

*Busted: "But I'm Good!"*

Job 23: 1-12

Mark 10: 17-31

A couple of items caught my eye as I was reading this week, and it happened after I figured out the general direction that I wanted to go with the sermon. Sometimes, God's Spirit is nice like that, pushing things in front of me for my sermon.

The first was an article entitled "We're all sinners (and we're all saints, too!)". This distressed my theological mind enough so that I read the piece. His angle was that we're all sinners and cannot be anything but sinners, lacking any ability either to make ourselves righteous before God or to keep from ourselves being sinful. Okay, good so far. Toward the end, he quickly shifts to the saint part. Of course, it is by God's grace that we are forgiven our sinfulness and become heirs of the new life promise in Jesus, hence saints. It seemed a bit too glib for me. That's because one of the things Christians love to do is receive the unmerited grace of God and then go on unchanged in life, thereby failing to value the costly grace that has been given from the cross, ending up with what we call "cheap grace." Because of God's grace, we think we're "good," and we just keep going on our merry way unchanged, bullet-proof to the transformation that is expected.

Of course, God's human creation has been struggling with its relationship with God forever. But we're in a particular time when our highly personalized faith has become disturbing. Some Christians foist the notion of a personal relationship with Jesus as being necessary in one's faith life. I have no idea what that means, and I don't have any idea what it would look like, yet the folks who talk that way seem to feel that it's urgently needed for any personal faith to be genuine. There is nothing direct or meaningful in scripture about that. If you ask them what they're talking about, they can't describe it to you; it's something that you experience.

Nonetheless, what this personalized Savior typically becomes is a weird corruption. That takes me to the second reading, an excerpt from a book titled *Soul Searching* which describes the problem this way:

*God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: [God] is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.*

The book I was reading, *You Lost Me*, written by the director of the conservative evangelical Barna Research Group, uses a more scholarly term for this: "moralistic therapeutic deism." Notice that this was not called Christianity; that's because it isn't, except that Jesus is the vehicle for this spiritual corruption.

Like Mr. Sinner-and-saint-at-the-same-time who treads the line toward cheap grace, the Divine Butler-Cosmic Therapist spiritual relationship also manages to evade the compelling challenges of the gospel, and sidesteps the reality of challenging one's sinfulness with faithful efforts at transformation. When confronted with such challenges

demanding change in one's daily living and life aspirations, people of this ridiculously diminished and corrupted version of faith protest, "But I'm good." This indicates that the Cosmic Therapist has done its job, but also that the church has not done its job. If the church is a consumer-oriented cultural institution, it can't afford to be so direct with demands of faithfulness to the way of Jesus and his Kingdom. No way. "People might not like us." Exactly what Jesus said ... never.

We do think we're good and like to be assured of our goodness. We can be like Job, however, when things go seriously sideways. Let's consider our passage from Job.

As we hear Job's words, we can hear his distress. You know Job's story, how he has lost **everything**, his wealth, his family, even his health, but still keeps his now-miserable life. Having been a good and righteous and faithful man throughout his life, he is at a complete loss to understand how the God of his life's faith and devotion could allow the series of tragic, ugly, life-sapping events to occur. Isn't God supposed to protect and save him? Is this punishment from God? If so, what caused this sentence to be imposed? Job insists in his own mind that he is a good person.

Let's listen to Job's pleading. Job identifies his troubles as coming directly from the hand of God: *Today also my complaint is bitter; [God's] hand is heavy despite my groaning.*

Job has never spoken directly to God, but feels this is warranted. Job needs to get an audience with God, like you would seek an audience with an earthly royal to present your case, seeking justice. Underlying Job's complaint is that the events afflicting him are unjust. Such tragedies could only be justified if Job himself was an evil and sinful man. He insists that he isn't; **he is a good person**. So he says:

*If only I knew where I might find [God], if only I could go to his dwelling!  
I would state my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.*

Job is very confident that he will be found blameless once he makes his case before God. He doesn't have much chance of that happening as he admits in the closing verses of today's passage:

*If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

Job is clearly distressed because he has hit the limit, unable to learn what he has done wrong, and even more, with no opportunity to re-affirm the justice of God. You'll have to read the rest of Job to see how that comes out, but the point is to witness that Job's distress comes from basic flaws in his relationship to God. Based on his self-perception of his practiced goodness and righteousness, Job expects God to recognize his goodness and righteousness, and bless him accordingly. But the relationship with God doesn't work that nice, neat, mechanical, self-serving way.

