

## The Gospel Train

Mark 10: 23-27

This is it, the last teaching in the *Ask Jack* summer sermon series. The last question is actually three questions from two different people about one subject. The subject is heaven and the questions are: what is heaven? how do you get there? and is everyone going?

The title for this sermon is inspired by an old spiritual called *The Gospel Train*. The lyrics include:

The Gospel train's comin', I hear it just at hand.  
I hear the car wheel rumblin' and rollin' thro' the land.  
The fare is cheap and all can go, the rich and poor are there;  
No second class aboard this train, no difference in the fare.  
Get on board little children, there's room for many more.

Walking through Barnes and Noble a couple of nights ago, I found myself in the religion/spirituality section. There, I saw a book titled HEAVEN by Dr. Randy Alcorn. Given my topic for today, I took it down and looked through it. This was written on the inside flap:

We all have questions about what heaven is like, and after twenty-five years of extensive research, Dr. Randy Alcorn has the answers. And the next time you hear somebody say, "We can't imagine what heaven will be like," you can tell them, "I can".

I'm glad to know that such an authoritative source is available because I don't think you'll get those kinds of answers in this teaching. You may want to consult this book, or many others on the topic of heaven.

The Bible says many different things about heaven. Most assume a cultural understanding of the time in which they were written. Examples include seeing heaven as being in the "bosom of Abraham," as surrounding the "throne of God," or walking "streets of gold."

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven (also called the kingdom of God, his focus was more on a way of living in this world than an indication of the nature of life after death. Despite the extensive descriptions in Dr. Randy Alcorn's book, I believe that heaven is a very personal idea. It is subjective with lots of different images and descriptions. The common threads that tie together the diverse images are really two: that heaven involves God and that it is a really good thing.

Your images of heaven are very important. What is heaven to you? What do you imagine heaven is like? I'm guessing your images include lots of different ideas. Heaven is an image that helps me endure the pain of the loss of loved ones who have died. It is an image that provides comfort in the face of such loss. I am encouraged that there is hope for continuing relationship. Heaven is an image that helps me face the prospect of my own death and provides a sense of meaning beyond this world of time and space. It is a way of believing that these few years of mortal life connect to a greater reality.

There can be a darker side when the image of heaven as reward makes life about being good enough or about winning the life lottery by being born into the right culture, the right family, and the right religion. Sadly, the promise of heaven has been used as tool for maintaining oppressive social systems. The hope of eternity paradise helped people, both black and white, cope with the continuing practice of slavery. It enabled many people to accept the evils of segregation and bigotry. It encouraged many women to endure misogyny, the dehumanization of women.

So, what is heaven like? That depends. What do we want heaven to be like? What do we need heaven to be like? What fills the empty space inside me? What eases my fear? What stimulates my dreams? What helps me cope with the worst life brings?

I went to see the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*. It was an hysterical and profane look at family relationships and family values against the backdrop of the culture surrounding child beauty pageants. At one point, the little girl of the family asked her uncle, who was with them because he had attempted suicide and could not be left alone, if he believed in heaven. Being an academic and a scholar, he replied thoughtfully, "I don't know". She pressed him, as children can do when adults become evasive: "What do you think?" As he was saying again, "I just don't know," she interrupted him with "I do". It was a touching moment in her world of family strife and uncertainty. She chose to believe. She needed to believe. It was very important for her. Then, her uncle asked tentatively, "Do you think I'll get in?" She told him simply, with the certainty of a child, "Yes". He needed to hear that.

So, who gets into heaven? What do you have to do to get in? What do you have to be? I received an e-mail from a friend back East this week about heaven. It seems a woman wrote the following:

I was testing children in my Sunday school class to see if they understood the concept of getting to Heaven. I asked them,

"If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven"?

"Noooooooo!" the children answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven"?

Again, the answer was, "Noooooooo!"

By now I was starting to smile. Hey, this was fun!

"Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into Heaven"? I asked them again.

Again, they all answered, "Noooooooo!"

I was just bursting with pride for them. "Well," I continued, "then how can I get into Heaven"?

A five-year-old boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

Concerns about heaven what it's like, and who gets to go, reflect deep concerns about our existence and the nature of our lives. How do you get there? First, "you gotta be dead". There's a concern! What are the other criteria for getting into heaven?

