

Sacred Struggles

by Eric Pasanchin

Status

*An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."
(Luke 9:46-48)*

Reflection

With the advent of personal networking websites like Facebook, many of us have been able to track down people we haven't seen in years. If you're like me, you might sometimes compare yourself to those long forgotten classmates and friends. Who has the most successful career? The best family life? The most money? We might even base our sense of self-worth on the status we have achieved relative to these acquaintances. Certainly, the world values people for their achievements and personal success. If you are rich, strong, handsome, beautiful, powerful, or talented, you are admired and have a competitive edge over others. None of us want to miss out on the best life has to offer, and we certainly don't want to see our peers pass us by. As a consequence, we almost all struggle for some measure of status. But is this really a competition in which we need to participate?

Jesus' first disciples felt the same kind of pressure we do. They argued amongst themselves as to which one of them was the greatest. They wanted status; they wanted power; they wanted to be favored by Jesus. But Jesus refused to play by the rules of the world. Calling a small child to his side, he said that those who receive a child in Jesus' name are actually receiving Jesus himself. He said that "The least among you is the greatest."

When I first read this passage, I misunderstood what Jesus was saying. I thought he was indicating that it was the showing of compassion to the weak and powerless that made one great. To be sure, Jesus advocates care for those he calls "the least." But, in this passage, he isn't saying that we earn greatness by welcoming the children. It is the children themselves who are the least, and therefore the greatest. It is the children with whom he identifies. Why is this? I suspect it is because children are not impressive by worldly standards. In first century society, children were not accorded great personal worth. They weren't wealthy, powerful, or influential. They couldn't even pretend to be. They were just children. And that, for Jesus, was sufficient. The little ones with no status and no claim to greatness are valued simply because they are children of God.

As we struggle for status, and compete for jobs, education, prestige or worldly success, it's important to realize that these are not the things by which our true value is measured. Our worth comes from something much deeper than any outward achievement. It comes simply from the fact that we exist; that God has created us; that we are God's children. Because of

this, even the least “successful” among us is a winner in God’s eyes. The only real mistake we can make in this regard is deciding that God’s love isn’t enough, and that we have to out-do others in order to feel good about ourselves. That kind of thinking hurts everyone! It’s best to accept the fact that you are accepted just as you are. You may not have the big house, the big promotion, or the big paycheck, but God loves you more than you can ever imagine, and that is more than enough.

Activity

Take some time to think about your attitude toward yourself. Are you satisfied with what you have accomplished? Do you feel driven to compete with others? Try to recognize those areas in which you don’t feel like you measure up, and then offer them to God. Ask God to help you live by grace, secure in God’s love and acceptance. Remember that God treasures you just as you are.

Prayer

Almighty God, creator of whales and minnows, of galaxies and atoms, of presidents and infants, I confess that I struggle with my social status. I worry about measuring up; I fear that I am not enough as I am. Help me to accept your promise that I am valuable to you without regard to my achievements. Grant me the gift of humility, that with the assurance of your unconditional love, I may likewise accept other people as they are and work to build a community of mutual respect and love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Key Thought

God loves and accepts us just as we are independent of our achievements or status.

Money

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:1-4)

Reflection

There was a time when I played the lottery on a regular basis. I didn't spend large sums of money on it, but whenever I stopped at the local convenience store to buy gas, I made sure to pick up a lottery ticket. I did this because I had a dream. It wasn't a noble dream of social justice and human equality, though. It was a dream of me surrounded by piles of cash, free to stop working and to buy whatever I wanted. Thankfully, I came to my senses and recognized that this was not an admirable goal. (Plus, the odds of winning were really poor!) I suspect that all of us have entertained a similar dream – that we might be freed from our anxieties by possessing great financial wealth.

Who doesn't have issues with money? We either struggle to find enough, or worry about keeping what we've got. There is no denying that money is necessary for us to function in society. But money is, at best, a means to an end. It is certainly not a worthy goal for our lives. No matter how much money we might acquire, it is not a true measure of our worth, and it certainly doesn't accompany us beyond this world into God's eternity. What really matters is not how much money we have, but our attitude toward what we do have. Our wealth does not last forever, but our relationships and character do. This brings us to today's passage from Luke.

