

# The Good Life (SERIES)

Holy Trinity Twickenham, November 2007.

Parts 1, 2 and 3 © Rev Mike Starkey.

## Part 1: Money (1 Timothy 6:17-21, Luke 12:13-21)

Back in 1992 there was an election in the US. And the candidates were Bill Clinton and George Bush senior. During the campaign, Clinton's political strategist James Carville put up a sign on Clinton's desk. And it said this: 'It's the Economy, Stupid!'

Carville was saying: Never forget. In politics, there really is only one issue: the economy. The party that can manage the economy and bring prosperity to more people is the party that's going to win elections.

We're starting a new series of talks, called The Good Life. We're taking a look at three areas of life that people believe will bring them happiness and satisfaction. Three things that if they had more of, they'd begin to live the good life. And we're starting this week with money.

There was a recent survey by Abbey, as in Abbey National. They found that people in the UK spend nearly £11,000 each a year on activities to make them feel happy. Things like eating out, shopping, socialising and holidays. Of course, in certain jobs, the amount you can spend will be a lot more. The average salary of a Premiership footballer last year was £676,000, or £13,000 a week. That will buy you a lot of new shoes and meals at Arthurs.

So the question we're asking over the next three weeks is: What's the connection between having faith and living the good life? Or more specifically: if you have an active faith, how does that affect how you pursue the good life? This week we're on money. And I've come up with three points to think about:

**1) Money and possessions are good!** Now, you might say: hang on a minute. Haven't we just heard warnings in the Bible against wealth? Isn't the Christian ideal a Mother Teresa who's taken a vow of poverty? Well, we'll look at the Bible in a moment. But bear with me for a moment, because it's important to realize what the Bible's big picture is in terms of money and possessions.

The Bible starts with Genesis, which talks about the goodness of the material world. Don't worry for now about whether the start of Genesis is a literal account of literal events, or a story to make a point. We're told God makes the material world and says it's 'very good'. It's not that human beings are divine sparks, trapped in a nasty material world - that's the opposite of the Christian view. The human body and the material world are good, because God made them good.

In the 10 Commandments, why is there a command not to steal? Because people have a right to own money and material goods. Through 2,000 years of Old Testament history, wealth and fine clothes are often a sign of blessing on somebody.

Christianity grows out of the Jewish faith. And the Jewish attitude towards wealth has always been suspicious of asceticism, or doing without. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but you don't find Jewish ascetics, people who go poor and hungry, for the sake of spirituality. This is important: in the spiritual tradition Jesus grew up in, money and possessions and the material world are good.

Even Jesus and his disciples weren't particularly poor. They were mostly tradesmen. And they certainly didn't idealise poverty: they attended parties and feasts. They were supported financially by a group of wealthy women. We know that the early Christians included lots of wealthy and influential people in the Roman Empire, who were benefactors of their cities.

And there are passages in the Bible that assume some Christians are wealthy. In our first reading, Paul talks about 'those who are rich in this present world,' (1 Timothy 6:17-19). But doesn't he go on to give them a warning? Well he does, and that's our second point:

**2) You can possess money, but don't let it possess you!** Paul goes on to say: 'Command those who are rich, not to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain'. In other words, the problems start when money becomes too important for us. When it becomes the goal of our life. When we start to find security in the fact that we have a nice house and nice food, and we have insurance policies to guard us against life's ups and downs.

The problems start when money becomes an end in itself. When you take something good which is a part of the created world, and make it more important than it's meant to be. Or you start to worship it.

And that's the point of Jesus's story about the 'rich fool'. A man who's very being is tied up in his business and profits. He's doing nicely, the business is expanding. He's about to take early retirement. But that same night, he drops dead. What was the ultimate value of that man's life? Instead of possessing his money, it possessed him. For all his wealth, he led an ultimately worth-less life.

Does Paul say anything else to Timothy about these wealthy people? Well, he does, and that's our third point:

**3) The antidote to greed is giving.** Paul says to Timothy about his rich friends: 'Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life'. I like that phrase: 'the life that is truly life'. I know a lot of people in our community who could do with a bit more 'life that is truly life'.

What Paul is saying is this: money is good, but it's dangerous. The danger is that I become so obsessed with the money itself and the pleasures it can bring me, rather than the good I can do with it. One of the early Christians, called Clement of Alexandria, said: 'We hold possessions for our brother (and sister)'s sake, not our own.' Money's a blessing, but it's also a responsibility.

