

***Theme: The Good Life******“Success and the Good Life”***

*Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – November 18-19, 2017*

**Scripture: Psalm 13:5-6; Matthew 22:35-40; Galatians 6:9-10**

**VIDEO                      Sermon Intro**

**SLIDE                      “Success and the Good Life”**

Please take out the Meditation Moments and Message Notes from your bulletin. At the top you will find one of the Scripture texts of the sermon and below that is a family or group activity you can do this week. You will find some blank lines below the Scripture and there are two big ideas that we are going to explore today. I want to encourage you to write those down, so you can try and practice during this week. I promise that if you will do these two things, you will experience more of the good life this week than you did last week. Continued on the bottom and back side, you will find daily Scripture readings which help us go deeper into today’s message. Each passage talks, in one way or another, about the good life and the questions allow for reflection.

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been talking about the good life, and the truth is that everyone wants to experience the good life. Nobody says, “Give me the mediocre life. I want a lousy life. Give me a bad life!” We want the good life and that’s part of what it means to be human, to long for that good life. The Hebrew scriptures in the Old Testament, Greek and Roman philosophers, contemporary philosophers, and every civilization in human history has looked at what it means to experience the good life. God longs for us to experience the good life as well. We have been reminding ourselves over the last two weeks that Jesus said this in John 10:10.

**BIBLE                      *10 The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My***

***purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.***

Jesus makes it clear that God wants us to have a rich and satisfying life, and during this series of sermons we're going to discover what that may look like. We all want to have a good life and the real question is this: How do we define the good life? The Scriptures have a lot to teach us about this, so we have looked at four keys over the past two weeks and today we look at two more keys to experiencing and living a good life. Each week, we have also talked about one counterfeit path to the good life. This path seems right and is a culturally acceptable path to the good life, but it doesn't really lead there. It doesn't deliver on His promises.

The first counterfeit approach suggested that the good life is found when we maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This is a Greek philosophy called enlightened hedonism. Enlightened hedonism is the idea that we have some ethics and moral values, but within that, we really want to experience pleasure as much as possible. This is often the default philosophy of modern Americans. There is also unenlightened hedonism, which places the individual above anyone else. People who follow this idea say, "I'm just looking out for number one and going to get all the pleasure I can, regardless of who it hurts or the consequences."

The writer of Ecclesiastes tried living life this way and found out it was not the path to the good life. He tried packing his life with pleasure by giving himself everything he desired. But when he got to the end of his life, he said it was all, ***"meaningless, like chasing after the wind."*** When we pack our lives with pleasure, we end up finding the unfulfilled, boring life and not the good life. It's like eating a dozen chocolate chip cookies. After a while they stop tasting good. That is how it works with pleasure. When our sole focus is on achieving pleasure, in the end we find it is meaningless.

The Greek and Roman philosophers, along with modern day psychology and the Scriptures teach us a different direction for finding the good life. We have looked at four key plans over the last two weeks and they are the first ones listed on your commitment cards last week. The first one is to be grateful every day for what we have. The idea is simply to want what we have so we don't focus and obsess about what we don't have.

## **SLIDE                    Be grateful daily for what we have**

We experience a good life when we cultivate gratitude in our lives. We gave you these cute gratitude journals and today we have more to give you if you didn't get one! We challenged you to take time each day to write down three or four things for which you are grateful. This is one of the ways that we discover the good life. The second key to living the good life is to discover a purpose greater than ourselves.

## **SLIDE                    Discover a purpose greater than myself.**

We need to think about why we are made, why we are here and what it means to be human. If we do what it means to be human, then we find the good life. Surprisingly, it's not in pursuing pleasures ourselves that we find meaning and purpose. It's by looking at the bigger picture; that helps us be the person God created us to be. For those of us who follow Jesus, this includes loving God, and blessing and loving the people around us.

Last week, we talked about another counterfeit path that claims if we just have enough money, then we will finally be happy. I have known many people throughout my life who are wealthy, but what I have seen is that if we think that money will make us happy, we never have quite enough. When you ask people, who have lots of money, how much more they need for happiness, the answer is always the same, "Just a little bit more. If I had just a little bit more, I would be happy."