Jesus and his disciples were observing people making public donations to the temple treasury. Jesus wasn't particularly impressed by the rich people's donations. What struck him was the giving of one poor widow, who gave not from her surplus, but from the money which she needed to live. We must be careful with this passage, because it has at times been used to manipulate people into giving when they couldn't afford to. But that is not the intent of the story. Notice that no one is coercing the woman to give. She isn't being manipulated with guilt, or promises of reward for her generosity. She is giving because she wants to. She is giving because she values God, and the work of God's temple, more than she values material wealth. She is committed to a lifestyle of generosity, rather than one of self-protection. It is this approach to life that Jesus' is commending. When we see money as our source of security, it becomes sacred to us; it becomes our god. We guard it jealously, and our commitment to protecting it blinds us to the good we might do for others. The widow, however, had a different attitude. Because she wasn't so worried about protecting her money, she was able to exercise greater freedom with it.

This really doesn't make sense from our cultural point of view. Usually, we'd think that wealth is what gives us freedom. Indeed, it does give us freedom to do some things we

couldn't otherwise do. But in terms of emotional and spiritual freedom, we can find our money holding us captive. The challenge is for us to exercise financial responsibility without losing our freedom to see and respond to the needs of others. When we are able to help people in need; when we give generously to those who are less fortunate than ourselves; when we value our common well-being as much as our individual comfort; when we honor God with our substance as much as with our words; then we will find ourselves growing in Spirit and awakening to God's presence in our lives.

Activity

Make a commitment for one week to give to everyone person in need who asks for your help. (Jesus commends this approach in the Sermon on the Mount). If there is a donation jar at the check-out counter, put something in. If you see a person with a "Homeless: Please help" sign by the side of the road, give them something. If you find yourself in a position to help another human being, do so. This obviously doesn't address the question as to whether these requests for aid are legitimate. For the purposes of this exercise, it doesn't matter. This is about you and your ability to exercise freedom with money. How does it feel to give whenever asked? How difficult is it? What does this teach you about your own relationship with money? If you aren't willing to do this exercise, what does that say?

Prayer

God of abundance, I don't want to be possessed by my possessions. I want to belong to you completely and without reservation. Help me to see my struggles with money as secondary in importance to my relationship with you. Give me the faith to be a generous person, and to trust you for my ultimate security. Set me free from anxiety and greed, that I might ready to respond to the needs of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

Being generous to other people helps us to reflect the generous nature of God.

Lust

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

Reflection

One of the biggest struggles we face in life has to do with our sexuality. People have always wrestled with the religious, ethical and social impact of their sexual behavior, and this is certainly reflected in the Scriptures. On the one hand, the Bible gives us a picture of the first humans being naked and feeling no shame. There is no indication of any difficulty whatsoever in their sexuality. But once they moved beyond the innocence of the garden and into the real world of choosing between good and evil, we find sexuality becoming a source of great conflict. The relationship between men and women is turned from a relationship of equal partnership into one of domination. In many cases, women came to be viewed as property – or at least as financial assets possessed by men. Marriage became a financial transaction, and divorce became a road to financial and social ruin for any woman cast aside by her husband. People, especially women, who violated society’s sexual rules were subject to stern punishment – often even death. You can’t have all this in your cultural heritage and not have some conflicted feelings about sexuality.

The Scriptures reflect the fact that sexuality touches us at the deepest level of our being – it is where our sense of identity, our self-worth, and the need for intimacy all come together. More than that, our sexuality has an impact on our personal relationships and, ultimately, on society itself. To complicate matters even further, our sexual instincts are deeply rooted in the most primitive part of the brain. In order to guarantee the survival of our species, we share in common with all creatures the drive to engage in sexual activity. This drive is deeply felt, but it isn’t particularly rational or easily controlled. As a consequence human societies have always developed rules to govern sexual behavior – even if each society has had somewhat different rules.

