

"HAVING IT ALL"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 E. 86th Street  
New York, New York  
October 13, 1985

## "HAVING IT ALL"

### INTRODUCTION

I have to give Helen Gurley Brown credit for the title of this sermon. She wrote a book entitled, Having It All, which I haven't read. In coming up with sermon titles week after week, sometimes I get a bit desperate, so I stole this title. But my conscience got to me. It said, "Clarke...you'd better read that book if you're going to use that title". From what I've heard about the book and what little bit I know about Helen Gurley Brown, I really didn't want to give time to it. But conscience won out. I went down the street to a book store. They didn't have it, so conscience was satisfied. I still haven't read it.

I'm sure that she, or her editors, chose the title for the same reason I stole it; because it symbolizes a yearning in people to find success in this life. That yearning has created a boom in the book business. That market in publishing exists because so many people feel that they have missed something in their life. They're not getting it all, and they're anxious to know, what must I do in order to be successful? ...in order to "have it all".

### DEVELOPMENT

It sounds to me an awful lot like the Biblical question, what must I do to get Eternal Life? And the Biblical claim is not that much different than the secular claim. The Bible claims that you can have it all! That's how I read our text for this morning, that famous line of John 3:16, for:

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have Eternal Life."

Eternal life! Oh, that's a bold claim. It's even more bold when you understand that it's not what we think about when we use the term "eternal". In English "eternal" means "forever", as in "I have been waiting an eternity for you to get dressed." That's not the way John uses it. For John, eternity does not mean an endless duration; it's not a quantity of life. For John, eternity means a quality of life. Eternal life was the perfect life, the ideal life. Eternal life is the life that you know you should live. So eternal life was something like having it all, having life finally the way you want it to be. That's eternal life.

### JOHN AND THE GREEKS

Now John is translating Hebrew terms into Greek. He's writing to Greeks and the Greeks never heard of Jewish terms such as the "Kingdom of God". And they had no idea what that meant. So he has to translate it, find Greek words that are the equivalent of the Hebrew concepts. And in a brilliant and ingenious translation he says to the Greeks, what the Jews call the "Kingdom of God" and what those Christian preachers are all talking about when they talk about Jesus bringing the Kingdom of God, is what you folks mean by eternal life.

Eternal life is the way things should be, and it was called "eternal" because it doesn't exist here. It exists only in the eternal realm, just as the Kingdom of God isn't here yet. It's at the end of history, the Jews believed. The Greeks believed eternal life is not here either. It's in the heavens above us. It's the way the gods live, not the way human mortals live. But we know

that's the life we want to live, and it is inaccessible to us, above and beyond us. So when John said that Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he said to the Greeks, eternal life is what he is really talking about. Do you follow me?

GREEKS AND JEWS There was a difference between Jews and Greeks. The Kingdom of God was in the future for the Jews. History for the Jews was moving toward a goal. That goal was called "the Kingdom of God". But for the Greeks, history wasn't going anywhere. It was meaningless. For the Greeks history was like those wheels in rat cages; it just keeps going around and around, doesn't go anywhere. And since history isn't going any place, then the ideal life can't be out there in the future where you can wait for it, but it has to be up there in the realm of the gods where you can ascend to it, if you can only escape from this body. So in Greek religion, meditation, ecstasy, and states of consciousness altered by drugs, and mysterious rituals and secret words were all used as means of ascending to the eternal realm. That kind of religion was rampant in the Greek world in the first century. To get eternal life; to experience the quality of life now that they know they should live.

The Jews waited for it in the Kingdom of God in the future. The Greeks tried to ascend to eternal life in the present. So there was a difference. But there was also this that they had in common: this life, the one that you and I must live right now, is not the way it's supposed to be. And you and I recognize that.

