

The Pursuit of More
Esther 3
Bellevue Baptist Church
June 14, 2026

Sermon begins with a clip of Jim Carrey at the Golden Globe awards.

When Jim Carrey made his legendary speech, in 2016, he not only brought his signature slapstick comedy, he also caught the room by surprise. In a string of carefully crafted statements, he made them laugh and made them think. Do these golden trophies carry any lasting value? Of course the answer was no. Like eating a box of candy—the sugar tastes good for a moment, but when it’s gone, the hunger remains.

Let’s think about that for a moment, shall we? As a wise man once said, If the grass seems greener on the other side of the fence, you need to water your lawn.

Why do we humans pine for more than we have? Why do we resonate with the words of Broadway’s Hamilton, “He will never be satisfied.”

Deep within the human soul is this need for recognition, affirmation, and admiration. We are all on a search. And what is it that we’re searching for?

Someone says, “I’m just doing what the Founding Fathers of America said I should do—As an American, I am entitled to life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness. I’m pursuing happiness.

Yes, but why does happiness feel so elusive? The minute you feel you’re within reach, the feeling of arrival gets delayed? Contentment is always just beyond our grasp. .

A secular, nonreligious writer wrote a piece called Happiness is a Problem. In it, he offers the following comments:

Whatever makes us happy today will no longer make us happy tomorrow...A fixation on happiness inevitably amounts to a never-ending pursuit of “something else”—a new house, a new relationship, another child, another pay raise. And despite all of our sweat and pain, we end up feeling eerily similar to how we started: inadequate.

This is not new information. Just read the book of Ecclesiastes—the Bible’s best offering for the philosophical soul. Ecclesiastes makes one thing clear—most of what we long for his meaningless, meaningless! A chasing after the wind.

“Hey! What are you doing this afternoon?”

“Chasing after the wind.”

“Sounds like a good use of time.”

If any of these thoughts enter your brain—they enter mine all the time—then hold onto your hat. Esther 2, where we land today, speaks to the problem of elusive happiness. If you brought a Bible, turn with me there.

Last week, we jumped into this story, and I failed to tell you where we are in the grand story of Scripture. Let me show you real quick. Here you see all 66 books of the Bible. The top row is the Old Testament, the bottom row the New. That top row, the first 39 books were written before Jesus entered the atmosphere. These books are like the prequel, the Old Testament, which sets the context for God showing up with skin on—a day we now refer to as Christmas.

If we zoom in on the Old Testament alone, as you can see, the books of the Old Testament are arranged according to genre—the Law, the History, the poetry, the Major and the Minor prophets. Esther is located in the section about Jewish history. As I said last week, of all the books of the Bible, this one reads the most like a novel. Like a story. And every good story has memorable characters, both heroes and villains. Today, we will meet the villain named Haman. He is the poster boy for pining. He could not get happy with what he had been given. His self-centeredness consumes him.

Esther is the heroic young woman. She was a Jewish teenager, born beautiful. Living in a foreign land, she was under the rule of the foolish ego-maniac king that we met last week: King Ahasuerus. When that king was publicly humiliated by his queen, he sought to make an example of her. He cast her aside and said, “I’ll search for a new queen! Let there be beauty contest—let it begin soon! Here we find an Old Testament episode of “The Bachelor.” As God in heaven would have, Esther would be chosen for such a time as this.

The first time we meet her, the Bible reads as follows:

The young woman had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking. When her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her into his family. Esther 2:7 (CSB)

What irony we have here. A beauty queen from a broken home. She had lost her parents somehow. She was placed in her uncle’s care. Mordecai would become the rock in this young girl’s life, but he would also become the little stone in Haman’s shoe.

Now you need to know this: at the same time that Esther came to power as the new queen, this man Haman, one of the king’s high-ranking officials—also received a huge promotion. He becomes the new Chief-of-Staff...3:1...

After all this took place, King Ahasuerus honored Haman....He promoted him in rank and gave him a higher position than all the other officials. 2 The entire royal staff at the King’s Gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, because the king had commanded this to be done for him. But Mordecai would not bow down or pay homage. Esther 3:1-2

Pay attention to what’s happening because this moment is the trigger that creates the conflict of the story...

