

GOD ONLY KNOWS

Last Thursday night Jill and I visited five grieving families, beautiful families but very sad. They had lost a son, a brother, an uncle and a friend. We talked about one of the biggest problems that faces millions of Christians. This young man died comparatively young, just in his forties. He had been much loved, he had been very capable. There had been some unpleasant experiences in his early years for which he was not responsible which had probably paved the way for some of the things that darkened his later years. And, obviously, the concern of the loved ones was not just for time but for eternity. And we talked with them from Scripture for quite some time on Thursday night and they had expressed the wish that this might go on tape for other people as well as themselves so that is the purpose of this hour.

I had given Roy another title for this service but on Friday we changed it after we heard from Gary.

What can be said to those millions of grieving Christians who loved someone whose destiny they have a question about? What can be said? Well, the first thing that can be said is this, that as a gnat cannot swallow the Atlantic, neither can any one of us comprehend all the purposes and all the knowledge of God, all His plans. That's the first thing. Let's be meek enough, humble enough to admit only God knows the whole story. A gnat cannot swallow the Atlantic and neither can we comprehend in any single instance all that is involved. We don't know enough. We can't read the heart. That's why Job said, "It's deeper than hell, higher than the heavens and broader than the sea, the wisdom and the knowledge of God." But ours is not like that.

The second thing that can be said is this: we have a loving Savior; he came to seek and to save the lost. It tells us in II Corin. 5 that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. He did the task. The people who will be excluded from what he did are those who set their wills against him deliberately, perservingly, in hatred of God, in hatred of good, in hatred of truth.

The third thing we need to say is that God's mercy is infinite. In

Psalm 130 it says, "If thou should mark iniquities, oh, Lord, who would stand?" When we lose a loved one, we look at their life, sometimes the bad stands out. It's good to remember at such a time that if a man murders one person, the penalty is really death as surely as if they had murdered fifty. The law of God does not make provision for being mainly good. The law of God demands that we be altogether good all of the time with all there is of us, therefore, unless it is true what the Psalmist says about God, we're done for. "If thou should mark iniquities, Lord, who would stand?" This is not just for some distant relatives that we feel had terrible shadows over them in their experience, but you and me..."If thou shouldst mark iniquities..." and, of course, the good news of that text is that it is saying God is a God who delights in forgiveness.

When he tells us in Matthew 18 that we are to forgive seventy times seven, it is what that tells me about God that is more cheering me than what it tells me about my duty. It tells me that God is like that, God forgives seventy times seven which means, infinitely...if we seek it, if we want it. He won't thrust his forgiveness upon those who could not care less but he longs to forgive. Psalm 78, Psalm, 103, Psalm 145, they all talk about the forgiveness of God.

The next point I would like to make is that we are forbidden in Scripture to judge the hearts of men. We are to judge lies because we have interaction with people and we will do wrong things unless we make some estimate as we enter into business and other relationships...marriage, etc. We are to judge by their works but we are not to judge people's hearts; we cannot judge their motives. Matt. 7:1 says, "Judge not that ye be not judged." In I Corin. 4:5, Paul says, "Judge nothing before the Lord comes; he will make manifest the hearts." So it is very important to understand that there are some cases that are wrapped in obscurity where we do well not to try to dogmatize about how it is going to turn out in eternity; only God knows. That is important for us to know.

The next point would be this, life is a continual dancing of atoms danced backwards. Adam refused to trust the word of God and

consequently came sin. Salvation is the opposite process, it is learning to trust God where Adam failed, learning to obey God where we cannot see God. Adam refused to believe and refused to obey. We must dance that dance backward. It begins in trusting God where we cannot trace him. So even with loved ones, ultimately we do with our children, brothers, sisters, parents, what we do with our sins...we place them in the hand of God, that's what we've got to do. You can't decide for your children. Once they get up into their teen years you can't tell them about every jot and tittle; you can advise them that the age of responsibility has come. They have to make their decisions... so what do we do with our children? We put them in the hands of God, that's what we do with our sins. We do all we can to help but we no longer are making the decisions. They have reached an age of responsibility. So we dance Adam's dance backward by learning to trust God where we cannot trace him, where we don't know what he is doing, we still believe he is good. We see through a glass darkly. We endure as seeing him who is invisible.

