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“Life Lessons: Winning and Losing”

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Ecclesiastes 2:9-11
Matthew 16:21-26

Now there is a simple truth most of us were taught as kids:

“It’s not whether you win or lose it’s.... how you play the game.”

That is not only a part of our conventional wisdom, but it is a theme found throughout the Bible. It is all over the Scriptures this truth that life is more about the process and quality than whether you come out on top.

Instinctively we know what Jesus knew--that you can end up with a huge house and a huge bank account but lose your soul, and examples are all around us.

You can have worldly success but still be empty inside, lonely and lost.

Although we know that life is not really about winning and losing, much of the time we view life in precisely those terms.

Our culture loves winners and does not have much sympathy for losers.

We get so focused upon what we think winning looks like, what we think success looks like, that we forget the whole point of the game itself.

Now, we have a powerful lesson in winning and losing from the book of Ecclesiastes.

This is a part of what is known as the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, coming right after Psalms and Proverbs.

All we know about the author of Ecclesiastes is that he was known as the Teacher, and called himself the son of David, meaning a descendant of King David.

This is a collection of philosophical reflections, rather than a testimony of belief, written sometime in the third century BC.

The author is essentially reflecting on the meaning of human existence.

Now most of us are not very familiar with Ecclesiastes as a whole.

We know one passage in particular, and chances are that even if you have never opened a Bible you know that passage, because you have heard it read at funerals, or if you are a Baby Boomer you remember a band called “The Byrds”

who made Ecclesiastes famous during the 1960s with a song called “Turn, Turn, Turn”

Let’s listen... (Play a selection from “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds)

This is all many people know of this book called Ecclesiastes.

But there is so much more to the story.

The author believes that most of life is essentially meaningless.
He is looking back on his life and realizing that everything he has pursued
has been chasing after the wind.

So near the end of his life, as an elderly man he is asking the question:
“What does it really mean?”

He comes to the realization that all the things he was pursuing his entire life were
essentially meaningless, vain, empty.

He missed out on so much in terms of spirituality, meaning and relationships.
As a young man he grew up in the lap of luxury.

Thus, early on he decided life was about pursuing wealth.
He acquired all the money he could ever want or ever spend.

But that did not satisfy him.

Then he thought that life must be all about pleasure and experiences.
So he made up his own form of a Bucket List and he went about experiencing
all that the world had to offer. But after he had crossed off everything on his
Bucket List, he still felt profoundly dissatisfied.

Then he decides life is about wisdom, so he seeks all the wisdom he can acquire.

He learns as much as possible from the sages and teachers.

But when he has learned all that there is to learn from them he still feels
unsatisfied.

Listen to how he describes this in Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 from The Message:

“Oh, how I prospered! I did great things. Built houses, planted vineyards,
designed gardens, bought slaves, male and female, who had children, giving me
even more slaves. I acquired large herds and flocks, larger than anyone else.

I piled up silver and gold, loot from kings.

I had singers entertain me with song and maidens for my bed.

Oh how I prospered! Everything I wanted I took, I never said no to myself!

I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing.

I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task, my reward to myself!
Then, I took a good look at everything I had done, looked at all the sweat and hard
work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke.

Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing there. Nothing.”

It is haunting, isn't it?

This book is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago.

We get so focused upon what the world tells us we need that we forget what God
tells us we need. This teacher reminds us that we were created for something else.
And winning and losing in life is not about how much you end up with, whether it

is wisdom or pleasure or power or money,
it is not about your home, car, stuff, retirement account, or even experiences,
but something else, something spiritual and eternal.

It is about each and every moment of your life, a gift from God.
It is about living deeply and appreciating each moment for the gift that it is.

Now I have struggled with this in my own life.

I so often have my head in the future.

I always think about what is ahead, and what I hope to do, often with anxiety.
I have thought about that time when the problems disappear, the bills are all paid,
the kids grow up, and so on.

I think about the future of this church, too.

I have such high hopes for us, when we get our relocation back on track and grow
and flourish and reach so many people in the years to come.

So I often think about the future of this congregation and how we can best
accomplish all that God is calling us to do and be.

But thinking about the future means that I fail to enjoy the present.

It means that I sometimes give more attention to problems than people.
And people always need to come before problems, possessions or positions.

So we move from the Teacher in Ecclesiastes to another Teacher, Jesus Christ.

In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus is telling his disciples that he is going to die.

Now the disciples were not prepared for that at all.

They left their fishing business and tax collecting business behind
to follow this man who they believed to be the Messiah.

