

**YOUR LIFE COUNTS!**

**Matthew 1:1-25**

**I. INTRO**

A. In the early 1940s, a film producer by the name of Frank Capra received a Christmas card from a friend with only nine lines on it that carried this basic thought: **Every single person's life is important because they touch so many other people.** That core thought eventually prompted Frank Capra to produce the timeless Christmas classic: ***It's a Wonderful Life.***

1. It's actually a story about a man named George Bailey and his search for significance and meaning in his life. When George's whole world appears to be collapsing, he comes to the conclusion that his life has been insignificant. Worthless. And that pushes him over the edge:

-When George is about to take his life, the film shows hundreds of people praying for his well-being. A guardian angel named Clarence comes to help. To prepare him for this job, a senior angel fills Clarence in on the details. George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is a guy who wants to make things happen with his life; he has this dream of getting out of his hometown to see the world, have great adventures, build great things.

-Time passes—and in the process of helping his family and helping the people around him—George never gets out of Bedford Falls. What he doesn't realize is how his small acts of kindness and generosity and selflessness have made a difference in the lives of **hundreds** of people. But, like us, all he sees is the loss of a dream. Like many people, he feels **stuck** in his circumstances. When his business hits a crisis—it appears that all he's poured his life into is about to be lost and that all that will be left for his family is shame. And that's George's rock bottom moment.

2. To help George understand the difference his life has made, Clarence, angel second-class, shows George what the world would look like if he'd never lived. And George realizes what a gift life is—especially when it's lived selflessly. -The climax of the film comes when all the people he's invested in for years pull together to help him in a time of crisis. It's the best known scene in the entire movie.

B. Every person I've ever met wants to make a difference in the world. It's not really a matter of being famous, or living out a continuous string of pleasurable moments or even having everything you've always wanted—although some settle for that.

-It's sensing that your life hasn't been like a pebble dropped into a pond; it sends out a few ripples, then sinks to the bottom out of sight. In fact, our need for significance—and it **is** a need—comes in second only to our need for food and safety.

1. The story of Christmas is the story of the birth of **the** most significant person who ever lived.

A person who split history in half, whose Name is known around the world. Someone who has been transforming lives—and transforming history for 2000 years. Of course, the event we celebrate is named after Him. **Christ**-mas. Jesus Christ.

2. The interesting thing is that all of those who surrounded Jesus' birth—didn't **seem** significant—at least as significance is usually measured in our world. They were not well-known, influential, powerful—or well-traveled. They didn't write books—and even the details surrounding their lives are quite sketchy.

-But, then again, the Christmas story is **not** a story of how God uses special people. It's about how God makes people special who are **willing** to be used. It's about how God uses people **right where they are** to make a difference for eternity—even if they live in little no-name places. Like Bedford Falls, Punxsutawney or Markham.

## II. YOU ARE SIGNIFICANT

- A. Let's talk for just a minute about what gets publicized in our world as the path to significance and meaning. According to what you've heard, what is the path to a significant life?

1. Meaning is usually, in our world, associated with success, achievement, influence, adventure—and, sometimes, money. The interesting thing is that this formula obviously didn't work for people like Howard Hughes. Howard Hughes built a fortune, flew the fastest planes, was a success in the film industry, & married some of the world's most beautiful women. And yet he died a billionaire junkie—insane by anybody's standards.
2. Now, it's not fair to stop with Howard Hughes—because he's just one person we've called successful. But the truth is that just because a person is successful, achieves great things, experiences really cool adventures and is esteemed by others doesn't translate over into making a difference, does it?

-I believe the hunger for meaning and significance clearly indicates that we were created in the image of God. But, sometimes it's like this itch we can't quite scratch. Sometimes we just unthinkingly adopt our culture's recipe for living well--“get a great education, build your talent, climb the ladder, stay healthy and pursue your dreams.” Those are not bad things. Not at all. But there are **not** a recipe for a meaningful life.

-The world has **always** been filled with successful, powerful, well-known, self-actualized people whose lives feel empty and meaningless.