Mordecai’s decision to remain standing, while the King’s VIPs bow down, is enough to send Haman into a rage. Haman has a little bomb buried deep within his heart that gets detonated that day.

In this moment he should have been happy—the King just gave him the opportunity of a lifetime—but something is broken in this man’s heart. He only sees the negative. While many bow, his mind becomes fixated on the one person that unsubscribed from his social media. He gives one person permission to steal all of his joy? This is crazy! Nobody does that, right?

You’ve never allowed one person to steal all of your joy, right? In a room full of people, you have NEVER found one person that seems the least impressed by you, thinking to yourself– “I’m gonna win that guy over.” And no matter how hard you try, no progress is made. Like Haman, we can all fall for this trap: We find the least impressed person in our life, and we make them the the largest presence in our mind.

Pause for a moment and consider one person that is eating away at your joy. Don’t point at them. Just think about them. See a problem person in your head.

Now, with their face in mind...listen the New Testament writer James:

What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don’t they come from your passions that wage war within you? You desire and do not have. James 4:1-2 CSB

What does James reveal about the human heart here? He says that your lack of peace is not another person’s fault. The problem is that you want their approval, and you do not have it. The war within us is caused by our idols.

Mordecai saw in his mind, probably from the time he was a teen, that final glorious moment when every person around him was fully impressed by him. And he was so close to having a unanimous vote! That one guy was ruining his dream!

V.5...

When Haman saw that Mordecai was not bowing down or paying him homage, he was filled with rage. 6 And when he learned of Mordecai’s ethnic identity, it seemed repugnant to Haman to do away with Mordecai alone. He planned to destroy all of Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout Ahasuerus’s kingdom. Esther 3:5-6

See how the evil of sin, when allowed to remain, can expand to irrational proportion?

In a nanosecond, Haman goes from hating Mordecai to hating an entire race of people. That phrase at the end of verse 5 is significant: *"Haman was filled with rage."* When he didn’t receive the honor he felt he deserved, something toxic erupted from within.

The book of Esther was originally written in Hebrew, and the word translated "rage" carries the idea of burning heat, wrath, poison, or venom. Mordecai’s refusal to bow didn’t create the poison. It exposed it. The reservoir of Haman’s heart was already contaminated. All Mordecai did was remove the lid. This is why the Bible is adamant that we pay attention to what’s brewing inside our hearts.

Think about the check-engine light in your car. When that light comes on, you don’t put a piece of tape over the dashboard and keep driving. You pull over. You pop the hood. You investigate the problem before it destroys the engine. Haman hadn’t learned that lesson, and perhaps some

of us in this room haven't either. Perhaps the Holy Spirit has a word for you about your bitterness.

When you sense bitterness growing, when resentment starts taking root, when you find yourself replaying conversations in your head, fantasizing about getting even, or secretly enjoying another person's failure, those are dashboard lights. They are warnings that something deeper is wrong.

In 2006, actor and comedian Michael Richards, best known for playing Kramer on the television show Seinfeld, was performing stand-up comedy at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles. During the show, a heckler shouted criticism from the crowd. A man shouted out, "You're not funny!" What should have been a minor interruption ignited something dark within him. Richards launched into an angry tirade filled with racist slurs and hateful comments. The incident was captured on video and spread rapidly across the country. Millions watched in disbelief.

Years later, Richards reflected on that night and admitted that what came out of him shocked even him. He said:

In view of the situation and the act going the way it was going, I don't know. The rage did go all over the place - it went to everybody in the room.

His comments are telling. The heckler may have triggered the explosion, but the explosion revealed something deeper that needed attention.

To his credit, Richards stepped away from the spotlight for years. He confessed that he needed to "cancel himself," to fade into the background, to seek out counseling and deal with the root issues, which put the poison in his heart.

That is the lesson of Haman. Haman never stopped to investigate his own heart. He never asked why one man's refusal to bow bothered him so deeply. He never examined the insecurity, pride, and hatred festering beneath the surface.

