

Cedric Martin, Matthew 6:25-34, May 19 2019

Back cover of *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson. “Do you want to be extravagantly blessed by God?... Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God’s favour, power, and protection. You’ll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind—and break through to the life you were meant to live.”

Preface: “Dear Reader, I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief- only one sentence with four parts- and tucked away in the bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favour with God. This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by His power. In fact, thousands of believers who are applying its truths are seeing miracles happen on a regular basis. Will you join me for a personal exploration of Jabez?” - Bruce Wilkinson.

So this book, by Bruce Wilkinson is written about a single prayer, that Jabez made in the book of 1st Chronicles. Here is the passage. *Jabez was honoured more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, “Because I bore him in pain.” Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!” And God granted what he asked.*

That’s it. That’s the end of Jabez. Jabez treated God like a genie and asked for selfish things. The end. Now Wilkinson here spends a while with this text, and shares how much you can

“expect” from God, and that God “always answers”. Those are some dangerous promises. He sold 9 million copies of this book in the first 2 years. (I got my copy at a thrift store, so no one else would pick it up.) I’d actually love to spend my whole sermon on revoking this book... but that’s not the passage we’re looking at today. Also, I’m hoping to keep my time relatively brief, as Jesus says in Matthew 6, just before our verses today “When you are praying [*Preaching*], do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”

There is an excellent rebuttal to this book. It’s a book called “Praying like Jesus” by James Mulholland. I highly recommend it to anyone. Here is a short passage from his book: “Indeed, in significant ways, the Prayer of Jabez is counter to the heart of the gospel and the priorities of Jesus. It represents the advancement of self and the resistance to self-denial Jesus confronted in his day and God continues to challenge within Christianity. And, although Mr. Wilkinson has tried to redeem the words of Jabez, he has only succeeded in fanning into flame the embers of a prosperity theology many had hoped was finally dying. He forgot the reason Jesus didn’t teach his disciples the Prayer of Jabez.

Jabez got it wrong” I have 2 copies of this book at home if anyone wants to borrow it.

So I preface our passage today with all of that because I want to set us up for success. The passage we’re looking at can also very easily be twisted to be that of a prosperity gospel. I listened to several pastors from megachurches preach on this topic on YouTube. They seemed to skip the part where Jesus says “Do not heap up empty phrases”.

I went to school for theatre, that's what I really know a lot about. There is a significant crossover between theatre and faith.

When I was in my first semester of first-year I had a teacher, she taught us movement and acting. She was brilliant. She started every class the same way. We'd all be sitting in a circle and she'd go around the room and she'd ask each of us individually if we were present. Some would answer "Yes" but with the undertones of "well obviously, I'm here aren't I?" As time went on we would start being more honest. Some would say "Well I haven't had my coffee yet" or others "I'm pretty exhausted" or "I'm like almost present". In acting, there is no *half-way*. This is what she was trying to teach us. It took us a long time to figure that out. It's not something you can easily teach either. To be fully present as an actor requires a lot of focus and no distractions.

You can't be worried about what you'll make for dinner later that night. You can't be thinking 'Do I know my next line'? To be fully present you have to be in the moment, receiving what's being given to you. You have to be listening to what's actually being said.

That's why I love live theatre so much. When an actor is present there are new things happening every night. They'll deliver a line slightly differently and it can change the whole meaning, and then their acting partner needs to react to that. It can change so much in one instant.

Let's take another look at Jesus' words. Starting with verse 24b, right before our passage starts.

24b You cannot serve God and wealth.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...”

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

The first time I preached was back in 2012. I was preaching about a very similar theme, in fact it was the passage right before this one, in the Luke version. Luke 12: 13-21. Sometimes called “The parable of the Rich Fool” for those who know it. But as Trent likes to teach our youth we should ignore the titles of passages. So you’ll just have to find that passage yourself.

I try very hard not to preach words I don’t mean. So since my first sermon, I’ve tried to hang onto to the words I said. I didn’t make it easy. Trying to live as Jesus said, “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”. So I asked that congregation why we bother to lock our front doors if Jesus does not want us to care about our abundance of possessions? I still don’t have a good answer to that. But sometimes I don’t lock my door, and I try to reassure myself I won’t need my computer anymore if it gets stolen.

I’ll let you know I agreed to speak today before I knew the topic, or the passages. Michele asked me in a staff meeting a little while ago and I said I’d love to. But as I was preparing yesterday, and trying not to worry about tomorrow I decided to look back on my notes in my google drive.

Now I've preached about 4 or 5 times before. But I actually have a folder started of potential sermon titles. I'm a writer, mostly of plays, but that's what I do. I think of a cool title, I'll write it down and maybe flesh it out a little.

Now what I found in my google drive was my longest unpreached sermon. It was written back in October of 2015, and it was on today's Bible passage. Call it luck, or call it divine, I think I was always meant to speak today, I just didn't know it... or have to worry about it. The following is the unedited words of 2015 Cedric about today's Bible passage from Matthew.

