**WHOM DO YOU SEEK TO SERVE AND HOW?**

**(Matthew 14:1-12)**

Imagine, if you will, that you are conducting man-on-the-street interviews. At random, you go up to perfect strangers and say to them, “Excuse me, I have an important question to ask you. As far as you can tell, what is the meaning of life?”

Many people are going to shake their head, shew you away, and not even attempt to give you an answer. But some might, and of those who do, what do suppose their answer will be?  
 While it might be interesting and I imagine even more disappointing to conduct those interviews, you don’t have to because other people have already done something similar. Four psychologists did a study of the quotations from famous people around the world about the meaning of life. The study analyzed the quotes of 195 men and women who all lived within the past few hundred years. They came up with eight basic answers as to the meaning of life.

1. **Life is primarily to be enjoyed and experienced. Enjoy the moment and the journey.** (17%)
2. **We live to express compassion to others, to love, to serve.** (13%) Albert Einstein stated: “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.”
3. **Life is unknowable, a mystery.** (13%)
4. **Life has no meaning.** (11%) The lawyer Clarence Darrow compared life to a ship that is “tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed to no port and no harbor, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot, simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves.”
5. **We are to worship God and prepare for the afterlife.** (11%) South African cleric Desmond Tutu said, “[We should] give God glory by reflecting His beauty and His love. That is why we are here, and that is the purpose of our lives.”
6. **Life is a struggle.** (8%)
7. **We are to create our own meaning of life.** (5%) Carl Sagan wrote: “We live in a vast and awesome universe in which, daily, suns are made and worlds destroyed, where humanity clings to an obscure clod of rock. The significance of our lives and our fragile realm derives from our own wisdom and courage. We are the custodians of life’s meaning.”
8. **Life is a joke.** (4%) The rock star Lou Reed said “Life is like Sanskrit read to a pony.” That leads me to ask, “If life is a joke, who is the joke-teller?”

The question as to the meaning of life can be answered by combining answers #1 and #5. Answer #1 is about enjoying life. Answer #5 is about worshiping God.

Let me explain. It was 372 years ago when a group of English and Scottish theologians got together and wrote a new catechism. You and I, since we live in 2019, we don’t know anything about catechisms. That’s too bad because we would be better of if we not only knew about them but if we actually knew them.

A catechism was used to teach children about the truths of the Bible and the Christian faith. It was a question and answer format. Children were taught to memorize both the questions and the answers.

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, published in 1647, dealt with the meaning of life. That first question was, “What is the chief end of man?” That phrase “chief end” means, “the number one goal, the primary duty, the ultimate purpose for which you and I were created.” So, the chief end of man really is about the meaning of life.

Let’s pretend that you are my class. I am your teacher. I am teaching you the catechism.

Class, the first question you need to memorize is this: “What is the chief end of man?” Say that with me, “What is the chief end of man?” Are you ready for the answer? “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” We are going to change the little word “and” to the little word “by” because the question does not ask for the “chief ends” (plural) but the “chief end” (singular). The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.” (Repeat) Say it with me, “The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.”

God wants you to be happy, but He wants you to discover that He is the source of your happiness. The problem is that you and I and the world are trying to find happiness by enjoying the gifts of God. We need to look for our joy in the Giver not in His gifts. “The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.”

Today’s passage illustrates three different approaches to the purpose of life. As we examine our passage, Matthew 14:1-12, and look at those three approaches, we are going to ask and answer two questions: “Whom Do You Seek to Please and How?”

There are four central characters in our story, John the Baptist, Herod, Herodias, and a girl, probably a teenager named Salome who was Herodias’ daughter. She is not named in the Bible, but we know her name from history.

In order to understand this passage, we need to do a little history lesson on the family of Herod. Herod, by the way, is a family name. There are many people in the Bible named Herod, but they are not all the same person.

The first Herod we meet in the Bible is Herod the Great. He was the King of the Jewish though he himself was not Jewish. He was of Idumean descent. He was on the throne when Jesus was born. It was the Magi, the Wise Men, who came to Herod wanting to know where newly born king was because they had seen his star. Herod learned from the Jewish scholars that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. It was that Herod who ordered that all the babies born in Bethlehem under a certain age be killed. He was a ruthless man.

Upon his death, Herod’s will stipulated that his kingdom was divided among three of his sons. Herod Archelaus was given Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. Herod Philip was given the land east and north of Galilee. Herod Antipas inherited the land of Galilee and Perea which was east of the Jordan River and east of Samaria and Judea. None of these men were given the title of King. That is why Matthew 14:1 refers to Herod as a tetrarch rather than a king. Verse 9 happens to use the word *king* in reference to Herod, but it wasn’t his true title.

