

September 11, 2011

The God Who Serves His People

Mark 10:45

INTRODUCTION

Today is the ten year anniversary of the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York. From a Christian perspective it marks ten years of missed opportunities for the gospel. What would Jesus do in the late morning hours if He were walking through the streets of New York ten years ago today?

Mychal Judge, chaplain of the New York City Fire Department, was the first recorded death. In a NPR story last week bystanders recounted his heroism, running into the burning North Tower with the firefighters. Filmmakers happened to be there, catching Judge trapped in the lobby on film, looking at the falling bodies out of the window and “absolving them of their sins as they fell.” It is difficult to argue against those kind of sentiments at a moment like this—except that, as those who have the only truth that will ever comfort forever, we don’t have a choice: Sinners absolving sinners, workers of charity trying to absorb an eternal fire with a cup of water, and ten years of churches still reinventing the faith to make it more relevant for falling sinners. Something is wrong with this picture.

After a series of church growth studies done in the years after 9-11, one commentator admitted, “The reason people are leaving the church now is that they have serious questions as to where their dead daughter is or how the world is going to end. Churches offer musical productions and food, but they are not answering the questions.”¹ Another opportunity similar to the wake of World War II was missed by a church that is embarrassed by its truth.

- THE INCARNATION IS THE GROUND OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE
- THE RANSOM OF MANY IS THE GROUND OF THE INCARNATION

The Big Idea is that Jesus Christ is the *only* God big enough to give himself for a debt that is our *only* ultimate problem.

¹ quoted in Charles Colson, *Being the Body* (Word Publishing, Nashville 2003); p. 17

This is a truth so big at the heart of Mark's Gospel that there are two truths in it so profound, and my only hesitancy is that I have given myself only one week to unpack these two "onlys"—**Only** one God is big enough to qualify as God (such a God must not be needy); **Only** one problem threatens the totality of our being and for all eternity and Jesus came to solve that problem. A church that does not have this theology and this gospel can be no good for people on a day like 9-11 or on any other day after it.

DOCTRINE

I. THE INCARNATION IS THE GROUND OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE

A) The Incarnation is by Definition a Humiliation

1. The all important word here is the word *For* (45). It means "because." In other words, everything Jesus just taught about what a Christian in his kingdom must be like—not like the Gentiles lording it over each other, but giving up themselves as slaves—all this is now given a reason: because or **for** this is who Jesus is. Just as in the original creation, when God made man and woman to speak about himself as an Image, so now the reason that this restored Image is to serve and give and get out of your comfort zone is because of what it says about who? *For even the Son of Man came* (45).

2. From where and into what did Jesus take on flesh? First, Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, fully God: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" [Col. 2:9]. Secondly, Jesus is the Son of Man, descended from David, born to a virgin, Mary, but nevertheless "made like his brothers in every respect" [Heb. 2:17], so He was fully human.

B) The Incarnation is the Form of a Servant

1. The Incarnation of Christ does not simply include being a humble servant. The very meaning of this earthly life of Jesus is the definition and picture and reality of a humble servant. Paul says this straightforwardly: "taking on the form of a servant" [Phi. 2:7]. So it is here in the rationale of Jesus—*for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve* (45)—not to be served, but to serve. But wait a minute! Doesn't the Bible say in so many ways and in so many places to serve the Lord? Indeed it does! "Serve the LORD with gladness" [Ps. 100:2]; "you shall serve him and hold fast to him" [Deut. 13:4].

2. But perhaps we are not being careful to distinguish between **two kinds of serving** here. When Paul spoke to the pagans he reintroduced them to the One they called “the unknown god,” and he said,

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **nor is he served by human hands**, *as though he needed anything*, **since** he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything [Acts 17:24-25].

King Solomon understood this in spite of building a temple for God. In his dedication of the temple he proclaimed: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” [1 Kings 8:27]. How you serve God—in other words, how you understand religion—tells people around you everything they need to know about what you really think about the nature of God himself. There is a kind of service where someone works and someone else pays: you exchange your effort and productivity for some payment. Because you have contributed to the owner of resources something he needs (labor), he exchanges in return something you need (wages). But there is another kind of service that is so simple that we forget to call it service. It’s the kind you can’t wait to do on a holiday. It might be when you pass out the presents from under the Christmas tree or when you serve the food around the banquet table. At first the two things may seem to have something in common. You’re moving in both. But in the second, joyful kind the thing you’re serving is not meant to get something else you want but to commend something you love as if there’s plenty to go around. Serving God is the second kind of serving in Scripture. We don’t serve God like an employee comes to an employer—we call that “works-righteousness”—but we serve God like a cook at Thanksgiving or a child around the Christmas tree. Serving Him means “serving Him up” or giving *of* Him—not *to* Him, as though He needed anything!

