



Dr. Mark Haas Sermon – 10/21/18

Joy In The Cost

Our second scripture reading tells the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Man. It comes from the book of **Matthew, Chapter 19, Verses 16 through 22.**

Here the word of the Lord.

Then someone came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ The young man said to Jesus, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother. Also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said to him, “**I have kept all these;**^[a] what do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you wish to **be perfect**, go, sell your possessions, and give the money^[b] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Good morning. It is my great pleasure to be able to talk to you this morning.

I come to you wearing multiple hats: as a member of the church, a member of the church’s Stewardship Committee, and as a Political Science professor.

I recognize that a political scientist talking from the pulpit is potentially risky.

I am reminded of a vignette from one of my favorite TV shows from my youth, All in the Family, in which Gloria was giving advice to her husband Michael Stivek about how to interact with her father, Archie Bunker, who as we all know was extremely difficult to deal with. “Remember,” Gloria said, “that there are three subjects you never discuss with my father: religion, politics, or anything else.”

I am talking about both religion and politics today, potentially confirming the phrase that fools jump in where angels fear to tread.

I want to begin by looking for a few moments at the Old Testament reading.

As you can imagine, this passage is a common one in stewardship season.

It talks about recognizing that all of our gifts and possessions come ultimately from God and that in recognition of this abundance we should give generously back to God and his church.

Good themes, no doubt, for achieving a successful stewardship campaign.

I want to concentrate, though, not as these themes, but on the descriptions found in verses 21 and especially 22.

Verse 21 in First Chronicles talks about the extent of the offerings to God, and they are substantial.

- “They offered sacrifices and burnt offerings to the LORD, a thousand bulls, a thousand rams, and a thousand lambs, with their libations, and sacrifices in abundance for all Israel.”
- Verse 22 says that the people made these extensive offerings happily: “They ate and drank before the LORD on that day with great joy.”

When I read this passage at the beginning of this year I thought about it in the context of a Stewardship campaign, and I found myself puzzled.

It is very difficult to convince people to give away their hard-earned money.

It seems to me that it is even harder to get people to give away their hard-earned money in a joyful manner.

Were these people in the Old Testament fanatical? Drunk? Simply better believers than I? What was their secret? **How did they find such great joy in the cost of giving?**

I want to try to answer this last question by using some insights from political science in general and international relations, which is my field of study, in particular.

One of the biggest dilemmas in my field is known as the **problem of uncertainty**, and it is often the root source of international conflict.

Let's talk about, for example, North Korea's nuclear and missile technologies. I know US-North Korean relations are not presently in crisis mode, but they have frequently been for the last 25 years, and if the past is any guide, a renewed period of crisis is likely.

The reason why these weapons are a source of threat that could ultimately result in war with the United States is that we are highly uncertain about Kim Jong Un's intentions regarding the weapons.

He says the weapons are for defensive purpose only, but, of course, he may be lying.

As long as we are uncertain about our rivals' intentions, we will be afraid about the power they possess. This fear, in turn, will create powerful incentives to get into international conflicts that we would otherwise avoid.

These dynamics are what make IR perpetually tragic. We may not want to go to war, but because we are uncertain about others' intentions, we may feel compelled to aggress out of anticipated self-defense.

It is impossible to solve the problem of uncertainty. **It can, though, be mitigated.** And a chief way in which this can occur is by employing what political scientists call “**costly signals.**”

A costly signal is an action that is so risky or costly for the person doing it that it demonstrated the sincerity of intent.

In other words, the action is so costly that a person who is lying about his intentions would be very unlikely to it.

Costly signals are typically compared to what is called **Cheap Talk**, which is costless for a person to do.

I often try to explain the differences between Costly Signals and Cheap Talk by using a lesson learned when I was 16 years old.

Kurt said: never pull in front of someone just because you have your turn signal on. This shouldn't be believed because it is cheap talk, it is costless for the driver.

But imagine if having the turn signal on meant the driver got a sustained electric shock. This should be believed because only someone who is really turning would endure the cost.

The same logic applies to International Relations, when the stakes for countries are often very high.

Lots of US leaders in the late 1980s, for example, doubted that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was sincere in his statements that he wanted to end the Cold War.

These statements were Cheap Talk that were trying to trick us to let our guard down and weaken NATO.

