



Chris Taylor's Sermon – 10/07/18

All of It?

Have you ever yearned for something and maybe even prayed for it, and then found once you had it, that it wasn't long before you kind of lost interest in it? Began to take it for granted, and started to look for something more? The tendency is not unique to us. Stoic philosophers have observed and commented on this very human tendency for thousands of years. Back in the first century, Seneca put it bluntly, "Who was ever satisfied, after attainment, with that which loomed up large as he prayed for it?" Fifteen hundred years later, Montaigne put it this way, "We go panting after things unknown and things to come, because the things that are present are never enough."¹

It is not that material things are evil or bad. God gave us this world to be a blessing. God intended for us to enjoy the things we find here. The issue, rather, is that we keep thinking that these things can make us happy; that the things of this world can somehow fill the greatest longings of our hearts. They can't. And it seems like every generation and every individual has to learn and relearn this lesson for themselves.

This is the lesson that lies at the heart of our scripture lesson this morning. It is the question: "In your heart-of-hearts, where do you really believe you are going to find life at its best? Where do you think you're going to find happiness and peace?"

A young man approaches Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is a burning question for him. He has run, we're told, to catch up to Jesus. He has knelt before him; a sign of his respect and devotion. Jesus loves him, loves what he is seeing in this young man's heart. His response, then, isn't an effort to brush him off or embarrass the young man. No, coming out of love Jesus wants to show him the way to life at its fullest and best.

"Sell everything," he says, "give it all to the poor, and then come, and follow me." The young man is crushed. Jesus has asked him to do the one thing he simply cannot do. He goes away grieving, we are told, because he was a man of many possessions. He can't get beyond the idea that it is his possessions that somehow hold the key to happiness.

We misunderstand this passage if we think it means we should all go and sell everything we have and give it away. There is nothing virtuous about poverty. It is a denial of God's good intention for us and makes us dependent upon the benevolence of others. No, there is something else, some other lesson, that Jesus would have us hear in this passage.

The first thing Jesus does is reframe the young man's question. The man asks about eternal life, but Jesus takes it deeper. What he is really asking about is salvation. So three times in verses 23, 24, and 25 Jesus speaks of "entering the kingdom of God." That's what salvation means. It is not just about the future. It is also about the present. The Kingdom of God – that space where God is fully present and where God's will is fully realized – is something that you and I can experience here and now. It is life at its best. It is life as God wants us to know it.

Go back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Take a look at Matt. 4:23. Jesus has just come out of his wilderness experience. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." The curing, the healing wasn't tangential to his message. It was instead the very evidence he offered that what he was saying was true: the kingdom of God is here! Healing, curing, restoration. This is what the Kingdom is about: life itself!

Having reframed the question, Jesus then wants this young man to understand that we don't earn the right to experience this kingdom. It is not about our works. The guy has got it all wrong. He comes asking, "What must I do?" The short answer is "you can't do anything." None of us can. The kingdom of God is a gift, not a reward. So Jesus points to the one area in this young man where he knows he is falling short: his attachment to money. He wants him to understand that in spite of all the good he has done ("I have kept all these [commands] since my youth"), there is no way he will ever be good enough.

The kingdom is about grace. It is not about being perfect. The young man, like many of us, needs to make the shift from trying to earn his way into the Kingdom to simply receiving what God has freely offered in Jesus: grace and love and forgiveness.

But there is a second part to this message. While we can't earn our way into the Kingdom, nevertheless our attitudes and efforts do have an impact on our experience of it. To the degree we believe that our happiness lies in the power or status conferred by possessions, to just that degree we are going to fall short of the Kingdom. We are going to fall short of life at its best. We will never be truly free.

Consider Jimmy Carter. At one point he was the most powerful man in the world. He was President of the United States. He lived in an enormous mansion, the White House, and he was surrounded by people devoted to serving and protecting him. Was that the high point of his life? Was everything downhill from there?

Here's the thing about Jimmy Carter: today he lives in a simple two bedroom ranch in a small, rural community. He is about as far from power and prestige and possessions as you can get. But if you asked him he would tell you that he is every bit as happy, and his life is every bit as full and rich, as it has ever been. He's found the key. He has found Jesus.

Jimmy Carter isn't against money. Neither is Jesus. The issue rather (and this is what the Stoics were getting at) is when we expect too much of it. The issue is when we start basing our hope for happiness on how much we have. That's when we get in trouble. That's when our attachment to money can become a barrier between us and God; a barrier to the life God wants to share.

And so we give. Giving generously, giving sacrificially is one of the most important spiritual disciplines that we can practice. We don't do it to impress God. It isn't going to change how much God loves us. We give, rather, because we need to. We give as a way to express our gratitude and love – to make it concrete and real. We give, because in this counter-intuitive, counter-cultural act of giving we break the hold that the material things of this world have upon us. We say to ourselves and to all the world that it is Christ and Christ alone who is Lord of our lives – not money, not status, not our possessions – and so in that single act of giving open ourselves to the life-changing presence and power of our gracious Lord.

If you've been looking to the things of this world to make you happy and found them lacking, maybe it's time to look somewhere else. Maybe it's time to turn to Jesus and to the abundant life that only he can offer.

ⁱ Ward Farnsworth, *The Practicing Stoic*, (David Godine, Boston, 2018), pp. 77, 79