

Christianity on Trial

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 16, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

There was a funeral in Texas. A millionaire oil tycoon was being buried. And you know how Texans like to do everything big. Well, this tycoon had made arrangements to have a really big funeral. A bull dozer dug a huge hole in the cemetery and the oil tycoon was buried sitting in the front seat of his brand new pink Cadillac Eldorado dressed up like a cowboy with a big white Stetson hat. As the bull dozers were filling in the hole and covering the Cadillac one of the mourners was overheard to say, "Man, now that's really living".

What is it that makes life worth living? Advertisements tell us that our chief goal in life is to eat well, to make lots of money, to be happy, and to do just about anything in order to be accepted. Most Christians have bought into this lie. We really believe that we're blessed if we have lots of money, food, laughter and popularity. But Jesus contradicts what the advertising media and our culture says. He says food, money, fun, and acceptance is not what makes life worth living. Let's take a closer look at what Jesus was saying.

1. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Poverty and hunger are not always blessings. Poverty and hunger are most often a curse. Christians work to eliminate poverty and hunger and their causes. But when we become poor and hungry because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we're blessed. I've never met or read

about a Christian who has lost or given up their fortunes for the sake of Christ who does not claim to be blessed.

I think of a businessman who passed up the windfall deal because he had scruples about hidden unethical elements in that deal. He could have been rich, ~~that is, if he had not be caught~~. Instead, because of his faith in Christ, he did what was right and refused to bow to those who wanted him to participate with them in this unethical deal. He's blessed. But woe unto those who get rich in unethical schemes.

I think also of a Southern Baptist medical doctor who goes every year to Guatemala on her vacations, not as a tourist, but as a doctor to the Quiche Indians who live in the highlands of Guatemala. She sleeps on dirt floors when she could be sleeping in a luxury hotel. She eats ~~cornmeal tortillas and~~ beans ^{and} when she could be enjoying caviar. Every year she spends her vacation in the villages of Guatemala, teaching about Jesus and healing Indians. If you were to say to her, "Do you think Jesus really wants you to sacrifice like this? You work hard as a doctor in the United States, you deserve a break." She would smile at you and and say, "I'm having a ball. It's such a blessing to serve these people."

Let me challenge those of you who are disciples of Jesus. What are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. I know of a retired farmer who went to Ethiopia as a volunteer in mission to help teach modern agricultural methods to poor Ethiopian farmers. What if you looked forward to retirement as an opportunity to sacrifice some of your comforts and contribute to the cause of Christ and his kingdom in some mission project. It

doesn't have to be a lifetime commitment. You might be surprised how blessed you would be if you gave up your comfortable home and car for a few weeks or months to minister in the name of Christ in some mission project here in the United States or in some other nation. But woe unto you if you try to find your meaning in life in wealth and food.

2. Jesus also said, "Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh."

Weeping in and of itself is not a blessing. Some of our members have recently lost loved ones. They weep because they are bereft of one they loved. It would be insensitive if I were to say, "You're blessed." It may be a blessing that you are able to weep. Some people aren't able to weep and their grief gets all clogged up inside. So it can be a blessing to be able to weep, but the cause of the weeping, the death of a loved one, is not a blessing.

But I believe Jesus was ~~saying to weeping disciples. These disciples were weeping because people were rejecting Jesus.~~ ^{saying that disciples who weep for others because of their lack of faith in Christ are blessed.} Jesus wept over Jerusalem because he came unto his own people but they didn't receive him. They rejected and crucified him. Disciples weep over the illnesses and losses of friends, neighbors, and enemies. But disciples also weep over those who reject Jesus. ~~What sort of~~ Disciples are required to love people enough to want nothing less for them^{than} a holistic salvation that includes not just their physical and emotional healing but their spiritual salvation as well.

