

Easy Believism and the Gospel

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When I picked that hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, I had a thought in mind. It is a hymn that I believe really expresses the mind of God when it comes to the issue of how he accomplishes his will on earth.

The passage we are going to be looking at this evening, I think, talks to that. And so I would like to read just a little more of the hymn that we sang. It is a wonderful hymn written by Martin Luther hundreds of years ago and one that has been sung through the ages. I think it is one of the great majestic hymns of the faith. And in the second stanza he says:

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And then in the third stanza:

And tho' this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph thro' us.
The Prince of Darkness grim—
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

The truth is that it is the Word of God that is supreme and accomplishes the will of God. And one of the things that has been a concern to me and a concern to many of my friends

in the ministry has been the issue of modern day evangelism and what the Word of God says about the methods of evangelism.

We live in a day when easy believism is often the issue, the methodology for reaching people with the gospel of Christ. Let me explain what I mean.

I went, many years ago, and this was, gosh, this was many years ago. This was before I went into the army and was in the army for 20 years so it has been a long time. I went to a conference in one of the largest churches in the United States. This was a church that had an attendance of—I believe at that time they had somewhere around 15,000 or 16,000 people who would attend every Sunday morning, a pretty big church, a church with massive ministries of all different sorts. And the conference was on evangelism.

And as I sat through this conference there were certain things that I learned that I found were helpful and many of them that I and others who were there, people that I met, found that we just simply had to disagree with. And among them were the idea that evangelism is sort of a system of salesmanship. This was the emphasis of the conference, that we sort of sell people into heaven, that what we say and what we do is what will affect whether a person is saved. And that was the very essence of what was being taught.

There were certain things that, I guess, if you think of motivation and the way you will do something, some of them were good. For instance, one of the things that the teacher said was that we are to make ourselves to look attractive. Now, I don't know how successful I could be at that, but, you know, that was the thing that he told us. He said that we were to dress nicely, attractively, be well groomed. We were to, you know, use something to make sure our breath was ok and all those things. And I guess that's all right. We certainly don't want to be an offense to anybody.

And then the other emphasis was that we have to—and the words that were used were—“Strike while the iron is hot.” The idea being that timing in our work of evangelism was everything, that it was our job to bring a person to the point where that person would make some sort of profession and pray some sort or prayer.

I have thought about that over the years many, many times. I have been in churches that teach similar things. And some of my experiences have really led me to search the Scripture in depth to see whether this is really what the Lord wants us to do.

I was the pastor of a church many, many years ago. This is, again, before I was in army. And I remember one couple, a couple that were, I think, typical of a lot of the people that I meet who are newcomers to churches. They came and they visited our church and came a few times and I went out to their home and spent a little bit of time with them. And as we were talking I looked around the house and it was evident that this was a home in which there was not much emphasis on things that were spiritual and things that were biblical. I don't have to go into any detail, but it was quite obvious that was, in fact, the case.

And as I spoke with them, I asked them to tell me the story of their salvation which is something that I like to do. I like to hear people recount how God has worked in their lives. And they said to me that they were at a meeting somewhere and they went forward at an invitation and they prayed a prayer and they were told by the minister that they should never again doubt their salvation, that they have secured it eternally.

And I looked about and I saw absolutely no evidence of any interest in the things of the Lord. In fact, they...when they finally did occasionally come to church it was very sporadic. They seemed to have very little interest in the things of God.

And I thought to myself, "What is it that we find in Scripture that would tell us the method that Jesus would use for evangelism?"

And I have studied many passages. In fact, in the light of those experiences I have examined every single sermon that was preached in the New Testament, preached by the Lord Jesus Christ and preached by the apostles and other disciples of the Lord. And one experience that Jesus had I found to be an extremely profound indicator of his method of reaching people with his gospel and it is the story of the person who is known as the rich young ruler.

And I am going to read from Matthew chapter 19. There are three different accounts of this, but I am going to read in chapter 19 of Matthew beginning in verse 16.

And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." Then he said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. "Again I say to you, 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." When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?" And looking at them Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."¹

¹ Matthew 19:16-26

As you read this, this can actually be a very shocking text of Scripture because it is one that seems to run contrary to all of our understanding of the gospel. But when we go through this we will see that it is actually a very clear picture of the gospel. A summary of what the Lord was saying is in the account that we find of this in the book of Luke in chapter 14 and verse 33 where it says, “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”²

The Lord gave to this man a test. Here was the test. He said, “You have to choose. You are going to choose between your possessions and Christ.”

