

BASEBALL IN THE BIBLE: WINNERS, LOSERS & THE VICTORY OF GOD

a sermon by

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Galveston, Texas

September 17, 2006

Text: "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.'"

Mark 10:27

Well, I've been here long enough to let you in on a carefully concealed secret about me. This is it; the one bit of information that you need to get my jokes, to sympathize with my wife and to have a little pity on my kids.

I love baseball. This is not to say that I'm just an ordinary, run-of-the mill fan. I'm an absolute fanatic about the game of baseball. I love the game at all levels. I enjoy watching children learning to play T-Ball. I enjoy watching grown men playing in the big league – even when they act like young children.

Baseball fans all have a story behind their love of the game. For me there was a childhood lived across the street from the neighborhood's high school field. Their team included some pretty good athletes. One player, Pat Rocket, went on to play for the Atlanta Braves in the 1970s. Another of those high school students, a pitcher, chose to pursue a career in professional football. Tommy Kramer went on to a great career as quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings and, briefly, for the New Orleans Saints.

As a high school student I endured the difficult season of my parents divorce and found respite at the minor league field. As the double-A affiliate of the Los Angeles Dodgers, San Antonio fielded teams with Steve Sax, Fernando Valenzuela and other future baseball-greats.

As a college student, I attended Austin College which was just a mile or so from the local little league fields. One summer I even lived in a house that was all of, maybe, 100 feet from the nearest ballgames. Even then I enjoyed spending summer evenings watching kids play the game and being amused by the parents. Well, on occasion I was actually a little offended and maybe even a bit frightened by some of the parents.

After college, while living many years in Dallas, I attended more than a few games played by the nearest major league franchise. Of that particular team, there are two facts that you should know. First, let us all remember that the Texas Rangers are the single least successful team in the history of professional sports. Not once, not ever, has the Rangers' organization managed to win a playoff game. In fact, their franchise playoff record is zero wins and six losses – all to the New York Yankees. But it was at a number of Rangers games that

Mrs. Green and I fell in love. Even today she's a good sport about the fact that I'll watch baseball on most evenings.

As a student of the Bible, and as a pastor, it is fascinating to observe that there are many important Biblical principles and themes that are very difficult to understand. But, when reduced to the common principles and themes of baseball, people are able to understand. The Bible is filled with illustrations and examples of baseball. The story told in this morning's New Testament lesson is easily misunderstood. But, when viewed through the lens of baseball, many people find clarity.

The Words of Jesus

In life, as in baseball, there are winners and losers. The existence of winners and losers is an absolute, inviolable rule. And, generally speaking, the winners and losers are easily identified. Yes, it is true that in life, as in baseball, there are identifiable winners and losers. But how does this fit together with the victory of God? These words spoken by Jesus – words about rich and poor; about being last and first – what do they mean?

Jesus had entered into Judea. Once there he was tested by the Pharisees with a question about marriage and divorce. Later, while again walking along the road, Jesus scolded his disciples who were preventing parents from bringing children to be blessed. Instead, Jesus asked that the children be brought to him. Jesus “took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.”

From there Jesus set out onto the road to continue his journey. He was approached by a man who asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

You may know how the conversation unfolds. The man asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He asks this question in spite of his claim that he has observed the law from his youth.

So, Jesus speaks to the heart-felt interests of the man. “‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.”

And so the topic is introduced. What exactly is the relationship between worldly wealth and eternal life?

Three (Misguided) Ideas

This sequence of events has captured the popular imagination. As preachers preach from this text, there are a few common, but misguided ideas as to the meaning conveyed by the words of Jesus.

Preachers are drawn, like a moth to the flame, to one of three statements spoken by Jesus.

- 1) “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (10:25).
- 2) Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time...” (10:29-30).
- 3) “But many that are first will be last, and the last first” (10:31).

The first of these statements – “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” – is an oft-repeated mantra by preachers who are warning against the dangers of wealth and possessions.

I personally have heard many sermons on this particular text. As a general rule, preachers who cling to this statement as a caution against your possession of wealth, are themselves great humanitarians. I have watched as these preachers stand in front of hundreds of people noting that it is dangerous for *you* to accumulate great wealth. So, rather than hundreds of people having their very souls placed in peril, these preachers suggest that you send your accumulated possessions to the preacher. So willing are these great humanitarians to save your soul, that they themselves are willing to take possession of your property and money.

Of course, what those preachers *fail* to tell you is more than interesting; it is fatal to their rationale. In the context of his conversation with a man who has great wealth, but apparently little faith, Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The words of Jesus are absolutely true. It *is* easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But, what goes unspoken here is the equally true statement that it is also easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a *poor* man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus just happened to be speaking to someone who trusted in money more than he trusted in God. So, in this context the words spoken by Jesus are absolutely appropriate for the conversation. However, our focus on this particular statement about money surely blinds us to the very point that Jesus is trying to make.

The second of Jesus’ statements – “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time...” – is also oft-repeated by preachers, usually on late night television. Their theory sounds very good. Since your gifts of faith will be blessed one-hundredfold in this life, you should begin by using this fact as an investment strategy.

