**A Life Worth Living**

**FBC Albemarle**

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Amy and I are not big hikers. We don’t hike for exercise or just to be outside. However, when we are visiting places that have hiking trails with sights worth seeing, we will take on the challenge. Many years ago, Amy and I went out to Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons for vacation. The scenery was incredible and many of the trails around the Grand Tetons wound around some beautiful lakes so Amy and I hiked several of the trails. The trails were well marked and even had mile posts on the trail to let you know how much further you had to go until you reach the end of the trail. That is the kind of hiking we like. Though I was in Boy Scouts growing up, I am pretty sure without the markers on the trail, it wouldn’t take much for me to get lost in the woods. I would wonder around hoping to find civilization.

Many readers of the Gospels often find themselves wandering through Jesus’ teaching like someone walking on a trail that was not well marked. Lessons about this and that, Jesus meeting people, healing people, confronting people…it all starts to run together. There seems to be so much of it, we sometimes feel we need some way of marking the path we’re really on as we read the gospel. Fortunately, that is exactly what Matthew did for us.

Matthew wrote his account of the gospel in five major blocks of Jesus teaching. Today’s text comes at the end of the first major block, the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter 10 consists of instructions to the disciples for their mission. A series of parables Jesus told is found in chapter 13. Christ’s teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven that is coming into being around Jesus and his ministry is located in chapter 18. Finally, chapters 23-25 describe the end of the world as we know it and the coming of a new world upon Christ’s return. After each block, Matthew ends the section with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished…” to help bring the discourse to a nice ending.

It makes sense that Matthew would write his account of the gospel in this manner. Matthew was a tax collector. He was organized and systematic. Most scholars believe that Matthew’s main objective was to help Christians retain much of the Jewish traditions in a faith that was quickly being accepted by Gentiles. Therefore, Matthew’s five blocks of narrative and Jesus’ teachings were intentional to create a parallel to the first five books of the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch. Matthew was trying to draw a parallel between Moses and Jesus, though he understood the divinity of Christ.

In his second of three books in the Good and Beautiful series, James Bryan Smith uses Christ’s Sermon on the Mount to show us the virtues of a Good and Beautiful Life. Smith says that there is one thing that everyone has in common: we all want to be happy. No one wants a dull, boring and meaningless life. We want it for ourselves and we want it for the people we love. The divergence between a miserable life and a good and beautiful life occurs in how a person pursues their happiness.

First, many people have the wrong definition of happiness. Too many people seek happiness that is temporary based on circumstances. Therefore, when difficulties and challenges happen in life, their world is thrown upside down without any trail markers. When we learn to define happiness as an inner disposition not based on external circumstances then we can be joyful even in midst of storms of life.

Second, the false narrative that many people have come to believe is that happiness is found in seeking the principles of this world. The world teaches that wealth will make us happy. It tells us to always look out for number one and to do whatever makes us happy. It teaches us that if you are not first, than you are last. No matter who we have to climb over, being on top is the only thing that will make us happy.

Jesus showed us that doing the things He taught, not as strict laws or rules, but as a new way of life creates a good and beautiful life. Jesus said, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man…” Remember what just happened. Jesus had turned upside down their understanding of the Laws of Moses in the beatitudes. He taught about things like anger, lust, lying, worrying, pride and judging others. Then he says in closing that if you put into practice his teachings, you would be like a wise man that built his house on the rock rather than the foolish man who would build it on sand. The wise person living in the Palestinian desert at that time would build his house on a secure rock to protect the house from the flash floods that sudden storms created. The foolish person would build directly on the sand and would have no protection against the strong storms. So those on the mountainside that day would’ve understood what Jesus meant in his parable.

However, they would’ve also heard a little more than what we see on the surface. Just 100 miles away from the mountainside in Jerusalem, a temple was being built by Herod’s men. They spoke of it as God’s House, and declared that it was built upon the rock, something that would withstand the wind and weather. However, Jesus would say later that the Temple would be torn apart and that the Church, the body of Christ, would be built on Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus, the Messiah. Matthew didn’t want his readers to miss the fact that if we build our lives on Jesus’ teaching, we will be part of the “house” that will last forever.

There is an old adage that says, “Life is hard. Then you die. Then they throw dirt in your face. Then the worms eat you. Be grateful it happens in that order.” If that is all life is, what is our purpose? Why would God create us? Jesus said that he came to give us life that is abundant; life that is abundant with meaningful relationships filled with love, joy and compassion; A life that is worth living. So what does it take to live a life worth living, a life that is good and beautiful?

First, it takes a life filled with obedience as a new way of life. Many people have grown up in church believing that a relationship with God was filled with do’s and don’ts to keep us from sinning and away from God’s wrath. Somehow, that doesn’t seem like an abundant life. There has to be more to life than a list of do’s and don’ts. However, if we see obedience to Christ’s teachings as a blueprint to an abundant life, then we will make it a lifestyle rather than something we do to avoid sin.

Anyone who has tried to lose weight understands that in order to lose weight and keep it off, there has to be a lifestyle change. Jumping on the bandwagon of the latest fad in weight loss only results in temporary change in our weight, if we see any change at all. We keep yo-yoing up and down until our frustration causes us to give up and give in. We know that in order to keep the weight off, we have to change how we eat, when we eat, how much we exercise, how much rest we get and how much stress we feel. How we live life has to change in order to gain a healthy lifestyle.

Jesus said that in order to live a life worth living, we must change our lifestyle to align with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ teachings are not suggestions for a better life; they are words to live by to experience the abundant life filled with biblical happiness. One theologian said it this way: “The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not meant to be admired but to be obeyed.” Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey my commands.” (John 14:15) Obedience as a new way of life is required.

When we choose obedience, we can trust that it will never disappoint us. When is the last time you followed Jesus’ teaching and you were disappointed? When is the last time you were obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit and it resulted in pain and brokenness? Even in situations where you could not see good and beauty, if we chose obedience, I bet it always resulted in life.

In the first chapter of *The Good and Beautiful Life*, James Bryan Smith quoted Dallas Willard on the cost of nondiscipleship. Willard said, “*Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10).”* When we don’t choose obedience, we miss out on the life that we were created to experience. We can place our complete trust in Jesus and his teachings because we know that God has our best interest in mind. He is trustworthy.

As a 15-year-old boy searching for meaning and purpose for his life, I made the choice toward obedience. I placed my trust in what the Bible said about Jesus and what Jesus said about how to live and experience his kingdom. Many times over, I have failed to be the person Jesus wants me to be. I have lost my anger, lusted after the things of the world, lied to myself and to others, worried about things I could not control, allowed my pride to stand in the way of doing the right thing and judged others while not dealing with the log in my own eye. However, because I choose to work toward obedience daily and because I place my trust in Jesus who gives me do-overs in life, I experience an abundant life and I get to participate in the kingdom of God. I’ve not achieved perfection and I never will on this side of heaven. But there is nothing I desire more than life with Christ. Just give me Jesus!

I choose to build my life upon the rock of Jesus Christ. I work to suppress my fleshly desires and I seek after God’s kingdom because that is a life worth living. That is a Good and Beautiful Life.