

## **WHAT GIVES MEANING TO LIFE? (Matthew 26:17-25)**

Have you ever asked yourself, “What is the meaning of life? What is life all about?”

In the cartoon strip *Peanuts*, Lucy says, “Life is a mystery, Charlie Brown.” Then, she asks, “Do you know the answer?”

Charlie Brown stands erect and replies, “Be kind. Don’t smoke. Be prompt. Smile a lot. Eat sensibly. Avoid cavities, and mark your ballot carefully . . . Avoid too much sun. Send overseas packages early. Insure your belongings, and try to keep the ball low . . .”

Before he could get out another platitude, Lucy interrupts him, “Hold real still,” she says, “because I’m going to hit you a very sharp blow upon the nose!”

I imagine that all of us feel a bit like Lucy when people give us simplistic, easy answers to life’s difficult, confusing, and intractable problems. If we are going to find fulfillment in life, each of us must discover what makes life worthwhile and what gives it meaning.

We saw in last Sunday’s message that Judas made a deal with the powers that be to betray his Rabbi, Jesus. There are many theories as to why he did what he did. Regardless which one you choose to believe, the bottom line is that Judas lost touch with the real meaning of life. He adopted for himself a substitute meaning.

Many of us do the same thing. For some, it might be power, or fame, or riches, or something else, but in the end, it won’t satisfy, just as it did not for Judas.

When you choose for yourself a meaning for life that does not match with the real meaning of life, there will be dis-appointment, disillusionment, and the consequences may be fatal. I don’t want to get ahead of myself, but in the next chapter of Matthew we see that out of profound guilt for what he had done, Judas took his own life. He died a suicide.

When people lack real meaning in life, it is not uncommon for them to end theirs. In the 20-year span between 1999 and 2018, the suicide rate went up 35%. Many public health officials fear that the COVID-19 pandemic will cause suicide rates to skyrocket even further. It is clear that the pandemic is worsening the mental health crisis. When people are not thinking clearly, they are at risk of doing the unthinkable.

There are many in our culture who are searching for meaning and purpose, but they are adrift on sea of aimlessness. We need to help them get in touch with what makes life worth living, but the first step is for us to make the same discovery.

When you have a stable, growing relationship with Jesus, you have a reason to get up in the morning. That relationship will sustain you through the day. It will even help you sleep well at night.

I believe our text—Matthew 26:17-25—offers clues as to what gives meaning to life. We are going to look at three related truths.

### **An Eagerness to Serve Gives Meaning to Live**

I want you to notice in v. 17 that there were among Jesus’ band of disciples some who

didn't wait for Jesus to come to them with an assignment; they went to Jesus and basically said, "Tell us what to do. We are ready to serve."

The disciples knew that Jesus would want to observe the Passover meal together with them. From their vantage point, that is why they came to Jerusalem. Of course, Jesus had a bigger and better one, and it would soon become clear to them.

I imagine they had celebrated this meal together the past couple of years. So far, however, Jesus hadn't said anything about where they would have this meal together. Apparently, they had been spending the nights of this week just outside of the City. We don't know just where for sure, but the evidence suggests it wasn't in Jerusalem proper where they had been sleeping.

It was expected, however, that if you came to Jerusalem for Passover that you would have the Passover meal somewhere in the City, but Jesus had not told them where.

You might be wondering what this Passover meal was all about, what its purpose was. Centuries before, God had sent Moses to Egypt for the express purpose of freeing His people from their bondage. For many years they had been enslaved by the Pharaoh. Moses went to speak to the Egyptian king. He delivered the message of God, "Let My people go." Ten times he spoke that command, and ten times Pharaoh hardened his heart and said, "No." After each time the answer "no" was given, God sent a plague upon the land. Each time the plague was different: the water of the Nile turning blood red; an infestation of frogs, gnats, flies; livestock dying; boils upon the people; hail; locusts; darkness.

The tenth plague was the death angel coming through the land. God told Moses to warn His people to kill a lamb, and then take the blood of that lamb and put it on the doorposts and above the door of their house. When the death angel came, He would see the blood of the lamb and pass over that house. No harm would come to the inhabitants of the house where the blood had been posted. Whenever the death angel came to a house that was not covered by the blood, the firstborn of that house would die.

The Egyptians, of course, did not put the lamb's blood around and over the doors of their homes. When the death angel came every first-born child, adult, and even the first born of their livestock died. There was great mourning throughout the land for there was not a single house where at least someone had not died. After that tenth plague occurred, the Pharaoh told Moses to take his people and leave Egypt.