The problem is that money doesn't provide what we think it is going to provide. There've been many philosophers throughout the history of humanity who have discovered this truth. Even the Beatles recognized this, "I don't care too much for money, money can't buy me love." After last week's sermon, one of you sent me this piece of humor. It's a picture of a woman on a yacht and the poster says at the bottom, "Money can't buy you love. But it can buy exotic cars and luxury yachts. Once you've got those covered, you'll be fighting love off with a stick!"

## **GRAPHIC                Money Can't Buy Love Poster**

After reading that poster, I realized how important last week's sermon really was for all of us! We learned what has happened to us in America as

we have tried to pursue this path. Our standard of living has doubled in the last 50 years, and yet research tells us that people are less happy. Having more stuff doesn't really provide the path to happiness and the good life. We heard about a piece of research where 120 people who made \$20 million a year or more found that 90% of them were unhappy. They were asked if they felt like they had enough, if they were experiencing the good life, and they all answered no. When they were asked how much more income they would need to have to feel secure to experience the good life, the average answer was 25% more. "If I could have 25% more than \$20 million a year, then I would finally feel secure and happy and satisfied."

So, we talked about some financial principles that do help us to experience the good life. These were the next two keys.

**SLIDE                      Learn to live beneath my means.**

If we have a certain level of living which we can afford, but we choose to live two or three rungs below that, we create for ourselves margin. Margin is where we find peace. When we have a friend who needs something, margin allows us to give to them generously, without feeling stress. Instead, we feel grateful that we can give in that way. When a transmission goes out, and we never thought it would, margin is what allows us to not stress out. Margin allows us to set financial goals. Margin allows us to give to God and others. Margin allows us to do things that are important in our lives. Margin creates peace and is one of the keys to the good life.

We know from research and from many financial gurus, that if we want to live a life which is less stressed and filled with less anxiety, then living beneath our means is key. The fourth key is what Jesus tells us,

**BIBLE                      *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."***

If we remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive, we will find the good life. There is more happiness and joy in giving than there is in receiving. It may be different for our smaller children, but for you, at Christmas, where do you find the greatest joy? Do you find it in opening the presents people gave to you, or watching people open the presents you have given to them? You know the answer to that! It is always more fun to watch the joy on other people's faces when they open a gift they really need or

want. As much as we appreciate the gifts we get, it is usually the gifts that we give that bring joy and meaning.

Today we are going to talk about success, which sounds like it should be synonymous with the good life. There are over 1 billion websites designed to tell us how to achieve success in our lives. There are hundreds of thousands of books which have been written on how to experience success. There are two very important questions we are going to ask today.

**SLIDE                      How is success connected to the good life?**

**SLIDE                      What do we mean by success?**

Sarah Vermunt wrote an article in Entrepreneur Magazine in which she said this,

**SLIDE                      *“At the height of my success, I was actually pretty miserable. I’m not saying there’s an inverse relationship between success and happiness, just that there’s not necessarily a positive one. They are two very different things. Achieving success is not the same as achieving happiness or experiencing the good life.”***

We can all name people that were wildly successful and very unhappy. Here are four of them that immediately come to my mind. Let’s see if you remember their stories.

**GRAPHIC                      Michael Jackson Thriller**

Michael Jackson still holds the record for the most albums ever sold, with 68 million copies of, “Thriller.” He was never able to top that success himself. He had everything you could possibly want or imagine that went along with success, yet when we watched his life, we saw a soul that seemed to be tortured with controversy in his later years. He never seemed to find contentment or the good life. Clearly, success did not bring him the good life.

**GRAPHIC                      Howard Hughes**

Some of you might be old enough to remember this person, or maybe you saw the movie about his life, “The Aviator.” During his life, he became the richest man on the planet for a period of time. He started film studios, an airplane manufacturing business and many other companies. In today’s

dollars, Howard Hughes was worth billions and billions of dollars. Every woman wanted to date him, and he was everything you might imagine a successful man to look like. Except, the last years of his life he spent holed up in a hotel room, using Mason jars to go to the bathroom. He was broken, unhappy and not experiencing the good life.

### **GRAPHIC          Amy Winehouse**

Those of you who are younger might remember Amy Winehouse, who won five Grammy awards for her second album. At the age of 29, she overdosed and died. Her concerts were sold out and she was revered as an amazingly gifted singer, yet all of that success did not bring happiness or fulfillment.

