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## **Creating a World Class Life**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

**“To create a world-class life we must render to God what is God’s.”**

The pictures were always powerful. An old, brown skinned woman walked the dusty streets. She was slightly bent—enough to make one wonder if she somehow carried the weight of the world. Perpetually a smile graced her face and there was always a hug that she had to give. Day in and day out, she gave her life and her whole self to the meeting of people’s needs.

Contrast that image with a congressional forum. Men and women lifted high in their chairs looking down toward two chairs at a table with microphones where two people sit in defensive postures. Stern words are shared. The people are essentially on trial. They seem to have participated in some greedy endeavor and now all manner of lives are affected.

The images are polar opposites. The latter comes to be when the people at the table—just fill in the blank with the names—Ken Lay of Enron, etc.—have sought the world’s definition of a world-class life. They have longed for the right cars, homes, and bowed at the feet of the almighty dollar. The former image is Mother Theresa who lived a world-class life by a far different standard and with vastly different motives.

Each image will get us to someone’s definition of a world-class life but the question is which one do you really want? That is a question only you can answer. Maybe it’s a no-brainer but if not maybe our passage can lend a hand in your decision. Hear these words from Matthew, chapter 22:15-22:

The Pharisees and the Herodians had taken great pains to construct such a perfect question that they would be able to stump Jesus with ease. To say yes to the question would certainly contradict all that he had been teaching heretofore about God. But, to say no to the question was to fail to give the appropriate allegiance to the Roman state. Either way the Pharisees and Herodians win and will no longer have to tolerate the likes of this Jesus character. They pose the question with that heir of pride and confidence that suggests they have Jesus just where they want him. They butter him up and ask the words: ‘what is your opinion, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’ What they don’t calculate is the fact that Jesus is a man of empathy. He has the ability to see through them, to understand their motives and he has the bravery to call them out on those motives. Calling them for what they are—hypocrites—he acknowledges that they are trying to trap him and then he offers them the twist that is a part of all of the gospel stories.

Not being one who has much use for money, Jesus asks to see this coin used for the payment of the tax. They hand him a denarius and there printed firmly on the coin is the image of Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus was a “shrewd, brilliant and astute politician” but he was also calculating and cold. It was those things that led the way to his power. His forcefulness opened the way for him to be named consul by the senate and he came to stand as a person to be “reckoned with.” Because he restored peace after 100 years of civil war, maintained an honest government and strong currency, expanded the road systems, created a postal service and worked for free trade, Octavian as he came to be called was given the title of Augustus, or “the exalted.” For all of his accomplishments, the people upon his death began to worship him as a god.

What Jesus deduces in his glance at that coin, is that we give ourselves to something and its image becomes a part of our being. Because they had given themselves to the ways of Roman society, it was right and fitting that they render to Caesar his appropriate due. His response offers a bit of a double meaning for wrapped up in it may well be that these Pharisees and Herodians have allowed the cold, calculating nature of the human god called Caesar Augustus to become a part of them. Their very query suggests that fact.

But if they understand themselves as children of God, then they must render themselves to God. It was enough of an answer to leave them fully dumbfounded and without response. What Jesus knew was that at our core, we all want to live a world class life. The problem is that we can't seem to decide on which definition of a world class life we will choose. Will it be that of the Ken Lays . . . of the Pharisees and Herodians or will it be that of the Mother Therasas and of Jesus?

Some of us believe that our very entrance and faithfulness in this place clearly enables us to answer affirmatively toward the latter part of the question—Mother Theresa and Jesus, of course. Others think that donning the moniker of Christian entitles us to the latter. And yet many of us, if we are honest aren't living lives that reflect those of the latter. If we are going to don that moniker, then it means that God is our final authority.

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, authors of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, have said that “building a strong life means that you allow performance to be the final judge of your strengths.” The product reveals the ingredients. Those of you who are woodworkers know that if you spend the big bucks for the mahogany wood special ordered and if you put your love and your heart and soul into the making of your woodwork you will have a remarkable and long standing product. But if you use the cheap and readily accessible MDF, your end product will not be as good and in many cases to the untrained eye the differences in the MDF versus the mahogany pieces will be evident. That, then, is to say, that the way we live our lives reflects whether or not we've rendered them to God.