- B. When you read the narratives of Jesus' birth, it seems like the Bible is trying to tell us that the people who surrounded this massive world-shaking event in history were not all that impressive. In other words, God didn't stack the deck in their favor. -For example, when it references the ancestry of Mary and Joseph—which was a very big deal in the culture—it talks about the heroes and the, well, not-so-heroic persons.

And in a world where significance was tied to who you descended from, it's clear that there's a point to this record.

1. Matthew traces things back to the family of Judah—which is good. That's David's line. But Matthew doesn't leave it at that; he says, "Want to know the scoop on Judah? The actual lineage comes from Tamar, his daughter-in-law posing as a prostitute, and Judah buying her services and getting her pregnant!" **That's** not good, is it! And he doesn't stop there. He points out that Rahab, King David's great-grandmother was originally a temple prostitute spared from Jericho because she hid the Israelite spies.

-There are several other skeletons Matthew digs out of the closet—but the one with the most scandal attached had to do with David himself.

**David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife. (Matthew 1:6 NIV)**

Anyone know the story there? David got sexually involved with the woman next door, got her pregnant, and then had her husband, one of his best friends and warriors, whacked to preserve his reputation.

Sounds like it's right out of Nancy Grace—or **The Sopranos**, doesn't it?

2. Why would Matthew, who wrote this narrative account of Jesus' birth take a fluorescent hi-liter to all this junk—knowing he was writing about the most important Person who ever lived? When Jesus called him to follow, he was a Roman tax collector—a bottom feeder in the minds of others. Was he trying to make himself look better?

-I honestly don't think that at **all**. I think he was trying to point out that Jesus' coming marked a change in **everything**. That Jesus was the God of the second chance. The God who gave grace and hope.

The God who would fill common ordinary people with His Spirit—give their lives tremendous power and influence and meaning. Didn't **matter** where they came from. See, Matthew—a moral outsider—nails this fact that it's not your family tree, it's not your money, it's not your talent or impressive title or education that God chooses. It's **you**. Everyone has incredible worth in God's eyes. Everyone has a shot at living a meaningful life—a life that truly changes some part of the world.

3. It's interesting that the big shots—the people you would **think** would take over the history books when Matthew was writing—are just footnotes in his story of Jesus.

-Herod, who was known all over the ancient world for the incredible things he built is reduced to a paranoid, jealous old kind who orders the slaughter of innocent babies to protect his authority. Caesar Augustus was called the "son of God"—"Lord"—"Savior" by his people. In Jesus' story, he's simply mentioned as the one who ordered the tax that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

-The chief priests and seminary professors of the day—had **huge** influence in that culture. In Jesus' story, they are the ones who give the correct answer as to where the Messiah would be born—and yet they don't even bother to search for Him.

4. As a reference point, let me read what Matthew writes about Jesus' birth.

**This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph.**

**But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.**

**As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:**

**"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 NLT)**

-The story starts with a poor young couple—probably in their teens. And they didn't live in a place where great people came from.

Being from Nazareth was like being from Timmons.

Sorry--Greenbow, Alabama. ***Fire up the pick-up, Jed—we're goin' ta town!***

-We sing the song, "We Three Kings." Actually, these visitors who got invited to God's Son's birthday party, were pagan astrologers. Good Jewish people were forbidden to have any dealings with them at all.

5. Know how we dress kids in bathrobes at Christmas and give them cute lines to say—stuffed sheep to hold? **Well**, by the time Jesus was born, the status of shepherds had dipped to where they were not even considered trustworthy enough to testify in court. Think about that! God gives the most amazing news ever to people who are considered unfit to testify!
6. Why am I saying all this? It's because in our world, significance tends to be based on how smart you are, where you live, what kind of job you do; how many people know your name and your title; the quality and the quantity of what you **produce! Do!**

-We are quite tempted to think when God wants to do something significant, He looks down from Heaven and says, "Wow, now **there's** an impressive person." "Oooh! Are they ever well-put-together! Am I good or **what?**" "Yes—**there's** a person who already has influence—I'll just ride on their coat-tails!"