And the man failed the test.

You see, Jesus is teaching us that salvation is only for those who are willing to give Christ first place in their lives. He was asking, the man was asking the question: how can he get eternal life?

Well, the term “eternal life” is used about 50 times in the Bible. It is in verses like John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”³

But much of the work of evangelism is getting people to understand their need of salvation. You see, it is not enough just to confront a person and say, “You know, you are a sinner, aren’t you?”

Well, anyone will answer yes to that. I would be hard pressed to find the person who would say, “No. I have never done anything wrong in my life.”

And so the question: Are you a sinner? Or, have you committed sins? Does not really hit to the issue at hand which is: Do you really comprehend what it means that you are a sinner?

Jesus’ methodology would probably have failed this course in evangelism that I took. For I am sure that he was neat and well groomed. I don’t mean that. But in his proclamation of the Word he did everything that this course taught not to do. I mean basically he chased this man away. He told this man that he had to obey commandments. He said to this man that he had to give up everything if he wanted Christ.

Easy believism leads many to think they have eternal life when they don’t. And I have a fear that some day when we are in heaven we will find that some of the people that we thought were saved really are not.

Well, let’s ask the question. What went wrong with this man? Well, in order to answer that let’s first look at what went right. Here was a man who had exactly the right motive, didn’t he? He went to Jesus and he said, “What can I do to inherit eternal life?”

² Luke 14:33

³ John 3:16

I ask you. What could be a more pointed and a more important question than that? How can I get eternal life?

I'll tell you something. If someone came to me and asked that question I would want to sit down and share with him, wouldn't you? Wouldn't that be your desire to share with him exactly the answer to that question?

“How I get eternal life?”

There is nothing wrong with that. Here was a man who had it all. The Scripture tells us in verse 20 of our passage that he was young and verse 22 that he was rich. In Luke chapter 18 we are told that he was a ruler. This probably meant that he was one of the rulers in the synagogue. The term that is used here gives that type of indication.

Here was an important, wealthy, religious leader. And he knew that he was missing something. And he knew that what he wanted was a life that was eternal and of great quality.

The life that Jesus talked about in John chapter 17 and verse three when he said, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”⁴ That is what he wanted.

Is there anything wrong with that? Not a thing.

Well, I'll tell you. He had the right attitude, too. The passage in Mark tells us—and, as I said, this is recounted in three of the gospels—in Mark chapter 10 it says this is verse 17, “As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”⁵

He ran to him. It wasn't like—and there is nothing wrong with Nicodemus—but it wasn't like Nicodemus who kind of snuck to him at night so nobody would see it. Here he was in broad daylight running up to the Lord Jesus Christ and coming up to him and asking him what he could do to inherit eternal life. He had the right attitude.

How many of you would like it if people would run up to you and say, “How do I get to be saved? How can I have eternal life?” Wouldn't that be exciting if every single day of your life someone ran up to you and asked that question.

That's what happened with this man. Not only did he have the right motive, not only did he have the right attitude, but he came to the right source. He went to the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ John 17:3

⁵ Mark 10:17

The Word of God tells us that Jesus is the only source of eternal life. He is eternal life. That is what the Scripture tells us.

This man, of course, had not read the New Testament. It didn't exist in his day. But he had a sense that this was the person who could tell him the truths relating to his eternal well being. Scripture tells us that Jesus is the source. 1 John chapter five it says:

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.⁶

We all know the passage in Acts chapter four and verse 12. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."⁷

You see, he asked the right question.

In John chapter six and verse 28 it says:

Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."⁸

The whole Word of God teaches very clearly that the source of eternal life is the Lord Jesus Christ. And here is someone who went to Jesus. Here was somebody who ran to Jesus. Here was someone who begged him to tell him the way to eternal life.

What does Jesus do? And this is really interesting. In this passage Jesus does not say—and I don't want to make a parody on evangelistic methods, but I want you to notice. Jesus does not say, "Well, let's pray a prayer." He doesn't say that. Jesus does not say, "I am going to explain to you a couple of Bible verses and then we will pray together." He just doesn't do that. He doesn't do that at all.

