

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

Mark 8: 34 - 38

Today is the fourth and final week of our Epiphany series called “January at the Movies”. (Epiphany doesn’t end this weekend, but our series does!) This series has been an interaction with our culture as we’ve been looking at some popular films that address themes that are also found in the Bible. And I tried to pick four films that say something about their particular themes that is *affirmed* by the Bible, and then we’ve been looking at how Scripture *adds* to what they have to say.

I’ve enjoyed putting this series together, and I hope it has been helpful and *fun* to you, too. Hopefully, we’ll do it again sometime, there is no shortage of films out there – and thanks for the *many* suggestions that I’ve received for the ‘next’ go-round.

I’ve heard (a number of times) a story told about John Wesley, the “spiritual father” of our Methodist Movement... I suppose it is true... it certainly sounds like something that Wesley would have said. Anyway, someone once asked him this question: “If you knew that tomorrow was to be your last day on the earth... what would you do differently?” Wesley thought a moment, and then answered, “*Nothing*”.

That exchange has been running through my head ever since I started thinking about this week’s message – even before I actually watched the movie (The Bucket List)! Because to me, it illustrates a life of someone who truly understood the point of his life... not just someone who knew what he was here for, but someone who *lived* totally in synch with his purpose. Every day. We’d all like to be there, wouldn’t we? I don’t know that I am...but I’d like to be.

“**The Bucket List**” is the story of two terminally ill cancer patients who form an instant and deep friendship. For all sorts of reasons, had it not been for the timing of their illnesses, or their being placed in the same hospital room, these two would not likely have ever had the chance to meet in their ordinary lives.

** Carter Cole (Morgan Freeman) is the first of these two friends that we meet. He is married, with grown children, he works an honest job as an auto mechanic. He is a trivia buff, who seems

The Bucket List.... Purpose in Life

to know everything about nearly everything. He is also (and you know I look for these things in films) a man of faith, and that faith is presented in a sympathetic manner throughout the film. It is taken seriously, which I appreciate. He is a *real* character, too, and if the adventuring parts of the film seemed a bit over the top to many critics, the character of Carter Cole, as a person, to me, in some ways is the kind of man I think every Christian male would want to be like.

He had some real problems (his relationship with his wife had gotten a bit stale, for example), but in the end, he lives out his faith, he grows, he lets his heart guide him, and his witness definitely has an effect on the other character in the film: Edward Cole.

Edward Cole (Jack Nicholson) is the owner of several hospitals through which he has become extremely rich. We first meet him at a hearing, in an attempt to take over another hospital. Very arrogantly, he announces to that hospital's board that *they* need them, but he certainly doesn't need *them*. In response, they point out that his hospitals are reputed to be grossly understaffed and cheaply managed. But he makes it clear that he stands by his standards.

It is in this scene where Edward first learns he is sick. Once he realizes what it is like to be stuck in a tiny hospital room with a complete stranger who can see him at his worst, he has the opportunity to experience first hand what his own standard of care is like. While he eats gourmet food, brought to him by his ever-faithful assistant Thomas (Sean Hayes) and has a personal doctor faithfully treating him and communicating to him, Edward watches his new friend Carter being neglected by a very short-handed staff.

But through their similar tragic circumstances (a very short term prognosis, less than a year to live), a deep bond is formed between these two very different men. Together they create a "Bucket List" - things they want to accomplish/ or experience before they "kick the bucket."

As you can imagine, the topic of God comes up *frequently*, as these two friends travel the world. (Edward funds every whim they come up with.) Though Carter never specifically says he is a Christian, there are plenty of times where we see scenes of him praying with his family, and times when he talks about his faith.

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

One of those interesting conversations is when the mention of faith first arises. The two men are ** [pic] on a private jet flying over the North Pole... Carter looks out the window, is overwhelmed by the beauty of what he is seeing. Edward listens to Carter awhile, then, talk about his belief in a Creator, and then finally confesses to him, *“I guess I could never wrap my head around it”* (meaning, ‘faith’). Carter looks at him and kind of chuckles, and says, *“Well, maybe your head is the problem.”*

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There is a very moving scene in the film, where Edward gives a eulogy at Carter’s funeral, and he shares how Carter has “saved his life”. Though he never says it in a spiritual context, we see through parts of the film that Edward does soften and change. Throughout the film are scenes where Carter is portrayed as a very fulfilled and loved man, certainly a man whose faith ultimately guides his choices – a man whose family is centered in their faith, especially in hard times - and in contrast, Edward begins to see how very empty his life truly is. He has all this money, but he doesn’t have what Carter has. I am not necessarily saying that this is a Christian film, but there is something in this film that points to God being the difference.

