

Prioritise the Living Hope in Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Hello everyone. So we're continuing our Lent series looking, as Richard said, at these themes of sacrifice and living hope. And the couple of verses I was given were actually just right at the end of that passage that Andy read for us. I understand that the youth last month were talking about how Jesus might communicate if he'd come today. Instead of 2,000 years ago. And in particular they were looking at would Jesus have a TikTok account?

And if you ask my kids what I think of TikTok, I am not a great fan and they will say that's based on absolutely no evidence. I've never been on TikTok but I've decided I don't like it. But whatever I think about TikTok, I think we have to concede that Jesus communicated in a way that was so relevant to the audience of the day. And I think Luke 12, if you look at it as a whole, is a bit of a masterclass in how Jesus communicates. So I don't have time to go through the whole chapter but I'm just going to look briefly what we have in the lead up to this. So if you have a Bible you could see this but hopefully you can also follow it on screen. So at the beginning of Luke 12 we're told that a large crowd has gathered to listen to Jesus. But Jesus actually doesn't address the crowd first, he talks to his disciples and he warns them about the danger of hypocrisy, putting our faith in the wrong things. And he uses an example of five sparrows sold for a penny and contrast that to the value of a person acknowledged by God. It feels a bit like you know sometimes politicians are asked the price of a pint of milk. Jesus was using the price of five sparrows which I have no idea what that would be now but hopefully the people that Jesus was speaking to I expect they would have known the answer to that.

Then he takes I think of a bit of a crowd Q&A.; He takes a question from the crowd. The crowd is about inheritance, it's a bit money box live. And Jesus answers the question and then he tells a story.

So he tells a parable, this is the parable of the rich fool. A story of a man who stalls grain in ever bigger barns but neglects to be generous. And then finally we have the passage that was read, Jesus's advice to his disciples. Don't let worry lead you to invest in the wrong things. And he uses this beautiful language and I'm sure many of you have heard this before to explain how much God cares for us. The ravens they do not sow or weep, they reap, they have no storeroom or barn yet God feeds them. The wildflowers neither labour or spin, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of those. Jesus was very good at tailoring his message to his audience. Some of those metaphors are relevant to his contemporary audience.

The grain in the barn, buying the sparrows. Some talk about the Israelites history, Solomon's robes. And some have kind of a universal appeal, the ravens, the lilies. So we're looking at the last couple of verses of this chapter. I'm just going to read them again.

[3 : 3 0] Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out a treasure in heaven that will never fail. Where no thief comes near and no moth destroys, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So that's fairly straightforward.

I might need help with grain storage metaphors, but you don't need to explain theft or moth infestation to this South London girl. These are metaphors that I can get behind. So this could be a short sermon.

The message is quite clear, I think, here. Jesus says, sell your possessions and give to the poor, because you can't take them with you. So let's get on and do it. It's not that easy, is it?

And I wonder if this is one of Jesus's clearest but least followed instructions. What makes this hard? And what does Jesus say that can help us with that?

The moths. Before COVID, a few years before COVID, I was diagnosed with bone cancer. I had a big operation on my leg. I think some of you will remember that. And one of the good things, I guess, that came out of that in hindsight is I changed career. At the time, I was working up in a museum, in an office, in marketing environment. And after I recovered from my operation, I actually left my job and I retrained to become a counsellor. As a result of that change, I packed up a lot of those types of clothes that I used to wear when I was working in an office. So pencil skirts, remember those?

[5 : 22] Smart dresses. I packed them up. I couldn't quite face getting rid of them, but I didn't wear them anymore because of the scarring on my leg and because I was no longer in that environment.

So I packed them up and I stored them under my bed. A couple of years later, just after COVID finished, when I was trying to find something to wear other than leggings, which I'd worn throughout the pandemic.

Some of you can identify. I got the bag out and I realised that some moths had happily feasted all summer on my old clothes. Got them all out. I washed them. I ironed them. I mended like hundreds of holes. And you know what? I haven't worn them since. Still under the bed, waiting for the next moth attack. And the thing in my experience about moths, I don't know about your experience of moths, is they don't seem to attack the things you use every day. They don't seem to attack the items of clothing that you get in and out of your cupboard regularly. They go for the things that you have stored away. Sometimes these are things you have forgotten about, but sometimes these are things that we've held on to in case we might need them. Sometimes they're precious things that you can't bear to part with.