### **GRAPHIC          Marilyn Monroe**

Most of us know this woman, Marilyn Monroe. She was a success by every measure: financially, stunning outward beauty, successful as a model and in film. Every man wanted to be with her and every woman wanted to be like her, even to this day with many dressing up in her likeness for Halloween. Yet, she also had a conflicted soul and died way too young.

### **GRAPHIC          Everest Team**

### **GRAPHIC          Everest Team 2**

My daughter and I watched this film recently about a group attempting to climb Mount Everest. They spent months, and some of them years, preparing. On the way up, there was a terrible storm as often happens, two members of the team died. As the leader made it to the top and looked out over the view, he thought about the sacrifices of money, time and lives, and he wondered aloud, "Is this all there is? What do we do after this?" He and one other person died on the way back down. I understand their bodies have not been recovered and that you literally walk past a graveyard if you attempt to climb Mount Everest even today.

### **GRAPHIC          Anne Hathaway**

Anne Hathaway won an Oscar for the portrayal of Fontaine in the most recent film adaptation of *Les Misérables*. She said, ***"I stood there at the Oscars, holding my statue, giving my speech, pretending to be happy."***

Here's what we know: Success and happiness are not the same thing. Success and the good life are not the same thing, at least not until we begin to reframe the good life and what we believe success to be. I think about my own life, and when I have achieved something that I thought was successful. One of the only trophies I ever got was this one from when I was part of a nationally recognized water polo team in high school. I have no idea why I still have this trophy, because I wasn't even a starter on the team! It feels great, but then you get to college and you're just another student like everyone else and I certainly didn't take this trophy with me. My mother sent it to me because she was tired of storing it! Not even she was impressed by it anymore!

Then I have this trophy for getting a hole-in-one many years ago. I didn't even get to see it go in the hole, but I have the trophy. They even put the ball in this trophy. Sometimes I sit in my office and I stare at it! How sad is that? I can't imagine anyone who gets their awards out every day and says, "Wow, these make me happy. Look at my awards! Touch them and see them and see how satisfied it makes you. This is the good life." That just seems ridiculous, yet as senior pastor standing up here, I'm doing that.

Success and achievement are not the keys to the good life, at least not as we often define them. That brings us to two more keys to the good life. The fifth key is found on these cards that I sent home with you last week, and if you didn't get one, I hope you will grab one on your way out. These are our commitment cards for this series of sermons and for stewardship this year. I want you to put them somewhere where you can remember these keys to the good life that we have talked about. We are actually in a circle and around next week and talk about that first one, one more time.

**SLIDE                    Invest in people and relationships.**

Investing in people and relationships is where we find the good life and where we find success. The Bible teaches us this. Psychology teaches us this today. Greek and Roman philosophers taught this. We learned the first week the Greek word that was used to define the good life.

**SLIDE                    Eudemonia = "the good life"**

Aristotle is the one who popularized this word, which meant, "Human



flourishing, happiness, joy and the good life.” If this is the goal, then how do we achieve that? One of the things that we see throughout the Scriptures is a reminder that the good life is experienced in relationships with people who are closest to us and with our fellow human beings.

Every year, the United Nations issues a report called, “The World Happiness Report.” It started out of Columbia University, and the UN surveys thousands of people in 50 different countries. They look to see how happy people are in those different nations and what are the factors which make them happy. In 2012, of the 50 countries who were ranked on happiness, where do you think the United States fell? We were number one in terms of income level, but way behind in most of the other key measures you would think would lead to happiness. We were ranked 35 of 50, for what people said in America was the relative happiness. We were right behind Vietnam that year. We bumped up to number 2 in 2014, but in 2017 we fell to number 16, and we continue to fall in our happiness meter.

The world happiness report uses this Greek term that we have been learning, and here’s what they said. ***“Eudemonia focuses on living in accord with what is intrinsically worthwhile and meaningful to human beings. Purpose, meaningful relationships, good health and contribution to the community are key drivers of happiness... Studies tend to confirm that of the determinants of happiness, being in relationship with other human beings is nearly always at the top of the list. Quite simply, social engagement makes people happy.”***

For many men and women, there is an internal drive for success that begins to develop early in life. We think that if we succeed, we will discover the good life. What’s interesting is that this report, and every other report on human happiness, tells us that the good life is not experienced by reaching some arbitrary level of success. The good life is experienced right under our nose, and found in the relationships we have with our friends, our spouses, our children, our parents and for those of us who follow Jesus, others in the body of Christ. This is where the good life is found, yet we miss it because we are so busy chasing other things we think will lead to success.