3. How you serve God is a reflection of your theology and therefore how you serve God either honors God or dishonors Him. So don’t serve God—*as though He needed anything!* If you serve God as if to contribute to Him then you contradict the whole meaning of the Incarnation! Now what kind of a God has the church in America served in the decade following 9-11? What has our mission in the streets, filled with broken and shell-shocked people, said about the God who serves? What have we commended to them? Who have we commended to them? Have we left God with them, or have we made the cold cup of water or the warm meal an end in itself?

II. THE RANSOM OF MANY IS THE GROUND OF THE INCARNATION

A) What is This Ransom that it Should Cost His Life?

1. The word **ransom** (*lytron*) and the word **redemption** (*apolytrosis*) are very closely associated in the Bible. Simply put, redemption is a purchase and ransom is the price for that purchase. But that is too simple. In the first century in which Jesus lived, two-thirds of the Romans Empire were slaves. In the ancient world, you became a slave as the result of being a captive of war, selling yourself into it either by poverty or an immoral lifestyle, or simply being the offspring of those who had done so. So the whole language of redemption and ransom was commercial; but it also carried with it the knowledge that the slave was in a morally reprehensible situation and utterly helpless. At one moment he or she was the property of one owner; at another the property of a new one. So redemption and ransom are not simply commercial (no one swipes a “ransom card”); there was a personal-moral element to the property. This is the context in which the Scriptures use this language of the sinner in relation to God.

Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit [Ps. 49:7-9].

Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed [Jn. 8:34, 36].

The last piece of the puzzle we need is that these two Greek words—*lytron* and *apolytrosis*—are then related to the simpler Greek word “to loose” (*luo*), so that a full meaning of redemption-with-ransom is literally “loosing-for-a-price.”

2. Now the payment was owed to God’s own justice. The glory of God is what was offended by sin and the wrath and curse of God is the punishment for that offense. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, just like the animals sacrificed in the Old Testament, was designed to flow upward to God. The cross stands in between God who is holy and the sinner who has is defiled and has committed treason. The punishment of God flows downward, but instead of falling upon the sinner, for all who would believe, it falls upon the Substitute instead. And flowing upward back to God is the satisfaction for his justice being met: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” [Eph. 5:2].

Christ is offered up and God is appeased. The satisfaction is owed to God; all the glory is given to God. So what does God hold up as the answer to the ultimate problem? Himself!

3. Notice that this is one train of those for Jesus: the Son of Man came to serve *and to give his life as a ransom for many* (45b). Notice the connection between this service and this ransom: that the most self-less act ever is the most **self-serving** act ever! In helping most where we most need it, He draws attention to himself. He serves us himself: “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men unto me” [Jn. 12:32]. This is the ultimate paradox at the center of reality—that for God to be good for us and give to us and serve us, He has to commend to us himself. He has to glorify himself and make much of himself. Notice that this service of his Son is like the meal that we spoke of before in the God-honoring kind of service. If God is not to be an idolater by putting other gods before himself, then when He offers us a solution and happiness He has to draw attention to himself. God has to save us from God. God has to be the solution to the world’s problems for the same reason that God was the reason for the world’s existence to begin with. God has to be the gospel for the same reason that “no other gods” can be put forward in the first commandment. Any other ‘god’ is no god at all! Any supposed God who says, “I know what will make you happy forever—seventy-two virgins or your own planet!”—that’s not ‘God,’ but a needy little comic book character, a vain imagination of children dreaming up superheroes. A big God who is really infinite needs nothing and has everything in himself to give you!

B) Who is This Many that They Should Be Served in This Way?

