

“Kingdom Eyesight”

Introduction: I received a prayer request last week, through some pastors that I know, about a little newborn girl who needed to be examined by a pediatric ophthalmologist. Not only did she fail a vision test right after her birth, but her dad had been born with congenital cataracts syndrome. The prayer was that if this little one needed cataract surgery, it would be done as quickly as possible so that she would retain as much of her vision as possible.

Our eyesight is something we can take for granted. I know I do. I rarely think twice about opening my eyes in the morning and being able to see. When you think about it, good eyesight is critical, not only for living well physically, but also spiritually. Jesus says as much as we continue to listen to his vision for kingdom of God living, for living a life that is truly life.

In this regard, you might recall that last week, right before the benediction, I laid a homework assignment on you. We had been wrestling with Jesus’ call to love our enemies, to do good, bless, and pray for those who hate us, curse us, and mistreat us (vv. 27-28). To put what we heard from Jesus into practice, I asked you to identify one of your enemies (even simply someone who just rubs you the wrong way!), and then ask God to show you one way you could show his amazing love to that person sometime during the week. I wonder how that went?! If it was hard, take heart; Jesus knows this isn’t easy.

So, in this morning’s text, we hear him continue to help us reflect on this topic. In particular, Jesus informs us that we must have good kingdom eyesight, which means that we must see ourselves, including our stuff and our sinfulness, clearly. If we don’t, if we’re not in the process of taking care of our own stuff, then we will have no hope of being helpful to our enemies, or our friends, no hope of saturating the places where we live and learn and work and play with the amazing love of God.

I. An Attitude Adjustment

A. Jesus uses a couple of short parables to tease this out, but he begins with an attitude check or “eye exam.” This exam has four angles to it: “Do not judge . . . Do not condemn . . . Forgive . . . Give . . .” Now, Jesus’ admonition not to judge does not mean that we should never be discerning. He in fact calls us to discern good from evil, to make moral choices, to watch out for false prophets and false teaching, all of which require some level of judgment. What Jesus is warning against, particularly as we join it with the other three angles of his attitude adjustment—do not condemn, forgive, and give—is an atmosphere of judgmentalism and criticism.

B. We get a stark picture of this in a later parable that Jesus tells, that of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk. 18:9-14). Both men went to the temple to pray. The prayer of the Pharisee went like this: “God, I thank you that I am not like the other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” By contrast, the tax collector’s prayer went this way: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This second guy, the one who humbled himself, who saw himself clearly, went home right before God; the one who exalted himself, who refused to see himself clearly and so looked down on others, did not.

C. The truth of the matter is that often, we can try to avoid dealing with our own issues, whether we’re aware of them or not, by highlighting or focusing on the problem in someone else.

Consciously, or subconsciously, we attempt to build ourselves up by tearing others down. Or, we may be well aware of our faults, but are having a hard time receiving the forgiveness Jesus offers and so we continue to judge ourselves harshly. That, in turn, becomes an easy pathway to judging others.

II. Two Parables of Insight

A. Seen in this light, the two parables that follow serve to illustrate the danger of being blind to, or unwilling to acknowledge, one's faults, all while still judging or condemning others. In the first, which strikes me as the kind of commercial the folks at Geico might produce, two blind men are pictured stumbling around together before both eventually fall into a pit. What Jesus wants us to see is the problem a teacher would have in leading a student toward life if he, the teacher, hadn't first dealt with his or her own stuff, their own sinfulness. The student will not have been helped and, even worse, will be in danger of ending up just like his blind, clueless teacher.

B. In the second, we're given a picture—it's almost like a caricature or an editorial cartoon—of someone trying to help another remove a speck of sawdust from their eye but is unable to. The prospective helper can't see well enough to help because of the huge plank that is in his own eye that he has, so far, ignored. Well might we imagine that the speck and the plank are from the same beam, affirming that what we criticize or judge in others is often what we're struggling with ourselves. Jesus quite clearly instructs us to deal with our own stuff first. If we don't, we're being hypocritical. If we do, we might just be able to have the kind of gracious eyesight that will enable us to help the one who is struggling.

C. I happened to be reading this week through the two NT letters of Peter and came across in his second letter an intriguing comment on our spiritual, kingdom eyesight and the effect that it can have. Peter begins by affirming for us that God has given us all we need to leave behind our old, sinful way of life and grow into the new kind of life that Jesus died and rose to make available to us. To that end, Peter encourages his readers to add to their faith virtues like goodness, knowledge, perseverance, mutual affection, and love. And then he says: "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins" (2 Pe. 1:5-9).

The point is that if we forget we were once enemies of God (cf. Ro. 5:10), that we needed cleaning from our sin, then we are nearsighted and blind and will not have the goodness and affection and love to offer to another, even our enemy. Any judgment that goes on should be left in God's hands. As the psalmist reminded us earlier, anything or anyone that is wicked or evil God in his wisdom and justice will take care of in his timing (92). Our call is to love.

III. A Proverb of Joy

A. Tucked in between all of his teaching in this sermon on the plain is what we might call a proverb of joy, or abundance that Jesus slips in: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Lk. 6:38b). This is an image taken from the marketplace in Jesus' day. The scene is the purchase of a commodity, like grain. Instead of being poured out in as skimpy a fashion as possible, the grain in the measuring container is pressed down and then the container is shaken so that there is no empty space

left. The container continues to be filled in a rounded heap such that it begins to overflow. The picture I have in my mind is trying to fit that extra, left-over spaghetti sauce into one of those plastic containers. There isn't quite enough room, so it all begins to leak out the top when you force the lid on!

B. Jesus applies this overflowing image to the extravagant, lavish love of God that comes to those who refrain from judgment and condemnation and instead offer forgiveness and generosity. Love has a way, Jesus want us to know, of coming back to us more abundantly than it goes out, if we're willing to offer it. It reminds me of a song I learned as a child called "Magic Penny." Its refrain is this: "Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more."

Jesus invites us to take him up on this promise. So let us go to his table where we are called to see ourselves clearly and then fill ourselves up with his love in order to be able to offer it to others.