**GRAPHIC**                      **Jrue and Lauren Holiday**



Jrue Holiday is a point guard for the New Orleans Pelicans in the NBA. I always enjoy watching people with a natural gift with the basketball. He averages over 17 points a game. He is married to Lauren, who was a USA women's team soccer star. Last year, when she was 6 months pregnant with their first child, she discovered she had a brain tumor. Holiday has his whole career ahead of him, but he contacts the general manager of the Pelicans and tells him that he will be quitting his multimillion dollar a year job. "My wife is sick, and she is more important than my career or any amount of money. I need to take care of her."

To their credit, the Pelicans management convinced him not to quit and gave him an indefinite leave of absence. He said that would be fine, but this was the most important part of his life and this is where he needed to focus his time and energy. Not everyone can quit their job if their spouse becomes sick. As an NBA player, no doubt he had set aside enough to be able to make that decision, but he still was sacrificing everything in order to take care of what was most important in his life. While we might not be able to quit our jobs, we can reprioritize and ask ourselves what's most important, and what really will bring us the good life. I would argue that the relationships we have with people are one of the ways we find success in the good life. The good news for them is they just celebrated their daughter's first birthday.

## **GRAPHIC          Holiday's Daughter**

Charlie Scharf, the CEO of VISA up until last year, quit his job when he was the pinnacle of success. For four years he led VISA and their stock price went up 134%. The future was incredibly bright, and everyone was confused why he was quitting. It even shook the stock market. The answer was that his wife and kids lived on the East Coast and his office with VISA was on the West Coast. He wanted to spend time with his family and that was more important.

I must admit that I've struggled with this issue in my own life. I don't mean to, and sometimes I'm not even aware of it, if I'm not careful. Ever since I became a pastor, I have been driven to help each church in ministry become everything they could be. Early in my ministry, I would be gone several nights a week and at least one weekend a month, if not more, leading retreats and mission trips for kids. I don't work as many nights these days,

but I'm still busy a good chunk of Saturday and most of Sunday, and if you add in weddings, that means the entire weekend is gone. I don't think of it as chasing success, because it gets confusing when you're doing it for God. But being so driven, we sometimes miss out on the things that really matter in our lives.

I think of something a mentor said to me, early on in ministry, that still haunts me when I get too busy serving God. He said, ***"Jeff, be careful not to sacrifice your wife and children on the altar of success."*** It's not just your kids and your spouse, but also the relationships we have with friends. I think of those who have gone through empty nest syndrome, when the kids finally leave the home. Many celebrated first, but often a depression sets in, and the statistics tell us that many marriages dissolve because their life has been about the kids and family the past 20 to 40 years depending on the age spread of your kids. Those bedrooms that were once always a mess are now dark, and it can be a challenging time.

I have met with many couples who have forgotten to nourish their own life as a couple with other friends and they find themselves isolated, unless of course the kids move back in and then they are stressed again and without support! We need relationships that will carry us through those kinds of moments in life. I hear from many who tell me some of the best experiences of their lives, after their kids left, was found sitting on their deck, or around a campfire, or just going for a hike with friends in whom they had invested. Those relationships matter the most, which is why we challenge you to connect with others and why we are raising up more leaders for small groups that you might be a part of. Each of us needs a group, whether it's a Bible study or a men's group or a women's group or the youth group or volunteering on a mission trip. These relationships deepen our faith and strengthen us and makes us happier and healthier.

This idea of relationship is not just about those who are close to us, but also how we live our lives in the world as human beings. Being a part of the human community, and seeking to do some things for the common good, is actually a driver of happiness in our own lives. This is why God said to Abraham these powerful words. ***"You are blessed to be a blessing."*** Let's say that together.

