

How Jesus Saw the Lost

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After the last Joliet men's study, I spent a few minutes talking with Rick Liggin, who preaches for the church in Peoria. As our conversation often does, it turned to the subject of how we can do a better job of helping Christians to serve God. One of the things that Rick said, that stuck with me, was that preachers often spend too much time talking about the what and not enough time talking about the why. We like to take our Bibles and beat people over the head with them about whatever commandment, but we don't look for ways to motivate people to obey.

I think this is particularly true when it comes to evangelism. As a whole, the Lord's church is not very good at evangelism, congregations know it, and preachers know it. They think that their responsibility, then, is to guilt the church into evangelism by presenting all the evangelism clobber passages and then saying, "Go forth and evangelize!" That's not good enough. If Christians get put on this guilt trip to evangelism, but they don't know how to do it and they don't know where evangelism comes from in the first place, the only result of the guilt trip is to make them feel guilty.

Over the past year, we've focused our attention on the hows of evangelism. We've talked about how it's important to build a relationship with our prospects, so they see us as people who care about them and are genuinely looking to help. We've talked about how to discuss the gospel with someone in a warm, non-threatening way. However, as important as the hows are, they still leave us without a basic motivation. They leave us without the why.

As with all our whys as Christians, we find our answer to that in the person of Jesus. Jesus' whole life on earth was dedicated to the lost, from the manger to the cross. He didn't do this because He was commanded to. He lived for the lost because He wanted to. So that we can learn from His whys, let's look this morning at how Jesus saw the lost.

Love and the Soul

First of all, when Jesus looked at the lost, He saw those who were created in His image. We learn this from a passage we looked at a couple weeks ago in Bible class, Genesis 1:26. When this passage says that we are created in the image and likeness of God, that doesn't mean that God has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Instead, it refers to a likeness that we can't even see—the likeness of our souls. When God breathed the breath of life into Adam's nostrils, He actually imparted some of His own spirit to Adam. As the children of Adam, we uniquely share in that divine spirit. We aren't just clever monkeys, as the proponents of the theory of evolution allege. Instead, even though we are created beings, we are eternal like God is. Every animal will die and disappear completely, but all of us will live on forever.

Because we are created in this way, that makes us valuable. Consider Jesus' commentary on Zacchaeus in Luke 19:9-10. Immediately before this, some of the "righteous" Jews in the crowd had been grumbling because Jesus had declared His intention to stay at Zacchaeus' house. They objected because Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a Roman lackey who cheated and oppressed his fellow Jews to make himself rich. In their eyes, Zacchaeus was scum, and they'd probably have been delighted to see him dead. They placed no value upon this lost Jew at all.

Jesus saw things differently. Even though Zacchaeus was undeniably a sinner, he was still somebody worth saving. He was a son of Abraham, no less than any of the righteous Jews who turned up their nose at him. He had a soul that was no less valuable than theirs was, and the worth of that soul moved Jesus to seek and save it.

Today, the soul of any human is worth every bit as much. There are some things that have only extrinsic value, in other words, the value that we put on them. For example, a dollar bill is just a piece of paper. The government can print as many dollar bills as it wants to, and the only reason those pieces of paper have value is because we take the government's word for it. On the other hand, there are also some things that have intrinsic value, that have worth because of their very nature. Something that has intrinsic value is a gold brick. Its worth is based on the fact that it is composed of the scarce element Au. Nations rise and fall, but the value of gold will endure until the end of time.

Like a gold brick, a soul has intrinsic value. Because it shares in that divine, eternal spirit, there is nothing more precious than a soul in the eyes of God. Because souls have this intrinsic value, people do too. We don't have to live perfect lives to establish our worth. We don't have to run around doing impressive things. Instead, the simple fact that we exist makes us valuable, and there is nothing we can do that will make us valueless. Even the most wretched sinner out there still possesses his soul, and as long as that soul remains, he is still the sinner whom Jesus came to save.

The intrinsic value of the soul is so great, in fact, that God saw fit to base His entire system of morality around it. Look at Matthew 22:39-40. When God tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, this is the reason why. We are to love our neighbor precisely because he isn't just a clever monkey. Instead, he is a partaker of the divine essence, the most precious thing imaginable. This eternal spirit is the foundation for love, and love in turn is the foundation for every other commandment. When God commands us not to steal, it's because theft is unloving. When God commands us not to lie,

it's because lying is unloving. Basically, in every area of our lives, we are to treat others with this affection and respect, because no matter what they say to us, no matter what they do, their souls endow them with worth.

