

Heavenly Minded: Earthly Good

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It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. C.S.Lewis

That statement by the former Oxford professor, avowed skeptic turned Christian apologist and prolific defender of the faith, has never been more appropriately applied to believers than it can be today. In fact, we often hear just the opposite point of view voiced in some Christian circles. It goes somewhat like this: "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." The actual effectiveness of a Christian lies somewhere in between. It means having a sound, well balanced, and biblically informed eternal perspective. The status of our eternal point of view will greatly affect how we regard our own, temporal purpose here on earth, any sickness or poverty which we or friends may experience, personal evangelism, injustice and end of life issues. These areas of concern will be discussed singularly.

Fulfilling A Temporal Purpose With Eternity In Mind.

Jesus said that we are in the world for a purpose, we are of an earthly good, and he summed those purposes up in two profound statements; *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. . . Love your neighbor as yourself.* (Matthew 22: 37,39) Jesus meant that we are to have a deep emotional attachment to God through the heart, a willful obedience to Him through the soul and as great an intellectual understanding as is possible through revealed truth (the Bible), with our minds. They all require a concerted effort in the search for true-truth and the character of God in the pages of the divine, Holy Scriptures. By loving the God of heaven and earth in that manner, our earthly neighbor will benefit as we seek to obey God's commands.

Jesus said, *If you love me you will obey what I command.* (John 14: 15) We will not lose our salvation if we fail to adhere to every command and every purpose that Jesus taught, only He was perfect enough to do that, but we will stand before Him when we go to heaven to answer for our failures. We are then also rewarded for those things that were pleasing to Him while we were here on earth. (II Corinthians 5: 10)

Solomon summed up the purpose of every Christian when he said, *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man.* (Ecclesiastes 12: 13) It was on this note that the framers

of The Westminster Shorter Catechism stated that the chief end of man is to "Glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We glorify Him and begin to enjoy Him after receiving Christ by faith while we are here on earth, a joy which will continue to be magnified immeasurably when we enter our eternal glory.

We were each saved for very specific purposes that are unique to every individual Christian. We are called to bring glory to God in various ways and through various means while we are temporarily residing here on earth. The reason we were afforded mercy and saved by God's sovereign choice is summed up in a statement which Paul made in a letter to the church at Ephesus: *For it is by grace you have been saved through faith_and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God_ not of works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" (Ephesians 2:8-10) God endowed us at birth with certain natural talents and abilities, and then when the Holy Spirit took up residence in our souls at the moment of our new birth, He also gave us one or more spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:4-11). Those talents, abilities and gifts were sovereignly distributed by God so that we could fulfill His purpose for our earthly lives. We are expected to use them for His glory and the benefit of others. (I Peter 4:10) We will answer in eternity for the way in which we used or failed to use those tools. That is what the parable of the talents was all about. (in that case a talent was a monetary exchange, not a spiritual gift or natural ability-Matthew 25:14-30)

Always Keeping An Eternal Perspective.

Having said all of that, we are also to be heavenly minded. The apostle Paul said; *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.* Colossians 3:1-2. Our affection (heart) for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit should outweigh any affection we have for our earthly life. A woman claiming to be a Christian once told me that if her deceased husband was not in heaven she didn't want to go there. That statement illustrates Paul's admonition quoted above. Her conditional heart for God paled in comparison to her unconditional, profound love for her husband. In essence she had broken the first commandment and had placed another god before the Supreme, Sovereign of the universe.

Some believing people focus so much on their earthly state that they lose site of the larger spectrum of life. Our earthly existence is extremely brief when measured on the eternal scale. It has been referred to as a mist or a vapor (James 4:14), a mere breath,

its length a mere hand breadth (Psalm 39:5). Paul warns us not to become too focused on our physical state because of its temporal nature. Instead he encourages believers to focus on their great hope of eternal life. In his letter to the church at Corinth Paul said, *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* (II Corinthians 4:16-18)

Paul is telling each of us to be more concerned with growing our inward self, our soul (the seat of intellect, emotion, personality and will) than we are with our degenerating bodies. The soul is the portion of our being that was created in God's image. By fixing our gaze on that which is unseen, our eternal soul, we gain an eternal perspective on our life. By realizing that our physical state is temporary we will spend a great deal more time improving the state of our soul than the appearance of our body. That perspective will afford us much wisdom in making end of life decisions and deciding upon whether or not to mechanically sustain a physical life that is without any hope of recovery; a perspective that too many Christians failed to consider in the emotionally charged case of Teri Schaivo.

Paul was an extremely effective Christian while he was here on earth. But he also had a healthy respect and longing for what lay ahead in eternity. In his letter to the church at Phillippi he wrote, *For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* (Philippians 1:21-24)

Paul also said, *Forgetting what is behind (On earth) and straining toward what is ahead (In heaven), I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 3:13-14) Unlike Paul we tend to dwell nostalgically in the past (I.e "the good old days") to the exclusion of the real joys that lie ahead in our heavenly home.

