

# Tough Questions, Real Answers: LIVIN' THE LIFE

## Micah 6:6-8

### *What is the good life?*

A sermon preached by  
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If you are a student of cinema, which is a fancy pants way of saying, if you study movies as an art form, instead of just something to watch while you eat your popcorn, you have probably heard of an Italian movie called “*La Dolce Vita*.” It was controversial when it came out in 1960. It was considered too racy for conservative movie audiences. But it cemented the reputation of the Italian director Federico Fellini, and it rocketed actors Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg to international stardom. It was famous for the opening scene of a statue of Jesus being carried by helicopter across Rome to the Vatican, and for the scene when the stars go wading in the famous Trevi fountain, which the tour guides in Rome still talk about today.<sup>1</sup>

*La Dolce Vita* means “The Sweet Life” and the thrust of the movie is the hunger, the ache of modern people for a good life, a life that means something, in a society that has abandoned its moral anchor. All of this plays out against a backdrop of religious imagery (like Jesus flying over Rome).

What is the good life? It's not just a modern question. It has been asked since the days of the Greek philosophers and the Biblical writers. I follow several podcasts that continue to ask the question today.

One of the most important treatments of this question was published this year in a book called *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study*.<sup>2</sup> There has been a study going on now for about 80 years at Harvard University. In the 1930's, they took a group of 700 young men, half of them students at Harvard and half of them from the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston, and they studied them for their health and happiness. Now they are studying the children and grandchildren of the original subjects. Through interviews and blood tests and brain scans, four generations of researchers tried to figure out what made life good or bad for these men. After tens of thousands of pages of research, they came to three conclusions:

1. Happiness, the good life, is based on positive relationships—family, friends, and I would add, God.

2. Positive personal connections are not just correlated with better health; good relationships cause better overall health, better heart health, and better memory.

3. Happiness is not correlated to external events or situations. Wealth, fame, and power are not determinative of a good life.

So what is a good life? That's our last tough question, and it's broad and deep. I have done more reading and research on this sermon than on any sermon in this series, but I think I have found some real answers.

Lots of Scripture talks about the good life. Jesus said that he came that we might have life in all its abundance.<sup>3</sup> Of all the advice Scripture gives about how to live, the little nugget we read out of the prophet Micah perhaps gets at the answer in the most concise form. One of my study Bibles said, "In this single sentence, the prophet sums up a century of brilliant prophecy."<sup>4</sup>

The Scripture asks, what does God want from us? Some sort of extravagant display of devotion? Maybe some over-the-top sacrifices? How about one of my children? We know the answer to that. God has shown us what the good life is. This is all God wants: "*to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.*"<sup>5</sup> I don't need to give you a Hebrew lesson here, but each of these three words—justice, kindness, and walking—are like "greatest hit" words in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Doing justice—*mishpat* in Hebrew—means to be fair in your treatment of others, to lift up the downtrodden, to stand against oppression of any sort. The Old Testament prophets were the champions of those who had been treated unjustly. Isaiah has a similar passage where he criticizes the false religiosity of the people while they are oppressing their neighbors. In God's name, he says, "*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.*"<sup>6</sup>

In a world filled with prejudice, hatred, division, and disparity, we are still called to do justice.

Loving kindness—*hesed*—is deeper than just being nice to people. The word is also translated "mercy," "steadfast love," and "faithfulness" in other texts. It means being faithful to the covenant love of God, and loving all people with the love of God.

Walking—*halakh*—is a term that is applied to all the ethical teaching of the Scripture, as well as the teaching of the rabbis that came after the Scripture. God wants us to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. The word is similar to the word Jesus used to call the disciples. "Follow me" means "walk with me." If you walk with God, you will walk humbly, because you will be aware of the greatness of God and your dependence on God's grace. Followers of God don't strut. We know we are walking on holy ground. Some translations prefer "wisely" to "humbly" in this verse. It is a wise thing to walk with God; it leads to a good life.

One of the blogs I follow is a retired United Methodist pastor named Martin Thielen. His blog is called "Doubter's Parish," which is what attracted me in the first place. He recently read the book about the Harvard study, and it led him to create his own list of components of happiness. He called them "five core essentials that I need in order to live my good life."<sup>7</sup> They are:

- **Relationships.** Martin agrees with the Harvard study that one of the sources of his happiness is positive, loving connection with other people.

- **Spirituality.** The most important relationship we have is with God. It's personal, and it's real, and our spiritual practices keep the relationship strong.

- **Work.** Work isn't everything, and it can easily become addictive. Some of us still work for a living; others are retired. Whether or not you get paid for what you do, it is important to have some meaningful activity that gives your life a purpose and makes you happy.

- **Health.** Our bodies, Paul says, are the temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Taking care of the temple—exercising, eating right, getting proper medical care—makes our lives better.

- **Gratitude.** If we live every day grateful for the blessings of God, we will be happier, and our lives will be better. Martin keeps a journal, and every day he jots down a list of things he is grateful for that day—something as big as his marriage, or as small as a good cup of coffee.

What would be on your list of core essentials for your good life? If you want to share your list with me, I would love to read it.