But money's a very subtle thing. I can tell myself: 'What matters is my attitude to money. As long as I don't have a greedy attitude, like that awful family next door, I'll be OK'. But the Bible talks surprisingly little about our attitudes. It talks a lot about our actions. Paul says: 'Tell them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share'. The test isn't whether or not you feel greedy or generous. The test is what you actually do with your money.

And here I want to be personal for a moment. For most of my life, I've given relatively small amounts of money to charity. And a small amount of money to church. Even after I became a vicar, that was what I did. And I told myself: 'It's OK, I'm not a greedy person. What matters is the attitude of my heart.'

But a few years ago, my wife and I sat down and took one of the most important decisions we've ever taken. We decided we were actually going to do something practical about generosity, not just talk about it.

And we decided, there and then, that we were going to set aside 10% of our monthly income, after tax, to give away. Some of it we pledged each month to friends of ours who were doing community work in Nepal. We also set up a standing order to a charity we supported. And we set up a standing order to church as well.

And there were two main effects for us when we did that:

**a) One was that our standard of living didn't change.** It's bizarre, but I've spoken to lots of other people who've found the same. When they set aside 10% of their disposable income to give away each month, it made no difference to their quality of life. It's like having a mortgage or a subscription to a gym: that becomes money which is already earmarked, and you live on what's left. But we honestly didn't find our standard of living fell at all.

**b) The other effect was that it felt incredibly liberating.** Giving away 10% of our monthly income didn't affect us very much, but we knew it made a huge difference to lots of other people. It freed us to be more generous to our friends working in Nepal. It freed us to be more generous to this church and other charities. And I felt liberated in my attitude to money for the first time in my life.

I started by saying most people link money and the good life. Turns out to be true, but not in the way most people think. Getting more money and spending more money on yourself doesn't actually make you happier. It's what all the research consistently finds, and it's what Jesus and Paul were saying 2000 years ago.

But the ability to improve the life of another person absolutely does give you a greater sense of purpose and contentment in your life. And that's one thing your money can do.

The challenge this week is a very simple one. It's not so much about your attitude to your money and possessions. It's more concrete than that. If you don't already do it, will you set aside a percentage of your monthly income to give away? It doesn't necessarily have to be 10%.

And this isn't only for people who have an active faith. You don't have to be a follower of Jesus to recognise that what Jesus says about money is true, for everybody:

**1) Money and possessions are good!**

**2) You can possess money, but don't let it possess you!**

**3) The antidote to greed is giving.**

I want to challenge everybody in church very directly and very specifically today. Make this the week you do something very practical about your money: make a decision to set aside a percentage of your monthly income, and find creative ways to give it away.

## Part 2: Romance (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, John 4:7-18)

In America almost half of all paperback books sold are romantic novels. Just one novelist, a woman called Nora Roberts, sells around 2.5 million books a year.

A successful Mills & Boon novel could be translated into 26 languages, and sold in more than 100 countries. A successful romantic novelist like Sophie Kinsella sells 100,000 copies in the UK, in the first month the book's out. It's not quite Harry Potter sales-figures, but that's more than virtually any other type of book.

And of course, it's not just novels. Romance is the big theme in films and in songs. It's the subject of gossip in the weekly magazines and tabloid newspapers. Teenagers dream of it, singles pursue it, and married couples try to hold onto it or rekindle it.

We've reached the second week in our series *The Good Life*, where we're looking at the things people long for in life, things people believe will make them happy. And we're thinking about the difference having a faith might make to the way we pursue the good life. Last week we looked at money. This week we're looking at romance.

I have to say, I feel a bit of trepidation talking about romance. Two reasons:

- 1) It makes me sound like an expert, and I expect my wife would be amused at that.
- 2) We have somebody in our congregation who works for Mills & Boon. I said to her earlier in the week: 'I'm talking about Romance on Sunday, and I thought of you'. And the other people in the room gave me a funny look, as if to say: 'Does his wife know about this?'. So if any of those people are in church this morning, I just want to say: 'It's because she works for Mills & Boon, that's why I thought of her!'

So, four thoughts about romance and the good life:

**1) Romantic love is good.** For some reason, most people don't think faith and romance go together. Maybe because churches have given the impression that human love isn't very important. By the end of the 4th century, the Roman Catholic church was saying that to be a priest you can't have romantic attractions. In Catholic circles, down the years, becoming a nun or a monk was often held up as an ideal. Lots of little Catholic girls seem to go through a phase where they dream of becoming nuns.

