

What Must I Do?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Ted Atkinson, pastor, Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, New York on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 13, 1985. Scripture Lessons for the day: Genesis 3:8-19; Psalm 90:1-12; Hebrews 4:1-3, 9-13; *Mark 10:17-30*.

No one had a greater concern for the salvation of men and women than Jesus. But sometimes he seemed indifferent to the spiritual concerns of people. Take our Gospel lesson for instance. A man ran up to Jesus, fell on his knees and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Here was a man passionately concerned about his soul. Here was a man ripe for conversion. But notice how Jesus deals with him. From the standpoint of 20th century evangelistic techniques Jesus really botched his opportunity to lead this man to salvation. I see at least four opportunities Jesus missed.

1. Jesus missed a golden opportunity to say that eternal life can't be inherited. The man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" You can inherit wealth but you can't inherit heaven. You can inherit your parents physical features, but you can't inherit their faith. Why didn't Jesus make this clear?

2. Jesus missed a golden opportunity to bear witness to his own sinlessness. The man called Jesus, "Good teacher." Why didn't Jesus praise the man for this observation? "You're right to call me good. I'm the one good man who ever lived. I commend you for recognising my goodness." Instead Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good-except God alone."

3. Jesus had a golden opportunity to make clear that salvation is not something we merit by our good works. The man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life". Jesus pointed to the Ten Commandments then he told the man to give away all his money and he

would have treasure in heaven. Well, that sounds like salvation by works. So many people think they can earn brownie points with God by giving away lots of money. Why didn't Jesus point this out.

4. *Jesus missed a golden opportunity to point out the man's sinfulness.* The rich man said, "All these commands I've kept since I was a boy". Why didn't Jesus make clear to him that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God?

So many missed opportunities. No wonder the poor rich man didn't make a decision for Christ. But who are we to judge the evangelistic techniques of Jesus? He's the one who should be judging our evangelistic techniques.

I'm deeply concerned about the direction so much evangelism has taken. Evangelism in the 20th century has become, for many people, simply a ~~matter of snatching souls from hell.~~ It's often a matter of playing upon a person's anxieties about death and hell to press them to make a decision for Christ. I really believe this is detrimental to the kingdom of Christ. So many Christians don't want to have anything at all to do with evangelism because they're turned off by this particular kind of evangelism.

I want us to take a look at two views of evangelism with the hopes that some of you who are turned off by high-pressured evangelistic techniques might see that there's another way and a better way. *In the first view of evangelism the world is pictured as a sinking ship with 3 billion hell-bound men and women aboard.* We're told that we shouldn't waste time trying to fix the ship because it's beyond repair and sinking fast. Our job is to get as many people off the sinking ship onto the life boats. There's no time to protest injustice. It's a waste of time to work for nuclear disarmament. Millions of men and women are dying of

starvation but what's that compared to the greater number of souls bound for hell. That's the view of many 20th century evangelicals.

But I believe there's another view; a more biblical view. For Jesus, evangelism wasn't so much snatching individuals from the flames of hell, but enlisting them for service in the Kingdom of God. Jesus wasn't interested in snatching people from a sinking ship. He came to save the ship and all those on board. The ship belongs to him. He's the captain of the ship. But pirates have hijacked it, have taken it off course, are terrorizing the passengers, have murdered some of them and thrown them over-board, and these hijackers are trying to scuttle the ship. The purpose of Jesus is to enlist men and women to wrest control of the ship from the hijackers, to repair the ship and make it sea-worthy once more, to put Jesus in his rightful place as captain so that he might bring us safely to our predestined port. The ship and its passengers will be saved, only the hi-jackers will be executed.

What a different approach to evangelism this view produces. The good news is the proclamation that God has saved the world through Christ. God's kingdom of justice, peace and love has already been established in this world. The serpents head has been crushed by Christ as had been prophesied in Genesis. God is going to win in the end.

The purpose of evangelism, then, is to go out and enlist men and women to bow to the sovereignty of Christ. The purpose of evangelism is to enlist men and women to go out into the world and reclaim it for Christ. The purpose of evangelism is to extend Christ's sovereignty in the factory, in the nation, in the home, and in the world. Scientists, doctors, economists, artists, novelists, musicians, philanthropists, factory-workers, mothers, fathers; each are enlisted to extend the kingdom of Christ in their sphere

of activity. Each is called to use all their talents and resources to subdue the earth and extend the kingdom of Christ by word and deed. Christians are men and women who won't allow hijackers to remain in control of the world but will wrest control from them and get the ship back on course.

This view of evangelism leads Christians to have two great concerns. We're concerned about eternal life and we're concerned about this life. We have a concern for souls and we have a concern for bodies. And we refuse to separate these two concerns.