When we hear Jesus equating lust with adultery, it brings this universal struggle to the fore. Nearly everyone knows what it is like to recognize another person as sexually attractive. Most people have learned to dismiss those thoughts that they shouldn’t act upon. We choose loyalty to our spouse over opportunities for infidelity. We set aside those desires that would be harmful to us or to other people. Our spiritual, moral selves may not be able to control the fleeting thoughts that bubble up from our primitive instincts, but we can control what we do with those thoughts. So, what does it mean that Jesus tells us the lustful look is the same as adultery? For one thing, scholars have pointed out that Jesus was a master of hyperbole, which is the art of saying something in an exaggerated way to make a point. Jesus would certainly prefer us to control our inappropriate lustful desires rather than act on them. He surely would not say, “Well you thought it, so you might as well do it. It’s all the same anyway!” Can you imagine him saying that? I didn’t think so. But, let’s not lose the

point he is trying to make. Jesus is warning us to be careful and to be humble. Every human knows what it is like to have lustful thoughts that, if acted upon, would be immoral and destructive. We must remain vigilant toward these desires because if we aren't careful, they could overtake us. How many examples do we need of otherwise good, admirable people getting into trouble because of a lapse in sexual judgment? It happens all the time. When we say to ourselves "It couldn't happen to me," we are at our most vulnerable. This especially becomes a danger when you are under stress, or your relationship with your mate is strained, or if you are using an intoxicant. We need to be careful, because the lustful thought can very easily become a lustful action. At the same time, this should humble us. If there is anything we like to judge other people for, it is their sexual indiscretions. Jesus' words should be for us a caution. If not for the grace of God, it could easily be one of us caught in a compromising situation! And so, Jesus words are an invitation to recognize the ease with which we might fall into sexual sin, as well as an opportunity to show grace to those who have made bad choices. Our genetic heritage makes this a common human struggle, and it presents us the opportunity to grow in self-awareness, discipline and grace.

Activity

As you go through your day, discretely keep track on the number of lustful thoughts that pass through your mind. It might be that these thoughts will emerge unbidden from your subconscious, or that they are stimulated by the people or images you encounter. Consider how much self control it takes to set these thoughts aside and continue with your day. Imagine the mess you'd make of your life if you acted on them. Take a moment to celebrate the good choices you have made, and to seek God's grace for the times you've taken the wrong path.

Prayer

God of creation, who has made us sexual beings, we praise you for the joy and intimacy we can find through our sexuality. We also offer to you our brokenness and our struggles. Help us to make good choices, to be faithful to our commitments, and to be humble about our weakness. Give us the strength to resist opportunities to sin, and help us to find the complete fulfillment for which you have made us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

Sexuality is a means by which we can grow in self-awareness, intimacy, discipline and grace.

Work

*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."
(Luke 17:20-21)*

Reflection

One thing we all do in life is work. Whether we labor for an employer outside the home, or for the maintenance of our own household, we all have work to do. A struggle that frequently emerges in this area has to do with the importance we assign to our work. Some people hate work and view it as a miserable inconvenience. Others see work as their reason for being, and use it as a means by which they prove their worth. Still others sense that they aren't working up to their potential and feel guilty about it. No matter who you are, chances are good that you sometimes struggle with the role work plays in your life.

The Bible is clear that work is important. God calls us to devote ourselves to the care of the planet and the responsible use of what resources we have been given. But the kind of work we do, or the success we experience at work, is not the measure of our worth or the ultimate purpose of our lives. Jesus tells us what is most important. The focus of Jesus' life and ministry was what he called, "The Kingdom of God." If you don't like the image of a King, you can call it the "Realm of God." In either case, Jesus proclaimed a vision of life lived according to God's will and God's values. As it turns out, a successful career is not the ultimate determinant of our value. When Jesus pronounced the blessings of his Kingdom on people, he never said, "Blessed are you who have awesome jobs." He said, "Blessed are you who are poor." Indeed, he suggested that the only way for the successful to be truly blessed is by helping those who appear to be unsuccessful. The goal of life, according to Jesus, is not to climb the ladder of success. The goal is to live within the realm of God's will. This isn't a kingdom that requires us to struggle for achievement in the world of corporate politics, or to journey from one place to another seeking career advancement. It is a discovery waiting to be made within and among us. It is not dependent on our worldly wealth, power or status. We enter the Kingdom of God when our internal priorities and external actions shift to reflect the way of Jesus. This Realm of God is readily available to all of us equally – whether you are a homemaker, a corporate executive, a factory worker, retired or unemployed.

It's great to have a job you enjoy. But no matter what your employment, or lack thereof, your personal worth does not depend on it. Your purpose in life is to discover the Kingdom of God in your midst, and to become a more Christ-like person. This is something that can happen no matter what kind of work you do.

