

“Food for the Journey”

Mark 10:17-27; Hebrews 4:12-16; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

⁶Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

⁷Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

¹⁰They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. ¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. ¹²For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹³Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. ¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Mark 10:17-27

¹⁷As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”

²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Hebrews 4:12-16

¹²Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

¹³And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

¹⁴Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The Sermon

Jesus didn't say that a person with wealth can't be saved, can't get into heaven, can't ever be found righteous enough to be acceptable.

He did say a couple of clarifying things about it, though, and for all who have a reasonably comfortable existence and maybe a dash extra, Jesus seems ready to disabuse us of a couple of notions:

one, the idea that we *do* good because *we're* good,

and two, the thought that doing enough good in the world to be considered righteous isn't particularly demanding: just be generally nice, and you're pretty much assured that you're on the right side—literally *righteous*, which means perfectly righteous, like Job, which is interesting since Job was written and included in the Bible as a fable, and was never intended to be the authorized biography of an actual human being. Nobody this side of Jesus is perfectly righteous.

Essentially, the good news of great joy rests on a couple of truths that are easily obscured. The good news is: we're not good, and this isn't easy. As a matter of fact, for humans on their own—especially people of means—righteousness is not possible.

That probably doesn't sound like good news. But when we don't recognize those two truths, the real good news becomes meaningless to us.

And when the real good news becomes meaningless to us, we become our own saviors.

And when we count on our own selves to be the source of, and the judges of, our own righteousness, the bar gets lowered even further, until eventually it becomes less and less clear to us why we should even care about, let alone doing anything to help out, anybody other than ourselves.

And then all that potential that God brought into the world by making you part of it goes to waste, dies on the vine, rots in the soil—all that

potential feeding and healing and caring and bringing hope that God was so excited to bring into this brutalized and darkened world on the day you were born.

But to realize that potential and be faithful asks a lot of us. It takes work, and conscience, and faithfulness, and loyalty to humankind, and loyalty to your neighbor, and forgiveness, and humility, and it isn't always easy. It's a long, long journey. None of us can last long on that journey by ourselves.

We rely on the kindness and goodness of God and others to give us the strength and sustenance to carry on doing good, embodying Christ's love, feeding the world's hunger, in all of its forms.

Jesus told the man with a lot of possessions, "No one is good but God alone."

In other words, we don't create or manufacture goodness within us; God is the source of good. We are channels—we're meant to be spigots—of God's goodness into the world, wells of the water of life, gushing up from underground springs not of our own making.

We don't do good because we're so good that it just flows out of us naturally and we can't even help it. We have to choose it.

Each of us is a complicated reality. Like emotions, we're not intrinsically good; we're not intrinsically bad. We *choose* to do good, or choose to do bad, or just choose not to do as much good as we are capable of.

And for all those who would choose to rack up a resume of good deeds primarily in order to make a case for our own righteousness—to feel good about ourselves so we can sleep at night—well, it's good news/bad news.

The bad news is: no matter how many accomplishments you string together in which the life chances of others are tangibly improved, it can never be enough to *make* us righteous.

The good news is: God doesn't demand that you become God in order to be found righteous. God simply demands that you become the best human you can be. So you can put aside for good the question of your own worthiness to claim your eternal reward. God takes care of that, so all we have to worry about is doing as much good for the world as we can.

We choose to do good, or choose to do bad, or just choose not to do good. Followers of Christ are clearly and compellingly instructed to choose to do good.

It's just that sometimes, that's a tall order.

You may have heard of "The Paradoxical Commandments" by Kent Keith; Mother Teresa had a version of this on her wall. Among its nuggets of wisdom, it says,

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway...

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway...

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
Fight for a few underdogs anyway...

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you have anyway.ⁱ

Sometimes choosing to do good can be a tall order. This is a long and demanding journey.

Back in the Old Testament book of Joshua, during the time of the conquest of Canaan, when militarily, the Israelites were on a roll and the surrounding peoples were rightly getting nervous, some Gibeonites came to the Israelites' leader, Joshua.

They told him they had been sent by the people of their country to “take provisions for the journey; go meet the Israelites, and say to them, ‘We are your servants; come now, make a treaty with us.’”

And to prove that they had travelled a long and grueling way to get there, they said to Joshua, look at what's left of the bread we brought:

“It was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey, on the day we set out to come to you, but now, see, it is dry and moldy; these wineskins were new when we filled them, and see, they are burst; and these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey.”

But it was all a ruse. The Gibeonites had been nearby all along, and just wanted to be able to negotiate for favorable treatment by demonstrating how they had made such sacrifices to go on the long and grueling journey. The bread was already dry and moldy, and everything else was already ratty, when they had first set out.

It can be tempting to try to find ways around the journey, to manufacture evidence that we've already done more than our share, to cut corners, or even to stand in front of the mirror and see if we can fool ourselves, if not one else, into believing that we've already given all that we have to give.

