



You are important to God and to us.
Feel free to share your thoughts, your
comments and your questions at:

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We have a ladder here in the chancel area this morning. That's by design. It's not something that Carl left here by mistake. I guess I should also add that given the results of my most recent ladder encounter, I was not the person who arranged the various climbers up this ladder. I asked Carl to put this ladder here this morning as an image. Perhaps we could think of this as representing the ladder of success. Perhaps as we look at this ladder we can reflect on where we are, and where we are going.

First let me ask a few questions that may have particular relevance for our graduates. What lies ahead? What dreams? What ambitions? What is at the top of your ladder? To get a college degree? To find a husband and have a family? Maybe your formula for success means that you have plans to be a millionaire by the time you are 40? Or you want to be a world class musician? Or a doctor? Or president of your own company?

Obviously no one gets very far up the ladder by being a chicken. Right? Being the playful puppy might win you some friends, but again, it's not going to take you very far up the ladder. Some will scamper up the ladder like monkeys. And yes, some will undoubtedly one day, soar like eagles . . . but then why would an eagle need a ladder?

Some of those questions may have a special significance for the graduates in our midst today, but they point us to a larger set of questions. Questions that we all need to think about regardless of our age, or our circumstances in life. Where are we and where are we going? Do we know?

But as we seek to answer those questions, I would invite you to think not just about this ladder, but also about the scripture passage that Erika read for us this morning. That scripture passage tells us two things. It tells of the wonderful confidence the disciples had in Jesus. They had heard his teaching, they had seen the miracles. They knew, they just knew that Jesus was going to go far . . . very far. That's one thing . . . but the scripture passage also shows how much the disciples totally, completely misunderstood who Jesus was and what he had come to do.

Before looking more closely at this passage, I would invite you to look with me at context of the story? Please turn in your Bibles to Mark 10. This morning I want to begin at vs. 13. Here we read that people were bringing children to Jesus. They wanted Jesus to touch them and bless them, but the disciples thought that this was a waste of the master's time. Jesus had more important things to do. But what happened? (vss. 14, 15)

But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Do you hear it? Entering the kingdom does not occur because of our intelligence, our social standing, our wealth, . . . it happens only when we, like children, receive God's gift of new life with gratitude and child-like trust.

Then in vss. 17ff, we find the story of a man who apparently had it all. In Mark he is identified as wealthy. Matthew (19:22) describes him as young. In Luke (18:18) he is called a ruler. Money, youth, power, what more could anyone want? But obviously there was some inner need that brought him to Jesus with the question - "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In response to Jesus' questions, Yes, he knew the commandments and . . . he was sure he had kept them. What did Jesus then tell him? (vs. 21)



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.

The young man could not do it. Could we? I don't know. We do know that this was a very troubling thought for the disciples as well (vs. 26)

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

It's like . . . "Whoa! Wait a minute! Isn't wealth a sign of God's blessing. If the wealthy cannot be saved, what hope is there for any of the rest of us?" I love Jesus' response . . . (vs. 27)

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

Do you hear that? Do you believe it? Getting into heaven . . . living the Christian life is not possible with our efforts. It cannot be done. In fact our human efforts at saving ourselves leaves us in a major mess. It's not possible with our effort. It is possible by God's grace.

Then yet again, (for the third time) Jesus predicts his death and . . . yet again, his disciples just don't get it. For immediately after Jesus told them that he was going to die, two of the disciples came and asked a question (vss. 35-37)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.

In other words, if Jesus was going to be the king, James and John were asking if they could be the Prime Minister and the Treasurer. It's like they were saying, Lord, when you get to be President and you are sitting there in the Oval Office, let us move our desks to the offices beside yours. Back then, no less than today, nearness to power mean personal power. But is that really what's it all about?

I confess, that I sometimes wonder at Jesus' restraint. Had I been Jesus, I think there are times when I would have been tempted to grab the disciples by the scruff of the neck and to knock a few heads together. "Hey guys, how can you be so thick headed? Are you ever going to get this?" But Jesus didn't. What did he say? (vss. 42-45)

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

About twenty-five years ago Don Kraybill wrote a book entitled *The Upside Down Kingdom*. It's a great book. I have referred to my copy often. So often that it's falling apart. Kraybill looks at the teachings of Jesus and points out the many, many ways in which the teaching of Jesus totally upsets the social systems of our world.

