

"Is God In It?"

Psalm 127, Mark 12:38-44

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What are our motivations for our actions? At the root of everything, why do we do what we do? Is God in it?

One day, as Jesus was sitting in the temple courts, he was watching folks put money in the treasury. There were all sorts of people coming and going, dropping in their offerings. He watched as many rich people put in large sums of money. Then he noticed a poor widow go up to the treasury and drop in two copper coins, worth about a penny. He was so struck by the scene that he called his disciples over. He had another teachable moment on his hands. It was another opportunity to show how the Kingdom of God differs from the practices of the day.

"Hey guys, come over here. You see that poor widow over there?" Jesus says. "She just put two copper coins into the treasury. Not worth much, huh? Well, I'm here to tell you that those two copper coins are more than anyone else put into the treasury."

Now this scene happened toward the end of Jesus' ministry, so I imagine the disciples saying to one another something like, "Here he goes again. We've heard this kind of thing before, but I still don't get it. Do you understand how two copper coins could be worth more than all that money that those rich people are giving?"

Jesus has to explain it to them. "You see, in the Kingdom of God, the exchange rate is completely different than what we know in the kingdom of the world. God doesn't look at the quantity of the gift, God looks at the heart of the person who gives. God pays attention to the intent behind the action."

And it's not just about money. Jesus also points to the scribes and says, "Look at them. They wear long, flowing robes so they look good. They like to be greeted with respect in the marketplace so they feel superior. They always want to have the best seat in the house at banquets. And their prayers! They go on and on, just to look good. It's like God isn't a big part at all of what they're doing, it's more about their own self-serving needs. That's not what God's looking for. That's not what God desires for us as we live into his kingdom. That's not how we build the Kingdom of God, it simply serves to strengthen the kingdom of the earth.

God desires a heart that is shaped by a relationship with God that transforms our thoughts and our actions. It is what comes from the heart that truly matters.

The psalmist had a keen insight into this. In the psalm I just read, we hear that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. The psalmist recognizes our tendency to do things on our own, not out of a heart that has been transformed by God. And how does that turn out? I think the psalmist hits the nail on the head when he writes about how it is in vain that we rise early and go to bed late in our anxious toiling. When we're doing anything on our own or for our own benefit, there is no rest, but, as the psalmist writes, God gives rest to his beloved. We have a greater sense of peace in our lives when our work comes from a heart that is in love with God.

I've been reading Dallas Willard's book, *The Renovation of the Heart*. In it, he says that Jesus began "A perpetual world revolution: one that is still in process and will continue until God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven...The revolution of Jesus is...a revolution of the human heart or spirit. It did not and does not proceed by means of the formation of social institutions and laws,...intending that these [social institutions and laws] would then impose a good order of life upon people who come under their power. Rather, his is a revolution of character, which proceeds by changing people from the inside through an ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another. It is one that changes their ideas, beliefs, feelings, and habits of choice...It penetrates to the deepest layers of their soul. What our life amounts to...is largely, if not entirely, a matter of what we become within."¹

I believe what is most important to God is the connection that we make with God from within our very being. A connection that transforms us from the inside out, and causes us to live lives that cannot help but build the kingdom of God here on earth.

There's a parable that may shed some light on what I'm talking about. It's called the parable of the acorns.

There was once a very large community of acorns living in a mighty oak tree. From birth, the acorns had been taught that their ultimate purpose in life was to achieve the highest level of acornness, represented by a highly polished shell. To help them achieve this, the acorn leaders established acorn health clubs, acorn beauty parlors, and acorn shell-polishing institutions. All acorns were expected to master the ability to keep their shells polished and assist other acorns in developing their skills to do the same.

Some acorns were not satisfied. They did not believe that life should be limited to self-polishing and helping others learn how to polish. They had noticed some things that the acorn leaders had not explained. They had become aware that no matter how highly polished an acorn was, there came a time when it would fall from the tree. The shell would crack. Moisture would seep

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002) p. 14-16.

in and cause what was known as acorn death. If all acorns had to die no matter how polished their shells were, why should they spend their lives polishing their shells?

These questions came to the attention of the acorn priests. They stepped forward to reassure all the acorns. It had been revealed to them, they said, that if an acorn obeyed all the commands of the priests and the leaders, kept its shell highly polished, paid its taxes and tithes, when the acorn died it would be transported to acorn heaven. Once there, no acorn ever had to worry about falling or losing its luster. There would be warm breezes forever, and every acorn would sit at the right hand of the acorn god and achieve acorn immortality.

The acorns were once again reassured and went back to polishing their shells.

