

Pencil and Paper

1/4 *School Supplies Series*

Psalm 103; John 13:34-35

08 01 2010 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Introduction to Series

Believe it or not, summer vacation is almost over. Students, parents, and teachers are already anticipating the **start of school**. Some schools begin this week, and the rest will soon follow.

In keeping with the season, the August worship series is entitled *School Supplies*. Each week we will explore some of the resources that God's students need to succeed. Today's sermon starts with the basics: *Pencil and Paper*.

Scripture: John 13:34-35

Introduction

Take out a pencil and a piece of paper and number to ten.

No matter your age, these words can still strike fear into the bravest of hearts! No one enjoys the prospects of a **pop quiz**. In THEORY, a test is value neutral—it simply measures a person's knowledge. For prepared students, it is an opportunity to show what they know. For unprepared students, it is chance to reveal what they DON'T know!

Actually all of life is a test that reveals what we know . . . and what we don't know. Today we are looking at the divine grading scale. The bad news is that God does not grade on the curve. The good news is that God does grade on the cross. So I invite you to consider what marks you are making.

I. Making Your Mark in the World

Earlier in the summer the City of Cartersville replaced the sidewalks in front of the sanctuary. After the workers finished, I walked outside to inspect the results. There is just something irresistible about fresh concrete. I had to really fight the urge to carve my initials into the soft cement. Now I'm not saying if I did or didn't, but I am saying that I really fought the urge!

Everyone wants to make a **mark in the world**. People long to make a lasting impression. This desire gets expressed in a variety of ways.

Children carve their names into trees and desks. Scouts earn merit badges. Athletes strive to set new records. High school students seek superlative honors.

The same impulse continues into adulthood. Business people pursue their careers. Investors acquire property and portfolios. Architects and contractors build towering edifices. People of integrity earn a reputation. Politicians expand their base of power. Entertainers gain popularity. We etch names and dates deep into tombstones. All of us possess an innate need to somehow make a difference in our world and insure that something of who we are survives.

A *Peanuts* cartoon by Charles Schultz shows **Linus** building an elaborate sandcastle on the beach. But then the rain begins to fall. First it sprinkles and then it pours. The little boy watches helplessly as the storm erases all of his hard work. In the closing panel, Linus says plaintively: “*There’s a lesson to be learned here somewhere, but I don’t know what it is!*”

Linus may not understand, but we know the lesson all too well. Little of what we do lasts for long. We build elaborate sandcastles and then act surprised when the storms of time knock them down.

The book of **Ecclesiastes** in the Old Testament is one of the most somber and sobering sections of the Bible. To use the language of our youth, it’s a real “buzz kill.”

The author, who called himself “*The Teacher*,” began the book with the words: “*Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!*” (Ecc. 1:2) There’s a cheery little thought to start your day. You probably didn’t find that particular verse in your *Upper Room* devotional this morning!

However, the words contain a tough truth. Little of what we accomplish in the world will last past our lifetimes. Psalm 103:15-16 reminds us:

*As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
The wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.*

In 1958, actor Alec Guinness starred in an unusual movie called ***The Horse’s Mouth***. He played the lead role of an eccentric painter named Gulley Jimson. During a pivotal moment in the plot, the artist seeks shelter in an abandoned church. He discovers a blank wall on the side of the building that becomes his canvas. The painter is inspired to create his largest work of art which he entitles *The Last Judgment*.

Then Jimson discovers that the building is scheduled for demolition. So he recruits some local youngsters to help him complete the project. The massive painting is finished just in time for the scheduled day of demolition.

After the demolition crew warns everyone to stand back, a bulldozer comes crashing through the wall, destroying the painting. The driver of the bulldozer is none other than the artist himself, Gulley Jimson.

When I read this story for the first time, the image stuck in my mind: a crazed artist painting his life’s masterpiece on a condemned building about to be demolished. And the title of the work is *The Last Judgment*.

