

No Earthly Good
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27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

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There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his plea and appears to him. "Sorry, but you can't take your wealth with you." The man implores the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules.

The man continues to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappears and informs the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars and places it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man dies and shows up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. St. Peter seeing the suitcase says, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!"

But, the man explains to St. Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checks and comes back saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through."

St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, "You brought pavement?"¹

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In our reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus harshly rebukes Peter for setting his mind on human things, earthly things, rather than on divine things, heavenly things. Perhaps Jesus would've rebuked the rich man from the anecdote I just shared, whose mind was on gold, but in heaven, gold is on the street.

Preachers love this text. Preachers love this text because it's the kind of trump card you play when folks get too worried about not making the budget, or too bogged down in church politics, or a little too resistant to upping this year's pledge—opting instead to save a little more for their

¹ "Take It With You," Beliefnet.com: //www.beliefnet.com/prayables/galleries/heaven-jokes.aspx.

retirement fund. It's not hard to imagine an old school reverend standing up in a budget meeting, looking the concerned treasurer square in the face, pointing a finger, and declaring in a loud and tremulous voice: *Behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* No offence intended to our beloved treasurer Andy or to the Board of Finance.

Do you see what I mean, though? It's the ultimate trump card. Except, I submit, the difference between divine things and human things, heavenly things and earthly things isn't what we think, at least not from Jesus' perspective.

For Jesus, heaven wasn't the final destination—not for him and certainly not for humanity. The idea of a heavenly reward after death comes from the Greeks—from the Middle Platonists. For Jesus and his followers, heaven was the divine domain. Earth was always the final destination for humanity and for Jesus—an earth remade after the divine dream of justice, unity, peace, and plenty for all. Jesus preached that heaven's realm was breaking in to the here-and-now world of human existence. He taught his followers how to live in light of this good news—to love their enemies, to share their resources, to cultivate the tiny seeds of heaven's realm until they were mature trees, sheltering the whole human family.

The authors of our gospels attribute miracles and healings to Jesus, not to paint him as God's favorite, but to provide evidence that heaven's realm really was actively transforming the world. And Jesus' own death on the cross, a death he foretold for the first time in this morning's reading, was the result of his radical message. Mark's Jesus knew that his message would lead to the cross, but the same Jesus denied himself for the sake of his message. For him, the sacrifice was worth it.

Peter didn't get it. How could he? The ancient Palestinian air was practically pregnant with apocalyptic fervor. The messiah, the Christ, would come and overthrow the Romans and return Israel to her former glory. Peter believed this. And Peter believed that Jesus was the one for

the job. It's no wonder all Jesus' talk of suffering and death at the hands of the authorities was so deeply troubling to Peter. Peter was stuck on *his* plans—on his people's plan to restore their nation and ensure their flourishing. Jesus, on the other hand, was following a different plan, one he understood to be heaven's divine plan to bring about cosmic flourishing—abundant life for all.

While Jesus' plan and Peter's plan both had flourishing as their end result, their means were entirely different. And that's what Jesus meant when he told Peter to stop focusing on human things and focus on divine things. As I said earlier, the two are not diametrically opposed because heaven's divine plan was, and is, about the flourishing of humanity and the healing of the earth. It's the means that are truly different.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. once said that, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." What we learn from Jesus is that the two are not in conflict. Heaven's plan *is* earthly good. To dedicate our lives to heaven's plan is not to keep people out of some future hell; is not to build our churches and evangelize our communities for the sake of increasing heaven's numbers; is not to live a life focused solely on the life hereafter. To dedicate ourselves to heaven's plan, as Jesus did, is to work for the transformation of the world that we have, right here, right now, for all. Heaven's plan *is* earthly good. And that, dear friends, is the very heart of Jesus' message—of the gospel.

And so, to all those whose sole focus is on the life hereafter; those for whom the good news of Jesus about the in-breaking of heaven's realm on earth is little more than fire insurance; those for whom global climate change and earth care are inconsequential; those for whom justice for all is an inconvenient speedbump on the road to eternity; to all those we can join Jesus in saying, "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*" Instead of setting our sights on some future paradise, let's join Jesus in praying for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. And let us work to make it so. Amen.