From that time on, the people were commanded to eat this Passover meal to commemorate the great deliverance God had worked for His people.

The disciples were aware that certain preparations had to be made. The feast required specific items to be present. **They would need:**

- **A bowl of salt water.** This was meant to remind the observers of the tears shed by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt due to the hardship they endured.
- **A collection of bitter herbs.** This was a reminder of the bitterness of slavery.
- **A paste made of apples, dates, pomegranates, and nuts.** This symbolized how the Hebrew slaves had to make bricks from the clay.
- **Sticks of cinnamon.** They were added to the tasty mixture to remind them how

that bricks were made from clay and straw.

- **Four cups of wine** to remind them of the four promises found in Exodus 6:6-7 (I will bring you out; I will deliver you; I will redeem you; I will take you to be My people).

We are not told in the gospel accounts whether Jesus and His disciples ate lamb when they observed the Last Supper, but since it was a Passover meal, it stands to reason that they did. The lamb would have to be taken to the Temple, slain, and its blood offered in sacrifice to God. Then, the lamb would have to be cooked.

The table would have to be prepared with the appropriate dishes and cups. So, some of the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Tell us where to go, and we will do what needs to be done.”

I wonder, are you waiting for Jesus to tap you on the shoulder, secretly hoping that He won't? Or, do you enter into His presence with a raised hand saying, “Here I am, Lord. Use me. Send me. Show me where you want me to go and what you want me to do”?

There is a difference between being willing to serve if called upon, and being eager to serve and volunteering to serve your Master.

Let me share a couple of quotes. The first comes from pastor/author Steve Sjogren. He wrote:

We love, serve, and care for others because that is normal behavior for people who are filled with God's Spirit. We are Christians. Christ was the ultimate servant. We can't help but serve because the Spirit of the Servant has filled our hearts. When we serve, we are just being who we naturally are.

Serving, however, is not natural to the life that is not led by the Spirit of God. Those who are not being led by God's Spirit would much rather be the ones served rather than ones serving.

In his book, *The Volunteer Revolution*, Bill Hybels wrote:

Most of us want to live lives of purpose. We want to give ourselves to a worthy cause. But years of bombardment by the messages of a self-serving culture have confused us. *Indulge yourself. Fulfill your desires. Satisfy your appetites. Pursue your pleasure. It's all about you.*

Given such messages, it's easy to understand our fear that investing time and energy into serving God and others will diminish our lives. What will really happen, we wonder, if we leave the comfort of the spectator stands and get dirty playing on the fields of servanthood?

You will never find the true meaning in life, and you will never experience the true joy God means for you to have if your focus is turned inward. Turn outward. Focus on helping others as a representative of Christ. That is where meaning is discovered. That is when joy is experienced. Jesus taught, “It is when you lay down your life for My sake that you find it.”

Paul's letter to the Romans is arguably the greatest letter he ever wrote. It is filled with

incredible, Christian teaching and insight. In his introduction to that letter, Paul says nothing about his education, nothing about his experience, nothing about his qualifications, nothing about his standing in the early, Christian community. Paul begins his letter this way: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.”

That is where meaning and purpose are found—in serving God and others because by serving others you are serving God. By the way, there is a huge difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. When you choose to serve, you get to decide who you will serve, when you will serve, how you will serve, and how long you will serve. When you choose to be a servant, however, you give up the right to make all of those decisions. Our goal is not to serve; it is to be a servant.

### **A Readiness to Give Gives Meaning to Life**

From Luke’s account of this story we learn that Jesus sent Peter and John into the City to make preparations for the Passover meal. We are not told that they are the two who volunteered to help. They may have been so. That stands to reason since they are the ones Jesus sent, but we aren’t specifically told that. Regardless, Jesus sent Peter and John into Jerusalem to make the needed preparations.

Jesus also tells them to look for a man carrying a jar of water. They are to follow that man and enter the house that he enters. Once they enter that house, they will find the master of the house, and they are to tell the master of the house that the Teacher wants to know where the room is that the Teacher and His students are to use for the Passover.

Seeing a man carry a jar of water would have caught their eyes because carrying water was usually the job of a woman rather than a man. By the way, they wouldn’t have used their hands and arms to carry the water. That would have been very inefficient. They would have simply placed the water jar on top of their head. So, here is this man walking carrying a jar of water on top of his head. The disciples spot him, and they just follow him, and he takes them right to the person with whom they need to speak.