Brothers and sisters, this is a parable for life. Most of what we do is painting on a building about to be demolished. Little will last beyond our lifetimes. The Last Judgment will reveal what lasts for eternity.

II. Making a Lasting Impression

Here's a sobering reality: most of what we count important will not endure. It may be necessary for the moment, but it has no lasting value. However, we tend to be a short-sighted people who invest our time and energy in the passing and temporal rather than the everlasting and eternal. We invest in a business that has declared bankruptcy.

So the critical question becomes: **What does last?** Here's the essential answer: **Love.** Jesus said that the **greatest commandment** is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second command is like the first: love your neighbor as yourself. To do one is to do the other. To neglect one is to neglect the other.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus said: "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

The mark we make upon the world is the influence we have on other's lives. The lasting impression we leave is how we have affected others around us.

Life is judged by a simple question: "**Did I love well?**" At the end of each day as we drift off to sleep, we are called to ask, "Did I love well today?" At the end of our lives as we close our eyes, we are called to ask, "Did I love well?"

"Did I love well as a son, daughter, brother, sister, spouse, parent, and neighbor? Did I love well?" The answer determines what mark we have made on the world through the lives of others.

In contemporary culture, **Mother Teresa** has become THE example of Christian love in our fallen world. The humble Catholic nun founded the *Missionaries of Charity* in India. She spent her lifetime ministering to the least, last, and lost of Indian society. Her wrinkled visage became the face of love and grace in our modern world.

When asked about her life's work, Mother Teresa replied: "*I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.*" (Repeat).

Each of us is a little pencil in the hand of God. The others around us are the paper upon which we write. Through our words and actions, our Lord sends a love letter to the lives of others that we touch.

III. Teachers

Today we have dedicated our **educators** to God's service during the coming school year. We have prayed that they might be instruments of divine grace in the lives of young people. We recognize what a vital role that teachers play—what a vital role CHRISTIAN teachers play—in children's lives.

In the 1995 movie, "*Mr. Holland's Opus*," Richard Dreyfuss plays the role of Glenn Holland who takes a temporary job as a high school music teacher. It is but a brief stop on the way to his true calling: writing great works of musical art. Yet life gets in the way as one thing after another occurs. The temporary job becomes a lifelong profession as he teaches generations of students. And the opus is never quite completed. As Holland nears retirement, he does not realize what a difference he has made in others' lives.

DVD MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS BEGIN: 02:08:35 END: 02:11:20

{“Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life and on a lot of lives I know. But I have a feeling that he considers a great part of his own life misspent. Rumor had it he was always working on this symphony of his. And this was going to make him famous, rich, probably both. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous, at least not outside of our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he would be wrong, because I think that he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame. Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life.”}

Christa McAuliffe was a teacher from Concord, New Hampshire who became the first educator selected for NASA's “*Teacher in Space*” program. She tragically died in the *Challenger* catastrophe in 1986. Her example inspired others to enter into the field of education. She once said, “*I touch the future. I teach.*” Christian teachers touch the past, present, and future—and they make an eternal difference in their students' lives.

I must confess at 50 plus years of age that I do not remember the names of every teacher that instructed me in school. BUT I do remember the ones that made a significant impact upon my life.

- ✓ Mrs. Thompson in first grade taught me a love of language with friends like Spot, Dick, and Jane.
- ✓ Mrs. Benefield in third grade told me how special I was.
- ✓ Mrs. Camp in fourth grade would not settle for less than my best.
- ✓ Mr. and Mrs. Rossiter taught sixth grade Sunday School and invested their lives into a rambunctious room of boys and girls.
- ✓ Mrs. Nunn in seventh grade saw leadership potential within me.
- ✓ George Freeman was my youth minister when I felt God's call to the ministry.
- ✓ Mrs. Johnston in high school developed my dramatic abilities.
- ✓ Mrs. Butler the senior counselor gave me direction.
- ✓ Dr. Hoyt at Berry College shared his social conscience.
- ✓ Dr. Gonzalez my college advisor combined academic and spiritual integrity.
- ✓ Jim Hopewell in seminary showed me how to live and die as a Christian.
- ✓ Bill Edwards hired me at Kennesaw UMC as his assistant pastor.
- ✓ And the list goes on and on, and it includes many of your names as well.

