

Fearless: Fear of Not Mattering Sunday, 4/25/21

Last week we considered how our brains are programmed to respond to fear.

Sometimes that programming helps us to escape danger, but oftentimes it keeps us from living fuller, more courageous lives. I introduced you to the Fearless Flash Cards, one way of reprogramming your brain with the Word of God. If you haven't given those a try yet, it's not too late. With the powerful love of God and some self-discipline, we can overcome the inertia that keeps us in the self-defeating grip of fear.

This week, we're going to talk about one of the elephants in our rooms, whether it's our basements, our sheds, our garages, or even our storage units. I'm talking about all that stuff you've been accumulating for decades. Some of our stuff we actually need, but much of it we have because we simply want it. Or, perhaps more to the point, we want it because it tells us a story about our lives having meaning. We buy stuff because we want to associate with brands and lifestyles, believing that we'll matter more if we have more of the right stuff.

Let's face it, businesses like "Got Junk" are thriving because Americans like us tend to accumulate things faster than we can pass them on, recycle, or trash them. Just this week I finally gave up on trying to repair our broken treadmill and decided to try the lazy approach by contacting this outfit for a bid to haul it away. Unfortunately, they don't come to my address, so I had to use the much less lazy method of stripping off the recyclable metals, which actually accounted for most of the treadmill. Things break, and then we suddenly have junk. At least our treadmill got used on a regular basis, although it wasn't me logging the hours of exercise! But what about the other stuff we've filled our lives with, some of which hasn't had a useful purpose in your life for years? Why are you still hanging onto it, and what do you imagine will become of it once you've died? Max Lucado tells the story of his fourth-grade friend Thomas who saved a cigarette butt discarded by Dean Martin because somehow keeping that cigarette butt convinced him that he could live the glamorous life of the rich and famous by simple association.¹

How about you? Are you hanging onto junk because you've invested your life in it?

¹ Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 22. Thomas Nelson (2009).

Do you need it to believe that you matter, that your presence on this ball of dirt and water makes a difference? You do matter, to others and to God, but not because of the stuff you aspire to collect.

How about a family? Max Lucado also asserts that many of us try to find our meaning in forming a family.² Most parents, myself included, would say that parenthood is both one of the most challenging, rewarding, and worthwhile pursuits of their lives. And yet, the meaning of our lives must certainly go beyond being remembered by the next one or two generations of offspring, and certainly well beyond the heirlooms we pass down to our descendants. There is some degree of immortality that each parent achieves, either genetically or through passed down values and traditions. But our family legacies aren't nearly as long-lasting as we imagine they'll be, with each generation developing preferences and problems of their own. Truthfully, most of us will be largely forgotten within two or three generations of our descendants. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't value and love families, who are a great gift from God, but they can't live up to the pressure and expectations that we often place on them for our eternal meaning and identity.

Why the great need for meaning, anyway? Why should insignificance frighten us so badly that we spend so much of our energy in this life trying to forestall our deaths or fashion our own versions of immortality? Why does it bother us so much when we don't win the game, or get called on in class, or get the promotion, or receive any of the thousands of different forms of attention and recognition that the social orders we live and work in have to offer? Somewhere, deep inside us, is a nagging certainty that we're important, and we all seem to have a regular need to have that fact affirmed. And the truth is that we are important, but the ways we matter most aren't always the ways we imagine. Our families, our work, our friends, and even our hobbies- they do matter, but there is a deeper meaning that we can only find in God that makes all those things have purpose.

Psalm 139 is a lovely, personal love song offered to God that recognizes the inescapable truth that no person can understand and value us as perfectly and as completely as the God who made us. "You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was

² Ibid

recorded in your book.”³ How many of you have photo albums, digital or otherwise, of your children, or from your own childhood? Psalm 139 suggests this image: That God holds a photo album for each of us, even before we’re born. And they’re not the usual kind of photo albums, where the first kid’s album is really complete, and as the parents get busier with more kids, fewer and fewer photos are taken. God holds equally complete photo albums for each of us, and they record everything of significance from our birth to our death in this life.

Why would God do that? The same reason we do it, surely. Because we love our children so much that we don’t want to miss out on recording and celebrating every single glorious moment of our children’s lives, no matter how small or humiliating. What’s more, we’re not just God’s children, but God’s craftsmanship, Psalm 139 instructs us, made “wonderfully complex.”⁴ If you think parents take pride in their children, can you even begin to imagine how much God takes pride in the pinnacle of God’s creative genius, each of us? If you’re afraid that you don’t matter to God because of something you are or are not, something you’ve done or haven’t done, then meditate on Psalm 139. God has your complete life in a photo album and loves you on every page of it!

But why, you might reasonably ask, is this so? How and why is it possible that the author of all life should be concerned with me? We find another clue in Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. I’m reading from chapter 1, beginning with verse 4, in the New Living Translation. **{Read Ephesians 1:4-11 NLT}**

If you’ve ever been back to the youth room here at church, then you’ve seen a sign like this: “No dots or stars.” It’s a reference to a story by Max Lucado called *You Are Special*. It’s a story of wooden people who had the practice of putting stars on people who did well and dots on people who didn’t make the grade. The protagonist of the story had so many dots that people gave him more dots just for having dots. Punchinello felt that he didn’t matter, until he met his maker, who explained that he mattered- not because of any stars or dots, but because his maker loved him.⁵

Paul makes a similar point in his letter. God chose us, not because of any of our

³ Psalm 139:16. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

⁴ Psalm 139:14. Ibid.

⁵ Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 24. Thomas Nelson (2009).

failings or accomplishments, but because God's very nature is one of love and grace. God's plan has been to demonstrate that grace through Jesus, choosing to make us blameless because of what Jesus did for us. God alone knows how covered with dots each of us would be if left to our own merit. But because of Jesus, there are no stars or dots in the eyes of God, and each of us matters to God, equally and eternally.

What's more, Paul assures us that we matter because we're all important to the fulfillment of God's perfect plan, which is this: "At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth."⁶ Think about that. Knowing that our rebellion has made us less than we were made to be, God nevertheless chose us to be made blameless and to be instruments of bring God's Kingdom on Earth into fulfillment, living examples of God's kindness and grace! In a sense, it's exactly our imperfections that make us most useful as example of God's grace. God's plan certainly is mysterious. If you're feeling afraid of not mattering, perhaps you need to embrace more of this mystery of God. As Paul puts it in 2Corinthians 12:9, "Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me."⁷

As Max Lucado points out, the fear that we don't matter can actually become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with that mistaken believe stoking counterproductive behaviors that undermine our successful navigation through the choices of life.⁸ I'm not old enough. I'm too old. I'm not smart enough. I don't have enough money. I'm not good looking enough. People don't like me. I'm not cool. These are the kinds of things that we rehearse in our hearts and minds that keep us focused on the wrong things and undermine our joy in this life. The truth is that you do matter, both to God and to God's people. The only stars and dots that have any meaning are the ones you accept for yourself. Jesus died so that we might know the truth and be set free to live as God's beloved children. Do you believe that? What can you do today to reinforce that essential truth?

Please take some time now to reflect on your great worth to God and to God's people.

⁶ Psalm 139:10. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

⁷ 2Corinthians 12:9. Ibid.

⁸ Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 26. Thomas Nelson (2009).



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