

The Good Life

2nd Weekend of Easter – April 2/3, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Matthew 6:25-33 (NRSV)

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?
²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?
²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,
²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.
³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?
³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’
³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.
³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

John 10:7-10 (NRSV)

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.
⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.
¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Despite our prosperity and our freedoms, we often seem to be more miserable than ever. We long for “the good old days” when life was simpler, better, and more fulfilling - when it was actually anything but the sort. We live our lives seeking what we think is the Good Life, but do we truly know what constitutes the Good Life? What is the life to which Jesus points us?

We spend our lives in the pursuit of the good life. Each of us has certain ideas about what that means. Money? Health? Family? Possessions? We might even be tempted to say one thing while we actually pursue another. In the coming weeks, we will be taking a journey toward a deeper and truer understanding of the Good Life. There can be no better place to begin this journey than with Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount.¹

All these things will be given to you

I’ve always concentrated on the “do not worry” theme in today’s passage from Matthew. Don’t worry, don’t worry. Yeah sure, I’ve thought to myself.

Average People Better Off . . . But

In *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Gregg Easterbrook documents the trends of American and European life since the end of World War II. On page after page, Easterbrook demonstrates that just about every objective indicator of social welfare, from per-capita income to home size to education levels, have trended upward with hardly any interruption. Yet, in a 1996 poll, 52% of respondents said the U.S. was worse off now than when their parents were growing up and 60% expected things to get worse still. Only 15% felt things were improving. This was in the midst of an economic boom and before 9/11. The story of the last fifty years has been one of the average person getting better and better off, of practically everything getting better – everything except happiness!

In 1950, about 60% of Americans said they were “happy” and that figure is unchanged today. In 1950, 7.5% of people described themselves as “very happy.” This has fallen to about 6% today and continues to fall. Of course, we can’t be too sure exactly what we mean by happiness. Every study on happiness needs an asterisk. But still, ask yourself. Are you happy? Are you as happy as you imagined that you would be at this point in your life? Are you as happy as you think you ought to be?

In the coming weeks, we’ll take a look at some keys to happiness that are emerging from some of the latest psychological and sociological studies. The answers will surprise you – or perhaps not, since you are a Christian!

¹The collection of Jesus’ teachings referred to as the Sermon on the Mount is from Matthew 5-7. It is the longest block of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels. This passage expresses the core of Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God.

Perhaps that explains why I paid so little attention to the last verse: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” I paid little attention, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section! In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, “strive” is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God’s kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: “This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one’s existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one’s heart.” Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God’s rule in our hearts?

The Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, “strive first for the kingdom of God,” what is he talking about? It is a lot less abstract than you probably think and, no, it isn’t a place in your heart. The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus’ day waited for the coming of this kingdom – an actual kingdom. When God again reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . and the Jews had waited for a long time.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ very first words are a blazing proclamation:

‘The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!’

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God’s kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God’s glory was shining upon them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom or tell us to strive for it?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, “Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way.” The kingdom of God is present, but not fully. We are to strive to live as if God’s kingdom is fully present, leading lives of righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. From this will flow our heart’s true desire.

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. Thus, even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God’s law. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God’s moral will, for that is true righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount is an extended block of Jesus’ teachings about the nature of God’s will for our lives, about what it means to be righteous, to do right in God’s sight.

Needs and wants

Jesus says if we strive first for God’s kingdom, then “all these things will be given to you as well.” What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn’t speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët-Chandon, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making “wants” into seeming “needs.” To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need “is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want,” leading to “a blurring of needs and wants.” The result is what he calls the “tyranny of the unnecessary.”²

If we are going to find our way to the Good Life, to the abundant life that Jesus promises and desires for us, we have to begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey must begin with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace of God, such transformation can be ours.

²Quoted in Easterbrook’s book, *The Progress Paradox*, p 136. (see the page one text box)

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the Good Life)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Deuteronomy 30 God is faithful and desires that his people choose life, the Good Life. This begins with God's Law, the expression of God's moral will.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Kings 3 Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Note how God promises Solomon more than Solomon ever imagined, so long as Solomon follows God's Law.</p>
<p>Day 3 Psalm 16 A song of trust and security in God - "You show me the path of life."</p>	<p>Day 4 Proverbs 3:13-33 The true wealth and the true security</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 Paul writes about the shape of a life pleasing to God</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy began this week, but it is still not too late to join a class. To learn more, simply go to www.standrewccl.org

Classes include *Get a Life: Debunking the Six Myths in the Quest for Contentment* (with Rev. Self), *First Place: Bringing Balance to the Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Mental* (with Rev. Self), *Christianity and Other Religions* (with Eric Roberson), *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World* (with Scott Engle), *Genesis: In the Beginning, God* (with Frankey Commer), *The Gospel of John – Part 2* (with Monty Moore), and *The Spirit-Filled Life* (with Scott Engle).

April Book Recommendation

The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse,
by Gregg Easterbrook

This is the book I discuss in the page one text box of today's study. Easterbrook is an accomplished writer and researcher with a reputation for evenhandedness and accuracy. His survey of the American culture is heavily footnoted and well-indexed. I think you'll find it very thought-provoking, especially as you read through his insights into the anxieties that characterize much of our lives. As a Christian, I'm sure that you will anticipate some of his conclusions about the place of kindness and gratitude in our search for happiness.

**A New Six-Week Teaching Series with Scott Engle begins this week
at 9:30 in Wesley Hall – Join Us!**

The Good Life: Biblical Perspectives on Abundant Living

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Good Life. What is it? You might begin by discussing what *you* would mean by the phrase. Then imagine that you are a public opinion researcher. What do you think most people would mean by “the Good Life?” Do you think that the responses of Christians would differ from non-Christians? How might they differ? What do you make of the fact that market researchers can find very little difference between the lives led by committed Christians (those who would say that they are trying to live as a disciple and attend church regularly) and those who are not?

Striving for the kingdom of God. This can seem so abstract. How can we make it more concrete? Discuss my analogy to living by U.S. law even in a lawless land. Is the analogy helpful? How? What do you think it means to be strive for “righteousness?” Could it be as plain as always seeking to do what is right? How do we know what is right? What does doing right have to do with achieving the Good Life? If you think of God's Law as a list of arbitrary rules, it may be hard to see the connection between doing right and the Good Life. But if God's Law shows us the way toward being truly human, then the connection is clearer.

Discuss the “tyranny of the unnecessary.” How might we more clearly distinguish between our needs and our wants? Where do we begin in the reshaping of our desires?