**SLIDE**                    ***“I am blessed to be a blessing.”***

To be authentically human in the eyes of God is to bless others, caring about them and working for the common good. Martin Luther King Jr. once said this about success. ***“We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries, or the size of automobiles, rather than by the quality of our service and our relationship to mankind.”***

He was reminding us of the true measure of success, which is the quality of our service and our relationships with others. It is not about the size of our car or house or our paycheck, which determines if we are a success or not in life. Albert Einstein said much the same thing when he said, ***“Try not to become a man of success, but rather to become a man of value.”***

I think of the most successful man who ever lived, who the night before he died turned to his disciples and said, ***“Those of you who want to really be great, must become the servants of all.”*** The next day, Jesus laid down his life for the human race, to save and redeem each of us. It was the single greatest act of sacrifice, when Jesus gave his life for the human race. The entirety of Scripture, including God coming in the flesh in the person of Jesus, teaches us that the good life is found in our relationships with others and in serving others. This is why the prophet Micah says these powerful words.

**BIBLE**            ***“What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, and practice lovingkindness, and walk humbly with God.”***

Jesus and the apostle Paul remind us that the meaning of life is found in loving one another, serving one another, blessing one another, forgiving one another, doing unto one another. As followers of Jesus, the good life is found in how we treat one another and live together. 1 John 3:14 says this...

**BIBLE**            ***14 If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead.***

We move from death, hopelessness and despair, hurt and heartache, into the good life that God longs for us to have, when we love, care for, bless, seek to serve, put the needs of others before ourselves. All this can be summed up with these words.

**SLIDE      The good life is experienced when we live a good life towards other human beings.**

This brings us to the sixth key, or principal to the good life. It's very simple and you have already seen it in print.

**SLIDE      The good life is found as we trust in God.**

There are three different Greek words found in the New Testament talk about life. **"Bios,"** is where we get the word biology from. **"Psyche,"** it is a word behind psychology. **"Zoa,"** is found in our word zoology, and is the one which is found most in the New Testament, 275 times. A good Greek dictionary will tell you that this word, during the time of Paul, means, ***"the absolute fullness of life, or life which is real and genuine."*** This is the New Testament word for eudemonia.

Jesus said, ***"I am the way and the truth and the zoa."*** John tells us that, ***"Jesus was zoa, and zoa was the light of all people."*** And Jesus said, ***"I have come that you might have zoa that is rich and satisfying."*** In the New Testament, Jesus is the author of life, the word of life, the giver of life, the source of life and the source of living water. We get to the end of the gospel of John and we read these powerful closing words, ***"These things are written so that you will believe, so you will trust that Jesus is the living Christ, God's son, and that by trusting or believing in him you will have zoa in his name."***

If we are searching for the good life, the New Testament shouts out to us on every other page, "Here is the good life! It is found in trusting in God through Jesus Christ. It is found in a relationship with God which sets the foundation and its where the good life begins and ends." The great news for us today is that we can experience this good life without cramming our lives full of stuff and pleasures and money. We can experience this kind of good life even when things are hard, and we are not experiencing pleasure. We can experience this good life when we are poor and have nothing, which I have seen with my own eyes.

We can experience this kind of good life when we are going through a divorce, or we have lost a loved one and the foundation of our world seems to be shaken. Everything seems to be falling down around us when we have received the diagnosis from the doctor and it's not good; when we are facing

the death of someone we love; when we feel all alone because that special someone has left us. Even in these moments of intense darkness, we can still be caught up in the good life when we trust in God through Jesus Christ. Let's remember the words of Psalm 13.

**BIBLE**      ***5 But I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. 6 I will sing to the Lord because he is good to me.***

Of course, David, can trust in God's unfailing love, and his heart rejoices, and he can sing the Lord's praise, because God has been good to him. What's interesting is that these are the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> verses of a lament Psalm. Let me remind you of how this Psalm begins...

**BIBLE**      ***1 O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? 2 How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? 3 Turn and answer me, O Lord my God! Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die! 4 Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!" Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.***

***"But I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the Lord because he is good to me."*** With a dogged determination, we hold on tight to God we trust that no matter what kind of hell we are walking through, God is walking with us and somehow it will be okay. We will experience the peace that passes all understanding, which guards our hearts and minds. We need not be afraid, even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We remember that he is our Redeemer and because of that, we don't have to be afraid. We recognize that nothing can separate us from the love of God and we find ourselves caught up, even during adversity, into God's good life.

