

Winning the Game of Life

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The Milton Bradley Company first produced and sold *The Game of Life* way back in 1860. In short time it became America's first and most popular parlor game. In 1960, the 100th anniversary of its creation, it was given a major update and modern facelift. I can remember playing this version of *The Game of Life* as a kid. It's been updated several times since. Now there's even an online version you can play. It's a fairly simple game that relies mostly on chance rather than strategy. You spin a wheel that tells you how many spaces along the board to advance your token that looks like a little car, and you do whatever it says on the space you land on. Along the way you go to college, get a career, acquire a spouse and maybe some kids, do a bunch of other stuff that either leaves you richer or poorer, and eventually you come to the end which is called the Day of Reckoning, whereupon you count up your total worth. The player with the most wins the game.

The player with the most wins the game. That's true of lots of other board games I can remember playing as a kid, some based on the stock market, others, like *Monopoly* based on acquiring and developing property – the difference being with *Monopoly* you win not only by becoming the richest but also by having the perverse satisfaction of driving all the other players into financial ruin. Then there's *Risk*, the game you win by commanding armies that conquer the world. You don't just bankrupt your opponents, you destroy them. What fun! But the goal of all these games and so many like them is the same: you win by acquiring the most.

Now, I don't think that's a lesson we learn from playing such games; rather it's a truth we hold to be self evident that is reflected in the games. At some level we all believe that the goal of *THE* game of life is to win. And you win by getting and hanging on to the most. He with the most toys wins. We believe it. It's the way it is.

But it shouldn't be. That's the theme that connects all three of today's Scripture lessons. In the Epistle, Paul warns us to put to death covetousness which he labels idolatry. It's the worship of wealth and possessions. In the Gospel, Jesus tells the Parable of the Rich Fool who acquired great wealth and lost his own soul. But I want to focus on the Old Testament lesson, the words of wise King Solomon that he recorded in Ecclesiastes, which for a lot of reasons has got to be the most depressing book of the Bible. If ever there was a man who won the game of life according to the ways of the world, Solomon is the guy. He had it all: power, fame, vast wealth, women – lots of women: 700 wives and 300 concubines – everything a man's heart could possibly desire and then some. The best clothes, the finest chariots, the most lavish palaces situated in the best locations, every meal a feast consisting of the tastiest and most costly delicacies, multitudes of servants to attend his most whimsical care and need, singers and entertainers and poets to keep him constantly amused ... a life of lavish luxury; the kind of life we all dream of having.

And then we hear his assessment of it: "Vanity of vanities ... All is vanity." It's maybe not the best translation because the primary meaning of vanity in English has to do with conceit, arrogance, and a preoccupation with one's personal appearance. That's not the idea here. The Hebrew word that Solomon uses means empty, useless, futile. Vanity is being used here in the sense of "all of it is in vain".

There are a number of reasons for this. One has to do with the law of diminishing returns. When you think having something will make you happy, you get it. And you are happy for a while. But over time the novelty wears off. It doesn't deliver the same level of happiness it

once did. Eventually you get bored with it. It ends up in the attic collecting dust. Then there's the problem of maintenance. The more you have the more you have to take care of. There comes a point when instead of owning things, the things start to own you, taking up all your time and effort to maintain them. And then there's having to worry about how you're going to keep all your stuff and protect it from being stolen. The more costly and valuable items you have, the more you are a target for those who want to take them from you.

Solomon has had to deal with all these problems on a massive scale for as long as he can remember; but when he writes Ecclesiastes, he's nearing the end of his life, so it's a different problem that's foremost in his mind. It's his mortality. He knows he's going to die. He knows that rich or poor, we all end up in the grave and that you can't take it with you. As they say, you'll never see a hearse pulling a trailer. Yes, the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt tried, packing their tombs with all the goodies they owned in life; but it didn't work out very well for them. Their graves were all robbed. The poor guys couldn't even keep their graves in the end. Now their mummified bodies are lying around in museums for curious folks to gawk at.

Not only can you not take it with you, you can't exercise any control of it after you're gone. This is Solomon's lament: "I worked hard and applied my wisdom to acquire all this wealth only to hand it over to someone who didn't have to work for it. And I don't know if he'll be wise or a fool." Actually, I think Solomon did have a pretty good indication about that. The heir apparent, his son Rehoboam, was a spoiled brat who, upon ascending to his father's throne, through his arrogance and stupidity threw away 90% of the kingdom that David established and that Solomon raised to the height of its glory. I think Solomon saw it coming and that's part of the reason he's so disgusted with it.

