

AMAZING PERCEPTION

In any serious consideration of the man Jesus, we are eventually confronted with His unusual way of seeing and understanding things. The Gospel writers do not portray Jesus as somebody trying to be cute, or who is sitting up in the night trying to find new ways to say things. He simply sees things in ways that the people around Him do not. Oh, Jesus sees what they see, but He also sees dimensions and meanings way beyond what most people notice.

Many of the people I know have unusual perceptions in some areas of life, especially in the areas where they have special gifts or difficult experiences. Trouble can heighten our awareness, and even change our priorities. But Jesus tells simple-sounding parables, and then if we look a little longer, suddenly the whole story shifts to a different level, revealing things we never would have thought of by ourselves. What is the price of the great pearl? Everybody has enough to buy the great pearl, if they really want it badly enough. But few want it enough to pay the price. All are welcome, but only if they want to pay the price. Technically Jesus is not being exclusive, but lots of us humans exclude ourselves. There is nothing here about getting thrown into Hell; *Gehenna* is not Dante's *Inferno*. Eternal punishment is not how Jesus thinks. It is how a lot of humans think, especially if they are Christians.

Despite the possible offense to some, I confess that I am no longer able to be objective in regard to Jesus' amazing perception. Without switching Him out of the category of man, it still seems clear to me that Jesus saw what life was truly about with more clarity than any other human ever has. It is true that His insight was so extraordinary, so startling, and so deep that people are still struggling with His teachings, and finding themselves wandering among concepts so vast that there is little hope of total comprehension.

The greatest minds of Western civilization have wrestled for two centuries with the mind of Jesus, and many of those minds became great in that very process. Yet the insights of Jesus remain fresh and compelling and limitless still. My claim is simply that Jesus is more profound than our grand titles can convey. He was a man who saw beneath the outer crust of life and into the heart of eternal truth. Somehow that is always connected to the reality of His close association with *Abba*, the numinous God who is personal and unbelievably caring.

We will take time this morning to look at only three incidents that are briefly mentioned in the context of the larger story. As we talk about these three, many of you will recall other incidents that illustrate the same claim. For me it is as if Jesus stops along the way, points to something, and says, “Look carefully. No, look again. There is much hidden here which reveals the Kingdom of God.”

As with last week, I have picked minor illustrations. I do not think they are minor in their implications, but they are tucked into the record unobtrusively, between larger issues. And the drama going on makes it easy to miss them.

I.) Jesus was eating a meal one Sabbath Day in the home of a leading Pharisee. Not a very startling setting. Most people like to socialize. If we can find enough time and enough money, we like to invite our friends to dinner. Christmas time is especially famous for such gatherings. Of course, sometimes there may be special motives, like when we invite the boss or someone who belongs to a social group we would like to be included in. But for the most part, it is just good to be with friends.

Yet Jesus says this is not enough. “Look again,” He says. “The world will never be improved – the Kingdom will never come – if we all keep operating on this level. Don’t just invite friends, brothers, kinsmen, rich neighbors – those who can return the favor. They don’t need it! Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind – those who need your friendship and cannot return the favor.”

Jesus does not dwell on the point, but in passing He points to it and says, “See, this is an illustration of the shortsighted exclusiveness and concern for personal pleasure that keep the world the way it is.”

A minor insight, we say to ourselves, as we get ready to neglect or forget one more thing that Jesus is trying to tell us. Minor, perhaps, but what havoc it would play in our normal approaches to socializing.

By the way, I do not like this passage either, if that is of any comfort to you. Would this teaching really help us to build the Kingdom of God if we took it seriously? Does it mean we invite only down-and-outers, or do we mix the invitations with normal friends and relatives? Are we to be rigid about it and never invite friends or relatives ever again? With our busy schedules, we have too little time as it is to keep up with friends and family. Besides, inviting people to dinner has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, right? Big revival

meetings; large sanctuaries filled with people on Sunday morning; famous speakers or authors; missions to far away places – that’s what Christianity is about, right?

Too bad we were not around to explain to Jesus what the Kingdom of God was really about, so we would not be faced with some of His ridiculous suggestions. But now it’s too late, and it is written in our Scriptures so that if anyone reads them – well, it makes it look as if when we think about the Kingdom of God, we are not even on the same subject that Jesus was when *He* talked about the Kingdom of God.

Doubtless this means that some of us who claim a desire to be followers of Jesus are going to have a hard time explaining to ourselves why we never “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” into our homes for food and friendship.

II.) Then there was that day when Jesus invited Levi (alias Matthew) to become a disciple. When Levi accepted this invitation, there followed a big banquet of celebration. It was in some ways illustrative of the passage we were just talking about. Do any of us miss the fact that Levi thought giving up his former life and becoming a full-time disciple of Jesus was cause for great celebration, and that a lot of his friends thought so too?

Anyway, this was not a banquet for the acceptable spiritual leaders of the nation. This was a banquet for tax-collectors and sinners – the dregs of Jewish society. And the upstanding Pharisees, Priests, scribes, and synagogue members objected. This was proof, they said, that Jesus was a false teacher – a false prophet. He was not a representative of God, and nobody should follow Him or listen to Him.

We do not have to struggle very hard to get the point. Jesus makes it too obvious. But that does not make it easy to start thinking in a different way. “People who are well do not need a doctor,” Jesus says. “People who are *sick* need a doctor.” Jesus comes to save sinners – those alienated from the love of God. If we are well, Jesus wants nothing to do with us. Or perhaps more accurately, if we *think* we are well – free from sin – Jesus has no time or interest in us. “All are welcome,” but only if we are sick – only if we are able to see and admit our SIN: the estrangement that is still there between us and God.