I’m going to share a clip from this film with you, its kind of sad, but it’s a movie that starts with two men getting the news that they are going to die, and ends with their death, so, it has a lot of sad moments; but in the end, I saw it as a positive statement about life; about what is really important in life – which ultimately are not things that you can buy, they are priceless, and yet we all can afford them. So here’s a scene from near the end of the Bucket List, where Edward reads a letter that Carter sent him...he then goes to his daughter’s home, whom he hasn’t seen in years, to reconcile with her... and he discovers there an unexpected gift.

**** (Play clip)**

Overall, “The Bucket List” is a truly beautiful film. It isn't perfect, there are some moments that some might find offensive. Despite that, this is a movie with a message about life. A message about living intentionally and with purpose. One film critic wrote this: *“It has been a very long time, if ever, that I have witnessed an audience so moved by a mainstream movie.”*

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

I didn't see it in a theater, but I can see how that would be the case. It provides many good openings for conversation about our beliefs and values, about how we are living them out, or *not* living them out. And, again, while this was not *per se* meant to be a 'Christian' film, it illustrates some excellent questions about living and dieing, and about our purpose in life... Why *am* I here?

We asked some forward looking questions to a number of folks from our church last weekend. To children, Teens/ College age young people, working aged adults, and some retired folks, we asked questions appropriate to their 'stage in life'. I appreciate those who responded (we had to turn them away!) ... and here's what we came up with:

[** video 2]

It never occurred to me (for some reason!) when I chose this film and this theme for the last week of our "Movie" series that I could end up today walking into a theological minefield – i.e., treading around some questions that have confounded Christian scholars from the very beginning. Issues like *predestination*. Does God have a purpose for our lives? Then, just how specific *is* God's plan for us?

** When God says through David in Psalm 139: 16,

All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be...

...what exactly does that mean? Does it mean that God simply *knows* what is going to happen in our lives? Or is it telling us that God has *planned* those days, and we're just living out a preplanned script? Or, (more where *I* am on this), does the answer lie somewhere in between?

We look at the Scriptures and we see all sorts of passages expressing the concept of God having some sort of *plan* or *purpose* for our lives.

From the calling of Abraham in the book of Genesis – where God requires Abraham to pull up stakes, and move to a far away place, because God has a plan to make Abraham into a 'great nation', through which the world would be blessed; to more general statements, like this one from the book of Proverbs:

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

Proverbs 19:21

Many are the plans in a human heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

Now, that kind of says that God has an ultimate plan, and it is going to happen. But at the same time we humans are making *our* plans... and they may or may *not* be in keeping with that ultimate purpose of God.

And indeed, that is the picture that emerges throughout the New Testament – someone put it like this: there are ‘levels’ of God’s will. There is first, God’s

- **Absolute Will**

This is God exercising omnipotence – “Let there be light... and it was so.” In Genesis 3:15, just after the “Fall” of the first humans, God pronounces punishment on the Serpent who deceived them with these words:

And I will put enmity

*between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."*

That singular reference (i.e., ‘he’) is considered to be the first prophecy in the Scripture concerning the coming Messiah. So God’s plan for our salvation – fixing what went wrong with the human race - was part of God’s Absolute Will – it was *going* to happen – through Israel. So, even through people’s *bad* or *wrong* choices, Jesus emerged, and became the fulfillment of that prophecy, and many others like it.

But along with God’s Absolute Will is God’s

- **Permissive Will**

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

We have free will, we are ‘permitted’ to choose our destiny. We are *permitted* to make choices about our careers, our goals, our friends, our spouses, everything; we can choose, in *many ways* how we will be remembered when we are gone. We can choose rightly or we can choose wrongly. Jesus talked a lot about this, without using these exact words.

He was clear that we have a choice as to obeying God – or working against him. Paul added that a time will come when everyone will recognize the sovereignty of God (a time when “*every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father*”), but all New Testament writers realize that we are free to either walk in God’s will or go against it.

My understanding of God’s will for our lives is this: while there are exceptions for reasons known only to God where the ‘Absolute’ and the ‘permissive’ merge (exceptions along the lines of God’s choosing Jeremiah to be a preacher from his birth, or the calling of Abraham, some people’s destinies are laid out in advance, but they could *still* refuse them) but for the most part I believe that God’s will for us is along the lines of our choosing our life’s path, making daily and sometimes mundane decisions that give God glory or not. Making choices that honor God in our work, in our social lives, in our play, in our waking, and sleeping, in our work and in our rest. Making God honoring choice is how we fulfill the will of God.