-That's absolutely **not** how God works. Listen to this insight from 1 Corinthians, a letter Paul wrote that we're currently studying:

**Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.**

**God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NLT)**

7. Now *here's* the truth. God will make a difference through *anyone* who will make themselves available. People who will *selflessly* give themselves to what *He* is up to on this planet.

He was up to something *BIG* then—and He's up to something *BIG* now. And He's using *very* ordinary people to do it. Are you interested? Do you have time and space in your busy schedule to actually make the difference you were *created* to make?

### III. THE *INCREDIBLE* WORTH OF YOUR LIFE

- A. There's this point in the film, *It's A Wonderful Life*, where Potter...pronounced, "Pott-ah"...is talking to George Bailey about the predicament he's in—owing \$8000, with only a life insurance policy as collateral. Pott-ah says, "Heh, heh, heh! George, you're worth more *dead* than *alive*."

-Have you ever felt like that? I have. Hang around very long on this planet and you'll probably have a moment like that when life feels *very* dark and *very* hopeless. I want to talk for a few minutes in closing about the *value* of your life.

1. Let me say it again—just so you understand it clearly. Your *worth* is not measured by how many heads you turn, by how much you accumulate, by how far you go in your schooling, your corporate world—or how impressed our world is with your achievements.
2. Some of you may remember how it was in vogue a few years ago to say something stupid like, "Yeah, a human being is made up of about \$18.99 worth of chemicals that can be bought at any pharmacy." Now, we *know* that's dumb, right? The value of anything is determined by what someone is willing to pay for it.

-Any stamp collectors here? Any of you know what the most valuable stamp in the world is? Well, according to the **Guinness World Book of Records**, it's the first issue of the *May 2, 1840 Penny Black*. It was bought at an auction on May 23, 1991 by a Japanese buyer for \$2.4 million U.S. Now, what's the paper and glue worth? Zip, right? Can you actually use it for it's intended purpose—like put it on an envelope and mail something? No. Someone might go *postal*—stamp **Insufficient Postage** all over it. At a paper mill, it's just paper. At a post office, it's just a cheap stamp. But to a sophisticated collector, *the worth of something is determined by how much someone is willing to pay for it*.

-Your worth and mine was made clear that night in Bethlehem—2000 years ago, when God allowed his Only Son to be given to this world, then laid in

manger in a smelly stable. Our worth became even clearer when His Son died on a cross 33 years later to **redeem** us, buy us back. It was this incredible act of love for people like me who could **never** find our way—much less earn our way—home to Him. I'm not impressive or valuable by any human standard. But according to a God who would give his Son for me, my life—and your life—is priceless.

3. If the awesome realization of that doesn't hit you and you never see your value to God, know what will happen? You'll allow other people to put the sticker price on you. Truth is, sometimes we do that ourselves. We advertise our bodies. We publicize our adventures, our accomplishments, our success, our net worth. It's like we're saying, "I'm a valuable person. I'm worth knowing. I'm worth respecting, accepting and loving! **Really!**"

-If you base your worth on stuff like that—your self-worth will depreciate over time—based on how your body, your job, your accomplishments age. See, in our world, **everything** depreciates—and you don't want your soul to be on some amortization schedule! You'll end up on sale at some flashing blue light special! That game, friends, is a game you cannot win. It's not even safe.

-The Good News Jesus brought is, "The competition is done. The popularity and significance pageant is over! Jesus has established our worth and leveled the playing field. We are **free** to live with meaning, to give our lives away to others!" Aren't you glad to know that you don't have to **compete** for God's attention? That He doesn't have you all lined up alongside others to decide **who's** the most important one? That value is not based on your intelligence, your beauty, your impressiveness, your productivity, your health, or even how many rules you keep.

- B. I think ***It's A Wonderful Life*** cuts closer to the core meaning of life than any other popular Christmas film. At the core, it's a story about investment. When push comes to shove, **where** and **how** do you invest your life? It's clear in this story that George Bailey's defining moments weren't in his adventures, his travels, his education, or what he built—like he thought they'd be. His defining moments—his **best** moments—were when he selflessly gave himself--invested his life in others. Especially when there was nothing in it for him.