Peter, who knew that he would one day be martyred for his faith said, *I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.* (II Peter 1:13-15) Those words which he wrote in the 1st Century continue to remind

Christians of the great truths which Peter taught. They may have killed Peter's body, but he left it behind and continues to be very much alive in heaven with Christ.

Evangelism Is Forged By An Eternal Perspective

When we have a heavenly mind we will become more effective in fulfilling Christ's great commission (Matthew 28:19). We will have a greater desire to share the gospel when we begin to look at people with eternity in mind; souls to be won or lost for all eternity. Evangelism is literally sharing the "good news" about eternity. There is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that we can live forever, if by faith we receive Christ as Lord and Savior of our earthly lives. He is our Savior because of His vicarious, atoning death on the cross that has paid the penalty for our sins and saved us from God's wrath (Romans 5:9) and eternal damnation (the bad news). He is Lord, because once we have become a member of His universal church we are committed to following His commandments and growing to become more like Him. When we begin to see people as God does, when we begin to view them from an eternal perspective we should be more willing to reach them for Christ.

While it is true that God has sovereignly chosen those with whom He desires to spend eternity (Ephesians 1:4-5), we are not aware of who they may or may not be. Thus, everyone we meet is a potential child of God; a soul for whom Christ may have died. With that in mind we should heed the words of St Francis of Assisi who said, "It is the responsibility of every Christian to witness all day, every day, and if necessary to speak." Our lifestyle and attitude often say more about us than any words we can speak to the contrary. When asked to defend our faith we should be willing, yet gracious responders. We should always be prepared to give an answer for what we believe and why we are so convinced of its truth. But we should always do so respecting the other person's background. (See I Peter 3:15) We can only be prepared if we know the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and can articulate them in a meaningful and understandable fashion. That takes time and effort, as we study, learn and put into practice the eternal truths from God's Holy Word.

The Comfort That Comes From A Heavenly Mindedness.

Trouble is an inevitable consequence of life. Jesus said *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* (John 16:33) In the book of Job one reads, *Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks flie upward.* (Job 5:7) It is more

comforting to look at the eternal perspective when adversity strikes. Is there something that I can learn from this experience? Will it make me a better person? C.S. Lewis reminds us the adversity is God's megaphone to get our attention. He uses it to discipline us and get us back on track, to slow us down when we're moving too fast and to enable us to grow. It is axiomatic that diamonds only come about when carbon containing materials (like coal) are subjected to great amounts of heat and pressure. God wants us to be like perfect diamonds when we enter heaven. When a silversmith wants to perfect his precious metal he heats it to very high temperatures. In the process the impurities rise to the molten surface. The metalworker continues the process until the surface is no longer clouded over with impurities. He can tell the moment in which that perfect purity has occurred because at that point in time he can see his own reflection in the surface of the smelting pot of silver. God often uses heat to purify us in order that we can reflect His glory here on earth.

God's purposes here on earth have profound eternal consequences. We need to view them as such. God is a being with a heavenly mind and a great deal of earthly good. In fact every good thing on earth is from God (James 1:17). Sickness is often viewed by some as a chastisement from God. On the contrary God will use sickness in a strong Christian to bring glory to Himself. G.K. Chesterton said of Job, that God did not intend to inflict him with sickness and loss because he was the worst of men, but precisely because he was the best. When Jesus was asked one day by His disciples whether a blind man's sin or that of his parent's had caused him to lose his sight, Jesus answered, *Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life* (John 9:3). Even death, the great enemy of all living things, the inevitable physical demise of all living creatures, has been overcome by Christ. God views the death of His children as a good thing. We on the other hand, because of our earthly perspective, view death as a bad thing; I.e Teri Schaivo. The Bible says, *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.* (Psalm 116: 15) That physical death will make us perfect, because we will become exactly like Jesus (I John 3:2) and that will please God. Furthermore, God has prepared joys for us that we cannot even imagine (I Corinthians 2:9), and being a beneficent God, that too will please Him as He views our amazement at the glory that heaven brings.

Called In Heaven To Account For Life On Earth.

