

“The Imperishable Fruit”

Reading: Luke 24:13-35; 1 Peter 1:17-23

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Neil deGrasse Tyson is an astrophysicist who works at the Hayden Planetarium in New York. He’s done a lot of brilliant work in communicating science and its value to the public, and here is one of his statements that has made the rounds in recent years: “The atoms of our bodies are traceable to stars that manufactured them in their cores and exploded these enriched ingredients across our galaxy, billions of years ago. For this reason, we are biologically connected to every other living thing in the world. We are chemically connected to all molecules on Earth. And we are atomically connected to all atoms in the universe. We are not figuratively, but literally stardust.” It’s an inspiring concept.

My intent is not to enter into the tiresome, manufactured debate of science versus religion; many godly Christians have no problem with Dr. Tyson’s cosmology, and the basics of nuclear fusion and star formation are pretty well understood these days. What I find interesting in that quote is how widely I see it quoted in various venues. People who would insist that the universe is a godless, purposeless place with no inherent meaning, reason, or direction still find this concept inspiring. Those whose worldview is firmly grounded on the belief that life has no meaning apart from the meaning we give it often still look for some sort of meaning.

Practically everyone would find a truly, completely meaningless existence not worth living. We have a drive for meaning, even if we have to make it up for ourselves. Douglas Adams was an author, atheist, and humorist who wrote the science-fiction comedy book *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, whose characters learn that the ultimate answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything is, in fact, 42. It’s a nonsensical answer for a nonsensical universe, but in spite of the lack of meaning, the plot continues. Why bother getting out of bed in the morning? Why continue to live in the face of the existential horror of a hostile, lonely, often uncaring universe? Do we live simply to work and provide for our families? Do we live for pleasure and happiness? Do we live for the sake of being inspired by beauty? Why does the plot go on?

These are not new questions, of course; the purpose of human life has been questioned since the beginning of history. The Apostle Peter was wrestling with this question in his letter to the Christians living scattered throughout modern-day Turkey. It was not a purely philosophical question for them, nor should it be for us today. The question of *why* we do what we do directly matters to *what* we do. These Christians had received the message of the gospel and had been transformed by Christ. They had been given new lives, “born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable,” as Peter says. But they’re still living in the old, perishable world with all of its hostility and futility, and they’re confused as to how the gospel is calling them to respond to that world.

Last week we began this Eastertide journey through the book of 1 Peter, and we began to see how much Peter emphasizes the imperishability of what Christ has done for us. Christ’s death and resurrection for us has given us immeasurable value, and yet we live in a world that has no idea what value really looks like. We are discovered as priceless heirlooms living in a junkyard. So how does that affect us? Do we leave the junkyard and go live in a museum, sequestered away in some quiet, safe

place? Do we start throwing out the junk around us and make no room for those around us whose value in Christ has not yet been revealed, and still live as part of the junkyard?

Pastor Carey's grandmother had a vase that she didn't particularly like that she kept stored away somewhere, until one day when the Antiques Roadshow came to town. She took the vase to be appraised and discovered that it was worth \$200, and from then on, that vase that had previously been ugly enough to stay tucked away in the coat closet was now kept on display on a shelf. New value, new meaning, new purpose changes how we live. And living is the point of being imperishable. We began to see last Sunday that being imperishable in Christ does not merely mean that death cannot touch us because we are safe and protected and kept away from danger; death cannot touch us because of the imperishable work of Christ which makes us so *alive* that death doesn't stand a chance. We are not so valuable that we get locked away in a vault; we are so valuable that everything around us reflects Christ's beauty. It is not that we are so holy that we avoid all death and contamination; it is that death and sin cringe before the presence of the holy Christ in us. Imperishable means living.

Peter loves teasing out this difference all throughout his letter. Again and again, there is this contrast made between life in the junkyard and life as an heirloom, perishable versus imperishable, that which fails and that which lasts, that which is defiled and that which is pure. These are two very different kinds of life he sketches out for us: the life you used to have apart from Christ, and the life that is now available to you in Christ. And if you're in Christ, there's no point in living like you used to live; it's a new birth into a new life.

In fact, he brings out a new element of this difference in the passage we read today. "You were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you by your ancestors," he says, picking up the thread running throughout the Bible. It's the same concept that is found in the book of Ecclesiastes: "'Meaningless, meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!'" And the Teacher spends the book reflecting on all of life's activities, and the conclusion is that none of them last; none of them matter. The "conclusion of the matter" is that the only thing worthwhile in the life of a human is to fear God and keep His commands. It's the same concept Paul talks about, as in Romans 1, where he discusses how those who refuse to glorify God find that their thinking becomes futile and their minds are darkened. They look for meaning in all kinds of places because we were meant to have meaning, but the places they find it are futile.