So I think down the years people have looked at priests and nuns and they've got the idea that the church isn't interested in romance, or even sees it as all rather sinful.

But if you read the Bible, a whole other picture begins to emerge. In the book of Genesis, God creates man and woman for each other, to be companions. And that means friendship, romance, sexuality. These aren't bad things: it's what we're created for. One bit of the Bible is a long love poem. It's called the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon. It's passionate and full of rather erotic imagery.

There's a phrase which recurs several times in the Bible. It's the image of a man and woman becoming 'one flesh'. It's an image of uniting two halves. You find it in the book of Genesis. You also find it in the teaching of Jesus and Paul. It's the heart of the Christian understanding of romantic love: two people being united as 'one flesh'. It's a powerful image. So from a Christian perspective, romantic love is good.

**2) You can be complete as one.** Some people spend their whole life without a romantic link with another person. Sometimes it's because they never meet the right person. Sometimes it's because of circumstances; like after the War when a lot of men died, there were lots of women who couldn't marry and have families. They remained single and went on to achieve extraordinary things in education and medicine and other areas.

Some people don't want a relationship. Other people might be single because a relationship's finished. Maybe they've been widowed, or a relationship ended in some way. Some people are hoping for the perfect person to come along and they're still waiting. There are lots of reasons why people might not have romance in their life.

And it's important to say: that's OK. We live in a society that idealises romance, and implies that if you don't have romance, you've missed out on the most important thing in life. Or you're abnormal, and you must be unfulfilled. But from a Christian perspective, we can be complete as one. The ultimate example of this is Jesus himself.

Despite what it says in the Da Vinci Code, there's no evidence that Jesus had a fling with Mary Magdalene. Jesus was a single man. And he's the most well-balanced, most fulfilled, most together person who ever walked the earth. His identity lay in who God created him to be, and what God called him to do. You could say singleness is a special calling from God, either for the long haul or for a short time. But it's a perfectly valid way to be. Single people shouldn't feel pressured by a romance-obsessed culture.

**3) Romance is temporary, but love is lasting.** For those of us in relationships, there's a real temptation to feel inadequate when it comes to romance. Almost every day of our lives we see idealized images of romantic love. It's not only in TV programmes, it's in the adverts too: you too could have this intense romantic thrill, if only you use this shampoo or eat this cereal. You find the same idealized images in movies and novels and magazines,

And people start to compare their own real-life relationship with what they see in TV drama or in the lives of Hollywood stars. And their own relationship begins to look ordinary in comparison. And a cycle of dissatisfaction and restlessness sets in. Sometimes people start looking elsewhere for the romantic high they think they're missing out on.

Now, what they don't tell you is that the kind of romance you find in Hollywood films and novels comes with a built-in self-destruct timer. In recent years there's been research done into romance. The intense, 'in love', 'can't think about anything else' feeling. And researchers have found that it's exciting while it lasts, but it lasts no more than two years.

The real question is what happens once the initial flutter has stopped fluttering. The answer of the romance junkie is that you keep chasing the romantic high. Some people move from one relationship to another, looking for the perfect one. In other words, the relationship where the romance never quiets down. The trouble is, it always does. Each relationship promises so much, but it can never match up to the idealized image in our mind. It can't, because that's not how romance works.

The Christian answer is quite different. It sees romance as a good thing. But it focuses not so much on the romance as on love. The Bible talks a lot about love, but it uses words like faithfulness and commitment. A Christian perspective says that the real challenge is building a stronger, lasting love over the longer term. It's a vision of something deeper and more fulfilling than romance. Romance is just the hors d'oeuvre!

**4) What you do affects how you feel.** This is the opposite of what most people expect. Most people think that if you feel loving towards somebody, you'll do loving things for them or say loving things to them. What most people don't know is that it works the other way round: if you do and say loving things for somebody, that builds feelings of love.

And this is what the Bible focusses on most. In the Bible, love is a verb. It's a doing word. It's about how you treat a person, day in day out. It's about being selfless as opposed to selfish. It's about treating a person with respect rather than ignoring their views. That's how Jesus can talk about loving your enemies. He doesn't mean sending them Valentine cards. He means treating them the way you'd most like to be treated yourself.