Paul, after being put in prison multiple times and beaten and ultimately beheaded for his faith, puts it this way...

**BIBLE**      ***"We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we are not depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we are not knocked out."***

Therefore, Paul had hope. He fixed his eyes, not on what is seen, but what is unseen. When we can experience the good life during adversity, you can see the real, good life. Whenever we take trips to places like Haiti or Africa or Guatemala, one of the things I hear most from those who go for the very first time is, ***“What amazed me, was how those children smiled and laughed. They had nothing to play with, yet they seem happy. They had no shoes on their feet and lived in homes with dirt floors.”*** Here are some of the images I was able to take of children singing and laughing and playing and dancing, even though they have all lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and some of them suffer with the illness themselves.

**GRAPHIC            HOREC 1**

**GRAPHIC            HOREC 2**

**GRAPHIC            HOREC 3**

There is joy because they are grateful for what they have instead of what they don't have. They are all living in poverty. They have relationships and friendships with each other and with their teachers. In Africa, everything is done in community and not in isolation like here in the United States. They trust in God and find joy in the good life, even during poverty and disease.

Gary was a parent of one of my youth from my first youth group. He had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade daughter and twin girls who were five when he developed a rare form of lung cancer that was inoperable and untreatable. We visited several times while he was in hospice as he went downhill daily, and I was always amazed by his spirit throughout his illness. One of the last things that we did together was have communion and then he requested his favorite song that was one we sang in the youth group and he had heard his daughter singing it over and over again. As we sang the song around his bedside, we did the motions together.

**SLIDE            *Love him in the morning, when you see the sun a rising. Love him in the evening because he took you through the day.***

***And in the in between time, when you feel the pressure coming, remember that he loves you and he promises to stay.***

***When you think you have to worry, because it seems the thing to***



***do. Remember He ain't in a hurry. He's always got time for you, so...***

***Love him in the morning, when you see the sun a rising. Love him in the evening because he took you through the day. And in the in between time, when you feel the pressure coming, remember that He loves you and he promises to stay.***

I can still picture that scene, Gary at the very end, in his hospital bed, surrounded by the people he cared about most. I met with Gary's family to plan his funeral, and I learned about the sacrifices he had made for his children and his wife. They told story after story of sacrifice and giving. They received hundreds of cards in the mail from people he had helped, both from the church and from his work and from the community. As we shared about his life after he was gone, it was clear that his life was the picture of success.

Success doesn't have to do with how much money we make, or how much pleasure we cram into our life, or what level of achievement we have had at some job. Success has everything to do with how we love the people who are put in our path, how we make the world a better place by investing in other human beings and how we trust in God's unfailing love.

Eudemonia, the good life, is found when we invest in our relationships with others and when we trust in God. This is why Jesus gave us the greatest commandments, which were to what?

**SLIDE      *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.***

Love God and love others. Everything else fits into those two commandments. We gave you these commitment cards to remind you of this, and I do hope you will grab one before you leave today if you don't have one already. I'm going to carry mine this year in my phone case, because that seems to go with me everywhere. These commitments are how we find the good life.

**SLIDE                      (Have each one fly in.)**

- **Be grateful daily for what we have.**
- **Discover a purpose greater than myself.**

- **Live beneath my means.**
- **Remember it's more blessed to give than receive.**
- **Invest in people and relationships.**
- **Trust God every day.**

We have very few tangible ways of putting God first, but one of the ways we can do that is through these commitments, especially the willingness to give to something bigger than ourselves by giving to our common ministry together here at First United Methodist Church. This is a small expression of the depth of our love and commitment to God. This should mean something to us. It means we are investing in the body of Christ here, and we trust in God.

I think when we do these things, we find joy in the good life in these commitments, not drudgery or guilt. At the end of our worship service today, you will find these great water bottles as you leave. There is one for each person and it's our way of thanking you for making a commitment to follow Jesus this year, and in the process discovering living water, the life, zoe, which is rich and satisfying. We will be giving these out in our welcome bags as we run out of coffee mugs, and I wanted each of you to have one as well. I hope that whenever you take a drink, you are reminded about the good life that God longs for you to have and how we discover that through these commitments of loving God and loving others. Let's pray...