And now, we are getting closer to the point--the salvation of many is going to be an absolute surprise to all of the rest of the saved. You think of the thief on the cross, who would have even thought among the followers of Jesus, among the twelve and some others that loved Him, that that man who was crucified with him was ever going to make it? Until they heard the words, "Lord, remember me," and Christ answered, no one would have thought that that man had any hope of Heaven. But our blessed Lord himself said, you're going to be there...the most unlikely man, a criminal under death sentence, highly unlikely. No one would have thought he had a chance but the Son of God, himself, said, you're going to be there. He represents a vast host. Can I also point out that that same day the man on the center cross looked hopeless and, indeed, gave a hopeless cry, "My God, my God," for with the sin of the world upon him it eclipsed hope for him at that point. He could not invoke his divine nature to support him. The darkness of the eclipse represents what was happening in his heart and mind as he bore our sin as the wrath of God beat upon him...he looked hopeless but he rose the third day. Suppose Peter had gone fishing after the threefold denial

of his Lord and in a storm had been drowned? Would not there have been a lot of speculation about the Big Fisherman among the Christians? He didn't like Jesus...he denied him three times, he denied him with curses and swearing, followed him afar off. "Oh," some Christians would say, "he's lost." Jesus comes from the grave and he sends a special message to Peter by the angel, "Go and tell the disciples and Peter," especially Peter. I know what is going on in the heart of Peter, go and tell him I love him still; go and tell him since he may have denied me but I can never deny him...remind him that humans may only have a feeble hold on the arm of Christ but his hold upon us is that of an older brother. It can never be severed unless we insist.

So there are many who will be saved; it will be a complete surprise. I think that anyone looking at David's experience after he has arranged the murder of Uriah the Hittite would have felt he was done for but when the Lord looked at the life of that man something like three score years and ten and all the vicissitudes of it and that for the most part his intent was on the will of God, that his habit and practice was to glorify God, God didn't even count and record in his heavenly books those slips because we are told in Kings that, "David kept all my commandments, doing only that which was right in my sight." And that was written after the adultery and the murder! "If thou shouldst mark iniquity, who would stand?" There's the great encouragement of Scripture. The man who has never made a mistake has never made anything and God is in the business of forgiveness to those who seek it. We often sing "Amazing Grace" and I have stood by the tomb of the composer of that song there in England and you see on his tombstone that he classified himself as profane and profligate, a man altogether a rebel against God but found by divine grace and saved. He was a slave master. He engaged in profligacy without limit in Africa when he was a slave; he was profane. He talked many men out of their Christian faith by argument and then the hand of God intervened and John Newton was born again...AMAZING GRACE, amazing grace indeed! but no one would have thought that that libertine, that profane atheist would ever had had a hope, but he is going to be there.

One of the many biographies I have at home is the CONFESSIONS OF ST. AUGUSTINE. Augustine influenced the world in the Middle Ages

more than any other man alive, any other man who had ever lived, and in his confession he talks about the problems of sin still in his life that he wants to overcome. He says, "Day after day I fight against these temptations. I call upon thy right hand and to thee refer my perplexities...." Someone has said that Augustine speaks like a bartender in this book. He is so frank and open and to him the Christian life is a battle and a march and he has his failures. He loses battles but he is going to win the war but his encouragement is, "If thou shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who would stand.... Thou Lord, are good and ready to forgive" (Psalm 86:5).

Now I come to a passage that very few people understand. Would you look with me please at Matthew the 18th chapter. The meaning of this passage is so breathtaking. The translators have always had a problem with it and the KJV really mistranslates ^{it} because it was really too good to be true as to what it was really saying. Let's look at it and observe.... Matt. 18:6: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." Now, the King James' version does not read like that, it reads like this: "Whoever offends one of these little ones," but that is not what the Greek says. The Greek says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones to offend (to sin)," and most modern translations have that... "Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin," now the point is as you go further on in the chapter, if you look at verse 10, "See you do not despise one of these little ones; I tell you, in heaven there are angels always behold the face of my father who is in heaven." These little ones who sin have angels who are looking after them... angels who see the face of God in heaven. And, by the way, 'little ones' in the New Testament while it begins with children, also means those who are immature in the Christian faith... "Feed my lambs." It means people who are trembling their way along the Christian path, who have not yet grown up. But the point I want to make is, here God distinctly says, he has some children who sin because of pressures brought upon them, that are too big for them, but the angels have not left them, get that point? It says in verse 6 that there are certain believers that have been caused to sin by wrong behavior of other people and it says in verse 10 that they still have angels caring for them who see the face of God in Heaven.