1. First of all, it is amazing how many people forget what the word “many” means when they want to bang our little Christian drums. On one side there are those who would say “You see—**many**, *not a specific small number*, so it is for all the same!” and others will shoot back “No, no, **many** is *not all* and Jesus said the way is narrow, so we should not expect too many!” But since when did **many** ever mean “not too many” or “so many that its all the same”? Many simply means many, or as John saw it, “After this I looked, and behold, a **great multitude** that no one could number, **from** every nation, **from** all tribes and peoples and languages” [Rev. 7:9]. That takes care of both of those little drums, doesn’t it! This “many” is so many that they are incalculable and this “many” is not equal to the original human race in Adam, but they are drawn from out of nations and tribes in the old world. That is the many that Jesus saves—it prevents us from being either do nothing fundamentalists or do nothing in particular liberals! If the way is narrow—great warning!—go out and tell many and get a whole lot of them on that narrow way!

2. But what about the place of this mission statement in all of the other similar statements [cf. Jn. 18:37]? In other words, why did Jesus really come to earth? Well, in another

‘mission statement’ Jesus tells us that “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” [Lk. 19:10]. One thing these statements have in common that might be easy to miss is that Christ was like this prior to the Incarnation. He came in order to serve his people in this way. He intended this of the Incarnation. The humanity of Jesus did not cause the lowliness of Jesus. This is what God is like; and out of this divine heart of compassion flows the humility of this Servant King.

Who is really cruel about 9-11—the God who has offered himself, long before it happened and ever since, or all the people who have tried to soften the blow by spending years lying to the people who plummeted to their death that day and have lied ever since about where your salvation can be found? God offers himself, his Son’s perfect blood, life forever, infinite joy, ever increasing. What do you offer that can compare?

Objection: But the whole context of this mission statement of Jesus is how the disciples are to understand their place in the kingdom. So the basic thing Jesus is doing here is giving us an example. He is calling us to be more like himself, to incarnate into culture and reach out and get dirty. What makes this such a mission statement of Jesus is how ‘missional’ it is.

Reply: That is certainly true that He is our example in incarnating into culture. But there is one very crucial difference between what *Christ* can give when He comes down and what *we* can give when we reach out. Christ can give of himself and satisfy the soul forever. Nothing we can give—if it’s not that—can do the same. Christ can put away our sin and shame and welcome us into God’s family forever. Nothing we communicate to the community—if it’s not that—can do the same.

The example is there for us; but how *we* follow the example is not the good news. And if we tell unbelievers to put their trust in how well we get on the mission of Jesus, then we are serving something else up: something other than the work of Christ as the good news. If we were to take a closer look into the outstretched hands of Jesus, to see what He serves us with, we would see one thing—the piercings of the nails that drew out our ransom price, his blood.

APPLICATION

1. To the Skeptic – What would Jesus have done 9-11 or immediately afterwards? I suspect He would have said the very same thing about a tower that fell in his own day. It was called the Tower of Salome.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish [Lk. 13:4-5].

Do you think that Jesus was changing the subject or making light of it? Or isn't Jesus' whole point that *you* have changed the subject and *you* are making light of it! What is it that we're making light of anyway? Are you quite sure that you are as outraged by evil as God is? This King who you and I have offended is not only kind enough to not let us change the subject, but He takes upon himself a weight that far outweighs a million falling towers. And if this Servant King is what God is like then consider your hope!

2. To the Sinner – A name was given to the place where the towers fell ten years ago. It was called Ground Zero. It's a name originally associated with the point closest to the blast of the atomic bombs that ended World War II. It's the spot that changes things forever. But there was another Ground Zero and it changed much more than a turn in history. It too was a place of death and even revenge. To anyone who doesn't want ultimate answers to ultimate questions, it looked like a senseless act of suffering. You see the danger that faced those who were in the Tower and on the planes was far different than those who faced what Jesus did. The Bible calls God our strong tower of refuge, a place of safety that we run into, in order to flee a danger infinitely greater than death itself. And that great danger is God himself. God saves us from God. He sends his own Son to pay the ransom that we owed to his own justice.

Those who were trapped inside the towers were exposed to its flames and its fall. But those who are hidden inside *this* Tower are protected from flames that will last forever.

People have spent the last decade debating over whether justice will be served in a foreign land or whether the terrorists themselves were seeking justice against us. The families of victims have cried for justice and conspiracy theories have added more fuel to that fire. But when all of this is forgotten—and there will come a day when it will be—the only place of safety from Justice (with a capital 'J') will be to run and take cover in that place where the judgment has already fallen.