And *that* is what comes out beautifully in the Bucket List. What Carter or Edward *did* for a *living* was irrelevant as far as the value or purpose of their lives. Our various skills, and sometimes the circumstances of life, take us in certain directions, but the *most important thing about all of us are the kind of choices we make within the context of the ‘bigger picture’*.

Now, we (followers of Jesus) would call that ‘bigger picture’ the will of God. What does God want from me? He wants me to be faithful to his commands. He wants me to put others before myself, like Jesus did... he wants me to be willing to forgive when I’m wronged. He wants me to take on the character of Christ. That’s the purpose of every person’s life who has given themselves to God. The scripture says, “You are not your own, you were bought with a price.”

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

Now at the same time, God has put in me (just like in you) certain ambitions, desires, plans, goals and they are good, or can be – but he wants to be sure that they don't get in the way other things that are much *more* important.

So, for me, my "Bucket List" has levels, or categories. There are some things that I'd like to do before I die – places I'd like to see, things I'd like to accomplish. But I wouldn't say that *any* of these things are the most important things in my life, they certainly have nothing to do with the legacy that I'd like to leave when my time here is over.

What *is* in my bucket? Well, if you look deep inside, at the very foundation... well let me tell you with a story. I know I shared this with some of you before, but it has been awhile, and many of you never heard it...it's one of my 'formative' stories.

When I was in seminary, I earned some money by working in a department store in Lexington, KY called "Gold Circle". I worked in housewares about 20 hours a week. Another friend of mine (Jeff) from Asbury College also worked there at the time, and the two of us befriended a High School senior named Matt, another employee. We used to meet in the break room, and talk about life and mostly music.

Jeff is now a band director in Indiana... well, Matt found out I was studying for the ministry and Jeff was a Christian, and he was fascinated by that. He was not a believer, but he was very nice kid, and an excellent tennis player, so we'd get together and play tennis once in awhile, and then go to my apartment for cold Cokes, and we'd talk about stuff like "the spiritual themes in Earth, Wind, and Fire", and stuff like that.

Jeff and I both witnessed to our faith, not in a way that tried to manipulate Matt, but just answering questions when we could, and sharing where we were in our journey. We never knew where Matt was in all of that, he never really said, or made a commitment that we knew of, and then he went off to college somewhere (on a tennis scholarship) and that was that. Or, so we thought.

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

Back when I was serving my first church, I was in the long, complicated process of working toward my ordination as an Elder in the UMC. I had finished college, and seminary...and the day of ordination was getting close. This was about 1981. And I remember that I had to attend a dinner of some sort up in North Jersey somewhere. So, I drove a long time and got there at the last minute.

I walked into the room, and every seat was taken. Except one. And this one seat was at a table full of District Superintendents and their wives (they were all men at the time). So I snuck in to that seat, wishing that I were invisible.

We were eating dinner, and I was listening to the conversation, where one of the DS's was sharing the joyful news that his son, who apparently, had been rebellious, and had made a point of rejecting the faith of his parents, this son had come to know the Lord. He became a follower of Christ in college. Of course, everyone was happy to hear that.

And he was telling the story of *how* it took place, how his son had gone to this little college in Ohio, and was assigned a roommate as a Freshman – some guy from Lexington KY, a guy named Matt who was there on a tennis scholarship. And I thought, “No way.” So I tentatively inquired... do you know Matt's last name?

He told me ... and it was the same person from back in the Gold Circle days.

And I realized in that moment not only why I was in ministry, but I saw what the most important thing in my life needed to be. Because I believe that God set all that up. I really believe that. Even back then, I'm thinking, “This might be the only time I ever get to see how the waves of some *little* thing I've done can go far beyond me, and change a life – forever.” But I got to see it. And I knew it was a gift.

So, my bucket list, my purpose in life, is to be available and responsive to God's leading as best I can. Whether it's a mundane day in the office, or out on a trail on the side of a mountain, or writing a sermon or being a husband or a dad, or in counseling with someone... to be available to God's leading... you just never know how God can use you.

The Bucket List... Purpose in Life

I want to someday hear the words of my Father in heaven saying to me: “Well done... good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful in the little things. And it mattered.” And in that moment, how much money I’ve made, or whatever recognition I received or didn’t receive, all the places I’ve visited, achievements I’ve accomplished won’t matter one bit... compared to knowing that God was able to use even me.

That’s what my life is about. How about yours?