But what he does is he focuses on two things that someone must clearly understand if that person is going to come to a real knowledge of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He starts out by focusing on the person of God. The man has said to him—and you get back to the text for a moment—the man has said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good?"⁹ Jesus answers, excuse me. "There is only One who is good."¹⁰

⁶ 1 John 5:11-12

⁷ Acts 4:12

⁸ John 6:28-29

⁹ Matthew 19:17

¹⁰ Ibid.

What does he do? He focuses on God. He says, “Now, I want you to understand. There is only one who is good. You have to understand that it is God and God alone, not you, not anybody else in the world, but God who is good.” So he starts by focusing on the person of God.

One of the things I think we need to teach more about in churches today is who is God. What is his character like? How does he relate to us?

And then he does something that seems extremely strange in the light of the way we generally hear the gospel presented. He answers the question with a very strange statement. He tells him, “You must keep the commandments.”

What?

Everybody knows you don’t get saved by keeping commandments. Isn’t that right? I know that. You know that. Jesus knows that. So why is he telling this man that he must keep the commandments? He says to him, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments,”¹¹ in our text, in Matthew chapter 19.

And then Jesus says to him—he asks him, “Which ones?”¹²—and he quotes the commandments. What Jesus is point out to him is his sinfulness. It is not that he can keep the commandments and be saved. Jesus never taught that. The disciples never taught that. That’s not taught in the Word of God. But what is taught is that the commandments will give us an understanding of our sinfulness. And that is what he was pointing out to the man.

He says, “Keep all the commandments.” And the expectation would be—at least I would think. If someone approached me and said, “Look, here are all the commandments. Keep them.” My reaction would be, “I can’t.” Wouldn’t that be your reaction? “I can’t keep all those commandments. That’s impossible.”

But that’s not what this man said. He thought he was pretty good. He thought, “Yeah, you know, I mean, you just...come on, give me a prayer, Jesus. I’ll pray. I’ll go to heaven.”

But Jesus very, very clearly showed him that he is sinful, that he does not keep the commandments.

How did he do that? Well, he points out a commandment that he has not kept and that is the last commandment of the 10 which is the commandment of covetousness.

But before we look at that we might want to ask: Why would someone point somebody to the law? It’s almost unheard of in our day. That’s what Jesus did. You point someone to

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Matthew 19:18

the law because the law is that which teaches us that we are sinful and we cannot obtain salvation on our own.

What was this man's expectation? Well, this man's expectation was that Jesus was going to help him to pray, that Jesus was going to make it an easy thing for him. Why don't you just go out and give a little money to the poor and we'll pray together and you can have everlasting life?

And Jesus was pointing out to him that he is not one who obeys the commandments.

In Romans, the first three chapters are spent on teaching us that we are sinful before the gospel is ever presented. And Jesus is teaching this man the very same lesson. You see, the law was given to lead us to Christ.

Listen to what it says in Galatians chapter three and verse 24. "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith."¹³ Until we recognize our sinfulness, until we understand that we are utterly bereft of any righteousness in the sight of God, until a man or a woman is ready to fall on the face before the Lord and say, "I am a sinner, Lord, save me. I can do nothing on my own to save myself," that person hasn't recognized his total and utter sinfulness.

And that was the problem with this man. Here was one who claimed to have obeyed the law. He did not confess his guilt and his sin.

Jesus made it very clear and we actually looked at this this morning where on the Sermon on the Mount he taught that the issue is not just the Word of the law, but the Spirit behind the law. The Lord Jesus said, "You will not commit murder," that that it was part of the law. But he made it very clear that being inappropriately angry is the same as committing the act of murder.

You see, here was somebody who would not recognize his own sinfulness. So what did Jesus say? Jesus loved the man. It says that and we go back to Mark again in Mark chapter 10 and verse 21 it says, "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, 'One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.'"¹⁴ Does that mean that everyone to be saved has to give up everything they have? No, it doesn't mean that.

God has not necessarily commanded you to sell all of your possessions and give them away. That is not the essence of what is being taught here. What Jesus was doing was looking into the heart of this man, something that we can't do. And he was able to discover that the thing that hindered this man from true salvation was the fact that he loved his possessions more than he loved God. And so for him, he said, "You must give them up. And then you will have everlasting life."