1. All the things he instinctively did—saving his brother from drowning; confronting a drunken pharmacist before he poisoned a child, protecting people's investments during the Depression—all that stuff seemed to have very little reward to it at the time. No one gave George any awards or lavished him with money or praise.

-But, according to the story, the difference he made was phenomenal. That's the point of this movie—that when you touch one person's life and make it better, that single act can have almost a limitless impact on the world. An impact you may never even know about.

-The truth this film presents is that the best investments in the world are **not** financial—they're in people. People are God's treasure on this planet. When God wanted to right the wrongs and reclaim this planet, he came as a **single person; Jesus**. He built relationships with **people**. He taught and healed and influenced **people**. And He gave his life for **people**.

-I think you know this, but let me say it anyway. Your significance, the meaning in your life, the difference you will make that will last—will be your investment in people. In eternity—**that's** what will matter. Everything else will just be...stuff. All the adventures you have. All the things you build or invent or collect. **Interesting** maybe—but just that.

2. I just recently read an editorial on ***It's A Wonderful Life***--in **Time** magazine, I believe. The author was comparing this film to another movie, ***A Christmas Story***—about a kid who wants a BB gun for Christmas. What caught me was the author's comment--something along the lines of, "Why would anyone ever think they could make a difference by living an altruist life in small town America? Forget Bedford Falls! Go for the BB gun!"
- Now, I realize that's tongue-in-cheek stuff, but I think it points out where ***It's A Wonderful Life*** is off—at least according to what Jesus taught. According to the film, George has very little time for God—until his life is in crisis. The answer to his prayer is to show him the difference he's made in other's lives without God.

-That's **not** the way it works. God's transforming power in our lives takes our eyes **off** ourselves, gives us power to love God—and then the power to love others in a redeeming way. The main difference we make in other's lives is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through **His** work in creating a selfless heart in us. By teaming up with **Him** in what He's doing to make all things right.

-What am I saying? That no one can make a difference for good apart from God's help? No. I'm **not** saying that. I'm saying that it is **God's** power at work in our hearts that truly gets after the selfishness, the pride, the anxiety, the fear—all the junk that keeps most people from loving others like they love themselves. The Spirit of God helps us know **where** to engage and **what** to do that doesn't just make people's lives a little better for a few years here—but has a **redeeming** influence on their lives.

-God makes a difference **through** us. See, God is the giver of true love. Selfless love. Love that makes people willing to put aside their pride, invest their time and resources—and keep on loving and giving in the name of Jesus. Even when they get hammered for it. Only God... **ONLY** God can give that kind of love. **Only** God can make a difference for all eternity through a willing human heart. Only **God** can give life.

3. To see that, all you have to do is look at Jesus' life—and what happened through Him. He came in unbelievably humiliating circumstances—laying aside everything that would identify Him as God. He was born helpless—like all babies. Raised in a crummy little town. Spent most of his life in construction—living with his Mom. I wonder if Mary thought, "Hmmm. Maybe the angel was **wrong?** He doesn't **look** like the Son of God or a Messiah!"

-He never did **kingly** things. He never developed management strategies or ways to publicize his movement—get noticed by Rome. He healed and taught

large crowds—but primarily invested himself in 12 people for three years. He never even traveled that far—probably not more than 100 miles from his hometown. But He triggered something in the hearts of those He invested his life in; and ***in the power of the Spirit*** went out and literally ***changed the world***. Turned it upside down!

-Know what Jesus trained them to do? He taught them that God was now running the show; ***His*** Kingdom had now come to earth—and that they could now go out with His life. He taught them, ***Love Wins!***

He said, “Love God, love others! Don’t boss them—serve them! Don’t hang onto your life—give it away. Selflessly. Without looking for an immediate return on your investment. Offer them the forgiveness, grace, healing, transformation and life I’m dying to give!”

-In short, Jesus trained them to look like Him, live like Him and love like Him.

One of the first names people came up with for his followers was ***Christians. Little Christs***. The scene they ***never*** forgot was Jesus hanging on a cross, his hands nailed open—***still*** giving as he took his last breath. He left the way He came—helpless, and with humility.

