Jesus is saying is that all of us are financial managers

of God's resources. And so God has entrusted you with your life, the number of hours in your day, the influences you have, and the gifts that you have to change the world. All of these are the treasures that God has entrusted to you. These are the gifts of life, but you didn't bring them with you when you entered this world and you can't take them with you when you leave. And in the end, God is going to hold an accounting of your life and ask, what did you do with all that I gave you?

Jesus goes on, when the master returns after his trip and he asks the man with the 5 talents, what he did with his money. He said, "master, I doubled what you gave me." to which the master replies, "well done, good and faithful servant." And then servant who was given 2 talents, also doubled his master's money. Recognizing he was also faithful the master says to him, "well done, good and faithful servant." But the 3rd servant comes and says master, "here's what I did. I took your \$680,000 and buried it in a hole in the ground for safe keeping. And after 10 years, ta da, here it is."

Now, let's put ourselves in the master's shoes for just a minute and imagine that you have some money that you'd like to invest with a few different financial managers because you don't want to put all your money in one place. And so, you give some to a guy named Merrill and some to a guy named Edward and some to a guy named Charles. And after ten years you check back in and find out that 2 of the three doubled your money but the 3rd guy says, "Hey I just want you to know. Our strategy was to take your money and put it in a hole in the ground for safekeeping so, ta da, here it is." What would you say to that person? You'd probably say, "You're fired!" Right? And what Jesus says, his version of "you're fired" is, *take this worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and gnashing teeth.*

This person had been an unfaithful servant because they were entrusted with something they didn't use wisely. You've been entrusted with your life, your health, your brain, with your talents, your ability to generate resources and influence others to do the same. What are you doing with it? That's what Jesus is asking about how our lives will be measured.

So, let's talk for a moment about what generosity actually looks. Landon is 16 years old, a member of Messiah Church, a recent confirmand, an active member of our Messiah Youth group and a Scout. And he is attempting to raise \$10,000 to benefit one of our community partners, Interfaith Outreach Community Partner's annual fundraiser. He got this idea last Monday night at his scout meeting after hearing the story of another scout and former Messiah member, Collin Verbick. Many years ago when he was a teenager, Collin began sleeping outside consecutive nights in order to raise awareness and \$10,000 for homelessness. This past summer, we lost Collin, now a husband and dad, after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Landon was moved by Collin's story and so he is also now sleeping outside every night until he raises \$10,000. This is the parable of the talents in real life. Landon is using his influence to raise awareness, practice generosity, encourage other people and bear witness to his faith. I can just imagine God saying to Landon, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Can I ask you, what are you doing with the talents God has given you and how will you measure your life? Life is not about what you have but what you are giving back. I believe this. This is not something I just tell you the Sunday before we turn in our pledge cards next week trying to get you to turn in a bigger pledge. This is how life works. The joy that you are going to have in life is in part what you give away and how you help other people.

Which is why Christensen in his book quotes Gloria Steinem who says, *we can tell our values by looking at our checkbooks.* Jesus says it this way, *where your treasure is, there your heart*

*will be also. Luke 12:34. Where you spend your money tells you a lot about what is important to you in your life. Christensen says how you allocate your resources can make your life turn out exactly as you hope or very different from what you intend.*

Let me leave you with these words from the apostle Paul, written to Timothy to tell the people that , *They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they make take hold of the life that really is life.* 1 Timothy 6:18

When you have the wrong measurement for your life, you take hold of something that is not life-giving. But Christ tells us there is a different way and that's a life of generosity. Don't let your life's work be capable of being disposed of in 4 hours by an auctioneer. But instead make your life's work investing in other people and making the world a better place and in God's kingdom through the work on this church so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.

Let's pray: God, I thank you so much for these folks here today. Our desire is to measure our lives in the way that you will measure our lives at the end of our days. Help us to be faithful to you. Help us to be generous and willing to share. Help us, o Lord, to look for ways to invest in ways that make a difference in this world. And help us to be generous towards you. And as we prepare to fill out our commitment cards next week, would you help us to honor you with what we write on those cards. Take the commitments that we make, multiply them and use them to change the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 12, 2023**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Loving and generous God, as I read your Word today, teach me what it means to be a good and faithful servant so that my life produces a great harvest for you and for your kingdom. In Jesus's name, Amen.