Elijah, alone, running for his life, had left everything behind, even his personal servant, and gone a full day's journey into the wilderness, and found a broom tree as lonely and solitary as he was, and he sank down at the foot of it, probably curled up in a fetal position, and said to God, "Please, just take me. I'm done for anyway."

And as he drifted somewhere between sleep, delirium, hunger, and sheer exhaustion, somebody tapped him, and he opened his eyes, and an angel—that is, a messenger from God—said, "Get up and eat." And right by Elijah's head, he saw a jar of water, close enough to reach out and feel its cool touch on his parched fingers. He felt warmth radiating from heated stones on which he could smell a fresh cake of bread.

The journey is long, and it's not easy. And no inherent goodness in Elijah made it any easier for him than it would be for you or for me. But God still had things for Elijah to do. A cup of water, a piece of fresh bread, a word of encouragement out of nowhere,ⁱⁱ and Elijah was able to carry on.

Thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail call it "trail magic." Sometimes along the way, for no obvious reason, and without specificity about the intended recipient, a tired, parched, emaciated and footsore traveler, making the hike from Springer Mountain in Georgia all the way up to the Hundred Mile Wilderness and Mount Katahdin in Maine, will find gifts or food or something cool to drink, just sitting there along the trail.ⁱⁱⁱ In towns along the way like Hot Springs (NC), you might even find somebody grilling food in their yard just for the hikers, for no other reason than pure hospitality.

They are probably what you and I would call "good people."

But what we really mean, according to Jesus, is that they are just people, like you and me, not organically good or bad, who decided to do something good for somebody else—specifically, for tired and hungry

travelers, about whom all they know is that those travelers are on a long and demanding journey.

In one of those stories that reminds us to be wary of anybody who advocates a return to “Biblical family values,” Sarah had “given” an Egyptian slave named Hagar to Sarah’s husband Abraham for the purpose of procreation. For some reason, tensions arose when Hagar conceived and had a son by Abraham.

Early one shameful morning, Hagar and the little boy were sent away, with only some bread and a skin of water, into the unforgiving wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Water for the journey doesn’t last very long, and when it ran out, the woman who as a girl had been taken so far from her home, into slavery, impregnated, and then sent away with nothing but the boy she had carried, put him under a bush and went someplace else to cry, because she knew it was the end, and she couldn’t bear to hear him crying his hungry, thirsty, final breaths before she drew her own.

And as she cried tears of rage and bottomless sorrow into the abyss of what could only have felt like the most godforsaken circumstances, the voice of a messenger of God said, “Don’t be afraid. I can hear you—both of you.” And God opened her eyes, and she could see now a spring of water, and she refilled the skin, and gave her son a drink.^{iv}

You can say the line you hear in the airplane about putting on your own oxygen mask first in the extremely unlikely event of a loss of pressure in the cabin. But every parent worthy of the name is going to make sure their child has food and water before they even think about the fact that *they* need food and water, too.

It’s a long journey and it isn’t easy. So when someone offers a drink of water, in that moment, it’s the most important thing in the world.

One of Jesus' disciples told him they had seen someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, and they had tried to stop that person, because it wasn't somebody they knew.

And Jesus said, "Don't stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us. Believe me when I say: *who ever* gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

That everyone needs it, and that literally anyone may undertake the goodness of providing it, was made obvious when Jesus, a Jewish man, stopped midday in his journey and, breaking so many societal rules it's almost funny, asked a Samaritan woman for a drink from a Samaritan well.^v

It's very soon after that episode in John's gospel that a large crowd has begun following Jesus specifically because they had seen the signs that he was doing for the sick.^{vi} The crowd members themselves may not be sick, but they're following him because they've seen what he was doing for ailing people.

He may be the last hope of those without financial resources who have at least one sick or suffering child, spouse or parent.

The fact that, as John says, the crowd "keeps" following him means it's people who have this much time available—no employment demanding their presence—and who are desperate enough to give this much commitment to such a desperate pursuit.

And Jesus said to his disciple Philip, "Hey, Phil, where in the world," or "how on earth," are we going to be able to buy bread for all these people?

And Philip says, more or less, "Well, I mean, we can't."

And Jesus says, not with his words but with his actions: “for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible.”

And five thousand desperate families on a long and draining journey, receive even more than they can consume of compassion, encouragement, and food.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,” says Isaiah,
 “and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
 “Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.”^{vii}

The journey is long and demanding wherein disciples serve the world around them with love and compassion.

So God has compassion on us, and we get help along the way.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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ⁱⁱ I Kings 19

ⁱⁱⁱ Among countless written references to trail magic, this is spoken of by Christopher Wren in *Walking to Vermont* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) and has been testified by my brother, Ken Grogg, who hiked the treacherous Hundred Mile Wilderness in the early 2000s.

^{iv} Genesis 16:1-6; 21:8-19

^v John 4

^{vi} John 6:2ff.

^{vii} Isaiah 55:1