We are not supplied the name of this person. He remains anonymous, but he is known by God. He appears to be a man of means. He has at least one servant who carries water for him, and he has a room that will accommodate Jesus and His 12 disciples.

Have you ever stopped to wonder how Jesus and 12 men were able to travel together for three to three and a half years together going from town to town while none of them had paying jobs during that time? It is not like they charged admission for people to hear Jesus speak. Today, he could make an enormous amount of money on speaking fees alone. Jesus didn’t heal a person, then hold out His hand and say, “That will be 100 denarii.” He never required payment for anything He did. He still doesn’t, by the way.

Neither does this church. We don’t charge admission for a church service. We don’t put your name on a prayer list at a price. We never have a two for one sale on baptisms. This church operates on the gifts of those who choose to support it.

The ministry of Jesus operated the same way. There were people who believed in what Jesus was doing, and they supported His ministry with their gifts. Unlike how it is for you and me, their gifts were not tax deductible. They weren’t supplied a giving

statement at the end of the year. They gave freely, willingly, and I am sure many of those who gave did so generously.

Giving to support what God is doing in our world is not an obligation. It's an opportunity. It is not a burden. It is truly a blessing.

It is reported that Winston Churchill, the great Prime Minister of England, once said, "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give."

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to give to support the work of God. He used the example of the believers in Macedonia to make his appeal. He says of them:

In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us (vv. 2-5).

Spending your money on stuff, on acquiring possessions, on experiences and entertainment, may provide you with temporary pleasure, but it will not add meaning to your life. Giving to support the work of God will.

Let me share an illustration from Pastor Ben Rogers:

When you go to a doctor for your annual check-up, he or she will often begin to poke, prod, and press various places, all the while asking, "Does this hurt? How about this?"

If you cry out in pain, one of two things has happened. Either the doctor has pushed too hard, without the right sensitivity. Or, more likely, there's something wrong, and the doctor will say, "We'd better do some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt there!"

So it is, when pastors preach on financial responsibility, and certain members cry out in discomfort, criticizing the message and the messenger. Either the pastor has pushed too hard. Or perhaps there's something wrong. In that case, I say, "My friend, we're in need of the Great Physician, because it's not supposed to hurt there."

Some people say, "Give 'til it hurts." I don't understand that saying because giving is not supposed to hurt. It should be a source of joy because it is one way of giving meaning to life.

### **A Willingness to Change Gives Meaning to Life**

Look again at vv. 20-25. John supplies a wealth of details that Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not. John tells us that before the events I just read, Jesus got a basin of water, clothed himself in a towel and proceeded to wash the feet of each of His disciples. That means He would have washed Judas' feet also.

I can just imagine Jesus on bended knee before Judas. As He is washing the feet of

His betrayer, He looks into eyes of Judas with love, and Judas turns His eyes away. At that moment, Judas could have said, “I can’t do it. Forgive me, Lord. I’m sorry.”

After Jesus announced that one of the twelve would betray Him, instead of asking hypocritically and insincerely, “Is it I, Rabbi,” Judas could have said, “I know it’s me, but I’m not going to do it. I just can’t.

But he wasn’t willing to change his plans, and he was either unwilling or unable to change his heart. The word *repent* means *change*. When we are headed in the wrong direction, we need to make a U-turn. We need to change the direction we are going and start heading in the right direction.

Jesus could have said, “One of you is going to betray Me, and that person is Judas.” He didn’t do that for two reasons, First, had He done so, Judas might not have made it out of the room alive, but second, I think Jesus wanted each disciple to examine his own heart.

A willingness to change begins with a willingness to examine. Are you willing to take a long, hard, and honest look at your own heart?

When the Lord points out areas of weakness and sin and disobedience, are you willing, with His help, to correct those parts of your heart and life and bring them under the Lordship of Christ?

According to Plato, his teacher Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

We need to examine our hearts with the commitment to change what needs to be changed. That takes courage.

John R.W. Stott was an Anglican priest, theologian, author, and a respected leader in the evangelical world. In 2005, *Time* magazine named him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In his lifetime he wrote over 50 books. He was a Chaplain to the Queen of England and a close friend to Billy Graham.

He died in July of 2011 at the ripe age of 90 years young. Before his death, he gave a last word of counsel to his assistant. He simply said, “Do the hard thing.” Stott believed that choosing the easy trail, the road most taken, and the path of least resistance can only end in mediocrity.

I can think of nothing harder than honestly examining your life and changing what needs to be changed.

I know that deep down you yearn to live a meaningful life. To do so, be eager to serve, ready to give, and willing to change.