Now, you understand, that nothing I am saying today am I denying the truth that people who shake their fist at the Almighty and who persistently and unceasingly say, "I want nothing to do with you," I am not talking about them. But I know people who time and again have been overwhelmed; I know people who have been so hurt in their childhood...they are not just fully equipped for the battle of life. I know people who have certain sicknesses of mind and body that affects their behavior and if I, an erring mortal, know that, how much more fully does God know it?

I said in a sermon sometime ago that if you think you have arrived, may I remind you that if you had a week of nights without sleep you would suddenly find yourself transformed into another person. I got a letter from a lady that said, that was so true for me, my husband has been continually sick, I'm hardly getting any sleep and I find myself so naturally tempted to irritability,...I don't know myself! But God knows...God knows.

The early Americans had a saying that there is no horse that can't be rode and there is no man that can't be throwed. They seem to be contradictory but, not really. Dear friends, there are circumstances for any one of us that could destroy us. You know, it is hard to picture the possibility--you get a mirror of it sometime in a dental or surgical situation. I went to a dentist here some time ago and he was not using any anesthetic and I KNEW IT (laughter)...my feet were shooting out like this at the bottom of the dental chair. He said, "Oh, we had better use some anesthetic." But is not life sometimes like that? Pressure comes upon you and you find yourself doing things that are not normal. Does God understand, dear friends, or does he say, you're finished with? Does an earthly father or mother say, you're finished with to a child that steps over the line and makes a mistake? Never! "If thou shouldst mark iniquities Lord, who would stand?" This passage of Scripture is very clear. God has children, his children who have angels looking after them and caring, yet, they sin--they are still his children. I speak not of presumptuous deliberate course of evil, that will cut any person off from God but with many, many people who love Christ, who want to do the right thing, their sins are sins of weakness rather than sins of rebellion

and the Bible makes a big distinction between the two. Of course, if I use this to encourage myself in transgression, I'm a fool and it might lead ultimately to rebellion so I am not to use this to encourage myself in evil. I am to use it to encourage myself in good. But this passage is very clear.

Joseph Conrad was one of the greatest writers toward the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. He was born in Poland under Russian control where life was very severe, very difficult. His father was a rebel against the Russians. Joseph grew up with the problems of wrestling with good and evil. One book he wrote was called LORD JIM. He pictures this young man who is first mate of a ship. He has a great imagination this young man, Jim. He is picturing what a great captain he is going to be one day and even while he is the first mate he thinks that if there is a mutiny on board he will deal with the mutineers and protect the captain! He has all these marvelous imaginations about what a great man he is going to be and he does mean well. Suddenly, he has an accident, has to go to the hospital and when he is well again he has to join an old freighter that looks like a floating coffin. It is so unsafe and he has only been on this one night when a great storm comes and his imagination begins to work overtime. He sees the water filling the boat. He sees them all going down to a watery grave and when all the other members of the crew hop into an escape boat he hops in too. This is the opposite of all his desires to be great and good and when he reaches shore he feels so badly about it that he goes and confesses to the Maritime community; there's a trial and he loses his papers as first mate. The rest of his life he is battling with this and he is put into situation after situation where he manifests tremendous courage but always this other thing is on his mind and ultimately he dies because of it. But Conrad pictures him talking to a man who behaved like a father to him and he says this: (Jim says) "I've been a so-called coward and I've been a so-called hero but there's not the difference of a paper thickness between the two." He said, "For many of us, we make sudden decisions in a moment, we do something out of the ordinary and it is labeled either as cowardice or heroism but it is not the persistent trend of a life at all! It is just a fluke of a decision of the moment. He says one does wrong, one lies to oneself about it and that's wrong. One tries

to cover it up and that's wrong. The fact is, he says, once you've done something a cause of action has begun that nothing can stop and, yet, says Jim, the most important thing I've learned it is not what is done by WHY it's done. That's the eye of the needle. That line in Joseph Conrad's book, LORD JIM, is a great line. It's not the WHAT, it's the WHY. In other words, God does not just look at the acts of the hands, he looks at the intent of the heart; not just the WHAT but the WHY. That's the eye of the needle!