Instead of dealing with the poison, he spread it. And that is always the danger of untreated rage. If we don't bring it to God, it never stays contained. It spills onto spouses, children, coworkers, neighbors, churches, and entire groups of people. One man wouldn't bow. And because Haman refused to deal with the darkness in his own soul, an entire nation nearly paid the price.

Now, let's move in on the story. Soon, Esther discovers Haman's plans to wipe out her people, she is overwhelmed with fear but Uncle Mordecai challenges her to use this God-given position to prevent this man from plotting evil. Here is the most famous verse in the story. He says:

If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." Esther 4:14

The young, untested queen must take the ultimate risk of her life. To expose the King's highest official would force him to make a decision of whose side he was on. And history had proven that he had no problem upgrading his queen.

She musters the courage and sticks her neck out, spilling the beans to the king, about her identity as a Jew, and about the evil plan a certain person has been devising, to slaughter her people.

King Ahasuerus spoke up and asked Queen Esther, "Who is this, and where is the one who would devise such a scheme?" Esther 7:5

I think the original language casts light on the depth of the king's inquiry. His words can be literally translated:

"Who is, and where is the one *who would fill his heart to do this?*"

Quick Bible study. This is not the only place in Scripture where we see this kind of language. The cross-references are fascinating.

Fast forward thousands of years to the era of the early church. In the book of Acts, the apostles were nurturing the baby Christian community when a rich couple named Ananias and Sapphira stepped up to make a large donation to the mission. What seemed like an act of kindness, however, was exposed as a pretentious gift with partial lies. The gift was good, but their hearts were bad. When Peter figured out what was happening, he confronted the situation:

"Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land?" Acts 5:3

Again, notice the language. There was a filling of the heart.

Hebrews 3:15 says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart..." We have a major role to play in the present state of our hearts.

The story of Haman, and the story of Ananias end in the same tragic way. Both of them lose their very lives because they waited too long before tending to their own hearts.

So let me show you the end before we talk through application. At the end of chapter 7, when the king finally finds out the evil Haman was planning, he makes a swift decision to carry out justice.

Harbona, one of the king's eunuchs, said, "There is a gallows seventy-five feet tall at Haman's house that he made for Mordecai, who gave the report that saved the king."

The king said, "Hang him on it."

They hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's anger subsided. Esther 7:9-10

This is irony at its highest level. Think about it. The gallows Haman built for his enemy became the instrument of his own destruction. The noose he prepared for Mordecai became the rope that tightened around his own neck.

Haman now stands as a warning to every person who ignores the flashing red light of resentment, envy, and rage. He is a monument to the danger of an untended heart. Author Anne Lamott once said, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."

That's exactly what bitterness does. We think we're hurting someone else. We replay the offense. We nurse the grudge. We keep score. We quietly build a gallows in our minds for the person who wounded us.

But in the end, bitterness rarely destroys its target. It destroys its host. When we refuse to tend to our hearts, we construct a gallows for someone else, only to discover that we are the ones standing beneath it.

Now, as many of you know, one of my favorite ways to end a sermon is with Q&A. Today, I'll just answer two.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

I struggle with wanting more power and influence at work. Is it wrong for me to want to be in charge?

It's completely human to want positions of influence. I don't think it's wrong for a person to hope they can maximize their potential, become a high-performing employee, a speaker who can hold a room, a writer who keeps people turning the page, or a leader who inspires others to do their best work.

If you're going to do something, why not do it with excellence? Excellence is a good thing. Ambition isn't always a bad thing. But motivation matters. In his excellent book, *The Motive*, Patrick Lencioni argues that there are essentially two reasons people pursue leadership.

The first is what he calls a **reward-centered motive**. A reward-centered leader views leadership as the prize at the end of the race. Deep down, they think, *I've worked hard to get here. I've sacrificed. I've paid my dues. Now it's my turn. Now I can enjoy the perks, the status, the authority, and the recognition.*

Leadership becomes a trophy.