As far as we know, Herod Antipas was the only one of Herod’s sons who ever met Jesus, and he didn’t meet Jesus until the day Jesus died. According to Luke 23, when Pilate learned that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent Jesus to Herod who happened to be in Jerusalem at that time. Herod plied Jesus with questions, but to his disappointment, Jesus said not a word in reply, and Herod sent Him back to Pilate.

For the purpose of this message, there are a couple of things you need to know. Herod had another brother who was also named Philip, but he wasn’t the ruler of who had land north and east of him. This Philip lived in Rome. He was a private citizen. Philip was married to a woman named Herodias who happened to be the younger daughter of an older brother who had been killed by his father. Herodias was first the niece and then the wife of Philip.

One day, Herod Antipas went to visit his brother in Rome and Herodias who was both his niece and his sister-in-law. Herod Antipas was attracted to Herodias. He convinced Herodias to divorce Philip. Herod Antipas divorced his wife, and then the two got married. Salome was the daughter of Philip and Herodias. When her parents divorced, Salome went with her mom and her new step-dad who was also her grand uncle from Rome to Herod Antipas’ home in Tiberias a beautiful, newly built city on the west side of Lake Galilee. Herod Antipas built that as his capital city.

On our second night in Israel, Ruth Ann and I stayed at a hotel in Tiberias.

The Jews were not happy with Herod Antipas. They had a man ruling over them who was not Jewish who divorced his wife with without cause and who married a woman related to him, which by their law was an incestuous relationship.

Enter John the Baptist. John was a truth-teller. He called a spade a spade. Titles did not matter to John. People of power and position did not intimidate John. John told Herod Antipas straight up, “What you have done is wrong. You have sinned by divorcing your wife and by marrying Herodias.”

Herod heard what John said. Herodias heard what John had said. Neither of them liked it, but Herodias was especially offended. You have heard it said, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Tropical storm Herodias become a full-blown hurricane. She was determined that John the Baptist would pay for his words. She badgered his husband into arresting John. All the way back in Matthew 4:12 just after Jesus’ temptation experience and just as He begins His public ministry, Jesus learns John had been arrested. Probably at least a year passed before the events described in our text.

Let’s get back to what our text teaches about the purpose of our lives.

1. **SOME SEEK TO PLEASE THEMSELVES BY USING OTHERS FOR THEMSELVES.**

Herod Antipas was having a birthday party. According to Mark 6, which gives us more details about this story, Herod put on a lavish banquet and invited his nobles, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee. It was a lavish affair. It was an opportunity to overeat and overdrink. After the partiers and already partied hard and had overdone both their eating and their drinking, Herodias sent her teenage daughter into the banquet room and had her dance for dear old step-dad and the besotted men.

The Bible does not describe the dance, but we can assume it was not square dancing. It was not ballroom dancing. Quite likely it was the kind of dancing you might expect in a room full of drunken men. It might not have been called the Dance of Seven Veils, but that might not be far off.

It is clear that Herodias is using her daughter for her own ends. When Herod Antipas, who was quite pleased with the dance, boasts that he will give Salome anything she wants up to half his kingdom, her mother instructs her to ask for John’s head on a platter. She is using the daughter.

Herodias is not the only one using someone else in this story. Mark tells us some of what Matthew leaves out. Listen to Mark 6:19-20.

**19**So Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But without Herod’s approval she was powerless, **20**for Herod respected John; and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him. Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him (NLT).

I think it is interesting that Herod was disturbed by the kinds of the things John said and yet at the same time, he liked to listen to him. I have the suspicion that Herod found himself surrounded by a bunch of “yes men.” Herod had no one in his employ who told him the unvarnished truth. They only told him what they thought he wanted to hear.

John, however, told Herod Antipas the truth unequivocally, and Herod found that refreshing. Here was a man who told it like it was and did so fearlessly. That appealed to Herod, and he respected John for being so courageous and so upfront.

In a sense, Herod Antipas was using John, and Herodias was using her daughter, and when the daughter gave an answer to her step-dad’s rash promise he faced a grave decision. Someone wasn’t going to get what was wanted. Either Herodias would not get what she wanted or Herod Antipas would not get what he wanted.

In the end, Herod feared his wife more than John, and John was executed. The problem was that Herod had no fear of God. Those who don’t fear God do bad things.