#### **SLIDE      Prayer**

If you are willing, please put your hands out on your lap, opened as if you were giving something to God.

*God, we thank you for our life. Without you, we would not be here. You give us the air that we breathe. You created the star that energizes and fuels our existence on this planet. You walk with us every moment of every day. You formed us and you stand with us when we walked through the hard times. You fill our hearts with peace and joy, when otherwise we might live in fear. You have sent Jesus Christ to suffer for us, and die, to give us life. Your Holy Spirit dwells within us. You have given us the body of Christ, this church. Everything we are and have is a gift from you, and we pause to be grateful*

today.

*Please, help us to remember what really matters. Help us to be grateful for what we have. Help us to find the purpose you have for us and live unto it. Help us to live beneath our means, and to always remember it is more blessed to give than to receive. Help us to invest in others that we might be used by you to make this world a better place. Finally, help us O God, to trust in you, and love you with all that we are and all that we have. May these commitments be an expression of our love for you in the place you have in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

## ***“Success and the Good Life”***

### **Theme: Success and the Good Life**

Scripture: Psalm 13:5-6; Matthew 22:35-40; Galatians 6:9-10

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon

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**Family/Community Activity for the week** – Read Luke 21:1-4. Discuss how the widow gave all she had, and that even though people didn't view it as much, God viewed her heart and saw her giving everything she had! Over the next few weeks, become more of a giving family. Select a container to be used as a “Kindness Counts” collection spot. Let your children know that every time you hear them say, “Thank you!” or each time they are kind to someone else, you will place a coin in the container. Each week, use half the collected change for a fun family treat and give the other half to church or to missions. Thank God for the opportunity to give.

**Meditation Moments for Monday, November 20** – Read Matthew 22:35-40. In the first two weeks of this series, we've looked at Gratitude, Purpose, Simplicity and Generosity as keys to the truly Good Life. This week we focus on loving relationships as keys to the Good Life. Jesus said that loving God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5) and loving people (cf. Leviticus 19:18) were the greatest commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures, pivotal expressions of how God defines the Good Life.

- Jesus told a story (cf. Matthew 25:1-12) that said we cannot borrow loving relationships. Have you ever wished you could “borrow” the love your devout grandmother or your pastor has for God? Doesn't work. God wants a love relationship with you, and like any love relationship, that means relating to God yourself. In what ways, if any, are you trying to let someone else relate to God for you? How can you make that vital relationship your own?
- Loving your neighbor as yourself can be challenging. God calls us to love others the way God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it very hard for us to fully love as God loves—unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake as much as for the sake of others. What has stopped you from loving someone relentlessly? How might you love them more fully today and tomorrow?

**Prayer:** *Lord, your love for me is always there, even when I forget it or try to tune it out. Help me to love you back, and to extend that same kind of love to all the people in my life. Amen.*

**Tuesday, November 21** – Read 2 Peter 1:3-8. Peter said that God’s forgiveness and divine love give us the inner power we need to escape the world’s immorality. Verses 5-7 listed the positive virtues God offers us. Let God build these things into your life, Peter said. They will bring you a good life, shielding you from an “inactive and unfruitful” existence.

- Peter made the sweeping claim that God “has given us everything we need for life and godliness.” Have you ever felt that “I could live my life with God if only God would \_\_\_\_\_?” Which of the qualities Peter listed in verses 5-7 do you long for the most? How can you more completely open yourself to God’s spiritual power to add these things to your life?
- Peter called on us to have these positive qualities “growing in you.” Which of these qualities do you find already present in your life? Thank God for them! Then ask God to guide you to see clearly which of the qualities are missing, or not growing. As you become aware of those places, work with God to grow an increasing measure of that virtue, making your life ever better.

**Prayer:** *O God, please add your divine power to my efforts, so that my life may continually grow in the positive qualities that you have promised will give me the truly good life. Amen*

**Wednesday, November 22** – Read 2 Corinthians 9:5-15. The apostle Paul was gathering funds from Gentile believers, in Corinth and elsewhere, to take to Jerusalem, where the Christian community was impoverished and suffering. That traveling Christian preacher (who had, as far as we know, no real estate, life insurance or retirement plan) wrote: “God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace”! That heartfelt exclamation gave us a look at the heart of a man focused on what he did have much more than on what he did not have. It gave us reason to think about how he defined “more than enough.”

