

"For Mortals It Is Impossible"

Mark 10:17-31

15 October 2006

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As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Prayer.

I know that many of you share the same passion as I do for the Andrew Lloyd

Webber / Tim Rice rock-opera "Jesus Christ Superstar." The opening scene is one where Judas is wrestling with his internal thoughts about Jesus, as circumstances lead him increasingly into his passion, suffering and death. Judas sings his criticisms of Jesus in the title song "Heaven On Their Mind," and these are the lyrics near the end:

Listen, Jesus, to the warning I give.
Please remember that I want us to live.
But it's sad to see our chances weakening with every hour.
All your followers are blind.
Too much heaven on their minds.
It was beautiful, but now it's sour.
Yes it's all gone sour.

"All your followers are blind. Too much heaven on their minds." Obvious Judas is critical of the seemingly blind, heaven seeking followers of Jesus.

It seems as if heaven is on the minds of a lot of people in today's world. For the Islamic fundamentalist, suicide bomber, the only thing on their mind is hatred and eternity. For the Jewish fundamentalist, it is all about preserving God's eternal blessing and chosen-ness to the descendants of Abraham.

For the religious right, conservative evangelicals, it's all about getting people saved. Though highly subjective, that is, subject to each person's judgment, being saved is all about grasping for some kind of emotional experience that is believed to make a person someone who is "in," someone who "goes up" when they die. The motive is the threat or fear of death, eternal damnation, not getting "in," of going "down," even for some, avoiding a "descent into hell for eternal persecution."

That fear, coupled with the manipulative threat of organized religion, or of an idolized, charismatic leader, has been an effective motivator over the past two millennium. "Believe or die" energized the Inquisition, empowered the Crusades, drove the Salem witch hunts, and remains today a negative motivator from the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome to the pulpit of Thomas Rhodes Baptist church in Virginia, and many places in-between.

As I survey the landscape of moderate Protestant America, my criticism would be that we don't have enough heaven on our minds. We might have committee meetings, building and property concerns, and denominational responsibilities and the ordination of homosexuals on our minds, but heaven is rarely mentioned. Heaven is a rarely spoken motivator that puts people in the pews. Though, I am

here to tell you that when it comes near to the end of life, heaven is a popular topic in the privacy of the pastoral visit.

Heaven is on the mind of this man who runs up and kneels before Jesus. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is the first, and primary concern of our Gospel today. What must I do; we ask as we join our thoughts with this impatient but respectful man, what must I do to inherit eternal life? We can almost see ourselves bowing before Jesus, in our mind's eye, and asking this question.

Jesus' first response: "You know the commandments;" he tells him, "follow the Law." In other words, what we do makes a difference.

We Protestants have been hiding behind The doctrine of Sola Fide for too long. Sola Fida or Faith Alone asserts that it solely is on the basis of God's grace through the believer's faith alone that believers are forgiven their transgressions and saved into eternal life.

There is a famous response to Sola Fida, and that is, "grace may be free, but it isn't cheap." Jesus tells the wealthy man in today's Gospel that what you do does matter. How you lead your life does make a difference to God. It is his first question. Have you followed God's Law? It isn't enough to believe, one has to put belief into action.

It isn't enough to talk about the problems of poverty, you have to work to eliminate poverty, you have to share of your riches with the poor. It isn't enough to talk about the problems of discrimination, inequality and injustice, you have to work to remove the sources of discrimination, inequality and injustice from society where ever they may occur; and that effort can only take place when you first work to change yourself.

Likewise, it isn't enough for me to stand before you and preach the Gospel. I have to live it, if these words are to have meaning; for the words of the Gospel to be genuine, having authenticity and validity.

What we do makes a difference.

The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus looked at him, loved him, ... and discovered something about him.

Perhaps Jesus is an excellent judge of character. Maybe he sees something in his eyes. Possibly, Jesus can discern this man's mind and heart. Jesus responds a second time – based upon what he had just learned – and says, "go, sell what you

own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

What Jesus is telling this man is that the depth and breath of generosity makes a difference to God. The happiest, most faithful people are those that give lavishly. Those who have the least anxiety about where they will spend eternity are those who dedicate a lifetime to Christian mission and service.

Accumulated money and possessions steal our focus, poisons the well of trust, causes one to become suspicious and envious. Give it away, Jesus tells us, and unburden your mind, un-complicate your relationship with others, return your focus to God, and you'll be much happier, more faithful, and confident in your eternal disposition.

Jesus is also telling us that giving to the poor is his priority, and it should be ours, too. Wealth comes at the expense of someone else's poverty. Our standard of living comes because of thousands ... even millions of people work for unjust wages, in completely unimaginable conditions, too many hours a day and too many days a week. Child labor and gender discrimination are unchallenged. Polluted conditions wreck health and families. Just because it doesn't happen in our neighborhood doesn't make it right, but it does makes us envied and hated on the world's stage.

Giving serves to equalize the inequalities of the world. Giving serves to build empathy and understanding. Giving breaks cycles of violence, hatred, and greed. Giving restores the world's order to God's order.

“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

While the wealthy man leaves, Jesus seizes the teachable moment with this simple observation: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Jesus sees that ultimately, all of us are flawed, sinful, fall short of God's expectation. There is something that makes us human, some thing that we feel we must hold on to that gives satisfaction to life. Is it that bank account? The amount or location of land? Is it the cottage, the boat, the car, the gameboy? Something always holds us down.

That OK in Jesus' book, because that make the umbilical connection between humankind and God so absolutely necessary. We must be connected to God,

because without this connection with the only one who can make eternal life possible, we would be doomed to the impossible and unimaginable: despair and death.

However, our God is the God of life; of eternal life! It is not enough to have created us flawed, to watch us struggle, and to watch us die. It is God's good desire to give to us eternal life, to send us his Son, Jesus Christ. It is God's will that we claim faith for our own, and accept the lifestyle that goes with it.

It is God's grace that recognizes that though we draw up short, given our best effort and intention, if we lead a life of faith and action, we will be sufficient before the only judge who counts when it comes to eternal life ... the Lord, God Almighty.

So, dearly beloved; take heed and listen. Place your faith in Jesus Christ as you Lord and Savior. Put your faith to work by doing the will of God in your life. What you do does makes a difference. Unburden yourself of your wealth and redistribute it to the poor, those most in need.

Then, leave the rest up to God. Rest assured. Leave the rest up to God. Amen.