The second is a **responsibility-centered motive**. This leader sees the position not as a reward but as a stewardship. They think, *"I have been entrusted with something significant. I don't deserve this opportunity any more than countless others who could have filled this role.*

Because I have been given this responsibility, I need to work harder, serve more people, make difficult decisions, and set the pace for everyone around me."

Leadership becomes a burden willingly carried.

That's much closer to the heart of Jesus. As long as your desire for influence is rooted in responsibility rather than reward, you are on solid ground. People tend to respect leaders who view authority as an opportunity to serve rather than an opportunity to be served.

In fact, this was one of Jesus' constant battles with His own disciples.

The Twelve often seemed eager to follow Christ, but every so often their true motives leaked out. They would argue about who was the greatest. They wanted to know who would receive the highest positions in the coming kingdom. James and John even recruited their mother to lobby Jesus on their behalf.

Imagine that conversation.

"Mom, would you mind talking to Jesus for us? See if you can secure a couple of seats in the front row."

They weren't thinking about carrying a cross. They were thinking about climbing a ladder. Jesus responded by completely redefining leadership: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." (Matthew 20:26) The world says leadership is about gaining power. Jesus says leadership is about assuming responsibility.

So yes, it's a good thing to want to maximize your life for the glory of God. Pursue excellence. Develop your gifts. Take initiative. Work hard. Just make sure you're building God's kingdom, not your own.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

Christians seem to be just as angry as everyone else. Why should I put my faith in Jesus if nothing is going to change?

This is a fair question. Why buy a fitness membership if every person coming out the door of that gym is overweight? The answer is simple and two-fold: you don't know how much they weighed when they started! Everybody is on an their own health journey, trying to become the best version of themselves. So that's one reason.

On top of that, not everyone that goes to the gym is working out.

If you're a skeptic, looking for reasons not to believe, surely you will find some professing Christians that have made little progress spiritually. Perhaps its understandable that unbelieving people are hesitant to join up with believers, when their own lives seem morally superior to the so-called religious.

I warn you in this, Jesus said we were in grave danger when we start using our spare time to find fault in other people—making ourselves feel better by finding other who are in worse shape. This is something that God hates—self-righteousness. It's the act of declaring myself superior by looking down on those around me.

When you come to church, you're misguided if you think you'll find a huge herd of god-like people. We all wish that were true, but in reality, we are sinners saved by the grace of God and praying for progress. We are not nearly perfect people. Even the Apostle Paul, perhaps the greatest Christ-follower in history had his share of hangups. You'd be surprised to read what he says about himself. You'd think he lived on a higher plane than all of us. He did, after all, write about half of the New Testament.

I'm sure that's more than you've accomplished in your stint on Earth. Authoring the largest chunk of the New Testament—I'd say you have to be a pretty great person to do that. And yet, look what he writes in Romans 7:

For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. Romans 7:18-19

Paul is not denying that he has grown. He's not saying he's made zero progress. He simply saying what we all feel—that we need the grace of God.

A few years ago, I was at a Christian concert and I heard this gal step up to the microphone and share a song that she had written. Her name was Jess Ray and she explained why she put these words to music. Caroline is going to come and sing this for us, but before I give her the nod, let me tell you why this song has become so meaningful to me.

The song reads like a humble confession—like the Apostle Paul admitting he was chief of sinners. Jess isn't pointing fingers at the sins of the world, she's wrestling with the sins of her own heart, which we should all do, especially on Sunday as we hear the Word of God spoken.

What strikes me every time I hear this song is its raw honesty—how we never outgrow our need for God's grace. This has been one of the great surprises in my Christian life. When I was younger, I assumed that if I walked with God long enough, I would arrive one day at a place where I didn't struggle with pride, selfishness, jealousy, or impatience anymore. I would preach grace but not be so desperately needy for it myself.

I was so wrong. I still desperately need the mercy of God. We all do.

The difference between Haman and a healthy believer is not that one has sin and the other doesn't. No, the difference is that one denies it. Where do you need to confess to God your great need for forgiveness?

Closing Blessing, as we dismiss:

20 Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us— 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Eph. 3:20-21

