Book 8

Sunday September 17, 1978

"WHEN LIFE LOSES ITS MEANING" Mark 10:17-22

There come times in the life of every person, maybe when one's body begins to be plagued by niggling little breakdowns, or when one begins to be aware of how quickly time has flown, or when one realizes that his or her youth is slipping away--there come times when life loses its meaning.

At such times a persons asks: "What's happened to my life? What's it all about, anyway." Depression can descend and disturbing questions intrude into one's daily life. We may ask: "What am I breaking myself for? Is this really all there is? What have I accomplished anyway? Why isn't it making me happier? What would make me happy? Here I am beginning to turn gray, and I still don't know what I really want to be when I grow up! How can I find more meaning, more significance for my life?"

These were the questions that were on the mind of the man who came to see Jesus Christ, as recorded by the Gospel of Mark. He used the words, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" But underneath the words he was asking--"What do I do when life has lost its meaning? How do I have to change?" In today's language we would probably say that the man was facing the "male mid-life crisis."

How come nobody ever told him it was going to be like this? He had been more concerned about how to make a good living, than about how to live.

But isn't that our problem also? Most of us are more concerned about how to make a good living, than about how to live. And despite our current struggle to mature we do not know enough about how to deal with the complex problems as we go through the different stages of life. Instead too many Americans remain incurably fascinated and obsessed by youth, the appearance of youth, the style of youth, the sound of youth, the touch of youth, the magic of youth--as if that would save us.

No one wants to grow old in our society today. Why should they? We all know that in our society the elderly are dismissed or discarded. We know that growing older means giving up the magic and getting nothing else in return--no rewards, no recognition. People do not ask, "What must I

do to inherit eternal life, but what must I do to keep from getting old or at least keep from looking old?" For many, to get old is to have life lose its meaning.

But let's get back to the man who came to Jesus with his question. That man was like many people in our time in other ways. Consider this example.

When the alarm clock goes off at 6:30 a.m., Harry grabs for it and groans. What a horrible dream, he thinks. I was in this haunted house. . .dark menacing eyes glaring at me, arms grabbing at me. I was scared and wanted desperately to get out, but every door I tried was locked, every window bolted.

His heart pounding, he shudders. Trying to forget the nightmare, Harry reaches for a cigarette and glances at his wife, Sue, still sleeping. As he dresses, he notices in the mirror that he is getting too fat. Got to get back in shape, he tells hiself. Perhaps take up jogging. Looking at himself in the mirror as he shaves, he sees blood-shot eyes, deep furrows across his brow. "What a sight," he thinks. "Can't drink the way I used to." He opens the medicine cabinet, takes three Excedrin, and continues to get ready for work.

"So what if I'm turning gray," he tells himself. Some of those guys at the class reunion were bald as a baby. Anyway, Brenda says the gray makes me look distinguished. And she sure was right about getting my hair styled. Brenda has some good ideas, sometimes. She's warm and tender. I guess that's why I go on seeing her.

As he continues to get ready for work, he thinks about the day ahead of him. Delivery problems again. Why is that factory always fouling up? No one does anything right anymore. And Joe, that guy is just not performing. I've got to fire him; been dreading it for weeks, but I can't put it off much longer. And the boss gets back from vacation this afternoon. That means trouble for sure.

Later at the office, Harry puts on his bifocals. Acquired about three months ago, they pinch and still feel strange. He resents them, maybe because he remembers the day his father got his and how old he thought his father was then. Now with the ritual being repeated, he feels like an old man too.

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Let's look at Harry more closely. He's worked hard all his life. "Work hard and you get ahead," that's what he's been taught. Every thing he has, he feels he's earned and he's got just about everything he's always wanted and hoped for--a nice home in the right neighborhood, two cars, a boat, he goes skiing in the winter and more. Yet it's strange because it isn't like he expected. Somehow deep down, he's not as happy as he thought he would be.

He's just been promoted to general sales manager and it's a job he's had his eye on a long time. His goal always had been to have that job before the age of 40, and he's reached that goal. More money, more prestige. But the pressure is beginning to bother him. He feels like he's being hassled every minute. The phone goes like crazy. His calendar is always jammed. Now he also has trouble keeping his temper under control.

Though Harry has reached many of his goals, he also knows that he's about as far as he will go. Something's happened to him. A few years ago, he loved his work. He loved pushing hard, being on the go, driving himself to the limit. But now he feels like he's running all the time, spinning his wheels and what's the point.

To make things worse, his father has cancer. So each day after work, he races to the hospital, visits his dad for a short while, tries to cheer him up. But it's a terrible strain. He just can't stand seeing his father so pale and scrawny. Is this what life is all about? Work hard, get old and then suffer and die?

Maybe, Harry thinks, he could handle all his responsibilities and problems a little better if he could just go home and relax. But he can't turn it off like he used to. He usually has a couple of drinks, watches TV, and tries to unwind. But lately when he tries to do this all he can think about is there's another year's payment due on the furniture and with his father in the hospital--it's all getting to him.

Harry's marriage is also growing stale. He's been having more arguments with his wife. They don't seem to understand each other anymore. She taking some courses at the university and when he's had an extra drink or two, she tells him he should talk about his problems instead of drinking so much.

His children are also bothering him more. They've changed so much lately. He can't communicate with them. He doesn't know what to make of it. His son in high school is smoking pot and when Harry tries to talk with him about it, the son says he just wants to groove on life, get into his own head. Then when Harry tells him he can't do that forever, he says, "Why not? I don't want to ruin my life with middle-class hangups like you, Dad."