We're not Jews or Greeks, at least not the ancient variety. But we know what we're talking about. We know that we have to cope with the same human condition, in the same two ways, incidentally. Did you ever notice that? Some people wait patiently, like the Jews, for something to happen in the future, like the Second Coming of Jesus, or Armageddon. And others seek ecstatic experiences in the present; like speaking in tongues, that will give them a feeling of peace and contentment with the eternal. But in either case, the motivation is the same. Life as it is right now is incomplete. Something's missing. We're all that way. You show me somebody who has everything, so as to be the envy of other people, and I will show you somebody who still believes something is missing in their life. There ought to be more, and no matter what they do to get it, no matter how they try to secure it - through money, or through activity, or any other way - there is still something missing.

A GOOD DAY EXPERIENCE Once in a while I'll have a good day. You ever have this experience? You get a good night's sleep. You get on the scales in the morning and discover you've lost three pounds while sleeping. You know it's going to be a good day. You read the newspaper and it's boring, which means there's nothing going on in the world today that makes you upset. The mail comes and brings you a check that you didn't expect. You make out a list of all the things you have to do that day, and you finish them all - by three o'clock. And you go home that night and relax. It's been a wonderful day. I've had such days, but you know what I think at the end of such a day. This isn't going to last. It never does. It can't last. You say, well...tomorrow things are going to get back to normal. And you know what that means. That means tomorrow something has to go wrong. I like what Dan Quisenberry...

Once in a while we know life as it should be. But it never lasts. We make mistakes that embarrass us, or others make mistakes that frustrate us, and thus we spend most of our time coping rather than conquering.

I've been involved in enough construction projects in and around the Church now that I've picked up some of the jargon of the trade. One of the terms that I love is "errors and omissions". Architects and engineers are human beings, so they make mistakes, the same as other mortals. But they don't call them mistakes. They call them "errors and omissions". They try to avoid them, but they can't. They're human beings. There will always be errors and omissions, and it's always been that way. And people have always longed for that time when there will be no more errors or omissions, when life will be the way we know it ought to be. To be human is to have that longing for eternal life. To have it all.

The pop psychologists and the success experts know that. They know what we want. And they give us techniques that promise to get it for us. When you read their books it seems so simple. You say, I can do that. Any dummy can do that. And they bolster up your self-confidence with such phrases as, "Your life is in your own hands". "You are what you make of yourself", and "If you have a positive attitude you can do anything in this life". You buy all that stuff and it's true. Some of it is true. And the testimonials are impressive, especially those testimonials of very successful people such as Lee Iaccoca, who wrote a book to prove that anyone with determination, hard work, a positive attitude, and a billion dollar loan from the United States Government can be a success in this life. So you try it, and sometimes it works. And sometimes it doesn't. And if it works it will never last, because of errors and omissions. I tell you, it's a dangerous myth to believe that eternal life, life as it should be, life that is genuinely fulfilling to you, is entirely in your hands. it isn't.

I remember Celia, in T. S. Eliot's Cocktail Party. She goes to her psychiatrist because she feels guilty, not because she has done anything wrong. She says, "I can't think of anything I've done wrong". She feels guilty because her life isn't the way it should be. She's not guilty of error; she's guilty of omission. Something's omitted. Something's missing, and she feels that it's her fault. Well, I tell you, no architect would ever undertake to construct a building without protecting himself against errors or omissions. So why do you think that you can build your life without them? And even if you can live your life flawlessly, even if you can live it so there are no errors on your part, and arrange your life perfectly, there will still be omissions. You will still feel something is missing. And no matter what you do, no matter how much you buy, you'll never purchase it.

THE TEXT AND WHAT IT TELLS US

Jesus says what is missing, God provides.  
"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life." Life as it should be. The next verse, the 17th verse, says the same thing another way.

"God sent His Son into the world - not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

I hope you can now begin to see what this great text is really saying to us. First of all, it says you can have eternal life right now, which means you can know right now, under the conditions of your existence, the kind of life that you know you ought to live. You don't have to wait for some time in the future,

you don't have to ascend, be transported out of the present into some magic realm or artificially stimulated world. Eternal life is possible right now in trusting that what God did in Jesus Christ He did for you!