The person most associated with this idea of health-and-wealth-theology is the televangelist Robert Tilton. Many of you will remember Robert Tilton and his once-famous television program *Success-N-Life*.

Robert Tilton is the man who perfected the sales pitch convincing many people that their contribution to his wealth would lead to their blessings. The strength of his sales pitch was its simplicity. You send a contribution of \$1,000, payable to Robert Tilton. He cashes the check and in exchange promises that God will repay your faith with a payment of \$100,000. That’s some kind of bargain. In exchange for the modest sum of \$1,000, you receive a promise of \$100,000.

All of this is based on Jesus statement, “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time.”

Perhaps you have noticed that I keep ending the quotation of Jesus’ words in the middle of the sentence. In truth, the words of Jesus, as quoted in the Gospel of Mark, do *not* support the health and wealth theology of Robert Tilton. Listen again to the words spoken by Jesus.

“There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, But he shall receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, *with persecutions*; and in the world to come eternal life.”

Jesus is again very clear. In *this* world the faithful people of God shall see both blessing and persecution. Such is the reality of this world. But, “in the world to come” the people of God shall find “eternal life.”

The third troubling and misunderstood statement is this: “many that are first will be last, and the last first.” This may be the most dangerously misunderstood of Jesus’ sayings.

Since the 1960s a number of theologians have looked to this saying –the “first will be last, and the last first” – and looked to the liberation of the poor and oppressed. This field of study, known by the name *Liberation Theology*, gained momentum with the writings of Gustavo Gutierrez, especially his 1972 essay, “A Theology of

Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation.” Dr. Gutierrez, now a lecturer at the University of Notre Dame, writes and speaks of what he calls the “preferential option of the poor;” the idea that God somehow identifies with and shall show preference for the poor and oppressed.

It may be said that Liberation Theology is rooted in Latin America, but it blossomed and produced fruit in Africa and in the United States. Liberation theologians include Latin Americans, Africans, and African Americans.

In fairness, I must acknowledge that different writers demonstrate varying degrees of sophistication. But, Liberation theology may be summarized with this sequence of events:

- 1) God identifies with the downtrodden, the oppressed. Because God identifies with them, the oppressed are then liberated by an act of God.
- 2) The oppressed, as an act of divinely-inspired liberation, then become the dominant force over their oppressors.
- 3) The former oppressors then become the newly-oppressed.
- 4) As said before, God identifies with the oppressed. And, so the cycle continues.

Many liberation theologians reduce the world to a self-perpetuating cycle of the conquered becoming the conqueror. Some say that Liberation Theology is nothing more than an unending and pointlessly self-perpetuating cycle.

What does this say of the victory of God? Asked another way, if the victory of God is, at most, a temporary reassignment of power and oppression, what good is it? Is there a lasting benefit to the victory of God?

The Lasting Victory of God

Jesus was traveling along the road when he was confronted by a man who asked what seemed to be a simple question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

In his answer, and in the conversation that follows, Jesus is very clear about three facts.

- 1) Wealth does not purchase a ticket to heaven. Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”
- 2) Leaving family and possessions does bring certain benefits. But, these blessings will also come “with persecutions.”
- 3) Then there is that troubling statement that “many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

These words of Jesus are very clear. But, in his conversations with the man, with his disciples and with the crowds, these words are not the most important point being spoken by Jesus.

Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

There it is; the life-changing truth – “all things are possible with God.” Consider again those same three questions that have been asked through the ages.

1) If wealth does not purchase a ticket to heaven, how then does a rich man enter into the kingdom of God?

“All things are possible with God.”

2) Even the faithful people of God endure both blessing and hardship. How possibly can this be healed in the Kingdom of God?

“All things are possible with God.”

3) Then there is that statement that the “first will be last, and the last first.”

“All things are possible with God.”

In life, as in baseball, there are winners and losers. Their existence is an absolute, inviolable rule. In baseball, the winners and losers are easily distinguished one from another. But, even when they know that their season is coming to an end, every ball player and every team play through the entire season. Statistics, including errors, are noted and recorded for all to see. When the season is complete and the playoffs are finished, the winners and losers are identified.

Then it happens.

As the old season passes and the new season begins, the teams are all at the common starting place. With all teams sharing a common record of zero wins and zero losses it may be said that ‘the first are be last, and the last first.’

It was great fun to watch and to cheer for the Houston Astros as they won the National League Championship series. It was great fun to watch them play the World Series. Yes, it would have been more fun to have watched them play a few more games. Each team and every player competed through to the very end of the season. Once the World Series was over, and the 2005 season concluded, the victories and defeats remained. But, at the same time, the first became the last, and the last first.

The victory of God is difficult to understand. But, the fact that it is difficult to see in this life does not means that it is not possible. Remember, with people some things are not possible. But, with God, all things are possible. The whole point of Jesus’ words is to clarify that there is, and shall be, a victory of God. That victory is visible now. That victory is lasting. The victory of God is even eternal.

With God all things really are possible.

END NOTES

