

Fixed Eyes

On this 4th Sunday in Lent, Jesus descends into the depths of His Passion. We hear the Gradual, as we do for 5 of the 6 Sundays in Lent, beseeching us to fix our eyes on Jesus as He makes the journey to the cross. Wherever your eyes are fixed that's where you're headed. So where are your eyes fixed? This world, family, job, kids, health, wealth, politics, hobbies, etc.?

Jesus shows us where the 12 particularly are to have their eyes fixed. Understand, these are seminary-trained disciples. Instructed by Jesus personally for 3 years. What Jesus tells them here is nothing new. He predicted His passionate suffering 2 times before this, but... spoiler alert... for the 1st time He tells them the why of it. This is part of the reason it's the most extensive prediction in Matthew. Using the number of Greek words in each, this one is 50% longer than the first and 100% longer than the second (*Gibbs, 996*).

It's also the most brutal of the 3. Remember they are heading to Jerusalem for the Passover Party. It was a time of celebrating and feasting. This wasn't the Day of Atonement where the OT church afflicted it's soul. It wasn't the Feast of Booths where they lived outdoors in makeshift dwellings to remember the 40 years of wandering for their fathers' unbelief. It was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Passover. Yes, they remembered they had to flee Egypt in haste with unleavened breads; yes they would remember their bitter captivity with bitter herbs. But Passover was a celebration of the Lord's deliverance from captivity. It's a party, but before they get there, Jesus stops takes the 12 aside. Really the idea emphasized is "by themselves" (YLT), 'privately.' "We are going up to Jerusalem" and for the first time Jesus says "they will condemn Him to death", "they will turn Him over to the Gentiles"; And then the darkness descends, the suffering rushes headlong: Jesus tells them this will happen in order 'to mock', 'to flog', to crucify' Him. Fix your eyes on this. This is what's coming.

Though this is the 3rd time Jesus has taught them these things, Luke tells us, "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what He was talking about." Don't blame Jesus. He wanted them to know these things. That's why He told them 3 times. Luke even says He spoke plainly. What is hiding the truth from them is their own willfulness. Surely you've seen this: the person thinks they are handling a situation by not thinking about it, not addressing it, ignoring it. To ignore is to be willfully ignorant. But do recall every Passion prediction ends with Jesus being raised on the 3rd day. But the noise of mocking, flogging, and crucifying blot Easter out.

Aunt Mary shows where the 12 actually have their eyes fixed. But Mark lets you know it was the namby-pamby sons of her, James and John, who were behind asking for the best seats in Jesus' kingdom. And both Matthew and Mark let you know that the other 10 were right behind them. Both Gospels say the others "were indignant." The OT church leaders were indignant at the children shouting Jesus' praises on Palm Sunday (Mt. 21:15). The ruler of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus healed on the sabbath the woman whom Satan had crippled for 18 years (Lk. 13:14). Pretty sad what the enemies of Jesus were indignant over, huh? Disciples are no better: they're indignant at the brothers' request and will be at another Mary for spending so much money to anoint Jesus' feet before He dies (Mt. 26:8). Jesus is said to be indignant one time, when His disciples hindered moms from bringing their babies to Him for blessing (Mk. 10:14).

Remember what Jesus told the 12 to fix their eyes on: betrayal to OT church; betrayal by OT church to Gentiles; and on Jesus being mocked, flogged, crucified. Right then Aunt Mary comes in a great display of humility, piety, and maybe worship. I know what you're thinking: Hadn't Jesus just promised them at the end of Matthew 19: "At the renewal of all things... you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel." She's just asking for the best seats in the kingdom. On the left and right of King Jesus. Someone has to sit there; why not them?

Jesus had pointed them to the cross; their eyes, Aunt Mary's, James' and John's, the other 10 apostles, aren't fixed on the cross but on glory. Whatever crosses we have in our life, we think they are something to be gotten through, endured, to get passed and then it's on to glory. As if Jesus didn't say the cross was something to take up daily and follow Him with, as if Jesus had promised us roses without thorns, as if the cross only purpose was for us to put it down. And that's why Jesus says in response to the request for the best seats: *Not* do you know what you're asking! James and John will be in Gethsemane when Jesus begs not to have to drink the cup of God's wrath against our sins and sinfulness. They will hear from Calvary as Matthew records: "Two robbers were crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left" (27:3). Did they think in response: that's the cup we said we'd drink; that's the places where we wanted to be!