But when Gorbachev unilaterally removed half a million men and 10,000 tanks from eastern Europe, it became very difficult for others to doubt the sincerity of his intent.

A person who was lying would not have adopted such costly policies. **Again, it is the costliness of an action that often reveals truthfulness.**

The insights of Costly Signals can be applied not only to person-to-person or state-to-state relations, but to ourselves about ourselves, including how we understand our faith.

A core Biblical insight is that we often have trouble seeing the world, and especially ourselves, objectively.

Political scientists refer to this phenomenon as that of **motivated bias**. Simply put, we are motivated to understand the world and ourselves in such a way to benefit ourselves.

We perceive things in such a way to make us feel good about ourselves and benefit our interests. We unconsciously distort evidence **to see what we want to see.**

I am a professor of political science, and my favorite expression of motivated bias at the political level is from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson in 1815 referring to the actions of the great powers at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

- "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws..."

Adams was referring to the power of self-delusion. Leaders' bias pushes them to believe some things about themselves but the reality is something very different.

I should stress that bias in general and self-delusion in particular is frequently stressed in the Bible.

- As Jesus said in Matthew chapter 7: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Think about the metaphor that Jesus uses. How can we not see a log in our own eye?

Because the power of motivated bias and self-delusion causes us to have highly distorted and deluded view of ourselves.

People are often blind to reality and we are particularly blind to understanding ourselves.

The problem of bias has obvious implications for faith.

We want to believe that we are good and faithful servants of God.

But if bias and self-delusion frequently distort how we perceive ourselves, how can we possibly know that we have an accurate understanding of ourselves?

We see these problems in the New Testament reading about the Rich Young Man that I read earlier. This passage is a common one for stewardship because it reminds us how the love of money can prevent us from being followings of Jesus.

This is not why I chose it. I chose it because it clearly reveals the power that self-deception can have on our lives.

Jesus asks the man if he has loved God fully and his neighbor as himself. And he says “all these have I kept” meaning he has kept them fully and perfectly.

Give me a break. The man was completely deluded. He was so sure of his faith, but bias blinded him.

He was not the person he thought himself to be, and he didn't really believe what he thought he did.

I am sure that we are not as delusional as the man and believe that we have perfectly loved God and neighbor.

But we would be foolish to believe that motivated bias aren't at work in our perceptions of ourselves.

We all have proverbial logs in our eyes that create blind spots about who we are, how we view others, and our relationship with God.

How can we see more clearly?

I would argue that just as costly signals help us understand when others are lying to us, costly signals can help us understand when we are deceiving ourselves.

If it is the costliness of an action that can demonstrate sincerity of intent, then costly actions can indicate that we are not deceiving ourselves about the character of our faith.

This does not, of course, mean that all costly behaviors can be presented as evidence of faith.

This is the delusion of fanatics and suicide bombers.

The costs we incur must be in the service of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Notice that in the New Testament reading, Jesus, in effect, instructs the man to adopt a costly signal of intent.

He was saying, if you think your faith is perfect, then do something very costly to help others demonstrate it.

The fact that the man wouldn't spoke volumes about the true nature of his faith.

A famous passage in the **second chapter in the book of James** can also be explained using the logic of costly signals.

- “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

To say go in peace, keep warm and eat is Cheap Talk. To actively take costly steps to provide these goods reveals to ourselves that our faith is truly alive.

And this brings us to Stewardship Sunday, which is one week from today.

The Stewardship committee is asking you to pledge generously in support of our church and its mission.

Like most main line churches, both membership and pledging are down significantly in recent years and the trends continue to be discouraging. Every member received in the mail a pamphlet detailing our challenges.

How should we think about our pledges?

Instead of viewing pledges as a burden or a duty, I respectfully suggest that we think of them as an opportunity, **an opportunity to send a costly signal to ourselves about ourselves.**

- A signal to ourselves that we are truly on board for helping to further God’s mission and the love of our neighbor.
- A signal to ourselves that we have not been blinded by the proverbial logs in our eyes.
- A signal to ourselves that our faith is not Cheap Talk but is instead truly central to who we are.

With such confirmation, I hope there truly can be, just as with our forbearers in the Old Testament, joy in the cost of giving and that we are thus alive in our faith.