So, let us assume that we are on the same page. Let's assume first, that we all want to live a world class life; second, that our definition of creating that life is that we must render to God what is God's, third that we understand that such a rendering means that we must render our very selves to God.

With that assumption, how do we get there? In recent weeks the news media has been full of bad news that seems never-ending—from a seemingly tenuous stock market to bank mergers and bailouts to gas crises. Yet in the midst of all of the bad news, this week, ABC's Good Morning America featured a story on a 28 year old woman who decided to create something nice. In the face of hard times, she wanted to offer encouragement so she created a website called Operation Nice where you can go and print out notes, send smiles to people and practice kindness in the face of our nation's pain. This is a young woman who understands the value of a world class life by Jesus' standards. She knows that in order to achieve a world class life one first must acknowledge who will be imprinted on one's life. It could have been herself but then she would have been a narcissist living only for herself and there never would have been a website. She could have been living for another human that she adores but then the world may not have been given access to the site. She could have chosen to imprint a human power upon herself such as her boss or a governmental leader but then maybe her website would have been more of a blog praising them. We don't know for sure that she's a person of faith, that God is her imprint of choice, but her other focused actions suggest that may well be so.

Once we, like the 28 year old woman, have acknowledged who will be imprinted on our lives we have to give ourselves to nurturing our relationships with God. Bernard of Clairvaux was a 10<sup>th</sup> century monk who developed something called the 'Stages of love.' He tracked the level of people's relationships to God by four categories. First, we love ourselves for ourselves sake. Then as we grow, we come to actually love God for ourselves sake. Further development brings us to a place of loving ourselves for God's sake and if we really get to the level of a Mother Theresa . . . then we love God for God's sake. It is only there that the world class life is realized—there where there is no more striving or defining—there where true being exists.

Until that moment with our imprint identified and our commitment to nurturing relationship with God, we begin to become self-aware. We are able to acknowledge the strengths that God has given us and we are able to participate in them such that we seek to improve our strengths. Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton worked together through their work with the Gallup Organization to create what they call the Strengths Finder assessment. The assessment identified 34 different strengths and they acknowledged the combinations of strengths in people were so varied that one would have to look very long and very hard to find someone just like themselves. They told the story of a man named Bruce.

Bruce had won one of the nation's most prestigious awards in teaching. Everyone said that he was "brilliant at creating a focused yet caring" learning environment. As they conducted

Gallup's study of excellence, they interviewed him and offered him feedback. Here is what they said about him:

“One of his strongest talents was Empathy, so we talked to him about how powerful it was that he could pick up on the feelings of each student, that he could make each one feel heard and understood. We described how this theme enabled him to hear the unspoken questions, to anticipate each student's learning hurdles, and to tailor his teaching style so that together they could find a way around them. We painted as vivid a picture as we could of how he had cultivated this talent into a tremendous strength. When we were done, Bruce sat there with a strange look on his face. He wasn't surprised. He wasn't intrigued. He didn't even seem particularly flattered. He was just confused. “Doesn't everyone do that?” he asked.”

Bruce's strengths were so much a part of him and he had honed them so—that, now, he wasn't concerned with striving. He had, like Mother Theresa, learned to just be.

When we've named the imprint for our lives as God, given ourselves to developing our relationships with God, as well as developing our God given strengths, we come to that ultimate moment when we are able to give ourselves such that our whole lives come focused on others. We have a purpose in life. It isn't that we just volunteer at a local agency or collect canned goods or do nice things for others. Those are all good things but a person who has given their life focus to others has altered their living. That choice of having a purpose in life informs every moment that they breathe. They may render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but that is irrelevant to them. They find their relevance in rendering their purpose filled life to God and the choices that they make for the sake of others is the very thing that reveals their world class lives.

To create a world class life, we must render to God what is God's, we must live for the One imprinted on our souls.

Who have you imprinted there?