

### **Sermon by John Timmer: “Rearranging Our Price Tags” from Matthew 3**

Our eyes naturally focus on stars-baseball and football greats, movie actors, TV personalities, famous authors, rock stars and tennis players. These are the people who dazzle us and dominate our magazines and television screens. We pour over the details of their lives: the clothes they wear, the people they love, the way they comb their hair, the breakfast cereal they eat. But examine their lives more closely and you will find that these stars are among the most miserable people on earth. Most have troubled or broken marriages. Many are heavy drinkers. Many are on drugs. Nearly all are tormented by self-doubt and are pitifully dependent on psychotherapy.

The Bible tells us to focus our eyes, not on stars, but on servants -- people whose left hand does not inform their right hand what it is doing, people who do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than themselves, people whose attitude to life is that of Christ Jesus himself.

The Bible tells us to train our spotlight on them. It tells us to focus our eyes on people who hunger and thirst after righteousness, on people who are merciful and peacemakers, on people who are poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and sad with the sad.

The Bible, in other words, tells us to reverse all of our values, to elevate, not the rich and the attractive and the famous; but the poor, the marginal, those who mourn. Instead of pursuing happiness, the Bible tells us to pursue service. Instead of extending vengeance, the Bible tells us to extend forgiveness. Instead of hoarding material things, the Bible tells us to lay up treasures in heaven.

Danish writer Kierkegaard tells a parable of a vandal who broke into a department store one night. But rather than steal things, he rearranged all the price tags. The next morning the sales people and customers came upon one surprise after another: diamond necklaces on sale for a dollar, and cheap costume-jewelry earrings costing thousands of dollars.

The gospel is like that vandal, Kierkegaard says. It rearranges all our price tags. It calls black white and white black. It says we must love our enemies and not hate them. It says we are not to resist one who is evil but to turn the right cheek to someone who has struck us on the left cheek. It says we must give generously to people in need, but without telling a single soul that we did. It says that, though we see weakness and wrong in others, we must refrain from judging them. It says we must pluck out our right eye rather than look at someone lustfully. It says we must forgive others their trespasses and not cultivate feelings of anger and hatred. It says we must live as free as a bird and not worry about the future.

The Gospel calls the poor rich and the rich poor. It says the first shall be last and the last first. The gospel rearranges all our price tags. And blessed are those who are not offended by this rearrangement.

This is what the cry of John the Baptist cry is all about. If you wish to receive Israel's long-awaited Messiah, John cries, you must repent. That is, you must adopt a new set of values; you

must focus your eyes, not on stars, but on servants. The reason many of us don't see the kingdom of heaven is because our eyes are focused on stars, is because we live by their values.

Shusaku Endo is one of Japan's foremost novelists. He is also a Christian. Shusaku Endo believes that Christianity has failed to make much impact on Japan because the Japanese have heard only one side of the story, have heard only the star side of the story, the beauty and majesty side of the story.

Japanese tourists visit Europe's cathedrals and museums and bring home pictures of that glory. Japanese people hear their choirs and orchestras perform Handel's Messiah and Bach's Mass in B Minor and enjoy listening to that glory. Yet somehow they miss the other side, the side of God making himself powerless, the side of Christ being crucified. As Endo points out, other religions offer a powerful, eternal Divine Being; only Christianity offers a God who took the form of a servant was born in human likeness, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Before we can receive this servant God, we must repent. Before we can receive him we must shift our eyes from stars to servants, must rearrange all the price tags, and must turn our life around so that it faces the direction from which Christ is coming to us. For if we don't, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. And if we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, we are left out in the cold.

In the September/October 1989 issue of *The Door*, Mike Yaconelli issues a cry similar to that of John the Baptist. The church must repent! Yaconelli announces. It must repent because thousands of people are being turned off to the Gospel, and that number gets larger every day.

What is the cause of this **mass** turn-off? Not Satan, not alcohol, not rock music, not drugs, not the New Age, not secular humanism. None of those things.

What turns thousands of people off to the Gospel is...Christians, specifically evangelical Christians, evangelical Christians whose eyes are focused on stars.

The greatest service we could do for God, Yaconelli says, the greatest impact we could make on evangelism in America, would be for all of us to shut up, would be for all of us to: quit talking, quit writing, quit making idiots of ourselves on television, quit building new churches, quit trying to convince the world that Christianity is true because Jesus makes us prettier, happier, thinner, wealthier, more successful, more popular, more influential, healthier, brighter and stronger.

Do we actually believe, Yaconelli asks, that the world is impressed with our fancy new churches, 12,000 in Sunday School, five services on Sunday morning, the millions who are watching on television, converted beauty queens and professional athletes, our book sales or our crusades? The world is not impressed. The world is laughing at us and the Jesus we supposedly are serving.

We are the ones who are impressed with ourselves. We are impressed with our political clout, our high profile, our visibility. Sadly, it's all an illusion and a lie. For it is not our job at all to

convince the world of how great and beautiful and successful and influential we are. Our job is simply to lift high the Christ who took the form of a servant, and humbled himself and became obedient unto death.

Repent! John the Baptist cries. Prepare yourself to receive the Christ! Prepare yourself by putting your life out of the star mode and into the servant mode! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

It's significant that Jesus' message is exactly the same as John's. In Matthew 4:17 we read, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying: 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.'" Jesus' message is not one whit different from that of John the Baptist.

Turn your life around, Jesus announces, because here comes the kingdom of heaven! Turn your life around, for with my coming God's rule is invading the world, with my coming God the king is returning to recapture the territory seized from him by the enemy.

This is what Jesus said 2000 years ago. This is what he is still saying today. And if you don't hear Jesus saying that, this means that you have domesticated him, that you have pulled him down to your level.

What you must see again is that Jesus still is today what he used to be 2000 years ago: the architect of a new economy, -the originator of a new value system, the rearranger of all of our price tags.

What Jesus still is proclaiming today is: when you remain in the old economy, when you cling to the old value system, when you refuse to have your price tags rearranged, then you continue to be duped by the cheap slogans and propaganda of a world whose sole intent is to maintain its independence from God's rule.

What Jesus still is proclaiming today is: Unless you repent, unless you turn your back on the old and follow him into the new, you have no future. Follow me! Jesus tells us. He could not have said it any simpler. These two words cut through a maze of theology. They are disrespectful of all denominational differences. They address everyone. The only way to answer Jesus' call is with your feet.

You either get up and start following Jesus into the kingdom of God with its revolutionary value system or you don't. You either follow Jesus into the future or you don't have a future. Follow me! These two simple words, you might say, sum up the whole of Christianity. Christianity is not a way of talking; it's a way of walking, of walking after Jesus into the realm where God's values prevail.

There's only one condition we must meet. We first must repent. We first must attune our values to Jesus' values. For if we don't, even though we follow Jesus, we will sooner or later become separated from him.

One of the most tragic passages in the New Testament is John 6:66, "After this, many of Jesus' disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." Now all of these people, at one time or another, made a decision to follow Jesus, but to follow Jesus without first repenting. Then, when the chips were down, when it became apparent that Jesus' values were diametrically opposed to theirs, many of the people drew back.

Therefore, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!