

+ Luke 12:13-21 + ...And That's the Meaning of Life + 11th Sunday after Pentecost + 4 August 2013 +

The last sound of the bell for class rings down the empty hallway. Doors of classrooms close shut for class to begin. After about 15 minutes of silence, a student rushes down the hall to his classroom. He's late. He tries to quietly open the door and maybe even sneak into class if his professor has his back turned, but, of course, the door is at the front of the classroom right across from the professor's desk. Just as the door opens, the professor declares, "...And that's the meaning of life! Oh, I'm sorry you missed it." With his face turning red, the student slides into the nearest empty desk.

That long-promised explanation of the "meaning of life" from our professor never did come, but even in his joking around, he had a point. As we were training for the ministry, it was important for us to be there on time, because we were learning about the real "meaning of life". Through our study of God's Word, we were learning what gives meaning and fulfillment not only to our lives, but to the lives of those whom we'd one day serve.

We were learning about something for which everyone is searching, but so few actually find. You see, people naturally yearn to find meaning or purpose or fulfillment in their lives. There's something missing in their lives, and they can't seem to fill it. So they search all over and everywhere. They try to find meaning in their work, their job, their position in the company, but eventually that work comes to an end, and when retired, they're back looking for meaning. They try to find meaning in their home and family, but a day comes when the kids move out or it's time to move someplace smaller. They try to find meaning in their hobbies, their activities, their interests, but over time, hobbies discontinue, activities slow down, and interests become not so interesting.

Then there's the most common way of all where people try to find meaning and purpose for their lives. It's so common that they often don't realize that it's become the focus of their lives. They try to find meaning in what they have and own (or at least what they want). They try to find purpose for their lives in the size of their bank account (that if they reach a certain point, then they'll be happy). They try to find fulfillment in the abundance of their possessions, an abundance of stuff, yet just like all the ways I described earlier, eventually all that money and stuff proves to be meaningless, either leaving them unfulfilled or destroying them from within. In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus teaches us the true meaning of life, and it's no joke.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for his final Passover celebration. His reputation had grown so much that massive crowds were following him. Luke tells us ***"that a crowd of many thousands came together"***. So many people were clamoring for Jesus ***"that they were trampling on one another."*** (Luke 12:1) In the meantime, Jesus' enemies were doing all they could to oppose and discredit him, ***"to trap him in something he said"*** (Luke 11:54)

With all this going on around him, Jesus kept on teaching the crowds. Along the way, ***"someone from the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.'"*** Now it wasn't all that unusual for someone to bring a dispute forward to be decided by a respected rabbi. This man was in a dispute with his brother over the family inheritance. Their grief at the loss of their last living parent had quickly turned into greed when they found out how big the inheritance was going to be. Jesus, of course, knew the man's thoughts and intentions. He recognized the greed that was at the heart of this dispute and in the heart of this man.

So Jesus denied the man's request. ***"Friend, ...who appointed me a judge or arbitrator over you?"*** Then Jesus turned to the crowd and gave them a lesson on the meaning of life. Is the meaning of life found in what I have or at least, what I want for myself? Is the reason for my existence—keeping up with my neighbors and doing all I can to live a life of ease? Jesus' lesson is pretty clear. ***"Watch out and be on guard against all greed because one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions."***

To emphasize his point even further, Jesus told them a parable. ***"A rich man's land was very productive."*** It was so productive that ***he thought to himself, "What should I do, since I don't have anywhere to store my crops?"*** Here's what I'll do. ***I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones and store all my grain and my goods there. Then I'll say to myself, 'You're all set. You're good to go with many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.'"***

Now on the face of it, it sounds like this man had a pretty good plan. The Lord had blessed him with a bumper crop, so much that he'd be able to retire early and live off that crop for many years. He made plans to build bigger barns and storage sheds for his crops and goods. He'd be able to enjoy himself in retirement. Was there anything wrong with him making plans? No, but he actually failed to plan for the future. Was it wrong to retire or

to **“eat, drink, and enjoy”** himself? No, but the man was so focused on himself and what he was going to do, that he forgot about the Giver of those abundant gifts which he now enjoyed.