Activity

Think about the way you spend your days. Do you go to work? Do you work at home? Are you seeking a job? Are you retired? Consider the degree to which your sense of self worth has been tied to your work. Does your work make you feel important? Does it make you feel insignificant? Either way, it's important to let Jesus correct your perspective. You are important because you are a child of God, no matter what you do or did for a job. Even if you feel like your work is not significant, it is of value to God because you are of value to God. Remember, the Realm of God is yours to discover and experience, no matter what your employment situation.

Prayer

God of creative purpose, thank you for creating me in your image, and for calling me to live in your Realm. Help me to see my work from your perspective. Grant that I may not tie my value to any employment situation, but rather that I might find fulfillment as I discover your Kingdom within. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

The realm (kingdom) of God is yours to discover and experience no matter what your employment situation.

Food

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:31-34)

Reflection

We nearly all struggle with food. In some cultures, the struggle is in finding enough to eat. For some in our country, this continues to be a struggle. But far and away the greatest struggle in our country is to stop eating so much, and to take off the extra weight we have gained. A quick review of media publications and programs shows the extent to which we are obsessed with food. Nearly every magazine at the grocery store checkout line features a combination of diet and exercise advice alongside recipe tips. On TV, there is a flood of programming having to do with diet, exercise and weight loss. In between programs, we are assailed by ads for unhealthy fast food restaurants. There is also an entire network dedicated to food and its preparation. There is even one guy who hosts a show designed to show him eating the grossest things you can imagine. What does it mean that we simultaneously obsess about the delicious things we might eat and the need to take off extra pounds? Obviously, these are conflicting desires that pretty much set us up for failure. And what does this have to do with our faith?

Jesus first spoke to people living in a culture of scarcity. They were legitimately worried about having enough to eat. Addressing those living on the edge of poverty and starvation, Jesus encouraged an attitude of faith, that they may not be consumed with worry, but instead live one day at a time, trusting God to provide. He didn't say that tough times would never come, but he assured them that worrying wouldn't help, and that God would ultimately provide.

I suspect that Jesus might speak to us in a similar way. To those of us who struggle with unhealthy attitudes toward food, I think Jesus would also say, "Do not worry. Seek God's kingdom first, and you will have what you need." One of the problems in our struggle with food is that we focus on the struggle, rather than the solution. If you are trying to lose weight, chances are good you spend a lot of time thinking about the food you would like to have but can't. If you aren't worried about weight, but rather are a "foodie" dedicated to culinary experience, you are likewise probably focused on the food. But in order to live a healthy, balanced life a different focus is necessary. Once again, the answer is found in Jesus vision of the Realm of God. In God's Kingdom, all will have enough to eat. Those who have will share with those who do not. Our primary focus will be on caring for one another and

glorifying God, rather than on either stuffing or starving ourselves. I know, this is much easier said than done, but it's the kind of attitude adjustment that opens the door to a healthier life.

The next time you feel compelled to worry about food, try to redirect your thoughts to the ideals of God's kingdom. Retrain your mind! Focus your energy on doing something to help those who don't have enough. Starvation and malnutrition are still enormous problems in many parts of the world, and you can make a positive difference when you change your focus from self to service. Do you eat to live, or live to eat? Jesus calls us to live for God, that all might have enough to eat.

The following websites can help you learn more about hunger issues and give you some pointers as to how you can make a positive difference.

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| Presbyterian Church (USA) | www.pcusa.org |
| Bread for the World | www.bread.org |
| Church World Service | www.churchworldservice.org |
| The Heifer Project | www.heifer.org |

Activity

For one day, keep track of the number of messages you receive from the media that either encourage you to lose weight or to eat. At the end of the day, take some time to reflect on these messages. What do you think it does to us when we are constantly subjected to these contrary messages? Consider how we might get out from under this psychologically unhealthy burden.

Prayer

God of the hungry and the fed, help me to have a healthy attitude toward food. Grant that I may be satisfied with what my body needs, and that I may become more sensitive to those who do not have enough. Work in my life and in the world to further the agenda of your Realm, in which all will have their daily bread. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

Jesus calls us to live for God, that all might have enough to eat.