Yet we do not want our children to play with so-and-so, because they might be a bad influence. But let's not be tentative and wishy-washy. They *are* a bad influence – no question about it. “One bad apple ...” and “birds of a feather ...” and all the other normal and logical wisdom of our familiar ways of thinking.

Raise children on this kind of wisdom and we do not need three guesses to see what kind of adults they will become. But Jesus had a very different operational principle. He did not believe that bad apples would inevitably turn good people into bad people. Nor did He believe, as many of us do, that evil would inevitably win out over good. Jesus believed that the more we trusted in God, the more we would be like yeast in the dough of the society around us. Jesus believed that faithful people could infect those around them with forgiveness and compassion and deeds of love. But if, in most places, the yeast refuses to get mixed up with the dough – which is the way of the church, and even the teaching of the church – then what?

If we take our parenthood seriously as Christians, do we not have to consider the possibility that our children might have a significant and crucial impact on those around them? Is the only purpose of going to school the goal of being accepted into USC or Stanford? Are we not called to live Christian Lives all along the way, whatever the outer circumstances?

Getting down to it, we cannot really be trying very hard to raise our children as Christians unless we welcome the opportunities to teach our children about spiritual warfare, about caring about others who really need them, and about what their responsibilities will be like as servants and ambassadors of God's true Messiah. Jesus does not always teach us to run from trouble. Sometimes we head into it because that is when we sometimes have the opportunity to overcome evil with good.

I know, just as well as any of you do, that our children seem so young. They seem *too* young to be confronted with the problems of good and evil or what it's like to live in a broken world. Teach them soccer and how to get good grades now; we can teach them about following Jesus and being the church after they are all grown up.

Can you imagine parents saying to their children, “What do you mean by spending all your time with the kids in your own in-group? Why don't I ever see you playing with the thugs, or dating the girls with questionable reputations, or becoming friends with the squares

that nobody likes? Don't you know that you are supposed to be about your Father's business?" Well, some of our children learn more about the Christian Way than we intended or expected. Hopefully we end up grateful for that.

In any case, Jesus is making the same point here that He was making in our first passage, only in a different context and from a different angle. He says, in effect, "If you gentlemen are too good for Levi, you are too good for ME. I came for sinners – go play 'righteous' with somebody else!"

III.) And so we come to the rich young ruler, who is good for several sermons all by himself. Today we are only asking his story to point out to us one aspect of Jesus' remarkable perception.

This young man is worried for fear he will not be acceptable to God – that he will not receive eternal life. Even so, he is quite convinced that he has done everything right, according to the book. The two sides of this coin do not match up. But most of us carry such coins in our own pockets, so we understand.

As Jesus recites the requirements of the Commandments, this young man cuts Him off before He reaches the one about "Thou shalt not covet." He cuts in to justify himself before the accusation he most fears can be voiced. I would not have noticed. Very probably this young man did not realize it himself. But Jesus is too calm, too clear, too aware of the deep dimensions of life to miss it. Five sentences, and Jesus has looked into the man's soul and locked onto the disease that is killing him.

I do not mean to imply a minor miracle here. Such perception is rare, but not magical. Jesus was what we in our time might call "an integrated person." He did not require the young man's approval to bolster His own insecurities. Jesus was clear about the values and truths by which He Himself lived. That allowed Him to turn an uncluttered mind to full focus on the person before Him. It is always easier to see clearly when there is no haze.

And Jesus invites the man out of his dead-end street. "Turn it loose, and come follow me." This is not a vague and general spiritual teaching for the whole population. This young man has a special hang-up, and he is given a special if rigorous way out of it. In fact, he is the only person in the New Testament who was invited to become one of the twelve and turned it down. He is not, by the way, invited

into a life of poverty, as so many love to claim. He is invited to become one of the twelve. And Jesus takes care of His own.

Of course, this young man is not the only person to be hypnotized by outer wealth and security. Then Jesus caps the story with a teaching altogether too familiar for our comfort: “It is hard for the rich – they end up caring too much for the security and comfort that wealth provides.” Some of them have to give it up in order to get free. But it is not poverty that is the goal. It is the freedom to become true children of God – *that* is the goal.

These are but a few illustrations of the amazing perception of Jesus. There are common threads running through them. We invite the people we like and the ones we want to like us. We often stay clear of those we do not approve of. We try to be acceptable to God, but not if it threatens our economics, our social position, or our definitions of “success” in this world.

Clearly Jesus believed and taught that such principles are not good enough for the Kingdom. They are the principles of Hell; not the mythological one – the real one: the principles of loneliness, isolation, aloofness, alienation. We will remain caught in our separation from God and our separation from each other unless we repent, change: radically and unequivocally change the principles by which we live – on every level. Of course, we cannot do that unaided. We need the presence and guidance and forgiveness and love of the Holy Spirit, all day and every day, to escape from the mire – the fear and the illusions of this temporal world.

Our culture has tried to change Jesus into a vague and distant figure who asks of us only what we already think is reasonable and who models for us a life that is very similar to the one we are already living. Even though that is comforting and reassuring, people are leaving the church in droves. Of course, a few are angry about something and so they leave. But mostly it is because the church, and the Christian Faith it claims to represent, is now so boring – so insignificant to the life going on all around us – that the notion of true devotion, true commitment, some all-out loyalty and love for a Messiah who is leading and guiding us into a very different WAY of Life does not seem like reality to most people in our time. On the other hand, most of them have never tried it. They have never tried to follow the Lord of the New Testament. Those who try it are in for huge and continual surprises.