There's a familiar New Testament story about sheep and goats in which the only criterion is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners. In that case, the only requirement for heaven is ministry to "the least of these".

Today's scripture lesson concerns getting into the kingdom of God, which is usually seen as synonymous with heaven and, ultimately about getting into heaven after we die. Jesus says that it's harder to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. Later interpretations of this image posit a low gate in Jerusalem called *The Eye of the Needle* where camels can only get through after being unpacked and by crawling on their knees. This is a later interpretation and not Jesus' image. Camels were the largest animals in that region and Jesus' image was of getting that large animal through just about the smallest hole there was, the eye of a needle. This is exactly what was meant. It is impossible, from our perspective, to enter

heaven by anything we do, especially with the baggage of wealth, power, and prestige. It's only possible with God.

Many Christians say you have to be *saved*, meaning to be the right kind of Christian, to get into heaven. Coincidentally, many Muslims say you have to be the right kind of Muslim to get in, etc. I believe heaven is not a reward for being saved or for doing anything. One's salvation status is often interpreted as a ticket to heaven

Salvation is a powerful image of people in loving relationship with the Holy in themselves. It is the image of discovering the mind of Christ in their own minds and of embracing God in their community. Salvation is God's gift regardless of theology or of religious labels.

The third question about heaven is this: "Is everyone going?" Assuming heaven as a destination, I say "Yes". One spiritual says, "everyone talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there". This is a critique of those who think they can control entry to heaven. The words I hear are these: "Get on board little children. The fare is cheap and all can go. There's room for many more"

The bigger question may well be this: "Will we recognize heaven when we are in it?" One powerful definition of heaven: "not a place where everyone you love is there, but a place where you will love everyone who is there."

If heaven is not a place, a destination, or a reward, what is it? Perhaps heaven is synonymous with living in God, not a destination but living a reality that is already present. In such a case, our invitation and our challenge is to open our eyes. It is to wake up to this reality and recognize the living presence of God in life and beyond death.

Heaven is being awake to the reality of the Holy in us, between us, and in all things. Heaven is trusting who we are in God even beyond this life. It is trusting our presence within God now, and being more fully present after we die.

I have a final question to ask, "Do our images of heaven ultimately help us?" When we use them to live in denial of some scary parts of life, are they good for us? Using heaven as a reward, a payoff for following Jesus, may cause us to miss the value in the following itself, in the power of that relationship, and the quality of life that issues. Using heaven as a hedge against honest grief, does the hope that our loved ones live on somewhere keep us from moving ahead with our lives? Do we allow ourselves to be stuck by keeping them as they were in this life, rather than letting their memory become part of us and empower us to move forward with our lives?

To the extent that the image of heaven lets us avoid the reality of death, denying the fear of non-existence, it may not be helpful, especially once we move out of childhood. Clinging to a literal image of heaven can cause us to push such fears out of conscious awareness. These fears then can control us and keep us from living fully and abundantly. Focusing on the afterlife, as many Christians and others do, can distract from task of working for justice, peace, and reconciliation – the task of transforming this world.

But we long for heaven, at least many of us do. Is that bad? Is it a false hope? Theologian Paul Tillich offers a helpful way to embrace and affirm the desire in our hearts for heaven. He claims that, as people, we come from the infinite and will go to the infinite. We belong to the infinite, but are separated from it in these mortal and finite lives. Awareness of this separation, at a deep level, causes anxiety and feelings of loss. This sense of separation includes separation from each other, so we have a strong desire to connect with others. This is related to our desire to reconnect to the infinite. We seek the meaning of life in reconnection to the eternal,

the infinite.

Tillich suggests that we touch the infinite in this life by connecting to each other. We do this in three ways. The first is through knowledge, by learning about the world, the universe, and each other. The second is through artistic expression. Each of us is capable of artistic expression which brings a limited participation in the meaning of another person's life. The third, a most powerful connection, is personal relationship. By this, he means knowing another person at a deep level, participating in the meaning of their life, living in communion with another, and with others.

There is more to life than what we see. I believe in what is infinite, what is eternal. I long for it. Our images of heaven all draw from the knowledge of the infinite within us. As the song says, "heaven is in my heart". That's how we get to the heaven that is not a place or a destination. It is in our hearts and in the hearts of each other. We discover heaven by embracing the Holy within and between us.

This image of heaven is really good for us and its all about God. That sounds heavenly and I say, "So be it. Amen."