Jesus seeks to refocus their and our eyes. There's a veil over the cross hiding the disciples from seeing it's glory. This isn't in the sense our crosses are veiled in Lent: as a symbol of our muted joy. The veil here is in the sense our Communion vessels and elements are veiled. The veil tells us what's underneath on the altar is something way more than meets the eyes. Something way more powerful than bread and wine; way more precious than the gold and silver vessels; way beyond the things of earth, men, and sinners. This veil over the Passion and the cross indicates that here are the things of heaven, of holiness, of God.

There's the problem. They think of Jesus' kingdom as one of power and might. They think in terms of a kingdom of power and even of glory not in terms of a kingdom of grace. Pagan rulers revel in power and that literally "lorded down" and "lorded against" others. Jesus says "It will not be that way with you." This is future indicative. He tells them not how they *must* change their thinking, living, and being, but promises they will be changed. But many, if not most, think Jesus is giving marching orders. You want to be great among other Christians? Be servant of all. You want to first? Be a slave.

In this view, Jesus tells the brothers, Aunt Mary, and the 10 how to get the next best places to the ones on either side of Him.

If you translate the last clause in the text “even as” rather than “just as” you take away some of the What Would Jesus Do idea that people usually hear this text with. You’re not to do “just as” Jesus does, but the promise is that you will be fueled by something different than the world is, “even as” Jesus was. Jesus didn’t come so you and I could be lords against or down upon others. He came to serve and give His life as a ransom. This is the story of the person saved from certain death and forever grateful, forever changed, forever focused on his savior. And what do such fixed eyes see? They see Jesus from day one of His ministry labeled as God’s Lamb carrying away the world’s sins. They see Him baptized to fulfill all righteousness. They see sins, sickness, and devil are no match for God in flesh and blood. They see the Man who stilled the storm is truly the Son of God.

What we see with refocused eyes is that He is holy we are not. He is perfect we are not. And now, 3 years into His ministry, they find out not only had Jesus come to serve, as He had in Feeding 5,000 than 4, healing people, raising the dead, He had come to give His life as a ransom in place of many. He came to die in the place of the damned sinners of all time and places. That would be me and you. And not just die but suffer betrayal by His Father, His friends, and then mocking, whipping, and crucifying. If you’ve ever known someone who was indebted to another person for literally saving their life, there is nothing that can break the bond that person has for their ‘savior’. It’s superhuman. Their eyes are fixed forever on the person who did that.

Don’t go off the rails here. Don’t think: Aha! Here we have a limited atonement. Jesus didn’t die for all but many; He didn’t rescue all but only some. Not even Calvin took it this way. He says, “‘Many’ is used, not for a definite number, but for a large number, in that He sets Himself over against all others. And this is its meaning also in Rom. 5:15, where Paul is not talking of a part of in mankind but the *whole human race*” (*Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol. II, p.277, emphasis mine. http://www.examiningscalvinism.com/files/Gospels/Matthew20_28.html*).

Lutheran commentators (*Ylvisaker, Gibbs, Buls*) say pretty much the same thing. But I see that while Jesus gave His holy life and His guilty death in place of all, only some, only many are ransomed in the sense that they actually go free. As the Easter grave is thrown open showing that our Death, our Sin, our Devils have been overcome by the risen Lord Jesus, not all come out of their tombs. Jesus was resurrected for the life of the world, but some stay dying. Not all come out of the chains of their sins. Oh Jesus’ ransomed them; Oh Jesus broke their chains but they see themselves bound as ever. And yes, while the resurrection of Jesus proves that Satan’s head has been crushed for all, many refuse to see that’s true of their devils. They are still alive and kicking and left to them to deal with.

We do read/hear this passage wrongly, if we think it ends with our eyes fixed on self, others, or the rewards of service. No as with the Gradual and the Introit, all eyes are to be on Jesus and Him crucified. The Romans hated the cross. Cicero said, "Let the very mention of the cross be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears" (*Pro Rabirio, 5*). Contrast this with our processional crucifix. In the 8th century till the 12th, the corpus on the processional crucifix would be facing the archbishop. Beginning with the 12th a corpus appeared on both sides. So whether clergy or lay, whether the cross was coming or going all eyes were fixed on a crucified Savior (*Church Vestments, Norris, 139*). Amen

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