I don't like the phrase 'Living paycheck to paycheck' because that to me implies that I'm living for the money. While it is true that I often do not have enough money set aside every month for rent until it's pretty close to being due, I still never feel like I am living 'paycheck to paycheck'. I am living for the joy of living, not living for the greed of money. Now it is also true that I am very blessed that I have never had to miss paying a rent check on time, that's partially due to my parents being there for me, partially due to the money I saved while working, and partially due to money from the government. However I often find that is what I ~~ean~~, or others get hung up on, the money. "Hey Cedric, how is it going in Toronto? Getting work? Paying rent?" I will say I'm doing well and that I am enjoying the work I am doing, and that I can pay rent. "Well good for you for being able to pay for those kinds of things". Now there have been lots of times where I really haven't enjoyed a job I've done, or am doing, but the reassurance I will often get is, "well at least you're making money, right?" Or "the money is good so who cares how hard it is". So then I think, okay well what's the point of doing something I don't like, agree with, or that doesn't make me happy? There was a comic [strip] I saw a while ago, which I, unfortunately, couldn't

find, but the gist of it was this. There was a fisherman sitting by the dock with his haul for the day, just relaxing. Along comes a man in a suit and asks him what he's doing. The fisherman replies that he's resting, he doesn't feel like doing any more work today. The man asks him why would you want to do that? The fisherman replies "well what should I be doing?". The man says "well you could catch even more fish and make more money!" "Then what?" asks the fisherman? "Well then you could save up and buy a boat, and be able to catch even more fish" says the man. "why would I need a boat?" says the fisherman. "then you could hire more fisherman and catch loads and loads of fish and make a lot more money" "what would I need more money for?" says the fisherman. "well then you could buy a whole fleet of fishing boats and make enough money to retire!" "and why would I want to retire?" "well then you could relax and be happy" says the man. "well how is that different than what I am doing now?"

There seems to be this pattern in our society that we can't break out of. You are born, you go to school. Public [elementary] school prepares you for high school, high school prepares you for University, College, or the workplace, University or College prepares you for the workplace.

Then you are supposed to find a job that makes you 'enough' money (enough is never enough though), then you are supposed to save the money so that way you can retire and not have to work so you can be happy for those final years where you just don't quite have as much energy as you used to when you were working and saving all that money. So why bother doing a job that you don't like? Well, so you can be happy many years from now... well what if God wants us to live our lives right now, and that maybe not all of us are called to live those kinds of lives?

Cedric from 4 years ago had some strong opinions. But I think for me the sentiment is still there. Just maybe I'm less cynical? Who knows.

Here's what I say, live your life! If you don't have dinner planned, don't worry! I'm not saying don't have dinner. Nor is Jesus telling us to fast. Just do everything in moderation. If you spend a lot of time being anxious about grocery lists, finding the perfect outfit, or being the perfect host, think instead of how great your day could be, or how fun hosting will be. Here's how I'm attempting to combat it today. I didn't plan my lunch or dinner for today. I'm sure I'll eat, but I'm not worried. Also, I came up with a way to completely randomize my outfit today, Top, Bottom and shoes...

Now "don't worry" doesn't mean we don't have to do anything. We can still go grocery shopping or get outfits out. But what I think is important is not doing it because it will impress someone else. Also, try changing your language. Instead of saying "I'm so worried about..." say instead "I'm going to plan and prepare for..." Here's an example. I will say "I'm going to plan and prepare for my wedding".

As I was preparing for today my fiancée, Alyse, said "Oh man, if there is one passage that perfectly describes you, Cedric, it's this one". I'm not sure I'm fully there. But I think I'd like to keep trying.

Now... relating back to our theme. Mother Earth. There is ample research about how spending time in the woods, or mountains or what have you, will reduce stress levels.

One such study was conducted in Japan with 420 participants in 35 different forests throughout Japan. They found that the Cortisol levels decreased, which is the main hormone in determining stress levels, they found a decrease in heart rate and an increase in parasympathetic nerve

activity by 55.0%, which indicates a relaxed state. They also found that immune functions are enhanced by forest therapy. Middle-aged employees volunteered to participate in these experiments. They used the NK (natural killer cells) activity, as an indicator of immune function, and it increased by 56% on the second day. A significant increase of 23% was also maintained for 1 month even after these subjects returned to urban life (Stay tuned for church in the forest at TUMC Retreat this year.)

I'll link [the whole study](#) in my sermon notes online.

I sat down at my computer to write today's sermon but it just wasn't coming to me. I was feeling uninspired for writing so I went for a walk, where I heard the words I thought I should share. I took a bike ride and thought of things to research. Our beautiful mother earth can speak to us when we're not stuffed up indoors at a computer. I don't blame Jesus from feeling like he needed to be up a mountain to share the good word. So this long weekend, and this spring I'll challenge you. Do not worry about tomorrow. Go and enjoy the weather.

Final prayer: Let's pray. Help us not worry about tomorrow, help us plan and prepare for tomorrow, but at the start of the day (not the old adage 'at the end of the day') at the start of the day allow for freedom of anxiousness. Allow for the day to affect us. And perhaps we can start living a little more like Jesus. Amen.