Do you ever use other people to please yourself? You don’t act for their good. You act for your own, and you use them to get what you want. The truth is that we elect people like that. We work for people like that. We might even live with people like that. Worse still is when we act like that.

We are supposed to use things and love people. In our day, however, many love things and they use people. Don’t be such a person. Let’s love people not use them.

1. **SOME SEEK TO PLEASE OTHERS BY LETTING OTHERS USE THEM.**

This was Salome. She knew exactly what was happening. She wasn’t innocent in John’s death; she was complicit. She willingly allowed herself to be used. She was a people-pleaser. She wanted to please her step-dad and she wanted to please her mom; so, she let herself be used.

Who is it that you are trying to please? Is it a parent? Is it a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker? In what ways are you letting yourself be used?

Some people let themselves be used sexually because they think they love that person, and they that person love’s them. That’s not love. That is self-love masquerading as something else. If you have to earn someone’s love, that’s not love.

Some people let themselves be used financially. There is nothing wrong with help a son or daughter get a start in life, but there comes a time when they have to stand on their own. If you have a child or relative or friend who repeatedly comes to you for a loan and those loans are never repaid, you may need to stop and ask yourself, “Am I being used here?” Another question you might want to ask is “Why am I letting myself be used?”

It is okay to be needed. It is okay that others depend on you. When, however, we fall into the trap of needing to be needed, that can become a form of people-pleasing. God has not called us to that.

The ironic thing is that John the Baptist was the exact opposite of the Salome, the one who asked for his head. John never would have been arrested had he been a people-pleaser. Instead of calling out Herod Antipas and Herodias for their sin, he could have remained quiet. He could have said, “Well, that is none of my business; I should just steer clear of that.”

We are to be truth-tellers not people pleasers, but we are to speak the truth with love. The truth without love is brutality while love without truth is mere sentimentality. People who are erring don’t need to be hit over the head with a scriptural hammer, nor do they need a warm-fuzzy that makes them feel comfortable in their disobedience. They need the truth clearly spoken from an obviously loving heart.

Don’t settle for being a people-pleaser. Don’t willingly let yourself be wrongly used.

1. **SOME SEEK TO PLEASE THE LORD BY GIVING THEMSELVES TO**

**THE LORD.**

John is the only person in our story who sought to please the Lord, and he did that by giving himself entirely to the Lord. While he was in Herod’s prison, on one of those occasions when Herod came to see him, he could have said, “You know, Herod, I’ve been thinking about some of the things I have said. I think I was overly harsh. I realize that life is tough. You are under enormous stress. I want to apologize for adding to that stress. Herod, I have the ear and support of a lot of people. I could make things easier for you from the outside far better than I can from behind these walls.”

John did not do that. He knew his job was not to please himself, and his job was not to please Herod. He was bound and determined to please God. God is pleased when we are faithful, and when we are faithful despite the personal hardship we face precisely because we are faithful.

It occurs to me that there are quite a few parallels between John and Jesus. Both were born under a miraculous set of circumstances. Both were spokesmen for God outside the Jewish religious system. Both were highly popular with the people. Both had disciples. Both spoke truth to power. Both died untimely deaths because they were faithful and because they were intent on pleasing God.

Are you attempting to please God with your life?

The late Howard Hendricks who was a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary told of a time when his flight was delayed. His fellow passengers were getting increasingly irritated, and some of them began to take out their frustrations on the flight attendants. Hendricks noticed how gracious and poised one of the flight attendants was. When they finally took off and she had a minute, he called her over and commended her. He told her that he wanted to write a letter of commendation to the airline to tell them what a good job she had done. She replied, “I don't work for the airline; I work for Jesus Christ. And this morning before I left for work, my husband and I prayed that I would be able to serve Christ in my job.” She used her job to serve Jesus; do you?

The pastor and author Stuart Briscoe once asked a young lady, “What do you do?”

She answered, “I’m a disciple of Jesus Christ, very skillfully disguised as a machine operator.”

Let me encourage you to be a disciple of Jesus Christ skillfully disguised as a grandparent, or a mother, or a student, or a city employee, or a small business owner, or a factory employee or whatever your day job happens to be.

We all have to decide what we are going to live for and who we are going to please. What is the chief end of your life? May the chief end of your life and my life be to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.

God’s pleasure and our pleasure are tied together. God is pleased and glorified when we are well-pleased with Him. When you find your pleasure in hearing from God, when you find your pleasure it telling others about God, when you find your pleasure in loving God, He will be most-pleased and most-glorified.