Why does the plot go on? What's the point of getting out of bed in the morning? What is meaningful? There are countless philosophies out there, some of which are even very good. But Peter's point and the point of other biblical authors is that they're empty, futile, meaningless, spinning your wheels, because they won't stand the test of time. Even being made of stardust, as impressive as that is, won't matter in the end, because the star themselves will one day burn out. In Peter's time, the recipients of his letter had probably worshipped idols of all kinds of gods, and it was an empty way of life handed down from previous generations because those idols were not gods.

The contrast is in the message of the gospel. Unlike those other pointless ways of life, the true God had a plan from the very beginning; Christ "was chosen before the creation of the world." God has always planned on being eternally faithful and self-giving to His people. Unlike other philosophies or gods that were invented in the recent past, this plan predates the universe itself. In some of the

verses before our passage for today, Peter says that the ancient prophets, with all of their insight into God's plans, would have loved to have seen what has been revealed to us in Christ. Even the angels lean in to catch a glimpse of what God has been planning all along. And it is, as we've said, imperishable. This plan will outlast the universe, because Christ is risen from the dead and is more alive than death can handle. "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever," Peter says.

We also read the wonderful account of the walk to Emmaus, which takes place on the day of Jesus' resurrection as two of His disciples are walking dejectedly away from Jerusalem. They encounter Jesus but don't recognize Him, and their conversation is about trying to make sense out of the events of Holy Week. Jesus unfolds the Scriptures to them, explaining how everything revealed in them set the stage for what had just happened. As unexpected as the resurrection was, it was always the plan — He was chosen before the creation of the world.

And so Peter is reminding them that the only heirloom they have received from their ancestors is futility, an empty way of life. However, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again, and being a part of His family gives us an imperishable heirloom that was planned from before the beginning of time and will surely last into eternity by the Father's faithfulness. We have a different allegiance, then; we claim a different family heritage. Therefore, as Peter says, we live out our time "as foreigners here in reverent fear." Remember what we pointed out last week, that Peter addresses the letter to "exiles," people who may never have left their hometown but are living as exiles because they have now claimed their citizenship in God's kingdom. We are exiles in the world's empty kingdoms but heirs of a priceless inheritance in God's eternal kingdom.

It's a contrast that has so often been lost by the church. We haven't always known how to answer that question of what our meaning is, and so we haven't always been very distinguishable from the rest of the world, or we've been distinguishable for all the wrong reasons. We haven't always heard what Peter goes on to say. So the question, then, is this: how does this inheritance change us? When your value is revealed, when you are given an imperishable reason for living, it ought to change you, so how should we be different? How do priceless heirlooms live in the junkyard?

We might be tempted to let our inheritance go to our heads. After all, we're saying that the God of the universe planned for all of this since before the creation of the world; that's pretty heady stuff. We've got an imperishable inheritance that is more valuable than gold; we are priceless heirlooms living in a junkyard. We are recipients of God's grace, and He has called us to be holy. We're set apart, we have special status. We have a right to lord our inheritance over the rest of the world. They're *unholy*. They're *disinherited*.

But no, Peter leaves no room for that. Our imperishable inheritance leaves no room for hubris. We can take no personal pride in our status as heirs. "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart," Peter tells us. The reason? "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." God has done this imperishable, eternal work in Christ for you; therefore, love. Love one another deeply, he tells us, from the heart. Make it a sincere love, a love without hypocrisy, without the masks that so often hide our true purpose.

We have an imperishable hope in Christ, and therefore we live holy lives, and therefore we love. That is the fundamental equation underlying the economy of God's kingdom. God's love leads to our holiness, which leads to our love. Love is the imperishable fruit of the imperishable seed Christ has planted in us. Too often we've missed part of that equation; we've emphasized one part of Peter's message without the others, and we therefore haven't looked much like exiles. But Peter is steering a very narrow course for us: the question is how this amazing message about Jesus changes how we live in a society that rejects it and us, and our natural inclination is to protect ourselves by either fighting or fleeing. We priceless heirlooms should either leave this filthy junkyard, or we should take over the junkyard, throw out the junk, and impose our rules. But neither of those options is available to those who have received the imperishable hope of Christ, because that hope came to us as an act of God's grace — we didn't deserve it — and it is available to anyone who will come. We may think we're living in a junkyard, but in reality we're living in the midst of a world full of priceless heirlooms that don't yet know their value and are living as though they're junk.

And so we love. Sincere love, deep love, from the heart. It's a difficult thing sometimes, but that's love. It's not a feeling, because feelings are easy; you can't really control them, they just *are*. But this love is a choice, a decision to set aside our differences and break down our boundaries and forgive our wrongs and love those in the body of Christ, and because we love the ones who have been redeemed, we also love those who have not yet been redeemed. You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. Therefore, purify yourself by obeying the truth so that you have a sincere love for each other.



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