

How Are You Measured?

If you asked most people who was John Paul Jones, they could respond in several ways, but mostly they would say he was an early American hero; the father of the Navy. Others might remember his words as he battled a much larger British warship when he uttered, "*I have not yet begun to fight!*" in response to a request by the commander of the enemy ship to surrender. (Jones eventually won the battle). Would anyone tell you how much he was worth, or how tall he was? There was so much more to his life than most of us could relate.

You may not know that as a Lieutenant he not only commanded the first colonial ship to attack the British, but later he also commanded a combined armada of colonial and French ships during several battles. He loved ships and travel, having started work on a merchant vessel at the age of thirteen. In fact, during his short, forty-five years of life, he was a commissioned officer of the United States, France, and Russia at one period or another.

His last battle was fought for Catherine the Great of Russia, where he was greatly admired by the nobility, but disliked by fellow Russian officers because he was a foreigner. Yet given all that he did, and the admiration we as Americans have bestowed on him, rarely if ever do we think of the fact that he came from humble beginnings as the son of a gardener.

Like many wanderers of his time, he had brushes with the law (even changing his name from John Paul to John Paul

Jones in order not to be found), and although never married, he was more than a “ladies man” having taken many lovers over the years. He was also prone to self-aggrandizement, writing many letters and exaggerated journals detailing his exploits, purportedly to increase his chances of higher ranks for the naval groups he commanded. Others believed the “stretched” truths came from an inferiority complex because of his shorter height (about 5’5” by some estimates).

During Jones' life he accumulated little wealth and died reasonably poor being buried in a rather nondescript grave in France. It was not until early in the twentieth century, in 1913, that his remains were moved to their present resting-place at the US Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland.

How do we measure the value of a person? Is it through their possessions and wealth? Certainly that was not the case with John Paul Jones. Yet how often do we begin describing someone we know in terms of what they have? *“There goes Bill Roseglass. That’s him over there in the new Mercedes convertible. Ya know, he made a killing when he invested in that real estate south of the Big Lake Mall.”* I know I have found myself prone to do that on more than one occasion.

Even during the time of Jesus, attributes like honor and wisdom were unfortunately equated to what today we would call the person’s tangible net worth. The account of King Solomon was a story of power, of a lust for gold, of squandering riches on monuments and palaces, and of the problems when we place our faith in material possessions.

In the book of Ecclesiastes which some attribute to Solomon, it states in 4:4, *“And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”*

Regardless of the authorship, it is a sincere statement of one person's reflection on life and how we often toil to gain recognition and riches which ultimately have little meaning. We envy the new car our friend drives, wish our clothes were more in vogue, or forgo our morals to gain political position. Solomon's preoccupation with materialism and power rather than to follow God's commandments led to his demise.

In the chapter "A Precious Loss", I write about attachments and how we form many levels of relationships to both the living and the inanimate. If we rank all that we are attached to, where does faith fit on that scale? Surely faith should be in the first position. If we lost all of the other items that we have on that list, shouldn't faith be the one we want to hold on to until the very end?

In America, our society tends to emphasize "things" over people. How can we ever have greater attachment to something that is inanimate than someone who is flesh and blood?

Although the answer should seem obvious, think how many marriages end because of arguments and financial anguish over one or the other's, seemingly insatiable appetite to accumulate an ever-increasing amount of assets . . . usually accompanied by a proportionally large burden of debt and worry? Problems created by cars that are too extravagant; houses that are too big (with rooms that are rarely visited); memberships to the best clubs; tuition for the most private of schools.

Are we sacrificing more important relations we could have by attaching ourselves to other "things" that in the end would be of little consequence?

When we die, will we not be remembered by what influence we had on others, rather than what material assets we amassed?

When we act as children of God, doing what He instructs us to do, we will create value far greater than all the gold and silver on earth! From my perspective, I would much rather be remembered like John Paul Jones for the good he accomplished rather than dwelling on the fact that he never had a big house or died poor.

Can my children and wife think of the good times we had talking to one another, or playing some silly game, and in the process not worry about whether we are “keeping up” with the Jones family down the street? Those kind of moments will certainly be more important and bring greater joy than looking at an expensive watch on your wrist. If it’s time you’re after, a twenty-five dollar timepiece works just as well as a three thousand dollar Swiss movement.

In John Steinbach’s gripping novel, *“The Grapes of Wrath”*, we are immersed into the depth of what it was like to lose most everything you physically owned. He writes about the families whose farms were devastated by the “dust bowl” droughts that swept the Midwest and Southwest United States during the 1930’s. For those that had deep pockets of money, it was a time of bargains as hundreds of small farms were bought for pennies on the dollar for back taxes, or delinquent bank notes.

