

August 20, 2006

## **Kingdom of Heaven**

*Matthew 9:18-33*

I have to admit that I have enjoyed these past few Sundays. I have missed being with you but I have enjoyed the opportunity to study without facing a deadline, that extra cup of coffee on Saturday and Sunday mornings and the leisurely reading of the newspapers. There was some concern that this class could not survive a period of not meeting, but here we are. As far as classes go we are about the smallest of the small. Our destiny is not to grow as a class but to shrink. Despite that destiny we have two of our inactive members join us today. As a percentage that is a magnum leap.

As class we can be proud of our heritage. Small in numbers we have been a major player in some of the major happenings that have been important in the ongoing mission of Highlands. It was a member of this class that started the sausage biscuit program. A program that has over time

evolved into our transit ministry, a ministry of which this church proudly boasts even though there is some concern of late.

Members of this class originated the McGowan Scholarships at Birmingham Southern. In their day they were the second most prestigious scholarship awarded to that school. The time and place didn't fit. With the passage of the McGowan Scholarships members of this class were instrumental in the formation of the Highlands Foundation providing this church with an economic crutch. The Methodist Education Leave Society was a product of two of our members. That society provided a unique educational opportunity to Methodist ministers in the North Alabama Conference. Through contributions from the Eli Lilly Foundation that opportunity is now offered ministers of all denominations in the state of Alabama. We can take some credit for the Christmas Eve Communion service that is one of the highlights of our holiday worship program. We used to have a "drop-in" communion service on Christmas Eve. This class initiated a more formal service at our house under the leadership

of class member Rev. Butterly. The formal Christmas Eve Service we now enjoy in the Sanctuary followed. A service that is largely supported by class members. I doubt that we would enjoy the wonderful music program featuring parts of the Alabama Symphony without the support of the members of this class.

And so it goes, from the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, comes a tree that can provide a roosting place for the birds of the air. Not trying to brag, just wanted to remind you that God has a plan for the least of these.

Today we study two events out of the life of Jesus, not what he said but what he did. Remember our study is aimed at how he walked the walk and not how he talked the talk.

As Jesus went about Galilee preaching, teaching and healing he was approached by two blind men calling for his pity. Jesus touched their eyes and cured them of their blindness. Then he cast out a demon that possessed the man who couldn't speak. Jesus cast out the demon and the dumb man spoke.

This put me to thinking, when we talk about the Kingdom of Heaven, what are we talking about? Are we talking about some mystical place where God reigns supreme as is portrayed by the words in the Book of Revelation? And then it is hard to think about Heaven without some concern about salvation. Without going into what is meant by “being saved” what does it take to get us into this kingdom?

I was brought up in the Presbyterian Church and the teachings of John Calvin. I was taught, or maybe I assumed, that once you accepted Jesus as Savior and God as Master you became a part of the “elect”. That as a member of the elect your sins past, present and future were forgiven and you received a pass into Heaven.

When I came to the Methodist Church I was faced with the doctrine that being a child of Adam we fall from grace for which we need redemption. That being saved is not enough, it is a process that must be repeated as we struggle, fall and attempt to rise again.

As I studied Paul things began to clear up although I have never been able to understand Romans. Paul tells us that we are saved by faith, not works. Faith being a belief in Christ and acting on that belief. Here was a comforting way to approach salvation and the entry into Heaven. IT was not your works, or the lack thereof, that got you in or kept you out of Heaven but whether or not you believed.

From an intellectual point of view resting my future on a belief was no problem. The concept of Jesus as Christ, all man, all God, seemed pretty good to me, so maybe my Presbyterian background wasn't too far off base.

The next step in the evolution of my thoughts of getting into Heaven were not so comforting. I read in the Book of James where James makes a profound statement, ***“Show me their deeds and I will show you faith.”***

Reaching back these words of James seem to connect with the one line I read in the Old Testament. It was about a man named Enoch. All we know about Enoch is contained in the

line, ***“Enoch walked with God and God took him.”*** According to this sentence Enoch was always in the presence of God, walking with him. This wasn't something that followed death it was an everyday thing. And then we turn the page and hear Jesus say, ***“I am the way.” “I bring you the more abundant life.”*** And look how Jesus illustrates his point. A man was blind, couldn't see, lived in darkness, Jesus touched his life and things changed from that point on. For all intents and purposes he was now a new man, born again, with a new prospective, a new outlook on life. This wasn't a promise of a better tomorrow it was the opportunity for a better today.