### **Monday, November 13**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 20:1-15**

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard. "Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.' And they went. "Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?' " "Because nobody has hired us,' they replied. "He responded, 'You also go into the vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.' When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.' "But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?'

### **Observation**

In Jesus' startling story, some workers agreed to work all day for a *denarion*, a typical day's wage. Others joined in at various points during the day, including some who started just an hour before quitting time. The master paid them a *denarion*, which led the all-day workers to grumble. (We may identify with those all-day workers—this may not feel "fair.") Then Jesus said that the master (God) asked pointedly, "Are you resentful because I'm generous?"

### **Application**

Does the master's way of paying the workers in this story feel unfair to you? It was not unfair, of course. No one was underpaid; it was just that some received 'unreasonable' generosity. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul said Christ was treated as we deserved so that we would be treated as he deserved. In what ways does that "unfair" exchange draw your heart toward Christ?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, I'm not yet there, but you already see me and treat me as the person you made me to be. Thank you for your generosity to me. Keep growing that quality in my life. Amen.

### **Tuesday, November 14**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 25:14-28**

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant's ability. Then he left on his journey. "After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. "Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, 'Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I've gained five more.' "His master replied, 'Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.' "The second servant also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I've gained two more.' "His master replied, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.' "Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, 'Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours.' "His master replied, 'You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven't sown and that I gather crops where I haven't spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins.

### **Observation**

Three servants—two called "good and faithful," the third fired for being "wicked and lazy." A *talent* was a lot of money—up to 20 years of a typical worker's wages. But in Jesus' story, the servant with two *talents* was as faithful as the one with five. Jesus said our faithfulness to God shows in our willingness to use whatever resources of energy, time, skills, money, or other assets God gives us to bless others and build God's kingdom.

### **Application**

What resources has God placed in your life? How are you using those resources to serve the Kingdom of God and bless others? Are there any resources you have “buried in a hole in the ground,” so to speak? If so, how can you begin to use them actively for God’s purposes?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, I want to be a good and faithful servant—but, I admit, sometimes I’d also like to keep the resources you entrust to me all for myself. Teach me daily more about what it means for me to be good and faithful. Amen.

### **Wednesday, November 15**

#### **Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Proverbs 11:23-28**

Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, don’t be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them. You must generously lend them whatever they need. But watch yourself! Make sure no wicked thought crosses your mind, such as, The seventh year is coming—the year of debt cancellation—so that you resent your poor fellow Israelites and don’t give them anything. If you do that, they will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin. No, give generously to needy persons. Don’t resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the LORD your God’s blessing you in all you do and work at. Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That’s why I’m giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land.

The desires of the righteous end up well,  
but the expectations of the wicked bring wrath.  
Those who give generously receive more,  
but those who are stingy with what is appropriate will grow needy.  
Generous persons will prosper;  
those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.  
People curse those who hoard grain,  
but they bless those who sell it.  
Those who look for good find favor,  
but those who seek evil—it will come to them.  
Those who trust in their wealth will wither,  
but the righteous will thrive like leafy trees.

### **Observation**

In defending Mary, who generously anointed his feet with costly perfume before his death and burial, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 15:11 (John 12:4-8). His words have at times been misused to justify an uncaring spirit toward the poor—an impossible meaning when we read their full setting in Deuteronomy 15. The sages who compiled the Proverbs closely linked generosity with righteousness, praising those who trust in God’s values and share generously with people in need.

### **Application**

Following God means valuing and admiring God’s qualities and wanting to have them yourself (Matthew 5:48). When we serve a generous God, it makes sense that we will want to grow in our own practice of generosity. Have you ever felt (in the words of Deuteronomy 15) “hard-

hearted” or “tight fisted” toward poor people, and “resented” giving to help them? In what ways is God helping you feel better about “opening your hand generously” to “the needy among you”?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, help me trust you enough that I am able to “refresh others” from an overflowing heart, and to thrive more and more each day in the sunlight of your inexhaustible love. Amen.

### **Thursday, November 16**

#### **Scripture: Luke 16:10-15**

“Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven’t been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? If you haven’t been faithful with someone else’s property, who will give you your own? No household servant 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.”