Something else also happened to Harry about a year ago. He met a younger woman named Brenda and fell for her and he's been seeing her regularly ever since. He feels he can really talk to Brenda. She make him feel young and romantic again. He tells himself it's all right because after all his wife is not very understanding anymore. His marriage was getting kind of boring anyway. A person's got to have a change, so he found Brenda. Yet he wonders why he feels so guilty about it?

Also last year, one of Harry's close associates and best friends at the office, died of a heart attack at the age of 42. He had never really been sick and then one day just keeled over at his desk. That really scared Harry for awhile. His wife finally made him see a doctor because he was so shook up. No major problem was discovered. His cholesterol count was too high. So he was told to watch his diet and try to relax more.

But Harry doesn't know how to relax anymore. The only way he can relax at all is by drinking. And its got to be something stronger than wine. He knows he's been drinking more than he should lately. But what else can he do, he tells himself. Liquor's the only thing that really works. It gets him to unwind a little.

When Harry's honest with himself, he feels trapped. But what's the answer? He can't just quit his job or break up his marriage or go running off to some south sea island. Sometimes he dreams of buying a farm and living out in the country where it's peaceful.

But he mostly goes on doing the same things every day. And deep down he feels that life has lost its meaning.

What causes life to lose its meaning in cases like Harry's, and in the case of the man who came to Jesus and in our own situation?

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1. One of the reasons our lives often lose meaning is because we seek our deepest meanings from the wrong sources. In Harry's case, he always believed that if he made enough money, had a prestigious job, owned the right kind of house, his life would be fulfilled. Then many of these goals are reached and his life is more unfullfilled than ever.

But instead of looking within himself, Harry begins to search for the answer elsewhere--perhaps a new lover, or some other new interest will restore his youth and give his life the meaning he craves.

Other persons become disillusioned for almost the opposite reason. They set high goals while young adults--one man told me his goal was to have a net worth financially of $500,000 by the time he was 35. He reached the age of 35, but had not reached that monetary goal and his life lost its meaning.

Some people believe that most if not all of life's meaning will be found in marriage and the family. And of course a happy marriage and a nice family can add much meaning and significance to one's life, but there has to be more.

2. A second reason why life often loses its meaning is because we do not know how to handle or cope with many of the changes which naturally come into our lives. As we get older we slow down, we have new aches and pains, we may become more forgetful, and new questions arise within us. Too often we have assumed that something is wrong when a grown person begins asking basic questions such as, "What do I really want?" or "Where do I go from here?" We have mistakenly assumed that a person 35 or 40, or 45 or 50 or 60 should know exactly what he or she wants or where they are heading.

In other words we have wrongly believed that people finish with the business of growing up when in their late twenties and never really change much after that; or finish growing after they get married or after they are settled down in their chosen vocation. Too many stories end with the phrase, "And they lived happily ever after." Such a belief is based on a profound misconception of what it means to be an adult. Today there is ample evidence to show that contrary to popular assumptions, adult life is neither a static state of affairs nor a slow slide downhill. It can be a process of continuing development.

People can continue to grow and change throughout their entire life course. Sometimes, of course, we go through periods that are relatively calm and stable and at other times we go through more turbulent and confusing periods when our life is in flux and our personality is expanding.

Life is to be a continuing period of steps or stages, and each one can present an opportunity for new growth. When we notice an internal struggle, or come to a period of soul-searching and reappraisal; when we begin to question the choices we made in our early adulthood, this can be a positive step as well as a negative one. Instead of facing these questions, however, our friend Harry ~~tried~~ is trying to run from them or avoid them.

Naturally, the loss of illusions is upsetting. To discover that what we always thought would add deep meaning and happiness to our lives in the final analysis does not, is disturbing. But such situations also offer us the opportunity to change and enlarge our lives.

What then are some of the things we can do when life loses its meaning?

For some, very little can be done. The man who came to Jesus asked the right question, but couldn't accept the answer. Jesus told him: "Sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me." But the man could not do it. He had too much invested in his god. The Bible says that his "countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions." He had hoped for an easier answer. He thought it would be a simple matter to find meaning for his life. Some people still think that--"I'll get me a new wife or a new husband or a new lover." or, I'll move to a new place and start all over. But we always take ourselves along.

In this case, Jesus was saying to the man, "Quit believing that you are going to find meaning in your life through your possessions or even through strict obedience to the religious rules." In his case, radical surgery was needed. Change the direction of your living. Come follow me!

This story in the Bible has an unhappy ending. The man asked the right question and even came to the right source for an answer, but couldn't follow through.

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Jesus was asking the man to continue his growth as an adult. So too for us. When our life loses its meaning, that is usually our greatest opportunity for at that point we are beginning to ask the right questions about ourselves, our goals, our total life. The secret is to find the right answer and having found it, to accept it and act on it. It also usually means leaving some of our false gods behind.

When Jesus told the man to follow him, he was saying--"You will only find the deepest meaning and lasting joy in your life when you base your life on what's eternal. You will ~~only~~ find eternal life, not only after you die, but here and now, when you base your life on eternal foundations, on God." Following Jesus means seeing yourself, others, the whole world in a new way. And -doing that is not something usually that all of a sudden happens and then we live happily ever after. Rather it means a continual following of the way of Jesus Christ, a continual growing and changing until the day we die, and then after death our life continues a a new way. Amen.