

Monday, November 13. Read Acts 20:31-38. In a final talk to church leaders in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul summed up his generous, upright quality of life. His words show in clear (and challenging) ways how he saw life's meaning, how he defined "success." In support of his view, he quoted Jesus (verse 35)—the only direct quote from Jesus that is not in the four gospels. Paul was going to Jerusalem to deliver a gift of funds he'd collected from Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians facing hardships. Think of a time when you gave something with an open heart (e.g. money, your time, a caring ear to someone hurting, etc.). Then recall a time when you bought an item you really wanted for yourself. Compare the two experiences. How lasting was the joy and well-being in each case? As he left this group of church leaders, Paul said, "I'm turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need" (verse 32, The Message). In what ways has your perspective on your "needs" and "wants" changed since you've opened your life to Jesus? List for yourself some examples of how what you value has shifted over time.

Tuesday, November 14. Read Matthew 6:19-24. Jesus taught that there can only be one "most important" focus, one main goal, in any life. He said if the pursuit of wealth becomes the center of your life, you begin serving wealth, which inevitably conflicts with loyalty to God. He taught the clear principle that "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," and then pointedly added, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Pastor Rick Warren wrote, "If I put my money in my house, that is where my heart is. If I put my money in eating out ... if I put my money in my clothes, if I put my money into a hobby, that's where my heart is. So the question becomes, where do you want your heart to be?" What's your answer—where do you want your heart to be? Scholar Craig Keener wrote that "Mammon" (the word translated "wealth" in verse 24) was "an Aramaic word for possessions or money, and Jesus seems to be personifying it as an idol." Few of us would ever think of physically bowing down before our bank account or a prized possession. So what do you think making wealth an idol looks like today? What does it mean, tangibly, for you to choose to serve God rather than wealth?

Wednesday, November 15. Read Matthew 25:14-30. Three servants—two of them "good and faithful," the third fired. In Jesus' story, the difference was NOT how much they had. The one with two coins (literally "talents"—a lot of money, up to 20 years of a typical worker's wages) was as faithful as the one with five. Jesus said our faithfulness to God shows in our willingness to use whatever energy, time, money or other assets we have to bless others and build God's kingdom. What resources has God placed in your life (money, time, talents, possessions that could help others, etc.)? How are you using those resources to serve God's Kingdom and bless others? Are there any resources you have "buried in a hole in the ground," so to speak? If so, how can you begin to actively use them for God's purposes? The apostle Paul wrote that "it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). The Message says when we live in God's way, "we find ourselves involved in loyal commitments" (Galatians 5:22). In what ways can the Spirit work through your commitments to God and people to grow the fruit of faithfulness in your life?

Thursday, November 16. Read Timothy 6:5-11, 17-19. The apostle Paul saw people lose faith and suffer "a lot of pain" when money was their life's goal. He urged Timothy to "run away" from that damaging view of life's purpose. Instead, he said, actively pursue the higher purposes of "righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness." Living that way, he said, is a key choice for taking hold of "what is truly life." Someone said that although many people give lip service to the idea that money can't buy happiness, most of us give "life service" to the hope that it just might after all. What motives are the main drivers of the way you live your life? What kind of outcome to your life are you "running away from" (verse 11)? What life goal are you pursuing with all your might? Verse 10 said money itself is not evil; the "love of money" is the problem. But voices designed to entice us to love money bombard us every day. As scholar N. T. Wright said, "Every advertisement, every other television program, many movies and most political manifestos are designed, by subtle and not-so-subtle ways, to make us say, 'If only I had just a bit more money, then I would be content.'" What steps can you take today to resist the temptation to look to money for joy, success and safety?

Friday, November 17. Read Philippians 2:1-11. Jesus pursued life goals that were at odds with much of his (and our) culture, and did so with strength, dignity and resolve. That did not mean that Jesus, as eyewitnesses described him to the four gospel writers, was self-destructive or weak-willed. Instead, it showed that the values that he taught and lived are values that will endure, values that give us a clearer sense of life's true meaning. Think about ads you've seen or heard in the last week using phrases like "you deserve it," "you're worth it," and so on. Paul, probably quoting an early Christian hymn, said Jesus "emptied himself" (verse 7). How did Jesus' values differ from the ones Rome, Greece (and 21st century America) thought make for a strong, "successful" life? In the light of history, do you believe Jesus was well-meaning but naïve—or was he right? "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus," Paul wrote in verse 5. Philippians 4:2-3 showed that a conflict between two leaders, people who had worked with Paul and with one another in the past, was tearing this church apart. How can you adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus if you find your own position, prestige or comfort challenged? What kind of trust and character does it take to adopt that attitude?