The Pharisees, who were money-lovers, heard all this and sneered at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves before other people, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued by people is deeply offensive to God.”

### **Observation**

Israel in Jesus’ day (like most countries today) had a few extremely rich people, and lots who were very poor. Jesus’ message in today’s reading was clear, and it was controversial. Jesus challenged the values of the religious leaders who were among the rich, saying it is impossible to serve God and wealth. Those who saw all their wealth as a sign of God’s favor sneered. Jesus replied, “What is highly valued by people is deeply offensive to God.”

### **Application**

Scholar N.T. Wright wrote of this passage, “Money is not a possession, it’s a trust: God entrusts property to people and expects it to be used to his glory and the welfare of his children, not for private glory or glamour.” The Message said the religious leaders thought Jesus was “hopelessly out of touch.” Does Jesus’ teaching about worldly wealth and true riches seem “out of touch” to you? Does it challenge you? Does it inspire you?

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Master, your greatest blessing in my life is not my bank account, home, or car. It is your eternal love for me. Help me to grow in my willingness to use all my other resources to bless others. Amen.

### **Friday, November 17**

#### **Scripture: Luke 12:13-21**

Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?” Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.” Then he told them a parable: “A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things

you have prepared for yourself?' This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

### **Observation**

Jesus stated a basic principle of his kingdom in verse 15: "One's life isn't determined by one's possessions." He followed up with a parable. It was a simple story – a rich man, reaping a large crop, thought of nothing but how to keep it all, adding it to his already abundant supply. Absorbed with earthly wealth, he forgot that, when life ended, none of it would be of any use to him. Jesus knew better and urged his hearers to become "rich toward God."

### **Application**

Scholar William Barclay said this rich farmer made two crucial errors. First, "he never saw beyond this world." For a Christian, mortality is no longer something to fear (Hebrews 2:14-15)—but it is a reality to take seriously. In what ways are you planning and living for the time when this world's material possessions will no longer matter?

The farmer's second error, Barclay said, was that "he never saw beyond himself." In contrast, he cited Methodism's founder John Wesley: "At Oxford he had an income of 30 British pounds a year. He lived on 28 British pounds and gave 2 away. When his income went up to 60 pounds, 90 pounds and 120 pounds a year, he still lived on 28 and gave the rest away." In what practical ways do you look beyond yourself when you evaluate and make changes to your standard of living?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, whenever my life ends, I want my greatest treasure to be stored up with you, and not left behind for an auctioneer to dispose of. Guide me into the kind of life that is rich toward you. Amen.

## **Saturday, November 18**

### **Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-19**

Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: we'll be happy with food and clothing. But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal. But as for you, man of God, run away from all these things. Instead, pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. Compete in the good fight of faith. Grab hold of eternal life—you were called to it, and you made a good confession of it in the presence of many witnesses. I command you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and Christ Jesus, who made the good confession when testifying before Pontius Pilate. Obey this order without fault or failure until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. The timing of this appearance is revealed by God alone, who is the blessed and only master, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He alone has immortality and lives in light that no one can come near. No human being has ever seen or is able to see him. Honor and eternal power belong to him. Amen.

Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. When they do these things, they will save a treasure for



themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.

### **Observation**

Paul's first letter to Timothy ended by pointing to one of the "great reversals" Jesus' message brings. Some people in Timothy's church had lots of money. Paul didn't want this often-short-lived wealth to blind them to God, "who richly provides" for our well-being. After describing the spiritual dangers that go with a lust for money, Paul told Timothy, "Run for your life from all this" (verse 11, The Message).

### **Application**

How rich (or poor) are you, by the measure these verses suggest? If your "contentment quotient" is strong, reflect on how it got that way. What changes might disrupt your contentment and for what reasons? If your quotient is lower, ask God to help you raise it. Ask the most contented person you know what values and choices led toward contentment. Verse 19 said generosity, sharing and a wealth of good deeds allow God's people to "take hold of what is truly life." What moments have you had that let you know that generosity and sharing are key aspects of a life truly worth living?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, my TV, social media, most of the items in my mailbox and my emails push me toward measuring my life in terms of material things. I'm thankful the Bible points me to your very different values. Teach me how to live more fully by your measure of what is truly life. Amen.