Sadly, the man didn't realize that in spite of his recently abundant wealth, his earthly life would end that night. At that moment, God said to him, **“You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared—whose will they be?”** God was nowhere to be found in this man's plans, and the man had no plans to include God in his future either. That made him a fool, because the man's future was now. His priorities, his purpose, his values, the meaning of his life were centered on storing up a lifetime of treasures for himself, but when his life came to an end, what good were they? No U-Haul trailer filled with prized possessions would be hitched to the back of his hearse. Jesus warned the people, **“That's how it is with the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”**

Jesus' words are harsh, but perhaps they sting a little bit more because coveting—that is, having a sinful desire for what does not belong to us—and greed come all too easily to us living here in 21st century America. Like those crowds in Jesus' day, you and I need to hear Jesus' warning against storing up treasures for ourselves. Now Jesus isn't saying we should not save or prepare for retirement or enjoy the material blessings that our God has so graciously given to us. Instead Jesus warns us to avoid being like that rich fool—devoting your entire life to getting what you want when you want it—a life devoted to me, myself, and I where I constantly want more because what I have just isn't enough. We want more, and our stuff becomes our god. Martin Luther explains, **“This is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no God.”** (*Large Catechism* 1:7-8)

Is that really what life is all about? In the things I have and get? Even if that's so, what happens to all you have when you're gone? Someone else gets it. It's auctioned off, sold, donated, gifted, trashed, or set aside for safekeeping. You and I don't get to keep for eternity what our Lord has so graciously given us in this life, yet in him, we find not only the Source of every blessing, but also the secret to “the meaning of life”.

Consider for a moment who told that parable and what he was doing at the time. Before us is a Savior, whose eternal, undying love for selfish, greedy sinners caused him to never forget his purpose in coming to this world. It was never about him. This Jesus is on his way not just to his final Passover celebration, but to a rough, heavy cross waiting for him on a lowly, skull-like hill outside the city of Jerusalem. He goes there to die for your coveting and your greed, my coveting and my greed. He goes to pay the price demanded by a holy God for the selfish sins of unsatisfied, discontented human beings who think life is all about the stuff we have and get. He goes to sacrifice himself for those whose lives and hearts and minds and eternity have been ruined by greed and a longing for selfish gain, and yet he goes because he loves you.

In that same love, he sounds this warning against coveting and greed because he cares for your soul. In that love, he also lives a life of perfect contentment in your place and mine. He lives and then he dies to give you and me new hearts filled with real, joyful satisfaction through his Gospel. He goes to Jerusalem to give us what we cannot find anywhere else in this life or in this world—meaning, purpose, fulfillment, satisfaction, and a heavenly inheritance that will neither perish, spoil, or fade that he alone earned for you and me.

That joyful satisfaction in Christ is then our motivation to be **“rich toward God”**, to include him in our plans, to see him as the Source of every physical and spiritual blessing you and I have. Joyful satisfaction in Christ leads to “thanksgiving”—a life of thanksgiving for all God has given you through Jesus. Seeing what you have and what you earn through that joyful satisfaction in Christ will cause you to see everything differently. Everything you have and receive is a gift from God's gracious hand. Use it to glorify the God who forgives you for your selfish greed. Everything you earn is a gift from God's gracious hand. As you plan ahead for the future, include your gracious Lord in those plans. How will he play an important role in the days, weeks, months, and years to come whether you're working or retired, whether you have kids at home or grandkids living elsewhere, whether you're single or married or widowed, whether you have a large bank account or small? How can every day of the rest of your life whether that's 24 hours or 48 years be devoted to saying “Thank you” to the God who has given you everything in Christ?

That's “thanksgiving”, and in the end, that's what makes life meaningful. You have satisfaction in Christ. Rejoice in that. Give thanks for that. Life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions, but in the abundance of thanksgiving every single day for God's indescribable grace through our Savior Jesus Christ, who will bring you to heaven someday. My friends, that's the meaning of life. Amen.