- God-given love, the apostle said, leads all believers to care about each other. He told Christians in Corinth that the Jerusalem believers “will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you.” He saw giving not as just a material act, but as a two-way street even if it took different forms. What helps you to think of your giving, whether you are able to give much or little, as participation in the life of God’s big family, not just another bill to pay?
- Paul did not invent the idea that God’s people should give freely without pressure (whether in money or in time, talent and encouragement). In Exodus 25:2, the call for offerings to build a desert sanctuary was “Receive my gift offerings from everyone who freely wants to give.” What reasons would God have for wanting us to give from free, grateful hearts without coercion or pressure? When have you felt the joy of giving freely from a grateful heart filled with love?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, guide my heart. Help my gratitude for your “outstanding grace” to overflow in my giving of whatever funds, time and talents I’ve received from your hand. Amen.*

**Thursday, November 23** – Read Romans 12:5-10, 13:8. We know, as a matter of history, that there were no Christian church buildings in Rome when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians there. We also know, from the content of his letter, that disputes over how to live out their faith divided Roman Christians (cf. Romans 14:1-10). Even without impressive buildings, Paul believed that building stronger relationships could make them stand out in that cutthroat city: “Be the best at showing honor to each other.”

- For Paul, loving others was not just something to be done with gritted teeth. “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law,” said the former Pharisee, who once thought of the Law very differently (cf. Philippians 3:4-7). Honest love (“without pretending”) reshapes our life, and fills it with meaning and joy. When have you found in your own life, and in the lives of people you know well, how genuinely loving people makes all of life better?
- John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, asked in one of his best-known sermons, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?” Who has lovingly helped you in your personal journey to “know, love, and serve God,” without trying to make your journey into a clone of their own? How can you best extend that same kind of supportive, generous love to others?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, sometimes it seems so much easier to pretend to love certain other people than to genuinely love them. Teach me that “pretend” love impoverishes my life, and keep leading me to your kind of genuine love. Amen.*

**Friday, November 24** – Read Colossians 3:9-16. God offers us a new nature that changes the ways we relate for the better. God can help us relate to all the people we worship with, rub elbows with, see at the market or pass as we walk the dog with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” This letter calls us to forgive one another the same way God has forgiven us. That may be hard when you need to forgive someone else—but what a blessing it is when someone else extends that treatment to you!

- This is pretty radical language: take off the “old human nature,” put on a “new nature.” Can you see elements of your “old nature” that you and God are in the process of “taking off”? Which of the beautiful “new nature” qualities named in these verses do you see thriving? Which ones do you want to ask God to grow in your life in the next six months?

- “Autoimmune” diseases happen when our body “turns against” itself. They can cause a great deal of suffering. Colossians said we need to live in peace because we are members of one body, the body of Christ. What steps can you take to make sure you aren’t the source of any “autoimmune” problems in Christ’s body?

**Prayer:** *Holy Spirit, I’ve learned the hard way that even when I manage to change an outward behavior, too often the inner struggle remains. Keep changing and growing me from the inside out. Amen.*

**Saturday, November 25** – Read 1 John 4:7-11, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9. Loving God and other people is much more than just being “nice.” Loving one another (both in giving and receiving) aligns us, like nothing else, with the heart of the God of the universe. God loves us, John wrote—and that is the reason that we can love God and one another. The apostle Paul drew on a theme from Scripture passages like Psalm 13:5-6 and Psalm 40:1-2. God’s loving presence, he affirmed, makes it possible for us to experience the good life even amid circumstances which, from a human perspective alone, might look like a terrible life.

- Most of us know the words: “God is love.” But are there life experiences and inner messages that make it hard for you to rely on God’s love? In what ways do you perceive and experience God as loving? What helps you trust God’s love more? Which people do you find it hardest to love as God loves them? In what ways has God’s love, and the love of other people you know, helped you to keep living the good life even at times of trouble, confusion, harassment or being knocked down by life?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you are the ultimate source of love, and the awe-inspiring model who shows me the lengths to which love went to reach me. Keep growing my ability to love you and others, to lead the truly good life in all circumstances. Amen.*