

Back in the 70s, the 1970s that is, there was a radio program on the BBC called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. If you're not familiar with *Hitchhiker's Guide*, it's a humorous science fiction series which eventually also became a series of novels, comic books, TV shows, and in 2005 a feature-length film.

In the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, an ancient race creates a super-computer to give them the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. The super-computer thinks and thinks and thinks and after 7 and a half million years it finally has the answer. So all the people gather around to discover the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. And the computer announces that the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything is... 42.

Which of course confuses everyone. How can 42 be the answer to life, the universe and everything? Well, the super-computer informs them that the answer doesn't make a lot of sense without knowing what the question is. So that super-computer helps the people build an even bigger, more sophisticated supercomputer that will do all the calculations and come up with the question that 42 is the answer for.

Now, on one hand, this is all absurd and we know that the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything is in fact not 42. But the reason we can still find something like this funny is that for so many of us the question of meaning and purpose in life is still something we're trying to figure out. What is the meaning of life? How can we find purpose in life? How can we feel truly happy and complete? These are the questions we continue to wrestle with both individually and as a group.

Today we're going to take a look at an interaction between Jesus and a rich man and see if we can answer this question of meaning and purpose. If you have a Bible with you, go ahead and turn to Matthew chapter 19. We're going to read verse 16 through 22 today.

"Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'

"'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied. 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.'

"'Which ones?' he inquired.

"Jesus replied, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother," and "love your neighbour as yourself."

"'All these I have kept,' the young man said. 'What do I still lack?'

"Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

This story starts out with a man coming up to Jesus and asking, “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” What actions do I take? What works do I perform? What activities do I engage in, in order to get eternal life?” Now, it’s important to understand what this man is and is not asking Jesus.

Generally, when we think of the idea of eternal life, we think of a life that goes on and on and on, stretching out in front of us for an infinite amount of time. We tend to think of eternal life in terms of its length. That we will continue to live forever and ever into eternity. However, that’s not at all what this man is asking about.

This man, like most of the people Jesus interacted with, was Jewish. And we have every reason to believe he had a first-century Palestinian worldview. Which means, like any good Jew of the time, he would have already believed in the coming resurrection. We’ve talked about this a lot in the past. Most Jews in Jesus’ day believed that at the end of this age, at the Day of the Lord, God would rescue all of Israel from their oppression, he would restore justice and order to the world and he would raise the righteous to everlasting life.

So this Jewish man who comes up to Jesus and asks, “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” is not asking the question, “How can I make sure I go to heaven when I die?” or even, “How can I make sure I’m part of the resurrection at the end of the age?” Those things would have been a giving for him. Resurrection, check. Life in the age to come, check. When he asked Jesus about eternal life, it’s not eternal length he’s talking about but, rather, an eternal depth.

We tend to use language like this ourselves. If you have a conversation with a friend or family member that is especially important or valuable or enriching, you would probably say something about how the conversation was deeply meaningful. You will describe how the conversation—what was said and how you felt and how they felt and the bond you shared—had a certain weight or gravity or importance to it. It wasn’t just a surface level conversation, but there was depth.

This is what the man is asking Jesus. “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” What can I do that will give my life depth and meaning and purpose and value? What can I do that will help me feel like I’m not just living life on the surface?

Jesus starts by telling him to obey the commands. When the man presses him to be more specific, he lists five of the 10 Commandments and his slips in Leviticus 19:18, the passage about loving your neighbour as yourself. The interesting thing here is that Jesus doesn’t quote all ten of the 10 Commandments, only the ones that deal with how you treat other people. And elsewhere Jesus has been known to say that the greatest commandment is the *Shema*, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, and he says this passage Leviticus 19 is like it. He combines the importance of loving God and loving your neighbour into the two equally greatest and inseparable commands. And yet here, when asked what this man can do in order to get meaning and purpose from life, Jesus just quotes the commandments that deal with other people.

However, the man insists that he has kept all of these commands and yet something is still missing. Notice his insistence. This isn’t a man who is worried that he hasn’t followed the right

steps in order to please God and is double checking. I've done that. I've been that kid who prayed and asked Jesus into my heart in grade primary only to worry later that maybe I didn't do it right and prayed to invite Jesus in again.

If that were all this man was after, assurance that what he's done is enough to experience the resurrection later, then he would have left after Jesus listed the commands. But there's something else. Something isn't right. He's kept these commands. He doesn't steal or kill or commit adultery. He doesn't lie or dishonour his parents and he loves his neighbours. But there's still something missing. So Jesus tells him to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor.

The text tells us that, "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." And what can happen when we read passages like this is that it's easy for us to read this simply as saying that rich people have a hard time relying on God and maybe we even thank God that we're not rich and that's about it. But I think a better question to ask here is why? Why, when the man came to Jesus asking what he can do to have a rich and deep and meaningful life, was Jesus' ultimate answer to sell his possessions and give it away to the poor?