The educators among us touch the future—they teach. They make a lasting mark upon the world through their students. And an educator may never know the influence he or she has upon a child life. Take a moment to recall a teacher who made a significant impact upon your life. You are who you are today because of whom that teacher was in your life yesterday.

Recall their names. See their faces. And as you feel led, call out their names as an offering of thankful prayer to God.

IV. Touching the Future

Teachers have a special ministry within the life of God's church. However, we all have the opportunity to touch others lives with love. Think about it for a moment—we are here today as Christians because someone loved us into God's kingdom. Parents, peers, family members, church members, and others showed us Christ's love.

When I was ordained as an elder, Bishop McDavid included a card with my **ordination certificate**. The card traced his ordination back to the bishop who ordained him and the bishop who ordained him and the bishop who ordained him . . . all the way back to John Wesley in 18th century England. It was a reminder that I was the latest in a long line of ministers to proclaim the gospel.

We all have such a **spiritual genealogy**. One or more persons served as midwives when we were born again by the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. In turn, we have the opportunity to serve this same function for others in our lives. And we never know what impact it will have in the future.

Ultimately, the Christian faith is CAUGHT and not TAUGHT. Faithful disciples have a contagious faith that infects others with God's love. The hallmark of the Christian life is love. A song popular in my youth declared, "*They will know we are Christians by our love.*" In order to make a lasting mark upon the world, we are called to love God and love others.

The name of Edward Kimball probably is not familiar to anyone in this room. He was a Sunday School teacher in his local church in Boston. In 1858, he helped lead a shoe clerk to Jesus Christ. The shoe clerk's name was Dwight L. Moody who became one an evangelist known around the world. While preaching a revival in England in 1870, he inspired an evangelistic zeal in a small church pastor named Fredrick B. Meyer.

While Meyer was preaching on an American college campus, a young student named J. Wilbur Chapman accepted Christ as his savior. Chapman worked with the YMCA and employed a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to help with evangelism.

Billy Sunday held a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina. A group of local men were so enthusiastic about the results that they planned another revival, inviting a minister named Mordecai Hamm to preach.

During Hamm's revival, a young man named Billy Graham heard God's call upon his life. Untold thousands have entered God's kingdom through Dr. Graham's ministry. And the list goes on. Only eternity will reveal the tremendous impact that a Sunday School teacher named Edward Kimball had upon the world.

Conclusion

Many of you know that we have a **Memorial Room** adjacent to the sanctuary. Photographs of the ministers who have served this church hang upon the walls. It's our church's version of a "Rogues' Gallery!" I periodically walk through the room and study my predecessors' pictures. The more recent ministers I know personally. Others I know by name and reputation. Before 1953, however, the clergy are nothing more than names and faces on a wall.

Whenever I'm feeling a bit too big for my britches, I look at that long line of photographs. Then I imagine a time decades from now when one of my successors will be studying the photographs in the Memorial Room. I will be nothing more than a name and a face on a wall—one in a long line of ministers who have served this church.

It's a humbling thought. During my worst moments, it helps me understand how the author of Ecclesiastes felt. In my best moments, it gives me a comforting sense of assurance that I am one link in a chain that began when Jesus called the first disciples. To echo the Apostle Paul's words, it is my duty to pass on what I have received. It certainly gives me a perspective on life and my place in the world.

There are many different ways to measure the mark that one has made in ministry and in life. But the same question echoes over and over again, "Have I loved well?" Our love for others and God makes a lasting impression for a lifetime and beyond—it lasts forever.

Amen.