Our first Bible reading this morning is a well-known passage that we often use at weddings. Paul writes to his friends in the Greek city of Corinth about the meaning of love. Incidentally, Corinth was infamous in the ancient world for its immorality. To 'corinthianize' meant to be sexually out of control. And that's why Paul needed to write to them about relationships. And the heart of what Paul says is this: love is a verb [READ 13:4-7]. It's about what you do, how you treat the other person.

And there's a very practical way couples can do that. I talk about this at weddings, and I've mentioned it in services before. The best book on relationships I've read is called *The Five Love Languages*. It's by a psychologist who discovered that different people express love in different ways. There are five basic ways people express love:

- Some people use **words**: they tell the other person they love them.
- Some people express love by spending **quality time** with the other person.
- Some people express love by giving **gifts**,
- Some people express love through **touch**: holding hands, arm round each other.
- Some people express love through **acts of service**: making meals, putting up shelves, taking out the rubbish.

If you're in a relationship, it's worth finding out what makes your partner feel loved and affirmed. Because chances are it won't be the same as what makes you feel loved and affirmed. In fact, if you're interested, we've got the book on the church bookstall. It's got a questionnaire to help you find what your love language is. But the important thing is: when you find out what makes your partner feel loved, go out of your way to do those things.

The Christian insight into love is that love's a verb, a doing word. If you sit waiting for a tidal wave of romance to knock you off your feet, you might be waiting a long time. And even if it does come, it won't last. But when you do loving things for a person you're committed to, you're building a deeper kind of love that's ultimately more satisfying.

So, is romance part of the good life? From a Christian perspective, yes. But it's only a temporary part of God's design for relationships. The Bible offers something much more ambitious and challenging than romance. It's a vision of a love which is faithful and committed. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

### Part 3: Fame (2 Chronicles 9:1-8, Luke 14:1-11)

One day historians will look back at our generation, and it's interesting to think what they'll find noteworthy or interesting. My hunch is that one of the things they'll write about is the Big Brother phenomenon. The whole idea of becoming famous for doing nothing at all.

If you think about it, it's extraordinary. Throughout history, people have become famous for doing things. Being a brilliant general or musician or engineer or medical pioneer. You walk through the centre of London, especially near the Houses of Parliament, and you see dozens of statues of notable Victorians, and most of them are completely forgotten now. But in their day, they were famous for their achievements, and they were commemorated for something they'd done.

In our first reading the Queen of Sheba in Arabia comes to visit King Solomon. Why? Because of his fame not only as a king, but as a teacher of wisdom. Solomon's famous, but his fame is based on something concrete: his wisdom writings and his skills as a ruler.

These days, you've got a media that makes people celebrities for doing nothing at all. For a few weeks at least, the whole nation gets to know this group of people in the Big Brother house, and they become celebrities. Household names. The tabloid press makes them front page news and the weekly magazines do in-depth features on them.

There was a survey among teenagers last year, 16-19 year olds. It was done by the Learning and Skills Council. And it was about teenagers' attitudes towards fame. It found that the desire to be famous was a huge motivator for today's teens. And one of the main reasons given was that it's an easy way to make money, without needing any skills or qualifications. That's what one in ten of the teenagers said.

Eleven per cent described their lives as 'just sitting around waiting to be discovered' (in other words, waiting to be discovered by TV producers and the public), and more than one in 6 are confident that they will become famous, through appearing on TV. And it's not just teenagers. For so many adults, their number one fantasy is being famous, because that's what they feel will bring purpose and satisfaction to their lives.

I guess for most people, their first option would be fame for doing something special. But lots of people will be more than happy with being famous just for being famous. The 'Paris Hilton' syndrome.

We've reached part 3 of our series called The Good Life, on the things most people today aspire to. We've looked at money and romance. Now we're on fame. And fame is a very modern temptation in some ways. In traditional societies you had a tiny handful of people who could ever be famous. The King or Emperor would have his face on the coins and there'd be statues of him in the market square. You'd have a few writers or philosophers that people had heard of. And in ancient Rome you had a few celebrity gladiators and charioteers. But that's about it.

In the 20th century it was changes in technology and media that made huge international fame possible. One was cinema, especially Hollywood. Then there was the rise of TV and the tabloid press. And the growth of public relations and media spin. All of these rely on celebrity. And that feeds the public's insatiable curiosity about other people's lives.