As time went on, there came to this acorn community a new acorn who described himself as an acorn prophet. The acorn prophet began to hold nightly meetings at which he told the acorns who gathered that they were being misled by the priests and leaders. The acorn prophet revealed that inside every acorn lived a mighty oak. According to the prophet, the highest purpose of acorn life was not to be highly polished, but to grow into oakness. He further explained that falling to the ground was simply a step in the process. To become an oak, it would be necessary to stop being an acorn. The falling process actually was the beginning of a new life. The prophet said each acorn owed it to the world to develop itself through hard work, loving gestures, and deliberate concentration to become a mighty oak tree.

While many acorns thought the message was pretty far-fetched, they could not help but be drawn to this acorn prophet. His words were so loving, although it was evident from his lackluster appearance that he had not been to the acorn beauty parlor in a while. Still, he had a glow. More than a luster, his glow seemed to come from the inside. He explained it was his oakness that made him glow, and that every acorn had the same ability. All they had to do was believe, work on their purpose in life, and never fear the fall from the tree.

When the acorn priests heard of the tales being told by the acorn prophet, they were extremely upset. "He'll ruin our business! We had better do something quick!" They did. The priests sent for the acorn prophet and turned him over to the courts. He was found guilty of unlawful challenge of the acorn hierarchy and blasphemy against the acorn priesthood. He was sentenced to death. In a very pompous and elaborate event, the acorn prophet was pushed from the tree to his death.

There were a few acorns who continued to question the teachings of the acorn priests. In secret meetings, they would gather to discuss and examine the written teachings the acorn prophet had left behind. They began to work with the principles the prophet had spoken of. They began to tap into their oakness with silent and deliberate thought. They shifted their attention from polishing their shells to developing their oakness.

Miraculously, with no special rites or ceremony, they began to feel like oaks, think like oaks, behave like oaks. In a very short time, they too began to glow. Although their luster was not as high as the priests told them it should be, they were peaceful, tranquil, loving, and seemingly wise in dealing with the pressures of acorn life. Their glow drew more and more acorns to the secret nightly meetings. Before long, there was a mighty oakness movement in the acorn community, and more and more acorns fulfilled their purpose in life to realize and to bring forth their oakness.²

Friends, the God of the universe created you, loves you, and calls you his beloved child, in whom he is well pleased. God's greatest desire is that we would understand this reality, be transformed by it, and live into it such a way that everything we do comes from the beginning point of our understanding of our belovedness and our connection to God.

And so, the invitation to Christian discipleship this morning is to find ways to connect and re-connect with the God who loves you, who created you, who delights in you, and who is able to transform your heart away from the patterns of this world and make it more in line with the heart of God.

Are you longing for a deeper experience of God in your life? Have you spent some intentional time practicing the presence of God lately? Would you like to grow deeper in your inward journey so that you can better understand how to serve God in the world? Maple Grove offers many different opportunities to open yourself to the transformation available through a connection with God. In the coming weeks and months there will be more opportunities. There's one in specific that I'd like to talk about.

I recently participated in a week-long spiritual formation experience run by the ministries of The Upper Room. One of the things I felt called to bring back to the Maple Grove community was the opportunity to share in some of the spiritual formation practices that I learned. I've developed what I'm calling "R&R Retreats." They're opportunities to refuel and reconnect with God. Under the attitude of "why not start now?" the first one will be this coming Saturday morning from 9-noon.

Together, we will spend time in worship, study, silence and reflection. We will take time to still our minds and spirits so that our souls can be transformed by the love of God and we can be strengthened for the journey of faith.

If you are feeling disconnected from God, this might be a great opportunity to re-connect. If you are struggling to discern God's will in an area of your life, you may find this to be a time of

² Adapted from the original version by John W. Aikens, *Explorations in Awareness* (Lakemont, GA: CSA Press, 1966).

focus and clarity. If you simply want to spend time with God, with no other purpose in mind, this may give you a structured way to do that.

If you are interested, there is a sign-up sheet in the main lobby where you could indicate your interest. If you can't make it this Saturday, there will be another one in December. If there is enough interest, I hope to offer this on an ongoing basis, hopefully monthly. You would not need to be able to join every month – each month will be self-contained. This is just one way you could open yourself up to a transformational connection with God. It may not be right for you. If it isn't, I invite you to consider any other ways you might find to connect in a deep and meaningful way with God as you continue your journey of faith.

My greatest prayer is that we would all find and establish a regular pattern of life that sustains our connection to God and enables us to live as people who have been transformed by the love of God so that we can truly help bring God's kingdom to bear here on earth. May it be so. Amen.