4. Here’s the deal. You ***have*** value. Infinite value. But the meaning of your life and the difference you make is up to you—whether or not you’ll cooperate with what God is up to. That will take faith, love, supernatural power—and guts. If you decide you want to make a difference on your own apart from God, you’ll crash and burn. ***He...God...*** knows the plan, what He’s doing. I don’t—and you don’t. Accomplishment, accumulation, power, popularity, education—it’s not what it’s cracked up to be.

-Your very first act in making the difference you were created to make is offering yourself to God totally for Him to do ***whatever*** He wants to with. ***Then*** God transforms your life by renewing the way you think. Then you find out what His good, pleasing and perfect will is. I didn’t make this up—it comes from the book of Romans, chapter 12. Jesus taught his disciples, “You can’t do ***anything*** without me!” Paul, said, “I can do ***all*** things through Christ—who ***gives me strength***.” After Jesus rose from the dead and gave his followers their mission, he said, “Wait! Don’t even ***try*** this without the Holy Spirit. When He comes—***He*** will give you power.”

-With ***God’s*** power in us, we can make the difference we were ***created*** to make. It usually starts in small and outwardly unimpressive ways. But over a lifetime—the number of changed people we leave in our wake is ***astounding***. Exponential. Love is ***extremely*** powerful. And it ***always wins!***

-But it takes faith to do that. Faith that ***this*** is the life God has blessed. Faith that loving what God loves and has invested most deeply in—PEOPLE-- ***always, ALWAYS*** pays off.

5. I thought about where some of you may find yourselves this morning.
  - a. It could be that you have invested the last 3, 4, 5—10 years of your life in kids. Doing that sometimes doesn’t feel very rewarding. Sometimes you feel the edge of their resentment—or their rebellion, and you think, “I wonder if it’s worth...?”
 

-Don’t even think that—cause it is. They are the ***specific*** people God has called you to influence. Touch their lives deeply—and you not only

touch your grand-children—your influence extends to all the people they influence!

- b. It could be that you have a life—a career—that has you flying at Mach 3, hair on fire. At least for now. Just remember in the excitement of it all—that it's the **people** you love and invest in that will be the measure of your life, not your paycheck or the nameplate on your door. If you've noticed, nameplates are **detachable!** Don't make sacrifices you'll regret at the big, the final awards ceremony some day.
- c. It could be that, like George Bailey in this film, you're **so** disappointed with how things have turned out. In your darkest moments, the ugly thought that crosses your mind is, "I wonder if it's worth going on?" -I just need to say, whatever has happened, only God gets to write up the final evaluation of a person's life. And it's not over until the fat lady sings. Not that you're **fat...** There's **always** hope—no matter how dark things get. And there's always time left to love others.
- d. The value of your life has been set by Jesus. Your life has infinite worth! **And so do the lives of the other people around you.** Make sure—**please** make sure they get included in your investment portfolio! Jesus gave his life for us—and He calls those who follow Him to selflessly give our lives away—just like Him!

#### IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. A long time ago, I heard a guy from Toronto speak who had been a missionary to Vietnam. He talked about how, back in the smaller villages, he would see people heading out into the rice paddies early in the morning with a set of bicycle pedals over their shoulders. They would hook those pedals up to a paddle wheel that moved water from one paddy to another. They would pedal all day—then come home with the pedals over their shoulders. He'd say, "Hey! What've you been doing all day?" "Oh, pedaling. Just pedaling."  
-Actually, they were growing rice for their family by giving it what it needed most. Water.
- B. A lot of life is like that, isn't it? It's just...so...**daily**. So...Bedford-Falls-ish. What've you been doing all day? Oh...pedaling. Just pedaling.  
-I think Jesus would say, "Remember the bigger picture! You're **not** pedaling alone! I will give you all the power in the universe, right in the routines of life, to make a difference in others! But **you** have to **choose** invest your life. Give it away—not hoard it for yourself.  
  
-So, now it's up to you. **You** have to make a decision!