

The Game of LIFE

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

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Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV)

¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD . . .”

Psalms 16:11

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

We all play what could be called the game of life, but do we truly know the rules or what constitutes winning? How does our Father want us to play the game?

When I was a boy, board games were popular. I can remember hot summer days spent playing sandlot baseball in the morning followed by a few hours of frantic high-stakes monopoly on a screened-in front porch in the heat of the afternoon. And yes, we sweaty fourth-graders always put money in the middle of the board. There was nothing more exciting than hitting the big score!

I can remember playing the game of LIFE when I was older, but as I recall, we didn’t play it much. I think the whole go-to-college-get-married thing was just a bit much for an about-

to-be teen boy. And as I got older, the game seemed pretty boring and way too dependent on luck.

I wish I could say that I recognized the problem of having a game in which winning means becoming a millionaire. But, no, I would have been coming from exactly the same place as the game designers. I loved the TV show, *The Millionaire*, and fantasied about Michael Anthony showing up at my door and handing me a tax-free check for a million dollars. It took a long time for me, but I think I'm finally learning how to play the game of life and what it means to "win."

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). Certainly, the younger son in Jesus' parable had a long list of all the great things money could buy.

Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth when he spoke of "all things," I'm also pretty sure 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."

If we are going to win the game of life as designed by God, 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.

How's it working for you?

Whatever your approach to life, my question to you would be, "How's it working for you?" Given the countless bookstore shelves filled with self-help books of one sort or another, I'd guess that many people would answer the question, "Not too well, really" or "Not as I had dreamed it would."

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? Do you feel like you're playing the game of life well.

The Parable of a Father and Two Sons

One of the most familiar of all Jesus' parables, you probably know today's scripture passage as "The Parable of the Prodigal¹ Son." The trouble with this title or any other is that the title

¹ "Prodigal" is not a word most of us use. It means to spend lavishly or foolishly.

immediately takes your attention to one character or aspect of the story. But, I have on my desk nine different commentaries on this parable and each one takes a somewhat different tack. Here's some background that may help you to see the surprises.

- This parable and the two that immediately precede it in Luke's gospel are Jesus' response to chattering among some Pharisees who are appalled that Jesus eats with tax collectors and assorted sinners. Tax collectors were despised by Jews because they worked as "entrepreneurs" who would collect as much money as they could, send to Rome what the empire required, and then keep the rest. They were seen as Jews who had sold-out to the pagan oppressors.
- When the younger son asks for his inheritance, it would have been shameful and humiliating for the father. The son is dishonoring his father, in violation of Torah. It is as if he wishes the father dead. Indeed, in the original Greek, the father literally divides his *bios*, his "life," between the two sons. Jesus' listeners would have understood how much the father had been shamed, making the father's joyful and unconditional welcome all the more shocking. Indeed, most listeners probably thought that the father had been pampering an immoral and poorly raised son.
- We all know that Jews don't eat pork. But under the OT law, Jews were forbidden from even touching the carcass of a dead pig (Leviticus 11:7-8). Jesus shows the younger brother caring for swine (and even willing to eat what they eat!) so that Jesus' listeners will understand that the young man could sink no lower. He had rendered himself unclean and placed himself outside the covenant with God. Jesus' listeners would have been happy for the story to end there and probably expected it to. The wayward son had gotten what he was due for dishonoring his father.
- When the younger son returns, the father runs to greet him. Running was seen as undignified for an elderly Jewish man. Given the typical attire, he would have had to grab up the hem of his long robe and go charging down the path! The father gives the son the family ring and sandals because they are both symbols that the father is welcoming him as a son, even though the younger son has said he'd be happy to return home as a hired hand. To Jesus' listeners, the father's complete and unquestioning welcome would have been shocking and offensive; doesn't the father have any pride!
- The elder son's behavior is also very insulting to the father. His refusal to enter the house or even speak to his father was an offense that would warrant a beating! Note that Jesus doesn't tell us the response of the elder son. The parable ends with the conclusion up in the air.

Playing the game to "win"

The game of LIFE is won by the person who ends the game with the most money. In our parable, the younger son seemed to be playing a different sort of game. Whoever can squander the most money on passing pleasures wins. Or perhaps he thought the winner would be the one willing to trash the most important relationships in their lives.

But the father shows a very different way to live, to play the game. It is the path of grace and forgiveness. It is God's path. As the psalmist writes, "You [God] show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

When the father goes running down the path to sweep his young son up in his arms, all forgiven, he is enacting God's own grace and forgiveness of you and me. Surely, as we contemplate this "game of life" and the path we should seek, we can't imagine that God gave the life of his own son so that we would be free to accumulate wealth for its own sake or to squander our lives on all the transitory pleasures that the world sets before us.

In the coming weeks, we'll look at various aspects of our lives, consider how well they are working, and strive to understand the path that God sets before us, so that we may walk in his ways and his alone.

Jesus and the Life Worth Striving For

Jesus had a lot to say about life and our strivings:

- “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).
- “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33, from the Sermon on the Mount)

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.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. If you’ve ever played the game of LIFE, reflect on your personal memories of playing the game. Did you enjoy playing this particular game? Why or why not?
2. If the younger son in Jesus’ parable had created a board game called LIFE before leaving home, what instruction would he give? How might his game rules have changed after he returned home? How would the older brother have set up the same board and rules?
3. With the understanding that the father in Jesus’ parable represents God’s perspective, what instructions would the father give his sons as to what it takes to “win” the game of life?
4. What does the way you are choosing to live your life today say about your understanding of what it takes to win at the game of LIFE? How is that working for you?
5. Write down a new set of instructions for yourself, incorporating the father’s perspective in Luke 15 of what it will mean for you to “win” at the game of LIFE in the future.
6. What changes will you need to make to follow this new set of instructions?
7. What difference will following this new set of instructions make in your life?

Daily Bible Readings

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.

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| <p>Monday, 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>Tuesday, 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>Wednesday, Psalm 16: A song of trust and security in God – "You show me the path of life."</p> | <p>Thursday, Proverbs 3:13-33: True wealth and true security</p> |
| <p>Friday, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12: Paul writes about the shape of a life pleasing to God.</p> | <p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p> |