In [God's] inverted kingdom, greatness is determined by one's willingness to serve – one's willingness to be a slave. The purpose, [writes Kraybill] is not to turn the hierarchy upside down and make a new one. Jesus is questioning the need for hierarchy and declaring it unconstitutional for His people . . . the point is that in [God's] Upside-Down Kingdom everyone is the greatest!

[Kraybill quotes] Francis Shaeffer who said, "There are no little people in [God's] kingdom."

In God's kingdom the way up – is *down!* This is not just something that Jesus talked about. That's what Jesus did. Writing to the believers in Philippi, the Apostle Paul wrote these words (2:5-8)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God

*as something to be exploited, {or grasped or held onto}
but {instead he} emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

If we are going to follow Jesus, our primary image becomes not the ladder but – the *cross!* That's what Jesus did for us. Do we know it? Do we believe it? What does it say about how we live our lives? How we invest our time? How we spend our money? What are we trying to achieve with our lives?

How far up the ladder of success do you plan to go? Who (or what) will be your obstacles along the way? Who will you have to step over . . . or on to get where you want to go? Will you find anything worthwhile, even if you ever do get to the top? Will you allow the ladder of success to obscure the way of the cross?

For some these are the questions to ask as you get started on this road to adulthood. For some of us, those are questions to ponder as we consider that portion of our lives that we still have left? These are not just questions for the young adults in our midst. Some of us have already started those working years? Some of us are in the middle of those working years . . . some of us are not that far away from retiring . . . and facing the question, “What next?” . . . some of us have retired . . . and that question is just as real for those who have retired as it is for those who are just getting started, “What am I going to do with the time I have left? Do I believe that God still wants me to make a difference in this world?”

About two weeks ago, I read a book written by Ken Dychtwald entitled, *Age Power*. In that book Dychtwald looks at the social and economic implications of the aging baby boomers for the future of this country. There is much that he writes that is both challenging and troubling. One section that I found especially inspiring was his assertion that we desperately need *elderheroes*. He notes that almost without exception the heroes we have emulated throughout much of our lives have been the young. (think sports, entertainment, fashion, finance . . .) But those heroes lose their ability to inspire as we reach the older years of our lives.

Dychtwald tells how he went on a Habitat for Humanity building blitz in the summer of 1998 in Houston TX with former president Jimmy Carter. That was a large project. Approximately 5000 people from all over the world came to build 100 houses in 5 days. Dychtwald writes that he was thrilled to learn that he would be one of the 40 people working on house # 1 with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter.

The week was hot – very hot. Most days the temperature was over 100°. Now at the time Dychtwald was 48. He thought he was in shape, but he very quickly became aware of how physically draining this was. But . . . and this was a fascinating surprise, Jimmy Carter, at 74, was providing amazing leadership throughout the week. Dychtwald writes:

Throughout the second day, all eyes were watching the Carter house to see when our roof went up. I was fascinated that our progress was being driven by the “old” man who said little. I could see that his leadership style involved never barking at people or being critical, but rather making everybody on the site work to keep pace with him.

Dychtwald writes of the amazing effort that went into building that houses in just five days:

At two-thirty on Friday afternoon – on schedule – President and Mrs. Carter brought us all inside for a little ceremony. The 50 of us stood in a circle in the living room holding hands. And it hit everybody at the same time what we had done.

Exhausted and filthy but with full hearts, we huddled in a circle as President Carter presided over a makeshift service. He said a prayer, then turned [to the new homeowners] and gave them a white linen-covered Bible – the first book for their new house. The gesture was so powerful . . .

Then Carter said to Wade, “Do you know what Jesus did?”

Wade replied, “He died for our sins.”

“But do you know what he did as a young man?” Carter asked. [And then he answered his own question.] “He was a carpenter, he worked with his hands. And so, by allowing us to build this house for you, in a small way you've allowed us to to the work of the Lord.”

[Then] Carter spoke of the blessing of giving, how the harder he and Mrs. Carter work, the more they feel blessed by the the results. Giving of themselves, he said made them stronger.

Now, I know that many of us here this morning know the truth of those words. I am very grateful to many of you who continue to volunteer, who continue to serve, to those who have been to the work camps, on the mission trips, and yes even those who were on our recent Disaster response trip in VA. It's true, isn't it. When we give our lives in service to others, we are greatly blessed by the results.

Are we willing to be blessed? Are we willing to follow the way of the cross? Will we walk with Jesus?