

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024

LUKE 12:13–21. (EHV)

Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because a man’s life is not measured by how many possessions he has.” He told them a parable: “The land of a certain rich man produced very well. He was thinking to himself, ‘What will I do, because I do not have anywhere to store my crops?’ He said, ‘This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will tell my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your soul will be demanded from you. Now who will get what you have prepared?’ That is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

What do you want out of life?

I remember when it started getting really popular to draw up Mission-Vision-Values statements. It started as a trend in secular institutions and then it seemed to hit the church like a tidal wave. Everyone was being told they should draw up Mission-Vision-Values statements. I got sick of it in a hurry, most on the church side of the matter, since I thought the Church’s mission had always been crystal clear. But I’m sure the movement wouldn’t have happened if it didn’t seem to fill a need. Apparently a bunch of businesses and institutions realized one day they had no idea why they existed, and so they wanted a sense of purpose and direction.

Even though I personally think the whole Mission-Vision-Values thing is overhyped with businesses and institutions, at some point it is vitally important to ask yourself, “What is my mission in life? What do I want out of life?”

Today, Ash Wednesday, is an especially good day to ask and answer that question. Today we are reminded that we are dust, and to dust we will return. That fact should color how we answer that question: What do we want out of life?

Jesus was in the middle of teaching the people, when suddenly a man from the crowd called out to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” This question seems to come out of nowhere, but I can’t imagine that this man was totally ignorant of who Jesus was or what he taught. I’m guessing that this man thought he had justice on his side, and that Jesus would therefore be on his side, because Jesus was just. Not only that, but his brother must have been there with him, and the man must have thought that his brother would listen to Jesus. If both brothers were there listening to Jesus, and if both brothers respected Jesus, then how bad could the man’s request have been?

Well, it was bad, not because it’s bad to have possessions and to receive inheritances, but because it reflected that the man wanted the wrong thing out of life. He thought the purpose of life was to get as much stuff as you could. He wasn’t concerned about his brother’s integrity or relationship with God. He was concerned that there was some property out there that he could have that he didn’t have yet, and he thought that Jesus could be the way to get it.

So Jesus told him and the crowd, “Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because a man’s life is not measured by how many possessions he has.”

He then went on to tell a parable. It was the parable of a man whose land produced one whale of a bumper crop that year. It produced so many crops that he literally didn’t know what to do with them or where to put them.

But then he realized that the purpose of his life had been fulfilled, as he understood it. His purpose was to work hard enough and do what needed to be done so that, maybe one day, life would serve him, rather than him serving life. And now, here was his chance. So he told himself, “This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will tell my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry.’”

What about us? Is that what we want out of life? If you had the chance to retire today and do nothing but take it easy, eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of your life, would you take it? Are you seeking to be served by life out of love for yourself, or are you seeking to be of service to life out of love for God? I’m over forty now; retirement is still a ways away, but it’s closer than it used to be, and it pops up in my mind more. In my retirement plans, am I hoping to have life serve me? Or am I hoping in retirement to be freed up to be of service to my family and others in different ways, as long as God gives me ability, or if I don’t have the ability, to be of service to others precisely by retiring and letting someone more capable take over?

Would you like to say that seeking to be served by life out of love for yourself is not your purpose, but you’re not certain if it’s true? There’s a saying: Follow the money. If you’re wondering why people are moving where they’re moving, if you’re wondering why you’re seeing the ads you’re seeing, if you’re wondering why politicians are pushing the agendas they’re pushing, follow the money. Same here. If you’re wondering what your purpose actually is, follow your wealth. Follow your wealth of money. Follow your wealth of time. Follow your wealth of ability. Where does it go? To whom or what is it dedicated?

God says that our life shouldn’t be about amassing treasure for ourselves, but it should first and foremost be about being rich toward him. Is that our first thought when we get paid? Our first thought when we enroll in a school, graduate from a school, get a new job, learn a new skill, or enter some other new chapter of our life? Is assembling with our fellow believers around God’s word our first thought at the beginning of each week? If it’s a week when we truly cannot make it, do we still think about it? Do we miss it? Do we say with the hymn writer, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold. Take my intellect and use every power as thou shalt choose”?

If you’re still not sure, then take the ultimate test. “But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your soul will be demanded from you. Now who will get what you have prepared?’ That is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

What if you died tonight? What would be the meaning of all your pursuits then? Would your purpose have been fulfilled?

Dying tonight is not out of the question. After all, God says we are dust, and to dust we will return, and we’ve seen it happen with every single human who has ever lived. Martin Luther once preached that while God is life itself, living from eternity to eternity, we are of mortal

matter and live every moment in the company of death. On another occasion, he wrote to soldiers and said, “God has thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are less than ten disasters or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, ‘How good God is to me! He has not sent every disaster to me in this one hour.’”

Friends, it’s so nice to live in a first world country. But it’s so, so awful being surrounded and influenced by a first world mindset, where we think that we have somehow escaped death’s company, where we think that death is far off and that we have time to get serious about religion and repentance later. “You fool,” God says when we think that way.

So what would your sudden death show about your life’s purpose? Would your sudden death show that it was cut short before it could be achieved? Or would it show that your life’s purpose had been fulfilled every day since you were baptized, because it was clearly a life lived to the Lord, lived to his glory, lived in faith in his Son, lived in contentment, lived in service to others according to your abilities?

What do you want out of life?

God wants us to want him and his kingdom of grace out of life. God wants us to ultimately want *out of life*, out of life here on earth into eternal life in heaven, not by taking our own life, but by trusting in his redeeming grace and living our entire lives with one eye toward our heavenly home with him. And if that is what we want out of life, then our purpose will not be to amass earth’s treasures for ourselves, but to be rich toward him.

Why is God worthy of that? Why is God worthy of having us be rich toward him?

He is worthy of us being rich toward him, because no matter how rich we are toward him, we will never outdo how rich he has been, and continues to be, toward us. In Christ his Son, he imparts all the treasures of true wisdom and knowledge. Though Christ was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich—rich in righteousness, peace, life, and joy in the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are rich in love, an appropriate thought on this Valentine’s Day. The apostle John reminds us that it is because God gave us his Son that we know what love truly is, that it is selfless action that puts the best interests of others first and foremost. We know it, because we have experienced it from God. Otherwise we would not know love; we would think it was just a feeling and everything about love would just come back to us. We will see just how rich we are in Christ as we journey through this Lent season and up to Easter yet again. We will see him give up his life on the cross to pay for all of our sins, including every second we have lived our life with a false purpose. One day we will see just how wealthy we are in Christ not just by faith, but also by sight, in heaven.

And he has given us all of these surpassingly great and eternally valuable treasures as a gift, at no cost!

Shia LeBeouf is a fairly famous actor. He starred in the show *Even Stevens* as a child. As a young man and adult, he has starred in movies like *Transformers*, *Holes*, and *The Peanut Butter Falcon*. Up until fairly recently, he wasn’t only famous for his on-screen performances, he was also famous for his off-screen antics. He was always in trouble with the law. It might be too early to say that he’s turned this life around; I don’t know him well enough. But I know that in a

recent interview, he said, “My whole purpose for existing in life was to be happy, and that’s not my purpose anymore. My purpose now is to be useful.” Not bad, and it’s certainly not a coincidence that he said that on the heels of getting reacquainted with the Christian faith.

But I think it was said better by an anonymously authored poem I once came across in a book of sheet music. I think it was put there simply to fill up space, but it beautifully sums up what Jesus is talking about here:

Dreams and goals, I have but three—
believe the truth continually,
live piously and reverently,
and give my soul up blessedly.
Amen, O Christ, so let it be!