One of Steinbach’s characters makes the astute observation in chapter 5, *“If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it’s part of him . . . and in some way he’s bigger because he owns it.”* But in contrasting the small farmer to the new land barons he continues, *“But let a man get property he doesn’t see, or can’t take time to get his fingers in, or can’t be there to walk on it - why, then . . . he*

is small, not big. Only his possessions are big - and he's the servant of his property."

Who do you know is a better person based on the *quantity* of what he owns?

I have a friend whose path I seem to cross every few years. As kids we competed with each other from rock throwing to seeing who could make the best score in school and, as we grew older, he seemed to beat me on many counts (particularly the scores). He worked very hard in college and achieved his goal of becoming a reasonably wealthy doctor (at a very early age).

There were many times I openly expressed envy at what he had, enjoying the opportunity to take the controls of one of his planes or ride in a car costing three times the price of mine. Luckily, as only a spouse can do, my wife was always there to bring me back to reality.

Unfortunately, like so many meteoric displays in the night's sky, his planes and house and expensive cars all disappeared in a flash when he became over-extended trying to expand his wealth even more. For him, he suffered what some consider the ultimate financial embarrassment - bankruptcy. Even now, several decades later, I believe he has not fully recovered from that period. I often wonder how his life would have been if material possessions had not seemed to be of so much importance to him early in his career.

Some businesses have part of their value stated in terms of what is called "intangible assets". These are items of value you cannot see or touch, but they are real. Think of the value of the name "McDonald's", or "Coca Cola". We too can have intangible values far more important than ones we can sit in or sleep on . . . things like wisdom, kindness, loving, empathy and reputation.

I ran across an interesting government statistic. In 1994, on average, 15.4 percent of Americans were poor each month, and about 22 percent — or 55 million people — were poor for at least two months during that year.¹⁴

First, it is obvious that many people went through a revolving door of poverty . . . some lasting inside its walls for a very short period, while others stayed much longer. However, what I also found interesting is that research has shown most people we classify statistically as being below the poverty line, don't think of themselves as being poor! It seems that the method our governments use to determine poverty only considers a monetary scale. Yet as people, we often believe we are doing better because we don't measure the quality of life in tangible assets or dollars, but rather by how we feel and what kind of "job" we are doing. In other words, are we a good neighbor, a good parent, or a good and faithful servant of God.

When my wife Ellie and I were first married, some of our best times were spent in our little apartment. She covered cheap snap-together hardboard tables with cloth to disguise them, and did a wonderful job arranging the few pieces of real furniture we had borrowed. And both of us will never forget me rebuilding the engine of an old Volkswagen "Beetle" on the kitchen floor (I don't think she will ever forget me getting motor oil on the curtains she made that covered the sliding-glass door). It was definitely one of several periods where we seemed to live from paycheck to paycheck, but on the scale of happiness, most of the time we were right at the top.

We need to be sure the scales by which we assess ourselves and others are both accurate and relative. Just as we would not use the Kelvin or Centigrade scales to measure the weight of groceries, we should not use the value of accumulated assets to measure happiness.

Look around you. Do you measure the teacher by the car they drive or Mother Teresa by the label in the clothes she wore? Proverb: 20:15: *“There is gold, and a multitude of rubies: but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.”*

Like so many other innate gifts of God, the ones of most importance are given to us freely and have no economically quantifiable value.

Obviously there is nothing wrong with being wealthy as long as what motivates you is not greed. It should be a by-product of what you are able to accomplish out of the good you or your organization gives to people. If you make a better mousetrap, why should you not be rewarded with more sales? If you are a great artist, why should your paintings not sell for a higher price?

In the end what matters is more than riches. As the inspired writer of Psalm's 49:16-20 penned, *“Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him Though while he lived he counted himself blessed - and men praise you when you prosper - he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light of life. A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”*

But what happens if you lose all of those assets you have accumulated? Can you survive without them?

Will others recognize you for who you are rather than what you have? Can you start over once, twice, or be gracious in your material loss, because in the end, what will your world remember about you. Will they say, *“There goes Bill Roseglass. What a great husband and father he has been. He was one of the most forgiving and cheerful people*

I've known, and it's reflected in each of his children and the eyes of his friends."?

One of my favorite poems is by Rudyard Kipling and is called "IF". Although the poem is a message to a child as instructions on how to be a man, we can all learn from its words. This particular set of edited verses seems more than appropriate:

"If you . . . (can) . . . watch the things you gave your life to broken, and stoop and build them up with worn-out tools,

. . . and lose and start again at your beginnings and never breathe a word about your loss, . . .

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, and which is more, you'll be a man, my son."