I think of a preacher and his wife. They picked up their young son after an afternoon of play at a friend's house. As they rode home, the boy was uncharacteristically quiet and seemed troubled. The parents gently inquired of

their son what could be wrong, but he didn't seem to want to talk about it. The parents, growing worried, encouraged him to get what was bothering him off his chest. "It's about Martin," replied the boy, referring to his playmate of the day, "but I can't tell you about it." The parents looked at each other, raising their eyebrows in concern, and prodded the boy to reveal what had happened. Finally he let it out. "Martin says he doesn't believe in Jesus." He was sad because his friend didn't share his faith in Jesus.

Are we who are followers of Jesus Christ concerned about those who don't know and trust him? Why do we leave it to the fundamentalists to weep over those who don't know and trust Jesus. Don't we also believe that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life apart from whom no one comes to the Father in heaven? We become sad, and rightly so, when a friend or neighbor gets cancer. We weep at times because of our concern. But disciples of Jesus are equally distraught by friends and neighbors who don't follow Christ and go down the ways of death.

3. Then Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man." It's always painful to be excluded and shut out. We all have a deep need to belong. When we feel excluded we need to ask ourselves, "Am I disliked and excluded because I'm a nerd, or is it on account of Jesus? Is it because I've taken a stand for Christ?"

What would you be willing to do in order to be accepted and liked? Several months ago a woman in Texas hired a hit-man to murder a high-school cheerleader who had ruined her daughter's chance to be a cheerleader. In that little town the most status belonged to the young man on the high school football team and the

cheerleaders. If you were a cheerleader or a football player you were in the in crowd. Some people are willing to do anything in order to be in the in crowd.

But Jesus said that you're blessed, you're really blessed if you suffer exclusion for the sake of Christ. Several years ago, when the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer was being revised, someone proposed, in jest, omitting the traditional Prayer for Enemies from the new prayer book because, "Episcopalians are now so nice that we no longer make enemies." Presbyterians, like Episcopalians, have made it in our culture. You won't usually be hated, excluded, reviled or defamed for being a Presbyterian.

But is there something that Christ wants you to do or say but you have done or said it yet because you know if you do it or say it you may be excluded; you may be defamed or shot down as a Jesus freak or a fanatic? Woe to those who are willing to do anything in order to be accepted.

What makes life really worth living? Not money, food, laughter, or popularity. We are blessed when we suffer the loss of wealth and popularity for the sake of Christ. We are blessed when we become deeply concerned for the physical and spiritual welfare of our friends and neighbors. We are blessed when we suffer exclusion for the sake of Christ.

Listen again to what Jesus says, not to everybody, but to his disciples; to those who have taken the yoke of Christ upon themselves to learn of and to obey him. He says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they

exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven..."

That's quite a promise Jesus makes to his disciples.

D.L. Moody was a great 19th century American evangelist. He once said, "The great trouble is that people take everything in general, and do not take it to themselves. Suppose a man should say to me: 'Moody, there was a man in Europe who died last and left five million dollars to a certain individual.' 'Well, I say, 'I don't doubt that; it's rather a common thing to happen,' and I don't think anything more about it. But suppose he says: 'But he left the money to you!' then I pay attention. I say, 'To me?' 'Yes, he left it to you.' I become suddenly interested. I want to know all about it. So are we apt to think Christ died for sinners: He died for everybody, and for nobody in particular. But when the truth comes to me that eternal life is mine, and all the glories of heaven are mine, I begin to be interested.'"

Jesus has made promises to you if you are truly his disciples. The Kingdom of God is yours. You will be filled. You will laugh. Your reward is great in heaven. When we step out on faith and believe those promises there will be no risk we are not willing to take for the sake of Jesus.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ. We have come here this morning to hear your word and to be healed. Cast out the unclean spirits that trouble us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, make us your disciples. We have no power or strength to turn unless you turn us. Enable us to find our blessedness, not in money, food, fun and acceptance by the world. Enable us to find our blessedness to living for you and sacrificing all that we are and have for you and for your kingdom. Amen.