

## Drawing Closer To God

*“Many people found their perception of the world changed permanently on September 11, 2001. The men who intentionally crashed four planes into three buildings and an open field were willing to sacrifice their lives and the lives of many others for something they believed in. As incredible as it sounds, the men responsible thought that their actions would bring them closer to God.”*

All human beings need to be close to God.

He designed us to live in fellowship with Him and we cannot be what we were designed to be unless we do.

And so our desire to draw closer to God is a good and natural thing.

Our problem is that a very UN-natural thing called sin has so hampered our ability to think clearly that when we try to get closer to God on our own, we come up with some very poor ways of doing it.

The nineteen Islamic terrorists who killed themselves along with thousands of other people on 9/11 are a case in point.

Their desire to be close to Allah led them to commit acts of hideous violence.

And I think we can safely say that when murder and suicide become the chosen means of getting closer to God—something has gone dreadfully wrong.

The first botched attempt to get closer to God in human history took place on the ancient plains of Shinar—which is, ironically, modern day Iraq.

Men said to each other, *“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.”*

What followed was a classic example of men trying to get to heaven by a method they had devised for themselves.

In this case, the obvious way to reach heaven was to use bricks and mortar and labor to build a literal skyscraper.

Subsequent attempts to get close to God became more sophisticated but reflected the same basic pattern of thinking, and all of them have been abject failures.

It is precisely that kind of thinking that underlay the question the man asked Jesus: *"What must I DO to inherit eternal life?"*

Of course one cannot "do" anything to gain an inheritance: one is either an heir or one is not.

Yet some of the most renowned Christian theologians in history have fallen into the trap of trying to build their own ladder to God.

For Thomas Aquinas reason was the ladder.

While continuing to believe that faith was man's primary way of "knowing" God, he also believed that reason or logic could reveal God to man.

For the Islamic terrorists of nine-eleven, yihad or the slaughter of "infidels" in holy war is a way to draw close to God.

We all want to DO something to get close to God, but the ways we come up with don't work.

The fact is, when we consult our own imaginations to come up with ways to get close to God, we end up with bad results.

The entire enterprise is doomed from the start, because nothing that we DO will bring us closer to God.

Or, better yet, nothing that WE do will bring us closer to God.

Now I suspect you might be thinking something like: *"What are you talking about?"*

*Of course we can do things which will bring us closer to God!*

*We can worship, we can pray, we can spend time in God's word, we can commune with God and each other, we can witness to our faith.*

*Clearly, these are things that bring us closer to God."*

Well...not exactly.

The fact is, these are not ways we move closer to God; *they are ways God moves closer to us.*

And this distinction is important because it describes the fundamental difference between pagan religion and Christianity.

Pagan religions are all about people seeking God; Christianity is all about God seeking people.

Pagan gods are lifeless idols, created out of human imagination, that consume the lives of those who serve them and leave them spiritually empty and dead.

The Christian God raises those who are spiritually dead to new life.

On the plain of Shinar men tried to build a tower to heaven so that they could make a name for themselves.

So God came down and confused the language of the men who were trying to build the tower and scattered them over the face of the earth.

By frustrating their plans to build a tower up to heaven, he was trying to teach them to place their hopes for reaching heaven in Him instead of in themselves, but the lesson didn't take.

Men still try to get closer to God in their own way.

Our Gospel lesson for today sets forth this problem vividly.

Jesus visits the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary.

Like any proper hostess, Martha immediately gets busy preparing a meal.

But Mary just sits down at Jesus' feet in order to listen to whatever He has to say.

Finally, Martha says to Jesus, *"Tell my sister to get up and help me."*

But Jesus' response surprises her. He says, *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

Now I defy every woman here this morning to tell me that this story doesn't rub you the wrong way.

Everything about this situation—the obligations of hospitality, our work ethic, the stature of the particular guest (after all, He was the Son of God!)—all of these factors would seem to indicate that Martha's behavior was more commendable than Mary's.