Show me their works and I will show you faith.

Someone astutely observed, ***“Everyone is but a bundle of possibilities and potentialities until he learns using what he has.”*** It is there, in the using, that one finds the life more abundant that starts here and now and ends up in eternity.

There is so much of value for life that pours out of the Gospels that one attempts to single out one thing at his peril.

That which attracts me out of today's study of Jesus' gift of sight to the blind man is that we don't wait to the last judgment to find the more abundant life, or if you will Heaven, or the Kingdom of God; we live it now.

Every week Birmingham sets a new record for killing. Almost everyday we read of a bomb exploding in some crowded area. This happens because somehow we forget or fail to recognize, something that was brought home to me week after week in Dr. McGowan's sermons. The individual human being is a thing of supreme value in the sight of God. The only thing of any sacredness in the world is the life and welfare of the individual human being. And, if we apply James thoughts to the belief and the sacredness of the individual life then the Kingdom of God begins, or ends, on how we treat our fellow man. To fully appreciate what James is saying calls us to recognize that our fellowman is God's representative to us.

When we wrong ourselves from the possibilities that can come from this one and only life that has been given us we

destroy something that all eternity cannot recreate. When we rob another out of the possibilities that can come from his or her life we destroy something that all eternity cannot recreate. We sin against God when we sin against ourselves. We sin against God when we sin against our fellowman.

As Jesus opened the eyes of this unknown blind man he seems to be telling us that it is not what we believe in theory that matters but what we do in practice. And that is what James is telling us; faith is found in practice.

Jesus gave the blind man a better life, not at some far off time, but right there on that dusty road in Galilee. Having been touched by Jesus this man was freed of his bonds so that he could live his life to the fullest of his potential.

This wasn't a new revelation to mankind. Years earlier the writer of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalms explained a man's life as a walk with God through the glen of doom, by green meadows and refreshing waters. In Dr. Moffatt's translation of the Bible this Psalm ends with these words: *"... yes and all through my life*



*Goodness and Kindness wait on me, the Eternal's guest within his household forevermore.*" He walked with God and God took him.

Boil it down – it's not who you know or what you know that represents your faith or your true life, it is what you do with that life. Jesus by the life he lives, "*Guides me by true paths, as he himself is true.*"

THE BIRMINGHAM  
Birmingham, Alabama

Guy McGowan, Minister  
Charles E. Fiquett, Jr. — Associate Ministers — B. Roderick Powers

VOL. 10 — NO. 37

MAY 31, 1962

### *Pastor's Message*

*The two highest ends toward which a man may dedicate himself are to bring goodness and gladness to the world. The final judgment which will rest upon every man's life is whether he added goodness and gladness to his fellow men or was an instrument of evil, depression, and discontent.*

*The course of most men's lives are brief interludes of joyousness between nagging fears, bitter disappointments, dark doubts, gnawing anxieties, exhausting struggles, and grievous trouble. The whole effort of civilization is to lift the masses of mankind from their primitive natural state of savagery which Thomas Hobbes so correctly described as "nasty, brutish, and short."*

*Since evil and sorrow are the scourges of mankind the individual who brings goodness and gladness to men is the saviour and redeemer of his fellows.*

*It behooves every man who would live responsibly to ask himself, "Am I, by the quality of my life and the deeds I do, one who brings goodness and gladness to my world or am I the opposite?"*

*The nearest to divinity to which any man can attain is to resolve at the beginning of each day "I will so be within myself and so act toward my fellow men that there will be more of goodness and gladness in that part of the world I touch today because I am there."*

#### PRAYER

*O God, make me today an instrument of goodness and gladness among my fellow men. Amen.*