I'm not much of a risk taker unless you consider racing motocross or flying small planes in that category. I've certainly had my share of bad investments, lost property, or made dumb purchases. So, it is difficult for me to describe the feeling of having to risk everything only to lose and have to start over. But stories like *The Grapes of Wrath*, can make me more clearly understand the emotional and spiritual challenges one would face.

Similarly, I have never known what it would be like to be really poor . . . unable to put food on the table for your family, or buy clothing to keep you warm. But I have seen it in several countries where I've traveled.

One vivid memory is of two beautiful children, definitely descendants of the Incas, standing near the front of the vehicle in which I was traveling. They stood begging for food in a little village several hours outside of Bogota, Columbia not far from a cathedral carved into an old salt mine. Although their native clothing was worn through in

spots, they were neatly dressed, and held themselves with dignity. And like most children, you could see the sparkle in their eyes, as they looked up the steps into our bus. They were still young enough not to fully appreciate the economic conditions in which they lived.

I'm sure at some time in their future they became aware of the vast differences between their world and the hustle of Bogota, a city of over 10 million people just a few hours away. Would they lose part of that vitality that made their faces light-up when someone smiled at them . . . lost because of being measured against what they did not have in ways of material assets? Would their smiles turn into the sullen and hardened stares of their parents?



Television ads and movies often show us what we don't have in a planned effort to make us want more of what they are offering. They want us to feel possession "impoverished". It's too bad they don't show more of us how we are spiritually impoverished. Wouldn't that be great? I'm reminded of what an advertising executive once told me. "*The public needs this product . . . they just don't know it yet!*"

Vance Packard wrote a book several decades ago titled "*Hidden Persuaders*". It describes many ways we as consumers are inundated by companies to entice us to make purchases. Some tactics border on the unethical. Often they prey on the undereducated, impoverished, or aged. Like his descriptions in the book, we must be on guard to not be influenced by all types of temptations to take what we have. *Our* hidden persuaders may come not in just the form of well crafted advertisements, but from pseudo-friendships, indirect relationships, and even the leadership in organizations where we work or worship.

In the first decade of the 21st Century, America lost it's business sense when it allowed monetary goals of investment bankers and others to provide loans (particularly mortgages) to people who could least afford them. Instead of helping the borrowers become long- term home owners, their greed ultimately crippled not only the individuals but the country. Yet, these people were both directly and indirectly persuaded that home ownership was the right thing to do without being warned about the consequences if the economy turned sour . . . which it did.



God's challenge to us is to realize that *we can never lose what is in us* and not let all that is around us keep us from our faith, regardless of the material temptations of our world or the monetary losses we might suffer.

Your faith is yours, and yours alone, and no one can ever take it from you. But if you're not careful, other "things" of temporal value can make you forget it's there.

How will you be measured by those you leave behind? In what way will you invest while you live? What will be your brand equity? What intangible assets of your life will those you encounter be left when you are no longer on this earth?

It's up to you and God.

Study Guide – Chapter VIII

How are you measured?

Over the centuries humans have developed all types of measuring devices and scales. Some have worked very well and lasted over time while others have lost their significance. Many are named after the people who developed them (the Kelvin or Fahrenheit scales for temperature), while others are derived from some physical aspect of the scale ("hands" for measuring a horse's height, or "foot" for linear measurements, being the approximate length of a Mediaeval person's foot).

As you read each question or point of discussion below, consider which types of systems and scales are valuable in measuring our lives.

1. Write down a list of at least 10 dimensional ways to measure yourself. Then remove all of those that apply to only physically tangible traits (height, weight, etc.) and create a scale for each that remain. Rank yourself on each scale and consider if that position is where you want it to be (low/high, a-b-c, etc.). If you are not satisfied with any ranking, make a plan to improve your position on that scale and then re-measure yourself every 90 days to check your progress.

2. Is it important to you to be ranked higher than those around you? If so, why? Did Jesus care about ranking?

3. Write your own epitaph such that if you were to die today, you would like to have it read at your funeral. Put it away for a couple of days, review it and then rewrite it if necessary. Did you make any significant changes and if so why?

4. Ask three friends to write your epitaph using less than 100 words and see what they say. Is it what you expected and if not, why?

5. Ask your spouse or children to write your epitaph. Again, is it what you expected or wanted them to say?

Group Discussion

1. Ask every person in the group to write down each person's name and then beside it, place only one word that they believe best describes that person. Then, taking one individual at a time, have each member read the word they chose for that person and then briefly explain why they selected that word. See if there are general trends or wide differences and discuss why they may exist.

2. In what terms did Jesus measure others? Support your premises with references to specific verses in the Bible.

3. Discuss how different cultures may measure personal achievement. Cite specific examples.

4. Ask for volunteers to describe what types of measurable results the organizations to which they belong look to achieve. This can include their place of employment. Openly discuss the pros and cons of each.