And they were banking on the fact that when he came into his power
everything would be wonderful. This was a great career path for them.

They would be at the center of authority when he claimed his power in Jerusalem.

Except now Jesus turns to them and says:

“We are heading to Jerusalem and there I will be despised, rejected, and put to
death. And they say, “No way, this is not what we signed on for.”

Peter even says: “Impossible, this cannot happen!”

And Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan. For this is of God, not human beings.”

The lesson here is that success looks very different from God’s point of view.
There is an easy path, the way of the world. And lots of people go down that path.

But there is another way, and it is narrow and difficult.

But Jesus said that if anyone wants to follow him, they must deny themselves and
pick up a cross.

For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world, but lose their soul?

I remember visiting with a woman years ago who told me that she did not love her husband anymore. She said that when they got married he was so nice and kind, and honest to a fault.

He made her laugh and she just loved being with him.

But over the years his job became his God, and he did anything to get ahead.

He lied to people, he cheated some people, he compromised his values.

He was always stressed and unhappy, nothing brought him joy.

He had lost his soul.

What good would it be for you to gain the whole world, yet lose your soul?

To keep from losing your soul, Jesus says lose yourself and take up a cross.

This means taking more interest in serving than being served, in blessing others than being blessed. Because it is in the process of giving life away that you find true life and meaning.

We know this. We know that life brings so many responsibilities and desires, but where life is really found is not in taking, but in giving back.

This is what it means to take up your cross, to follow him and serve him to understand his path and way of life.

None of us want to come to the end of our lives and look back and say,

“I wanted to be happy and content, but I never ever was.

Everything I chased after in the end was all pretty meaningless.

Smoke and spitting into the wind.”

You may have heard of Armand Hammer, not the baking soda, but the multi-billionaire. This man was a doctor and the CEO of Occidental Petroleum for many years. I had heard of him, and his famous art collection, but not known that much about him.

He was a giant of business and a confidant of world leaders.

He was a huge figure on the world scene.

But after his death at the age of 92, the real story came out.

He got his start laundering money for the Soviets.

When he made some money, he paid authors to write fictitious autobiographies of his life to impress other people.

When he was younger and in medical school, he performed a procedure upon a young woman that killed her.

His father took the blame for this and spent 2 years in prison.

He neglected his only son and would not admit that he had fathered a daughter.

He had no friends at his company and when his brother died, he sued the estate for \$667,000 out of a \$700,000 estate, keeping that money from his brothers wife who was in a nursing home, and his brothers children.

When he died his own son did not attend his funeral, and the only people who would carry his casket were those who were paid to do so.

A multi-billionaire, tycoon with all that the world had to offer.

But did he win or lose in life?

Did he ever know true contentment or peace of mind?

The path of Christ is a path of seeking a bigger purpose beyond ourselves.

Aligning our lives with something more significant than our own happiness.

This Independence Day weekend I cannot help but think of those men and women who sacrificed so much for the freedom we take for granted today.

Some gave the ultimate sacrifice and we owe them so much.

They had a vision much larger than the limits of their time.

They were willing to die for that vision and so many did die.

They stood up for truth, no matter who told it, they advocated for justice, no matter who was against it, and they dreamed of a country open to everyone.

We honor their memory by working for those same things ourselves, and never taking our freedom for granted.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote that the real purpose of human life is not to discover happiness, but freedom. Merton wrote:

“To be free, fully free to live and love is what matters most for the children of God. To be free from compulsions. To be free from the opinions of others. To be free from the mindless pursuit of wealth, success, and status. Even when everything is taken away you can still be completely free.”

What a gift.

And that of course is the gift we are given in Jesus Christ.

The gift of freedom, the freedom that comes when we align ourselves with something greater than ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

British journalist and author Malcom Muggeridge became a Christian late in life after doing a documentary on Mother Theresa.

And he wrote about how Christianity changed his life by saying:

“When I look back on my life nowadays, which I sometimes do, what strikes me forcibly is that what seemed at the time most significant and

seductive, seems now must futile and absurd.

For instance, success in all of its various guises; being known and praised;
ostensible pleasures like acquiring money or women,
traveling, going to and fro in the world and up and down exploring whatever

Vanity Fair has to offer.

In retrospect these all seem like exercises in self-gratification,
what Pascal called “licking the earth.”

They are diversions designed to distract our attention from the true purpose
of our existence in this world, which is quite simply, to look for God, and in
looking to find God, and in finding God to love God and serve God.”

May we all discover the true freedom that comes from losing ourselves and saving
our souls.

Amen.