

Pentecost 10
08/13/06

Matthew 6:25-34
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In the ancient Arabian folktale, *Aladdin*, an evil magician, posing as Aladdin's uncle, tricks him into going after a beautiful lamp that is hidden in a cave. When Aladdin finds the lamp, he decides to keep it for himself. The magician is furious and seals Aladdin in the cave to die. Aladdin cries and, when he wrings his hands, he unsuspectingly summons a genie from the lamp. The genie frees Aladdin from the cave and offers to grant his every wish. Aladdin eventually becomes very rich, marries the sultan's daughter, and lives happily ever after.

I begin today by playing the part of Aladdin's genie, and say to you, "I have the power to grant you three wishes. Whatever you ask I will do." If I possessed such power, what would you ask for? What three things would you ask for, if you could have anything you want? It's a somewhat scary thought, isn't it? I mean, we talk about what we want, but what if we really were given the opportunity to see our wishes come true? What would we wish for? And, on a much higher level, would our wishes reflect what God wants for us in life?

I believe I can say with some degree of certainty that what the average American would ask for would be the following (and in no particular order): more money; a happy marriage; obedient, well-adjusted children; good health; the alleviation of all troubles; the absence of all pain; a long life; and endless happiness. No doubt, most of us in the church would list the same things.

As we today consider the text before us, we note that Jesus is in the middle of his famous Sermon on the Mount, a sermon that he preaches primarily to believers. In this sermon on practical life lessons, Jesus is teaching us how to avoid the anxiety—or at least temper the tension—of life by placing our faith and trust in the God of heaven. It is only then that we will learn the lesson of setting spiritual priorities in life. Or, to put it another way, setting spiritual priorities in life can happen only when we learn to trust God to provide all that we need for life. Today, then, as we continue our current series of sermons, *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off*, we learn from Jesus the lesson of:

Seeking First Things First

- 1. The human heart is naturally out of focus.**
- 2. Only God's Word can change our heart.**
- 3. Once changed, we can set spiritual priorities.**

1. Jesus says, *"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

What Jesus says here strikes at the very heart and core of those things that we want most in life. What Aladdin's genie would gladly provide for us bears little or no resemblance to the things that Jesus wants for us. We spend so much time and effort wrapped up in life and with the things of life that we lose sight of what really matters. Ever since Satan and his sidekick, sin, snuck up on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the human heart has been out of focus. Our priorities have been all messed up. We seek after gold and diamonds and dismiss the voice of God. We seek after cheap, imitation, designer clothing and reject the robe of righteousness. We seek after health and neglect holiness. We seek after palaces of gleam and glitter and pass by homes of grace and godliness. We seek for our pain to be alleviated and turn our backs on God's purposes for our lives.

My friends, we must recognize that the only way out of our predicament, the only way to discard our wish list of toys and trinkets, is to repent of our sins and let Jesus take his seat on the throne of our heart. Only he can change our heart. Only he can remove our heart of stone, a heart that seeks after the things of this world, and give us a heart of flesh, a heart that seeks after the things of God.

So, I ask you again, what is your ambition in life? If God were to grant you one wish, what would it be? To get rich? To make a name for yourself? To do some wonderful thing for someone? Listen to me. Jesus says that the highest desire, the greatest wish, the best ambition, that can grab hold of any human heart is a longing to see God.

2. Now for us to see God, we must first seek him. **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,”** Jesus says. Sad to say, we seek things, not God. We seek our comfort, not God. We seek our contentment, not God. We seek our happiness, not God. Things can never give us direction in life. Things can never comfort us or make us happy or content in a lasting way. Things can never give us the wisdom we need to understand our predicaments, or our possibilities in life. Things are just things, but God is God.

There once was a woman who bought a parrot to keep her company, but she returned it the next day. “This parrot doesn’t talk,” she told the storeowner. “Does he have a mirror in his cage?” he asked. “Parrots love mirrors. They see their reflection and want to talk.” The woman bought a mirror and went home.

The next day she was back; the bird still wasn’t talking. “Does he have a ladder?” the storeowner asked. “Parrots love ladders. A happy parrot is a talkative parrot.” The woman bought a ladder and went home.

The next day she was back with the same problem. “Your parrot needs a swing,” the storeowner said. “Once he starts swinging, he’ll talk up a storm.” The woman really didn’t want to keep buying stuff and had little confidence that the swing would work but, wanting her parrot to talk, she bought it, took it home, and put it in his cage. The parrot, however, didn’t even seem to notice.

When she walked into the store the next day, she was angry. “What’s the matter now?” the storeowner asked. “That parrot you sold me died,” she said. “Died!” he blurted out. “Did he ever say a word?” “Yes, he did—right before he died,” the woman replied. “What did he say?” the storeowner inquired. The woman answered, “Awk! Don’t they sell any food at that store?”

Fellow redeemed, our greatest need in life is to know God with all of our heart. And our greatest priority in life is to seek him with the same. What that means for us is that we need to spend time with him in his Word, allowing him to teach us about his grace and his glory, his comfort and his care, his wonders and his ways, his mercy and his might. We need to be in his Word, pondering the great and glorious truth that **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor 5:19).** We need to be in his Word, hearing what he has to tell us about his will for our life, what he is doing in the midst of our present circumstances, and in what direction he wants to lead us. Nothing apart from seeking and finding the Lord in his Word will give us the security, the rest, and the joy that every one of us longs for in life. The psalmist knew his stuff when he said, **“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you**

the desires of your heart” (37:4).

3. I find it interesting that Jesus precedes the word *first* in his sermon with the word *seek*. **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,”** he says. The word *seek* means *to desire earnestly; to strive after with much effort*. Both definitions strongly suggest that a serious effort must be made. And that’s the point Jesus is making. Something as important as growing and maturing in our relationship with Jesus requires effort. It’s the same thing the Apostle Paul is getting at when he says, **“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Php 2:12).** Neither Jesus nor Paul is speaking of the objective work of redemption, for that none of us could ever accomplish. That required the perfect life and sacrificial death of God’s one and only Son. Only he can (and has) put us into a perfect and peaceful relationship with God. No, they are speaking subjectively, that is, of our relationship with God. And while it is true that only the Holy Spirit can work and sustain saving faith in our heart, once he brings us to faith by the gospel we can cooperate with him our life of sanctification. We are given a New Man that says *yes* to godliness and *no* to sin.

Sure, life is busy. But if you neglect the care of your soul, you have neglected the most important part of your life. Jesus once asked, **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mk 8:36,37)** You will never regret making Jesus and your relationship with him the highest priority in your life. Never. Jesus promises, **“...and all these things will be given to you as well.”** When Jesus holds the first place in your heart and life, you will lack for nothing you need.

An old, tired woman with a heavy bag of groceries boarded a bus. Carrying her burden down the aisle, she found a seat and plopped into it, resting the bag on her lap. A kind businessman sitting across from her watched her for a while. Finally, he leaned across the aisle and said, “Madam, if you put your bag on the floor, the bus will carry you and the bag, too.” How much truth there is in his kind remark. How often we do as that woman did. We come to Jesus for our soul’s salvation and yet stubbornly refuse to let him carry our burdens and look after our daily lives. As a result, we fail to seek first things first, and our priorities get all out of whack. We are willing to get on the bus but refuse to lay down the burdens.

My dear friends, may the God of heaven lead us to seek first things first. And when we fail, may he lead us back to the deep well of his grace and forgiveness in Christ. And then, having assured us that Jesus lived and died for our sins of lack of trust and weakness of faith, too, may he give us the strength and willingness to live yet another day under his providence and care. Amen.