¹³ Galatians 3:24

¹⁴ Mark 10:21

Jesus was dealing with the man's primary sin. He loved his possessions more than he loved God.

Now what is the conclusion to this? What is the result? The man did not receive Christ as Savior. It says that he went away grieving because he had many possessions. He would not trust in Christ, but instead he was trusting in that which he owns.

Evangelism starts with our teaching the person of God and teaching the sinfulness of man. It then comes to the grace of God which Jesus was willing to offer to this man.

The fear that I have is that if this same man would approach some people today, he would not be taught what Jesus taught him. But what he would be taught is: You can love your possessions more than God as long as you pray the right prayer you will be saved.

Now I would like to make a comparison here. And I think it is important for us. I brought out something that I think is extremely important to emphasize because we live in a Christian society where the idea of easy believism has become more the standard than anything else. There is another wonderful picture that is given to us that has the exact opposite ending. And that is the story of Zaccheus. And all of you know little Zaccheus who went up the tree and, anyway, I want to read the story of Zaccheus as we find it in Luke chapter 19.

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich.¹⁵

Sound like the rich young ruler? Here is this fellow here, lots of money, you know. He is a sinful person. He is one...if you know anything about the tax collectors of the day he conspired with the Romans to collect all kinds of money. They told him how much he had to pay and he collected as much as he possibly could and he kept the rest. That's what a tax collector did.

Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house."¹⁶

Here we have a wealthy man, a man who has gained his wealth inappropriately. He was a sinful man. Jesus sees him—as he climbs up the tree to see Jesus who is going by—and he invites him in very much the same way that Jesus was willing to invite the rich young ruler. He was open to sharing with him. And so he is open to sharing with Zaccheus.

¹⁵ Luke 19:1-2

¹⁶ Luke 19:3-5

And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."¹⁷

You know, this is one of the things that amazes me. God sends us out into the world to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ and then when we spend time with sinners people criticize us for it. Have you ever noticed that? Well, anyway, that is what they did with Jesus.

If we are going to win sinful people, we need to be out talking to sinful people and sharing with them the gospel of Christ. "Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord...'"¹⁸ Now, listen to these words. Here is the exact opposite of the rich young ruler. He says, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."¹⁹

In other words, here was a man who recognized the fact that he had sinned against God. Here was a man who recognized the fact that he was an out and out thief. That is what he was. He was stealing money from the people.

The Romans had said to him, "You must collect 10 denarius."

And he goes to the person and says, "Your taxes are 30 denarius."

This is what happened. I am just making up the numbers, but that is the concept of what happened. And then he palmed the rest of it. He kept it for himself taking ridiculous amounts of money in tax. He knew he had done wrong.

He said, "I will give it back four times as much."

And Jesus said to him—listen to the words.

Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.²⁰

What is the difference between these two men? What is the difference? The difference is that the first man did not recognize his sinful condition, that this man came to Jesus expecting easy believism.

"Jesus, you know, kind of wave your hand over me. Get me to pray something, get me to give a little money. I want salvation."

¹⁷ Luke 19:6-7

¹⁸ Luke 19:8

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Luke 19:9-10

Jesus would have nothing to do with that, for that is not the Word of God.

And he went away without obtaining the salvation that he sought. But Zaccheus in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ recognized his sinfulness, in effect repented of sin. Repentance in his case was saying, "I'll give it all back if necessary." And Jesus said, "Salvation has come today to this house."

What is the message for us today? Well, the first message is that we need to look into our own hearts. Have we believed on the basis of easy believism? Is it possible that there is someone here who has never truly repented of sin? I don't mean giving everything you own to the poor, but whatever that sin is that would beset you, have you repented and trusted the Lord Jesus in faith?

And then it is for us to understand that as we approach other people and as we share the message with them, we need to be certain that they understand the nature of God, that they understand the concept of sin and that they understand that Jesus Christ is willing to forgive sinners, sinners who are ready to repent and believe.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for the Word that you give to us, that Word that gives to us the eternal salvation which is ours in the Lord Jesus. Help us, Father, now to understand your Word, to live by it and to share it with others around us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.