The relationship of these two concerns is seen in our Gospel lesson. Jesus said to the rich young ruler that he lacked one thing. His personal morality lack nothing. He did not lack concern for his own soul. The one thing he lacked was concern for the poor. He was like a lot of modern evangelicals. We're so wrapped up in getting our own spiritual needs met that we've little concern for the poor. The best selling books in evangelical circles are self-help books; how to be happy and successful; how to think positively; how to win against depression. So often we're like little children crying out, "Feed me, feed me." We need to be fed spiritually but there comes a time when we need to turn our gaze outward to others to see their needs.

I'd be the first to admit that many people are just the opposite of the rich young ruler. They have great concern for the poor but they have no concern about spiritual things. They protest nuclear armaments. They march for civil rights. They work to dismantle apartheid in South Africa. They defend the rights of Central American illegal aliens. They collect and raise money for victims of earthquakes, wars and famine and from my perspective, all these things are good. We need more people like this. But I sometimes wonder if they lack concern for spiritual needs.

But the one thing that many evangelical Christians lack is a concern for the poor. We have a concern for our own souls but the one thing we lack is a love for social justice. That was the rich young ruler's lack. Jesus once said "whosoever will save his soul shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his soul for my sake shall find it." The rich young ruler was so wrapped up in saving his own soul that he was in danger of losing it. He was so concerned about his own salvation that he couldn't see the lepers, the blind, the beggars, the widows that were all around him.

Last night I was reading Carl Rowan's column in the Buffalo News. He was saying that over 8 million Americans are seeking jobs but can't find them. 35.7 percent of black Americans live in poverty. So many people can't find a legitimate way to earn a living. At a time when \$300 billion a year is being spent on military programs, social programs are being cut. He concludes that it's a social and moral scandal that 33 million Americans live in poverty and another 20 to 30 million are classified as needy. I believe that Jesus would call it a social and moral scandal as well. It's a scandal that those conditions exist in a nation where 33% of the people claim to have had a born-again religious experience. Like the rich young ruler we're wrapped up in our own spiritual concerns and are blind to the needs of the poor.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" Mark 10:23-27.

With God, all things are possible; even the rich may be saved.

Jesus is saying that salvation is ultimately in the hands of ~~the~~ God. Personally I'm glad that salvation is in God's hands rather than my own. I

can trust God with my salvation because I know God through Christ. I know what kind of a God he is. He's trustworthy. In Christ I see a God who was willing to go to hell so that I wouldn't have to go there. Because I trust God with my salvation I don't have to worry and fret myself about it. I can get on with the work of the kingdom without becoming neurotically concerned with my own soul.

But Jesus didn't stop with simply telling the rich young ruler to sell everything and give it to the poor. Salvation isn't bought by giving away our money. Salvation is found as we follow Jesus. Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "Come, follow me."

In the New Testament the early Christians weren't called the people of the religious experience, or the people of the book, or the people of orthodox doctrine. ~~They were called the people of the way and the way~~ they followed was that of Christ. To believe meant to follow Jesus. So these early Christians followed Jesus and became a caring, sharing, and open community especially sensitive to the poor and the outcast. Their love for God, for one another, and for the oppressed was central to their reputation. Their refusal to kill, to recognize racial distinctions, or to bow down before the imperial gods of Rome were a matter of public knowledge.

Aristides, an early Christian spokesperson, described the Christians to the Roman emperor Hadrian in this way:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother.

That was the secret of their evangelistic success. The early Christian church was so successfuly, not because all their members were trained in the latest evangelistic techniques, but because the Christian way of life

was so attractive in the pagan world that people flocked to Christian assemblies. The early Christians were known for the way they lived, not only for what they believed. For them, the two were completely intertwined.

Evangelism that's faithful to the New Testament will never separate the salvation of the individual from a visible witness to God's kingdom on earth. Our need is for a fresh consciousness of Christian community and of Christian conversion. In the midst of oppressive social conditions throughout the world we must again turn to Jesus and follow him. Then authentic evangelism will flower and genuine revival break forth in this land once more. But first we must examine and honestly face up to the ways our evangelism has been corrupted and our conversion distorted.

I end this sermon with what may be a rather surprising reference to the Roman Catholic mass. The word *mass* is said to be derived from the final sentence of the old Latin rite, *ite missa est*. In polite English it might be rendered 'now you are dismissed.' In more blunt language it could be just 'get out!'-- Get out into the world which God made and God-like beings inhabit, the world into which Christ came and into which he now sends us. For that's where we belong. The world is the arena in which we're to live and love, witness and serve, suffer and die for Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.