Here is one of the saddest books I have ever read, the story of Madam Curie, a great lady, a wonderful woman. Did you know she was not a believer? She grew up in Poland, again, under Russian control just as Joseph Conrad did. Her mother died when she was very young and she had been praying for her mother's recovery and the mother did not recover. She lost a sister in disease and then began a life long battle herself against infirmities because for 30 years she worked with radium. You know, even in my young manhood, every radiologist I knew died early. They take more defense now against it. All the government statistics about safety in radiation have become more stringent with the passage of every year. But this lady had 30 years of exposure to it. She lost her faith in the terrible pressures of her early life in a country that was severely oppressed by the Russians. She had terrible struggles. She married a great man, Pierre Curie, and then suddenly he was killed. I want to read you a few lines that illustrate what we are talking about. On page 251 of this book written by her daughter, Eve, it talks about the burial and here is Madam Curie reflecting and she writes in her diary these words: "We took you back, we saw you go down into the big deep hole and then the dreadful procession of people. They wanted to take us away. Jacques and I resisted. We wanted to see everything to the end. They filled the grave and put sheaves of flowers on it. Everything is over, Pierre sleeping his last sleep. It is the end of everything, everything, everything." But...she saved a little package of some of the remnants of this man who had been run over by a carriage, some of the remnants of his brain that had been gathered up in rags and then she called her sister. One evening, one of the last the two sisters spent together, Marie made a sign to her elder sister to follow her. She led her into her own bedroom

where in spite of the summer heat, a great wood fire was flaming. She locked the door behind her. Brania's (?) surprise questioned the widow's face. It was even paler and more bloodless than usual. Without a word, Marie took a stiff bulky packet wrapped in water-proof paper and then she sat down before the fire and signed to her sister to sit down beside her. She had a pair of strong scissors ready on the mantelpiece. Brania, she murmured, 'you must help me.' Slowly she undid the string, opened the paper, the flames lit up her trembling hands. A bundle appeared which was carefully knotted into a cloth. Brania hesitated an instant and then she unfolded the white cloth. Brania restrained a cry of horror. The wrapping enclosed a hideous mass of clothing, linen, dried mud, blackened blood. Marie had been keeping near her for days the clothes Pierre had worn when the wagon struck him. The silent widow began to cut up the darkened cloak. She cut the pieces one by one into the fire, watched them shrivel up into smoke and to be consumed and disappear. Suddenly, she stopped struggling in vain against the tears that darkened her tired eyes. In the half congealed folds of the cloth appeared some viscus fragments of matter, the last scraps of the brain which a few weeks before held noble thoughts, the discoveries of genius had been born. Marie contemplated these corrupt remnants pensively. She touched them and kissed them desperately until Brania dragged the clothing and scissors away from her and began, in turn, to cut and throw the pieces of cloth into the fire. The task was finished at last without a single word pronounced between the two women. "I could not have endured having this touched by different hands," Marie said at last in a strangling voice. And coming near Brania, "Now tell me how am I going to manage to live? I know that I must. How shall I do it? How can I do it? " She didn't have the Christian hope but she lived as a Christian would live, in kindness, gentleness, long-suffering, humility. I ask the question, will she be saved? Listen, Scripture is very clear...the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, self control. No person can have that precious bundle unless the spirit of God has moved upon their heart. Nobody can have it. There are going to be a lot of people saved because of Christ. No one is saved otherwise. But there will be some who will say, he's not heard his name but because of Christ, the spirit of God is moving everywhere, everywhere.