Every believer has been given the gifts (I Corinthians 12:7-11; Romans 12:6-8), the spiritual power (Acts 1:8) and the opportunities (I Peter 3:15) to serve our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and we shall each be called to stand before Him and to give an account of the work that He planned for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10) Paul testifies to this

very fact when we read his letter to the church at Corinth, *For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* (II Corinthians 5:10) While it is true that our sins were judged on Calvary's cross, our works will be judged by the very same Jesus who died for our sins. In fact it was for the very purpose of our works that He died for us and chose us to serve Him. (John 15:16)

We will also be held accountable for the spiritual growth that we attained while here in our physical state. Each of us has been afforded the capacity to grow at different rates and in greater or lesser degrees, but we are all expected to grow to some degree. We will be held accountable for maximizing our individual potential; that is the definition of real spiritual prosperity and success as a believer, not material gain. That is what the Lord meant as He spoke these words to Joshua; *Do not let this Book of the law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.* (Joshua 1:8) It is only through spiritual growth that we can be effective Christians. If the thought of having to answer in heaven for not growing on earth is the only impetus that causes us to mature spiritually, then so be it. That is one of the things that C.S. Lewis meant when he talked about our ineffectiveness here on earth. We sometimes forget that we will have to answer for that lack of matureness in the next life.

Loyalty To Earth And Heaven

While Christians are found in practically every nation on earth, we all share a common citizenship; we are eternal citizens of heaven. Paul told the newly converted members of the church at Ephesus (and it applies to us), *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people...* (Ephesians 2:19) To the Philippian church Paul wrote, *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And, we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.* (Philippians 3:20-21)

We should obey and follow the laws of whatever nation in which we happen to reside (Romans 13:1), as long as they are in conformity with the laws of God. We should be good stewards of its resources and protectors of the freedom we enjoy within its gates. But we must also keep in mind the words of that joyous Gospel hymn, "This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through." We must always keep eternity in mind when ever we see a particular nation (even our own) heading in the wrong direction. In this world

there will be injustice and corruption in high and lowly places, but on the eternal scale justice is always served. The same can be said of the injustice we see, where individuals are concerned. Instead of seeking to repay those who do us a personal injustice we should heed the words of the apostle Paul who said, *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* (Romans 12:17-19) We can be certain that God will one day balance the scales of justice.

In the meantime, Jesus has called us to be salt and light in whatever nation we happened to be living. (Matthew 5:13-16) Salt is one of the earth's most ubiquitous and underestimated resources; so are Christians. There are more Christians throughout the world than some may realize because much of the true church is working and worshipping underground in third world nations and in China. Some estimates set the number at 60 million believers in that oriental nation of one billion people. Christians too are underestimated in the positive influence that they can have on society; especially by other Christians. Salt causes thirst, and our testimony, our way of life, our world view should make others thirsty for our faith and lifestyle. Salt heals, and as Christians we should be in the habit of bringing healing, not hurt, to personal relationships. Salt is a preservative and the only way that meat was kept from spoiling until refrigeration became prevalent. We should prevent or slow the inevitable moral decay in our immediate circles of life. Salt was a valuable commodity in the time of Christ. It was used as payment for a hard day's labor. From that fact has come the expression, "He's not worth his salt." We should realize that God thought enough of our eternal worth to send His Son to die in our place and remove our sin from His sight.

We are told by the Lord that we are the light of the world. He also said that He was the Light of the world; not a contradiction, both are true. As the sun lights the day, so the moon lights the night. The light which comes from the moon is not intrinsic; it is a reflection of the sun. The moon is a dead satellite. So too, were we once spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1) until God made us alive (Ephesians 2:4-5) and gave us the light of the knowledge of Himself in the Person of Christ. (II Corinthians 4:6) As we grow we are to reflect the light of Christ and the light of biblical truth in this sin darkened world. (II Corinthians 3:18)

Time and Eternity

There is no time in eternity. God is timeless and so is His heaven. God developed time for our benefit so that we could function in an orderly fashion: Time is man's earthly integration point. He put a spin on the earth such that it would complete one revolution every 24 hours. He gave the earth a push such that it would orbit the sun once every 365 days. He gave the moon a shove, such that it would orbit the earth once every 30 days. Finally, He created the entire universe in six days and rested on the seventh to give us the week.

We are time bound creatures but each one of us is running out of time (Psalm 31: 15; Psalm 90: 10). We must make the best of whatever time we have left to make a difference for eternity. There are only two entities that are currently present on this earth that will last forever; a person's soul and the Word of God. Everything else will one day pass away. All the earthbound things that we seem to think matter so much will one day be destroyed (Revelation 21: 1). Jesus warned, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.* (Luke 21:33) Of course the heaven to which he referred was the cosmos, not the eternal abode of our triune God, the angels and the saints of all time. A person's soul will also last forever, either in heaven or hell. (Matthew 25:46)

We are in a race against time, each of us has been allotted a certain number of days to accomplish that which our sovereign God planned for us to do in order to bring Him glory and extend His kingdom. He and myriads of angels are watching closely to see just how well we accomplish our particular, personal, appointed tasks. With that in mind, I close this discussion with the words of the author of a letter to the Hebrews; inserts being mine. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (In Heaven), let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (On Earth). Let us fix our eyes on Jesus (In Heaven), the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him (In Heaven) endured the cross, scorning its shame (On Earth), and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (In Heaven)*

Hebrews 12:1-2

Soli Deo Gloria