The second point of this passage is that God does not condemn you for the life you live. You may condemn yourself, but God doesn't. The truth of the matter is that you are harder on yourself than God is. You may punish yourself, as many people do, for your errors and omissions. But God has come to free you from bondage to them. He won't free you from errors and omissions. He does not exempt you from the human condition. He frees you from being burdened by guilt. He didn't send His son to condemn, but to forgive. We all need to remember

The third thing this passage says is really astounding. In fact, it's an affront to many people. It says all of this is a gift. "God so loved the world He gave....." Eternal life is a gift. You can't earn it, you can't do anything to purchase it, you can't do anything to achieve it. In fact, if you try, you're going to lose it. God so loved that He gave. It's a gift. As Paul puts it in Ephesians,

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, but it is a gift of God."

#### AND THIS, TOO

If you ask me, how can I know that, I am not sure that I can tell you. And if you ask, what can I do to get it, I think that means you haven't got the point yet. In fact, until you stop trying to do things in order to gain it, you won't know it. It comes only when you can see that life itself is a gift, and that what God did in Jesus Christ He did in order to show us what He is always doing. He didn't just give you love once, two thousand years ago. The love that you see there on the cross is the love that surrounds you all of your days. And there is no formula that anybody can give you that will enable you to experience that, except stop trying to experience it, and receive it. Stop trying to earn it. Stop trying to purchase it. Stop doing. Sit still and open your eyes. Receive.

#### TO SEE LIFE IN A NEW WAY

There is no formula, but there are stories, parables, that enable you to see your life in a new way. Wendell Berry is a writer who tells such stories. He tells stories about America in an earlier generation, rural America. And Berry has a way of making stories serve as parables so that you can see God's grace in our everyday life. In his book, The Memory of Old Jack, he tells the story of a man who worked hard all his life to make a success out of his farm, but he met disappointment after disappointment, and after each blow he heroically picks up and starts over again, or he stoically continues, only to meet the final disappointment, the loss of his land. That's a final disappointment for him because he's tied to the land spiritually. What religion he has is religion of the mystery of the land. That's what kept him going, that's his world, that's the source of meaning for him. And it's in that same world, in the land, that he experiences what John is talking about when he says, "Eternal life is given to us as a gift."

This is how it comes to him. The words of the 23rd Psalm come back. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me". He memorized that psalm as a boy, but now, for the first time, he really understands what it's trying to say to him.

He knows now that the psalmist experienced the same thing that he has experienced. He'd come up against the limit of his life. He has known disappointment and failure. He'd experienced despair. He'd even contemplated his own death. He knew what it was like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The psalmist knew that, but he knew something else. He knew that his origin as a human being was not in anything he or any other man had done, and he knew that now he couldn't do anything sufficient to his real needs. In other words, he was a dependent, and therefore limited, human being. And that means that his life is not in his own hands; his life is in the hands of God. There is a limit on his life, and the psalmist was able to look beyond this limit and see there the world, still potent and abounding. And he saw that the world would always be there, whether he lived or died. Beyond our strength, beyond our intelligence, our desires, our faith and our hope, there is always more. The cup runneth over. And when he knows that, he lives by a bounty not his own. Though ruin lies behind him, and though ruin may await him, he's in peace.

Then Berry writes this about Old Jack.

"It had seemed to him that his life had come to a new beginning. He's forty-eight years old. He had come to a profound peace and trust, and this peace would abide with him to the end of his days. And all this he knew in the quiet of his heart."

That's what it looks like. Eternal life - peace and trust to the end of your days. And you can't earn that, and you can't grab it, and you can't buy it. You have to sit quietly where you are and receive it, as a gift. And when you do, then you'll know when you begin your life again, with all of its errors and omissions, that you will take with you something eternal.

In the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of John, at the end of Jesus' teaching ministry, according to John, he gives a farewell speech to His disciples. And this means to you and me. He says this:

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. So let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

PRAYER     Make us sensitive to your presence and your nearness in these quiet moments, O God. Open our hearts that we may receive your love as it comes to us in Christ Jesus. Strengthen and sustain us, we ask, as we depart and return to the world from which we have come. In the spirit of Christ who has given us the gift of Eternal life...Amen