I have a relative very, very close to me whom I love dearly. I have written him more letters than anybody else on earth, over a 1000 in recent years. His exposure to religion in his early years was hatred. He decided that if God belonged to that he didn't want anything to do with God. But I don't know anyone who is kinder and more upright regarding principle than this close relative of mine. I think he is in for a big surprise when he wakes up and sees a smiling Christ on the resurrection morning. I want to suggest to you that there are loads of people who reject the God of conventional religion because he has been wrongly presented to them, see? But who, nevertheless, have been taught by life as the spirit of God moves upon them that truth telling is better than lying; purity is better than impurity; kindness is better than cruelty. You cannot have meekness, gentleness, long suffering, love, as a bundle unless the spirit of God is moving on you. That's the fruit of the spirit. I believe we shall see her in that great day.

There will be some saved where these virtues may not be so obvious as in the case of Madame Curie, for example, everyone of you has stood by someone with a fever and if you get too close, you may be hit....do you feel angry about the person with the fever whose arms are flailing and you get in the way and you get hit...of course not!

Dear friends there are so many people who have been so hurt in early life, sometimes by sexual abuse, sometimes by cruelty, sometimes by sort of mind washing, brainwashing, that they go through life in a semi-fever with a longing for goodness, a longing for truth but they don't ever quite make it, see? Does God know? Of course he knows! We are now aware as we have never been aware before of the influence of heredity in early environment. Usually our decisions have the casting vote but it is not always a casting vote that gives continual triumph. For some people the scales are heavily weighed against them, dear friends. Just as it is true that we are all born with a different amount of vitality, we're all born with different I.Q., so it is true we are born with different capacities for moral life unless the Lord works miraculously. And even when he works miraculously, there are some limitations because of what has happened to some people.

This is particularly true in children who have been abused at any stage.

What have we said today? We have tried to say that just as a gnat cannot swallow the Atlantic, it is not possible for you and for me to understand everything that is involved in any single person's life. The roots that are too many, the influences are too numerous and we only see one part of a person. We only see them through one part of certain days of certain months of certain years so we cannot really be dogmatic when we speak about people. We know so little about them.

The second thing we've said today is that we do know some things, that we have a loving Savior who wants to save everyone who wants to be saved. He wants to save everyone who wants to be saved. And what I am trying to suggest to you in this study is that there are many people whose lives may not look victorious but who yet have not come to that point where they are shaking the fist at God, have not decided against God but who have found themselves too weak to have victory as we would want them to have victory. But if, as Matthew 18:7 says, 18:6-10, says very clearly, if it is true that some children of God are guilty of sin, yet, have angels caring for them none the less, then, what encouragement we can have.

And then as we review Scriptural biographies it is quite clear that many will be saved that no one would have thought could be saved. The penitent thief is a wonderful example of that and then, finally, we've pointed out that there will be some folks who outwardly show religion but nevertheless have the movings of the spirit upon them because they wanted that, who have had yearnings to be better, who had a love for the good and the true. Wherever the fruit of the spirit is, dear friend, is because the spirit's been moving. God is infinitely better than you and I have never thought and I would recommend to you the verse in Genesis 18:25 that says: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Leave it with him and he will do what we would do if we knew what he knows.

Let me finish with this poem from John Dunn. John Dunn was one of the most influential literary men in the world. He was the cannon of St. Paul's Cathedral, he was an ancestor of William Cowper, the great poet and hymn writer. Many people are puzzled about his early life because when you hear these songs you get the feeling that in his early years he was very, very promiscuous and when he was dying with the plague, eight years before he finally died and the bell was tolling (church bell), he thought, my friends have begun the death tolling for me because they know I don't have long to live and he wrote those famous words:

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

He also said on one occasion; "No man is an island." We are aware of these famous statements but this is what he wrote having entered into the fullness of the Gospel...he came a great preacher, a great writer. This is called a hymn to God, the Father:

"Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun which was my sin though it were done before (meaning his inherited guilt). Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run and do run still, though still I do deplore (now he is talking about behavior). When thou hast done now hast not done for I have more. Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won others to sin and made my sins their door. Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun a year or two but wallowed in a score? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more. I have a sin of fear that when I have spun my last thread I shall perish on the shore, but swear by thyself that at my death thy son shall shine as he shines now and heretofore and having done that, thou hast done I fear no more."