We've got a slightly different version of this problem today. For as long as I can remember, I've heard parents say, "I had to work really hard to get where I am. I want my kids to have it better than I did." So they did. They gave their kids everything they wanted; just handed it over to them. And now – what a surprise – we have a generation of young adults who largely believe that everything should be free: college, health care, housing, you name it. And why not? "Everything's always been given to me for free. Why can't that continue?"

But returning to Solomon, by the standards of this world he clearly won the game of life; but what he discovered upon having done so is that winning in the way he did is losing. It's inevitable. It's part of curse that the Lord placed upon the earth for Adam's sake after he fell into sin: "In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you ... By the sweat of your face you'll eat your bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you shall return." In other words you'll work hard in difficult circumstances just to live, but all your work will accomplish nothing because you'll end up dead anyway. All your work will prove to be empty, useless, futile. Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity.

That's the way things are with "all things done under the sun" – which is Solomon's way of saying with human affairs on this earth apart from a covenant relationship with the Lord. And Solomon knew this from personal experience too. In his later years he allowed his heart to drift away from the Lord. He went so far as to participate in the worship of idols with some of the many wives he had taken. For a time he fell from grace; lost his faith in the one, true, eternal, and living God. And for someone like that *this* world, *this* life, is all there is.

It comes as no surprise that what wise King Solomon discovered some 3000 years ago is precisely the same thing that the best, brightest, and most scientific minds are telling us today. Life has no meaning. The universe sprang into being on its own due to some cosmic flatulence.

We are nothing more than the accidental products of time and chance. We live for a while and then we die, no more significant than mold on a piece of bread or bacteria in a Petri dish. It doesn't mean anything. There is no higher purpose. There is nothing transcendent. There is no good or evil. There is no way to win the game of life. Everyone loses. All is vanity – under the sun, which is to say, without God.

“For apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” Solomon asks. What gives meaning to life is the Lord. Only if there is a Creator is there a creation that has meaning and purpose. Only if there is a God is there such a thing as good and evil. Apart from him there can be nothing transcendent: no such thing as love, no such thing as beauty, no such things as joy and peace and satisfaction. Only if there is a God who gives life is there a way to win the game of life – and that winning comes not of focusing on the work that we do and the wealth and possessions we amass for ourselves in this life, but rather by focusing on the Lord and the work that he has done to give us life eternal.

Oddly enough, this work was accomplished for us by a descendant of wise King Solomon. He was a man who, though he worked hard throughout his lifetime, did not acquire vast wealth. Indeed, he had very few personal possessions. In the end, the only thing of value he owned was literally the shirt on his back – and that had almost certainly been a gift. This man worked for a different goal. He worked to keep the Law of God. He worked to achieve the righteousness that we could not attain for ourselves. And then he died a horrible, shameful, agonizing death to pay the penalty that we could not pay even if we suffered in hell for all eternity. As his corpse hung limp on the cross it appeared by all earthly standards that he had lost the game of life – lost it in the worst imaginable way.

He had, in fact, won it – not only for himself but for all of us too. On the third day he proved it when he rose from the dead. He won the game of life by defeating death. And what he earned in his life on earth by his hard work he leaves to others who do not work for it: it's the righteousness that comes by faith in him. The question is: will you be wise or a fool with what he's left you? Or, to ask it another way: Do you want to win the game of life?

To do so requires a reordering of our priorities. Jesus said, “One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And yet, at times, we all fall into the trap of thinking that it does: the one with the most toys wins. There are many examples I could give you of how this is true, but let me give you one specific case. It has to do with career opportunities. People put their résumés out there hoping to land a lucrative job, one in which they'll make a lot of money. And when they get an offer, they go to investigate. They look at what the job entails, the housing market, the quality of the schools for their kids, what the commute to work would be like, the crime rate, and who knows what else. And we pretty much all agree, yes, by all means, go wherever the best job takes you. But the one thing that's almost always last on the list of deciding factors (if it shows up at all) is whether there is a faithful church there, one in which I will be properly fed with the Word of God. That *should* be the first item on the list. In the end, it's the only one that matters. To believe otherwise is to believe the lie. And for being deceived by this lie (and we all are to some extent), we need to repent. And we need to turn to him who won the game of life for us – which isn't a game at all. It's real life: life eternal, full of meaning and purpose and love and joy. And it comes from knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to learn more of him, and allowing him by the Holy Spirit to lead you into the ways of his righteousness and works of service for others. Let's get our priorities right. Let's win the game of life through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!