Throughout the career of Jesus, we see that He considered the lost worthy of this kind of love. For example, look at Mark 10:21. Here, Jesus is speaking to the rich young ruler, and as the whole story reveals, the rich young ruler is not the most lovable character in the Bible. He's not conscious of the sin in his own life. Instead, he proudly informs Jesus that he keeps the whole Law perfectly. Then, when Jesus ups the ante by telling him to sell all of his possessions, he reveals that his true priority is money, not God. However, Jesus is able to look at a man like this, a man whom He knows is about to flunk the biggest test of his spiritual existence, and still feel love for him. The love of Jesus was never conditional. It was never based on what someone did, although Jesus could speak quite harshly to the self-righteous Pharisees. Even when Jesus was on the cross, we see Him expressing His love for the very men who crucified Him by praying for their forgiveness. Jesus loved everyone, the evil and good alike, fully and without restraint.

Jesus and the Lost.

Because Jesus loved even the vilest sinner so completely, He also saw them as in need of help. No passage better captures this than Matthew 9:36. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, He was constantly beset by people who wanted His help. They never left Him alone, never gave Him a moment's peace. In fact, many of His journeys across the Sea of Galilee were attempts to get away from the crowds. And yet, when we see Jesus looking at this crowd, He isn't thinking about Himself. He's thinking about them. He's thinking about how miserable they are, how confused, how leaderless. He's thinking about how much they need His help. Today, how many people do we know who are like sheep without a shepherd? How many of the worldly people in our lives stumble from disaster to disaster, always trying something new in their search for happiness and peace, yet never finding what they're looking for? How many people need our help?

Jesus also believed that when it was in His power to help others, He should extend that help. That's the core point of one of His greatest parables, the parable of the good Samaritan. We see the punch line in Luke 10:36-37. Jesus wants us to see that "neighbor" is not a geographic description. Instead, we make ourselves neighbors to others when we help them according to their needs. Nowhere, of course, do we see a better illustration of this than in Jesus' own life. When He died on the cross, He died for all the sins of mankind for all time. He died for the sins of people who hadn't even been born yet when He took His last breath. He died not for the righteous, not for the good. Instead, He gave everything He had for the sinner, for the lost. He died for us. When we get right down to it, the motivation for this supreme sacrifice was quite simple. He loved us. He knew that we needed help, and that He could help us. For Him, that was enough. When we read, "Go and do the same" in Luke 10, that's what we should be thinking of.

Finally, though, Jesus saw the lost as useful. Paul's thoughts on this are quite revealing in 1 Timothy 1:15-16. Since the day of Pentecost, untold thousands of people have become Christians. As far as we know, though, only one of them started down that road because of a revelation of the risen Lord, and that was Saul, who later became Paul. Saul of Tarsus was not an immediately obvious candidate for conversion. Instead, he was Church Enemy No. 1. He persecuted Christians by throwing them into prison, torturing them until they blasphemed Jesus, and voting for their executions. And yet, Jesus loved even this bloodstained tyrant of a man. He could see beyond Saul's vicious, cruel actions to a man who would be useful in the work, and so He sent His disciple Ananias to preach the gospel to him, and the persecutor of the church was baptized and saved. From that point on, everywhere he went, Paul was a living testimony to the grace of Jesus. People could consider his past life and look at him now, and see from his preaching and example that if God could save a monster like Saul of Tarsus, then He could save them as well. In winning Saul, Jesus didn't just save one soul. Instead, He saved thousands, a process that continues as the writing of Paul wins hearts for Christ today.

Conclusion.

That, in a nutshell, is that way that Jesus considered the lost. However, that way of thinking isn't supposed to end with Jesus. It's supposed to transform our lives as well. Look with me at Galatians 2:20. This leaves every one of us with a simple but critical question. Does Christ live in me? We sing hymns that make that claim, but simply singing doesn't prove anything. We've seen who Jesus was. If He truly lives in us, here's what it will look like: We will recognize that every lost person we encounter, no matter how humble, is created in the image of God. We will acknowledge that every one of them, no matter what sins they have committed, is a being of great and surpassing value and worth. Despite their flaws, we will understand that their nature makes them worthy of our love, and we will love them. We will see that every lost person is in desperate need of our help, distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Because of our love, we will help them as we have opportunity, with a help that will lead them to the Lord. Finally, we will recognize that every lost person has potential for use in the kingdom, so that still more souls may be brought to Christ through them.

That's the way that Jesus thought about lost people. If Jesus is truly living within us, that's the way we will think about lost people. Once we reach that point, once we value the lost like Jesus did, we will be as effective as He was too.