And I think this unlocks something about what Jesus is saying in this passage. Jesus is repeatedly telling us not to put our trust in the things we possess and to put our trust instead in him. And I think the reason we find this hard is really because of fear. I know that I fear endings of things. I also fear change. And I think we probably all fear loss because it's painful. These things are painful. They're difficult for us to face.

It might be with my office closed that we're struggling to say goodbye to a period of our lives which is behind us. Or it could be that and it can be that facing up to that is painful. And I think it's even more painful if maybe the thing that you have lost is a person. Maybe you've suffered a bereavement. And it's hard to get rid of the stuff that reminds you of that person. My favourite television programme at the moment is Sort Out Your Life with Stacey Solomon. Has anyone seen this? It's on BBC One on Tuesdays. Sort Out Your Life fans.

[7 : 56] So this, to just explain this to those of you who haven't seen it, it's essentially a programme where a team of experts help you reduce the possessions that are cluttering up and overflowing in your house in order that you can create space for lives, for your present lives, to do the things you might want to do in the future. And the premise is they take the entire contents of your house, every single item, and they lay it out in an enormous warehouse. You then go to the warehouse and you get rid of half the stuff. And then they put it back beautifully into your house. What I love about this programme is I think it gets to the root of how our attachment to possessions is so emotional. It's not actually about the things, it's about what the things mean to us, what they represent. So in the first episode of the most recent series, there is a couple who, they have an older daughter, and then they lost three babies.

And then they became pregnant with triplets, three boys, so they now have four children. And the house is overflowing with stuff. But because of the loss of the babies, the parents have kept, the mum in particular, has kept everything that relates to the triplets' upbringing. She's kept all their baby stuff, all their toys. In one of the scenes, she's kept hundreds, every single one of their school exercise books. And when one of the presenters challenges her about why she has kept them, she says, these exercise books are evidence of the boys' achievements. You know, she never thought that she'd be able to bear the triplet. She never thought they'd live to grow up. So they represent the achievements. And the presenter points at the three boys, and she says, they are the physical evidence of your achievement, your living boys. So Jesus, I think, wants us to put trust in the living things, because he came to bring us life. Jesus says it is not the things that you have that provide inheritance. It is your living relationship with Jesus. It is what Jesus has done for us, and our relationship with him, which gives us living hope. Peter puts this beautifully in his letter, 1 Peter 1, verse 3. Praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. So our living hope is the inheritance we have in Jesus, but let's unpack a bit what Peter says about it. So he says in that passage, it is stored in heaven, our inheritance is stored in heaven, and I think that makes it difficult, because we don't always have that heavenly perspective. We like the things that we can see here and now, and we struggle, I think, with something that doesn't feel so tangible. We are shielded by God's power through our faith.

Faith is important. How much do we have? And we need to be active in maintaining our faith through our relationship with Jesus. And also at the end there, there's that acknowledgement that life involves grief and loss. You may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trial.

I think that's the stumbling block. We're told we will have trials, but when they come, they can shake us. And sometimes we can be held back in our Christian journey by past losses, because we fear that those losses will happen again. And none of this is very easy.

I don't know how you felt about that passage when it was read. You may have found it encouraging, but sometimes we read phrases like, do not worry, and they can sound just like empty words.

[12 : 32] When I was a young person, I was told that the Bible contained the phrase, do not worry, 365 times, one for each day of the year. That sounds good, but it's actually not true.

And I don't think that's what God is like. He doesn't combat our worry by telling us not to worry over and over and over and over again. What's so amazing about Jesus's ministry is it's practical.

So when Jesus tells us not to worry, he sends Jesus to give us the blueprint of what that might look like, of how to live a life which has less worry in it. So Jesus gives us the instruction manual of how to do that.

So let's have a look at what Jesus says. First of all, bring your grief and loss to Jesus. So Jesus here is, he's already, isn't he journeying towards the cross? This is our Lent series.

And he alludes to it at the start of the chapter in verse four. He says, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that can do no more.

[13 : 49] Jesus is already thinking about the kind of death he will suffer. Jesus is no stranger to loss, pain or grief. And because of this, I think we can ask for his help if we struggle with it. God does not expect us to bear emotional hardship alone.

In Matthew 11, Jesus says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

My experience is that first step that's difficult, coming to Jesus with our problems. I was reminding myself of what a yoke looks like.