When I think of walking humbly with God, one of the people I think of is Eugene Peterson. Peterson, who died in 2018, was a Presbyterian minister, writer, and poet. He published around 30 books, but his claim to fame was a dynamic paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*.<sup>9</sup> However, even with the recognition that comes with authorship, Peterson remained a humble servant. He pastored the same small Presbyterian Church in Maryland for 29 years, turning down many offers to serve larger congregations. He only joined the faculty of a seminary in retirement.

In his memoir, entitled simply *The Pastor*, he characterized the good life of a Christian as “a long obedience in the same direction.”<sup>10</sup> I love that phrase. Ironically and delightfully, he got the phrase from reading the 19<sup>th</sup>-century atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. As a young pastor in the 1960's, Peterson read Nietzsche, and he found this sentence: “The essential thing in heaven and earth is ...that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, [in] something that has made life worth living.”<sup>11</sup> Eugene was not too proud to take the words of an atheist and turn them into Christian words. In fact, he imagined being visited by the ghost of Nietzsche, and the old philosopher scowling in anger at what Eugene had done.

He later wrote a book by that title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*.<sup>12</sup> In that book, he wrote that to live a good life, we must play two roles. The first is disciple. A follower of Jesus is a disciple. Disciple means “learner.” Disciples of Jesus are constantly learning how to be more like Jesus.

Almost forty years ago, I learned a lesson which has always stuck with me. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, two management gurus, wrote a book called *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. It was the kind of book I read when I was learning how to lead a church. For the book, the authors interviewed 90 of the most successful business leaders in America, in order to find out what they had in common. The one characteristic that all 90 leaders had in common was not background, geography, education, or political persuasion. The one thing that was common to all these successful leaders was that they were all “perpetual learners.”<sup>13</sup> All through their lives, they kept up; they kept abreast of

developments; they read books and attended events to keep learning, and it manifested itself in effective leadership.

The good Christian life involves being a disciple, continually learning the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus. We keep studying Scripture; we keep worshipping; we keep engaging in study and service with other people, because that's how we grow and manifest effective discipleship.

The other role Peterson talked about is the pilgrim. A pilgrim is a person on a religious journey. When we go to the Holy Land, I tell my groups, "You are not tourists. You are pilgrims." We are following the way; we are on the road; we are treading in the footsteps of our Master. Along the way, we change the world. There is a purpose to our pilgrimage.

This time of year, when you say "pilgrim," you think of Thanksgiving, right? That's exactly what that hardy band of settlers in New England was. They were an oppressed religious minority in England, so they undertook a dangerous and grueling journey to find a place where they could practice their religion in freedom. They were not a big group. In fact, after their first brutal winter, there were only about 50 of them still alive. But it doesn't take many. A small group of pilgrims can have a big impact.

Robert Bellah, the renowned sociologist, wrote, "We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a new vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision (and act on it)."<sup>14</sup> Two percent! Christian pilgrims, disciples of Jesus, make up more than two percent of our population, wouldn't you guess? What if the Christians, even in our own community, began to get more serious about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God? Wouldn't that be something? Wouldn't that make life better? Wouldn't that change the world?

The first American pilgrims on our shores did something else that was very important. After suffering so much in the beginning, they began, with the help of some of the Native Americans, to enjoy the fruits of their new land. They learned to hunt and fish; they grew crops; they quit dying. So they were thankful to God. Then they turned their thanks into giving. They invited their indigenous neighbors for a feast and games, because they were also thankful for the help. Much of what we celebrate about that first Thanksgiving is more legendary than historical, but the point is still true. When you suffer and survive, give thanks. When you give thanks, share what you have with everybody you can, even those who are not like you. You might make friends, and friends are what make life good.

Today we have an opportunity to understand and to experience the good life. One other observation that was made by the authors of that Harvard study on happiness: it's never too late to start, to re-start, to repair, or to reclaim your happiness. You can take a significant step today—or any day—to practice the core essentials of your happiness and to enjoy the good life.

In all my research on the good life, two words keep coming up over and over again: gratitude and generosity. The good and happy life is a life that is thankful and giving. That's always part of it. Today is Commitment Sunday for our church, for the support of our ministry into the coming year. To be honest, the church needs it to continue to function. To be really honest, you need it more. Unless you can learn to be grateful and generous, you will not learn how to be a disciple or a pilgrim. But if you do, you will be on the way. You will be on the way that leads to life, and that life is sweet—*La Dolce Vita*.

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- <sup>1</sup> Federico Fellini, et al., *La Dolce Vita* (Riama Films, 1960).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Waldinger, Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> John 10:10.
- <sup>4</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1313.
- <sup>5</sup> Micah 6:8.
- <sup>6</sup> Isaiah 58: 6-8.
- <sup>7</sup> <https://doubtersparish.com/2023/09/05/creating-a-good-life/>.
- <sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.
- <sup>9</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).
- <sup>10</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 245ff.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 11f..
- <sup>13</sup> Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 188.
- <sup>14</sup> Alex A. Gondola, Jr., *Holidays Are Holy Days: Sermons for Special Sundays*, (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, 2012).