Time

Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'" Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" (Luke 14:16-24)

Reflection

The fictional character Willy Wonka ways, "There is so much time and so little to do." If only that were true! Instead, most of us experience just the opposite. There are so many things to do, and so little time in which to do them. We have a difficult time setting our priorities because our options are virtually unlimited and many of them are worthwhile. It's inevitable that we struggle in choosing how to spend our time. And while the choices are difficult for a single person or empty nesters, once you add children into the mix, it becomes even harder. We feel responsible for our children's development and don't want them to miss out on any opportunities. Consequently, parents can find themselves overwhelmed with the demands of their children's scheduled practices, lessons, performances and games. Add to this all the many demands placed upon your average adult, and it's a wonder we don't all collapse from exhaustion. This is just plain unhealthy, but we tolerate it because we don't know what else to do.

Jesus doesn't let us off easy on the topic of time management. He tells a story about a man who gave a banquet and invited his friends. But his friends were all too busy to come. They had chosen other priorities, even though none of them were particularly urgent. This frustrated the man to no end, and so he sent his servants out to bring in people off the street - the blind, the crippled, the lame and the poor - until his banquet hall was filled. And then he swears that none of those who were originally invited will taste the feast.

It sounds kind of harsh, doesn't it? Couldn't they come by later, and maybe pick up some leftovers? Or maybe they could dine with him some other time? But that's not how it works, especially since this story is illustrative of the Kingdom of God, and not just an ordinary banquet. In this life, we all have to make choices and choose our priorities. God invites us to

the “feast” of Divine love and grace. When we take that invitation lightly, it interferes with our ability to experience God. Imagine being a guest in someone’s home, but being so busy talking on your cell phone or texting that you actually have no quality time with your host. How good a relationship do you think this would create between you? Would your host be pleased? Is that the kind of person you want to be? And yet, that’s how many of us approach our relationship with God. We assume that God can wait for us to do all the other things we want, and that God will still be there waiting for our attention with baited breath when we are done. Of course, we never are done because life’s business continues until we die. And then we trust God will be there for us. Personally, I believe God will indeed be there for us even if we have made little time for Jesus in this life – but even so, I don’t want to treat God that way. I doubt you do either. The fact is, God calls us to make some difficult choices. You can’t have it all. If you want to be close to God, you’re going to have to say no to other things. Maybe your children can’t be in every activity they want to be. Maybe you will need to spend more time on your relationship with God and less time washing the car or dusting the house. Remember, you are invited to the feast of God’s kingdom, but you can’t enjoy the banquet if you don’t make time to attend!

Activity

Make a list of all the things you want to do in any given week. Try to total up how much time these activities will take. Make sure you allow time for meals, sleep and personal hygiene. How much time is left? Is any left, or are you in a time deficit? Now check to see how much time you allocated to God and God’s work. Does your schedule make sense, or will you need to adjust your plans to make for a more life-giving, God-honoring schedule?

Prayer

God of eternity, I confess to you my struggle to get everything done. I don’t want to miss out on the good things life has to offer, and I want my family to have the best. Help me to set good priorities and to make time for you in my life. Use this time to instruct me and to develop my character, that I might experience the joy of your Kingdom feast. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Key Thought

If you want to be close to God you’ve got to make time for God.

Small Group Meeting: Sacred Struggles

1. Path of Community

Go around your group let everyone share their answers to this question:

- When you were a child, with what school subject did you struggle the most? How did you manage that struggle and what did you learn from it?

2. Path of Learning

Today we will review. Discuss these questions in your group.

- Which of this week's readings/scriptures meant the most to you?
- What have your struggles taught you about God? Yourself? Other people?
- How can you pass on what you have learned?

3. Path of Service

Evaluate the project you took part in. Celebrate what went well, and learn from those things that could have been better. Is this a form of service you'd like to continue?

4. Path of Invitation

Will your group be continuing after Lent? If so, you can choose a study/discussion resource from the list given to your group leader. Have you planned a social event to which you might invite newcomers? This is a great chance to expand your ministry through invitation.

5. Path of Worship

Share any highs or lows from the week. After each person shares, the group may say together, "We share your prayer." Other options include participants taking turns in leading prayer, or having a time for silent prayer after all have shared.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. (You may wish to join hands for this!)

6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.