Eight years ago, Donald Miller wrote a book called *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. If you've never heard of Donald Miller, at the time he was most famous for a book he wrote a few years before that called *Blue Like Jazz*, which was a collection of essays details Miller's growing understanding of Jesus and our need to respond to him. That might be the driest explanation of that book I could possibly give, but the book was immensely popular, especially with people in their teens and 20s. The book was so popular that a director and a screen-writers decided they wanted to turn the book into a movie. Remember, the book was a collection of essays. And the movie was going to be a narrative, a story about a character.

So in 2008, Donald Miller wrote *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* which was all about what he learned about stories while working with these two men on *Blue Like Jazz: The Movie*. What he discovered was that there are certain elements that make up a good story and these elements work whether the story is a movie, a novel or your real life.

So here's what a story is at its core. A story is a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it. That's it. Every movie you've ever watched, every novel you've ever read, every play you've gone to is this. It's about a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it. If it's a happy story they character probably got whatever they were trying to get. If it was a tragedy, they probably didn't. And just like in a movie or a book, the elements that make up a good story are true in our own lives as well. Good stories have characters with good or noble ambitions. Bad stories, the ones we don't care about, have characters with bad ambitions. What they want are things that we don't tend to care about or think are meaningful or valuable.

Picture this. Let's say you went to the movies and you sat down with your popcorn and your M&Ms that you like to sprinkle on top. As the movie starts to play out you discover that the primary goal of the character is to make enough money to purchase a brand new BMW. So the character maybe gets a second job and they put in lots of overtime and they save all their money. At one point there's a montage of the person learning to make all their meals with cans of peas because those are the cheapest and it helps them save more money. And finally, in the big climax of the movie the person counts up all their money and they realize they've done it,

they've earned and saved enough for the BMW. And as the credits of the movie roll, you see them driving off the lot of the dealership in their new car. Here's the thing about that story. That's not an inspiring story. Frankly, that's an incredibly boring story. But the reason it was boring, the reason it was meaningless was the ambition was terrible. The thing the character wanted didn't serve any greater purpose.

Here's what this has to do with our passage from Matthew. In the last verse it says, "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." Remember, a story is a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it. What did this young man want? Well, he kind of wanted eternal life. He kind of wanted meaning and purpose in life. But more than that, he wanted his wealth. He wanted the comfort and security that his wealth provided. The reason he came to Jesus in the first place was that he realized that he was telling a bad story with his life. His life didn't have any real meaning or purpose.

And so he came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to get eternal life? What must I do in order to experience a life that is rich and valuable and gives me a sense of satisfaction and purpose and meaning?" And Jesus response was, "Sell your possessions and give it all away to the poor." Essentially Jesus was saying, "Make other people your ambition. Make other people and their improvement the thing that your story is about." If you want to live a meaningful life, it must be lived in service to others.

There is something inside of us, when we hear stories of sacrifice in order for other people to benefit, there's something that resonates with us. You hear about the single father who grew up in the ghetto and now he's working two jobs in order to make sure he son can afford to go to university and break the cycle. That's a good story. You hear about the woman who works all day as a lawyer but then goes to a soup kitchen in the evenings to provide meals for homeless people. That's a good story. You hear about the church who pooled their money and sponsored a family from Syria so they could resettle in Canada and have a chance at raising their kids. That's a great story.

Like the young man who approached Jesus, when we live lives that are essentially all about us, that are inward-focused and concerned most for our own comfort and safety and security, then what we discover, like the young man, is that our lives lack meaning and purpose. On the other hand, when we work and sacrifice for the sake of others, that's when our lives began to feel eternally deep with meaning.

Connexus Church in Barrie, Ontario says it this way on their website, "Ever notice there are no inspiring stories of accumulation, but there are thousands of inspiring stories of sacrifice?" The stories that inspire us are the stories of people sacrificing for others. If you want to live a meaningful life it must be lived in service to others.

So the question we need to ask is, "How has God blessed you?" What are you doing with the time and talents and resources that God has given you? Do you hoard them? Do you use what God has given you simply to accumulate more? Or do you use what God has given you to bless those around you? How has God blessed you? How can you use the ways God has blessed you in order to bless others?

Furthermore, how do you view the people around you? Are they here to help you get whatever it is that you want? Or are you here to help them? When we see people as the stepping stones to get whatever we want, power, prestige, wealth, we will always feel like life is meaningless. But when we see those resources—power, prestige, wealth—as stepping stones to help those around us, we will tell a good story with our lives. We will get eternal, deep, meaningful life. If you want to live a meaningful life it must be lived in service to others.

Let's pray.