So here are three reflections on fame:

**1) Fame isn't all it's cracked up to be.** My father once told me an Arabian proverb about marriage: 'Marriage is like a besieged castle; those who are on the outside wish to get in; and those who are on the inside wish to get out.' I think that's very cynical - I don't think that's true of marriage at all. But it's certainly true of fame.

A lot of people spend their lives cultivating fame and public curiosity. But when it arrives, they spend their lives regretting it and wanting privacy. The lives of lots of people in the public eye are made hellish by constant media intrusion. They can't go anywhere without packs of paparazzi following them. They can't go to the shops without being photographed. And they can't lose weight or put on weight without there being front page stories about how they're either dangerously thin or dangerously overweight.

So many people with international fame are on record as saying that they wish they could not be famous any more. The actor Brad Pitt says that. And for some celebrities, the pressures of fame prove unbearable. The rich and famous have a particularly bad record for messed up lives, including broken relationships, drug abuse and early death.

But still people who don't have fame imagine it'll be the answer to all their problems. Fame really is like a besieged castle; those who're on the outside wish to get in; and those who're on the inside wish to get out.

**2) Fame isn't as important as character.** When I'm looking for wise quotations about life, I wouldn't normally look to the chat show host Oprah Winfrey. But I read a quotation from Oprah recently that I thought was very wise: 'If you come to fame not understanding who you are, it will define who you are.'

We live in an age where lots of people really don't know who they are. People define their identities by the clothes they wear and the other things they buy. In other words, they're buying an image they'd like to associate with. For so many people today, their identity is a matter of personal choice and style rather than something rooted in their character or values or personality.

What Oprah's saying is that a lot of people look for fame to compensate for an absence of character. They don't know who they are, so they hope fame will give them the sense of themselves they lack. But if you become famous and you don't already know who you are, you'll be shaped by the pursuit of fame and the expectations of fame. In other words, you'll become a superficial person. You are your image. The surface is all there is.

That's particularly true in the culture of hip hop music, where artists often adopt a kind of fictional persona. One of the best selling rap artists is known as 50 Cent. Actually his real name is Curtis Jackson III. The singer Brian Warner found fame when he rebranded himself Marilyn Manson and adopted a gothic horror image. So many musicians and disc-jockeys adopt an image and a stage name, and that's all the public sees.

Interestingly, the pioneer of horror film imagery in rock music was the singer Alice Cooper (who of course is a man, real name Vincent Furnier). After years of rock excess, Alice Cooper became a Christian. He still performs music, but he's said in interviews that he has to separate off the hyped public persona from the real man. It's like a costume he wears to go on stage: he even talks about Alice in the third person, as if he's talking about somebody else. The image is not the real thing.

And that's because for the Christian faith, character comes first. And your character isn't based on a public image or whether other people recognize you or not. We each have value because we're made by God, to bear his image in the world (that's in Genesis). We're made for relationships: with God and other people (that's the teaching of Jesus).

The philosopher Descartes said: 'I think therefore I am'. Our celebrity culture says: 'I'm recognised by others therefore I am.' The Christian faith says: 'I'm in relationships therefore I am'. It's a very different way of making sense of your life.

**3) Don't confuse fame with significance.** I've got a theory as to why people are so desperate to be famous: it's about wanting to live a life of heroism and significance, a life of lasting value. I can understand why some people look at the world and see most people living drab and uneventful lives.

But where they go wrong is to equate that yearning for heroism and lasting value with dreams of fame and recognition. Because fame alone won't bring you the significance you crave. At best, you'll end up with a life which is famous but empty. Jesus warns about the possibility of gaining the world but losing your soul, in other words your true self. Who God created you to be.

When Jesus calls his first followers, he calls them to leave their predictable and respectable lives. To follow him on a whole new adventure. To live lives of significance. To model a whole new way of living and relating. And that's an adventure he still calls people on today. And that includes you and me.

A bit later in our service we'll be inviting everybody to come forward for Holy Communion, either for the bread and wine or else for a prayer of blessing. And I believe there are people in church this morning who should take that opportunity to say their own quiet prayer to God. A prayer of faith and commitment. A prayer asking God to take the rather shallow assumptions about fame and fortune that they've absorbed from today's culture, and replace them with a deeper yearning for lives of real significance.

It's about saying your own 'yes' to that invitation of Jesus to live a life of lasting value. If you've never done that before, today's your chance to do that.