I can hear my mother, my sister, my wife and every one of my daughters exclaim: ***"WHO'S GONNA COOK THE POT ROAST!!!???" "WHO'S GONNA DO THE DISHES!!!???" THE LORD IS IN OUR HOUSE, FOR PETE'S SAKE; WHO'S GOING TO SEE THAT HE GETS FED???!!!"***

But you see, that's the problem.

The Lord doesn't need OUR food; we need his.

But we'd rather be doing things FOR Him than receiving things FROM Him, wouldn't we?

There's a term that was popular in the business world a few decades ago: the term was "the activity trap."

The idea was that whenever a problem presented itself, the natural instinct of management was to jump up and start doing something about it.

*"We can't just sit here –we gotta DO something!*

*As long as we are DOING something, things will turn out OK."*

A fellow manager once said to me: *"I'd rather be going 70 mph in the wrong direction than 10 mph in the right one."*

He wasn't kidding either. He was proving it even as he spoke!

I don't know what there is in us that makes us suckers for the activity trap—but whatever it is, it tends to affect our religious thinking as much as it does our secular thinking.

Spiritually speaking, we have a tendency to try to do things for ourselves rather ask the Lord to do them.

This tendency lies very deep in our sinful nature—our old Adam, as Paul calls it—and it consists of the conviction that if it's going to get done, WE are going to have to do it.

And the reverse: if WE don't do it, it won't get done—or at least it won't get done right.

So if things aren't going the way they should in my spiritual life, it must be because I'm not doing enough of *something*.

I'm not praying enough or worshipping enough or spending enough time in the Word—or maybe my faith is too weak or there are sins in my life I've failed to address—and so on.

It's up to me to do something to increase my faith..

We forget that divine wisdom is superior to our wisdom and that all human endeavor shrinks to insignificance before divine purpose.

God has promised to heal us, to save us, to cause all things to work together for good in our lives and to prepare a place for us in heaven when we leave this earth.

He has also promised to work in us through His means of grace—worship, prayer and His word to sanctify us—to make us more like His Son.

What He has NOT promised to do is to give us a clear understanding of how He is working in our life at any given point in time.

If we possessed that kind of understanding, there would be no need for faith, would there?

As the old saying goes, He hasn't promised us that the flight will be smooth but He has promised us that we will arrive safe and sound at our destination—provided we don't bail out along the way.

Now I'm not suggesting that all you husbands inform your wives that from now on she can handle chores around the house while you read your Bible.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view) God has provided enough time for both.

What I am saying is that as we go about doing the things God has given us to do in our lives and in our vocations, we will be blessed if we keep in mind that while the activity is ours—the outcome belongs to God.

Luther put it this way: *“Work as if everything depended on you but always remember that it all depends upon God.”*

Again, someone might ask: why do anything since God determines the outcome anyway?

Because if you're doing nothing, the outcome can hardly be anything other than nothing.

God loves to work IN us and THROUGH us to accomplish His purposes. That's an honor, not a burden!

As Paul put it in his *Letter to the Colossians*: *“To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”*

Or in his *Letter to the Philippians*: *“...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose.”*

We are blessed to be God's workmen, image-bearers He has chosen to do good works in this world.

However, Luther observed that men are inclined to think that “good works” in God's eyes are the “special” things we do for God—like giving money to the poor or painting the church or witnessing to our faith.

And while these are certainly good works, they are not the only kinds of works that please God.

A good work in God's eyes is anything that one does as a fruit of a life lived in faith in Jesus Christ.

In our jobs, in our hobbies, in our day-to-day conversations, if we are living in faith in Jesus Christ we are doing good works.

As Jesus said, “A good tree bears good fruit.”

As Luther also said, we should “...walk among our good works as in a paradise of God, for a plowboy on his way to the field in the morning with a hymn on his lips serves the Lord as well as Martin Luther.”

So no matter how it may seem to us at any given point in time, the work we do is not without purpose: it brings honor to God and God uses it to

accomplish great things—probably far greater things than we can imagine!

That's not a cause for resignation; that's a reason to rejoice!

Amen.