Now let's consider that troubling passage in Mark's gospel that really bothers wealthy westerners like us. This is about an individual who comes to Jesus and ask the question: *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* We pick up several clues about this person. He is ingratiating, calling Jesus "Good Teacher" in a fawning way. Jesus is not impressed at all: *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.* To which we ask Jesus, "But Jesus aren't you good?" I mean Jesus is supposedly to be perfectly good, right? Well, sorry to disappoint you orthodox theologians, apparently not – subject for another sermon – but it does give us pause about our own assumptions of our goodness, doesn't it?

Then Jesus proceeds to answer the man's question by referring to the commandments. Rather glibly, the man responds that he has kept the commandments from childhood. If he is saying anything about himself, it is that **he is good**. He is also saying that he knows those commandments aren't the answer he seeks.

Jesus has a pretty good idea about what's going through this guy's mind. If his appearance and his attitude didn't give him away, he tipped his hand when he asked the question. The key word is "inherit." Inheritance is something of which this fellow is personally familiar. Further, the man isn't thinking of anything *he must do*, as in changing his life in any way. He wants to inherit it, acquire it without any real effort, gain it like an entitlement, a privilege of birth, as a Jew already blessed by God in material things.

Now Jesus' response to such persistence provides the man with a price he can understand. *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.* Jesus zeroes in on the one thing that he knows the man cherishes of greatest value to him; his wealth. The price of eternal life in the Kingdom *right now* is to have nothing blocking your path, yielding that which is most prized and valued in order to receive what has the highest, ultimate value. The price tag for this man is steep, too steep, and he goes away sad.

We should realize that this is an uncommon and unexpected demand by Jesus on this man. We find no other command of this kind, and certainly no command that echoes this expectation to 'go and sell what you have and give to the poor.' While there are plenty of places in the gospels where the virtue and value of the poor, weak, and vulnerable in the eyes of God gets brought forth, and criticisms of wealth abound, we do not have Jesus making this requirement to dispose of material wealth to anyone else. Rather, Jesus picks out the singular point where the man derived his strength, his security, and his identity. By targeting his wealth, Jesus set up a standard that would likely cause the defeat and turning away of the man. Or the man would prove he was genuine in his quest, and would do whatever it took to join the Kingdom.

Note that it says Jesus "loved him" before he delivered the knockout statement about selling his wealth. That seems quite out of place until we realize that Jesus' devotion both to the man and to his own mission would not **allow** him offer up an easy answer, one that would be attainable **without** discomfort, sacrifice, or surrender.

The rest of the disciples are rather appalled by what Jesus has demanded from the man and said about wealth. Then Jesus teaches: *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* Their stunned response makes you think that either they were wealthy themselves, or else they *expected* to become wealthy as a result of their service to Jesus, like they might still be harboring notions of great rewards for their service in the coming Kingdom. They seem quite disappointed.

Jesus ends this story, not with any admonition about wealth, but reflecting about what people leave behind, home, family, parents, children, property, in order to share in eternal life in the Kingdom. *But many who are first will be last, and the last first.* It is all about what we would surrender and sacrifice in the name of the Lord to follow him and participate in his Kingdom work.

Let me clarify a common misperception while we're on the subject. The issue of eternal life in the gospels, like here, is *not* what contemporary Christians think is life-after-death. In fact, surprising to many, Jesus **never** refers to life-after-death. Eternal life comes from life in the Kingdom, hence the focus on 'entering the Kingdom.' As I've been saying, the Kingdom is the uniting of heaven and earth that had separated when humanity was thrown out of Paradise for seeking to become like God. Eternal life is in the Kingdom, the coming unity of heaven and earth to fulfill God's plan.

Further, one enters the Kingdom in *this* life, not any next life. Life in the Kingdom is eternal life **now**. Maybe we need a sermon on that one.

What we find in both stories are the pins which pop the bubble of our frequently self-assured "goodness." They make me step back and reassess how good I really am, and not simply in terms of the world which was gracious enough to present me with an award this week. I hear these scriptures and feel (if not look) like the dog on our bulletin cover.

The path to the Kingdom is not portrayed as a general admission ticket that you can show up and buy at the box office for minimal cost an hour before the show. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 outline just how demanding the path is for the Kingdom servant. I thought I was good, but there is more that the Kingdom demands than simply being "good." Following Jesus with genuine commitment and determined spirit comes with the expectation of self-sacrifice, not self-congratulation.

May we still hear those challenges that would push us out of complacency and contentment and into demands of the new life promise of Jesus and his Kingdom.