It's a harness. It doesn't look that great to start with. I think putting on the harness feels difficult. It feels like it curtails our freedom.

[14 : 54] But with Jesus, yoked to Jesus, we have that promise of a lighter load. So don't hide your loss under the bed like I did. Take it to Jesus and let him unburden you.

And sometimes we can do this on our own with God through prayer. And sometimes I think we do need the support of Christian fellowship to do this. Prayer ministry, small groups, occasionally people benefit from professional help.

But if you are carrying grief and loss, which you know is holding you back from living, then take it to Jesus. It's a long road, but maybe today could be that first step.

Secondly, contemplate, sorry, it's actually consider. Consider God's creation. Consider the birds of the fields. We live in a materialist culture and we are bombarded with messages that we need more things.

That's certainly something I think has changed in my lifetime. You no longer need to go to Piccadilly Circus to see advertising messages. We see them all the time, don't we, on our phones, in our homes, on our televisions.

[16 : 06] In contrast, I think God gives us good things to focus on. And there have been many scientific studies about the benefits of nature on mental well-being.

And last year there was a particularly interesting study that showed that the participants just looked at a picture of nature. So not even actual nature, just a picture of a forest.

And it was shown to benefit their mental health. So the participants who looked at the picture of nature, their heart rate lowered. The parts of their nervous system that is activated by stress was deactivated.

And there were changes in the prefrontal cortex. So that's the front part of our brain, the front of our cortex. It's the part of our brain that helps us feel calm and make rational decisions.

Slightly underdeveloped in toddlers and teenagers. And over time, this study showed that looking at nature, it changed how the brain worked.

[17 : 09] So it not only allowed people to be calm in the present, it helped them to be calmer people in the future. Well, that shouldn't be a surprise, should it? Because the science is always catching up with scripture.

Jesus says, consider the birds, consider the fields. I looked up the word that Jesus has used that we have considered. Sometimes it's translated as contemplate.

Katanaur, the verb katanaur is used in the New Testament to denote deep, attentive observation or consideration. It implies more than a casual glance, suggesting a thorough and careful examination and contemplation.

So when Jesus says, consider the birds, he's not saying, look at them briefly. Think about them for a couple of minutes. Jesus is saying, consider them, contemplate them, spend time observing them in order that you can understand them.

And I think Jesus is saying this because he knows, because God created our brains, he knows that they are calmed by things that God created for us for free, for our enjoyment, the natural world all around us.

[18 : 26] And it makes sense that the longer we spend contemplating God's creation, rather than Amazon Prime, the better we will feel and the less stuff we might think we need.

Spring is a great time to start, isn't it? Spending a little bit more time in God's creation. So the third thing I think Jesus shows us is, deepen your relationship with him.

Our relationship with Jesus is the treasure that will never fail. Are you investing in that? And Jesus says, provide purses for yourself that will not wear out.

I thought this was maybe a bit of a prophetic message for me, because at the moment I have a hole in my purse, in the coin compartment.

And it's not a total disaster. The coins don't come out of the purse altogether, but they go into the lining and they get stuck. But the problem is when I'm in the shop ready to pay for something, I can't access the coins.

[19 : 31] They're stuck somewhere in the lining. I can't get to them. So what is the purse? I think it's our holy habits, Bible reading, prayer, Christian fellowship.

And the treasure is our living hope in Jesus. Because Jesus has paid a great price for us, hasn't he? He paid a great price for us on the cross.

Our salvation is the most valuable thing we possess. Do we have that knowledge front and centre in our lives? When we face hardship, is that the thing that we draw on?

Is that the thing that we can access easily? Or is it lost somewhere in your lining? Just trying to think if this is still, most of the people here still have purses.

I'm trying to think some young people. Is it Apple Pay, Joseph, yep. Make Jesus your default payment card. Does that work? So is our treasure secure in Jesus?

[20 : 39] So it's spring. Oh, sorry, I've got a picture of a purse. So it's spring. And it's also the season of Lent. It's a season where we say goodbye to old things.

Of the previous season to make space for new things. I've been doing quite a lot of pruning in my garden. I've been cutting back dead growth to allow for new growth.

So what maybe are we ready to leave behind? What areas of our lives, what possessions, what bad habits need cutting away?

How can we create space to prioritise the living hope that we have in Jesus? What might that look like for us?

Thank you.