

"Focus on Life Now, Not on Heaven"

Half-Truth #12

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"Some people are so heavenly-minded, they are no earthly good." At least that was what Oliver Wendell Homes Sr., a well-known 19th century physician, once said. Johnny Cash apparently thought he knew some people like that. He wrote a song in 1977 entitled, "No Earthly Good. Now, there are plenty of people who claim evangelical churches and Christians tend to be too focused on heaven, eternal salvation, and are not focused enough on the needs people have right now. Yet is that really the case? Pastor John Piper concedes *it is possible* to be too heavenly minded, but then adds, "I've never met one of those people. And I suspect, if I met one who seemed that way, that problem would not really be that his mind is full of the glories of heaven, but that his mind is empty, and his mouth is full of platitudes." In other words, Piper means there would be plenty of talk about heaven, but very little actual thought about it.

Friends, the questions we are going to explore today is this: Are we as Christians often too heavenly minded? Or are we not heavenly minded enough? Should we focus more on helping people here and now? Or should we devote more of our time and energy to making sure that we and the people we care about are ready for eternal life, for heaven? Let's pause and pray that this morning, through His word and by His spirit, the Lord would enable us to know and obey truth.

The bible talks about many responsibilities we have on earth here and now. Yet, various bible passages make it clear that, as Christians, our true home is heaven. In **Philippians 3:20** the apostle Paul contrasts Christian believers with those who "set their minds on earthly things," and says, "**But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.**" The idea that heaven is our true home is something Jesus pointed to in **John 17:16** when he describes his followers this way: **They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.** The writer of **Hebrews 11:15,16** says this was true of the Old Testament patriarchs and sees them as a role model for us as Christians. **If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desired a better**

country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Since he sees heaven as our true home, the apostle Paul gives us these instructions in **Colossians 3:1-2** **If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.** Let me read those verses from the New Living Testament. **Colossians 3:1-2 Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.**

Now, when Paul says not to think about the things of earth, I don't think he means we should be oblivious to our daily responsibilities. For example, before you came to church today, most of you ate something for breakfast. I think that was a good thing to do. And the moms among us are very much aware that breakfast doesn't happen without some thought and effort. All of you got dressed this morning. You gave that some thought and are not wearing what you slept in last night. I am grateful for that. Thank you. Most of you drove to church this morning. At some point you thought about making sure there was gasoline in your fuel tank, or you would not have gotten here. Every day you have to think about some earthly things. The apostle Paul had to do so as well. And there are all sort of ways that failing to do this can mess up our lives, the lives of those around us, and keep from honoring the Lord. Paul does not mean we should be oblivious to our daily responsibilities.

So, what does Paul, really the Lord, mean when he says we are to set our minds on the things above, on heavenly things? Well, **first** I think this means we are to view even the most mundane aspects of life from an eternal perspective. Or we could say we should view the things of earth from the perspective the Lord wants us to have. **1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.** How does one do that, even in the very

ordinary aspects of life? Well, part of it is doing everything with gratitude. As you pump gasoline into that fuel tank you can give thanks for the blessing of being able to drive to church this morning, rather than having to walk. You also should think about how what you are doing can be used to serve God and other people. How can the Lord be honored in the ordinary things you do today? As you fill that fuel tank you can ask yourself, are there folks who would be helped by me offering them a ride somewhere? Should I take a trip to Duluth to visit someone in the hospital? That is all part of having a heavenly perspective on the ordinary parts of life.

Second, we need to set our minds on heavenly things simply to remind us that heaven is our true home. Years ago, I read a little book by Michael Griffith called, “God’s Forgetful Pilgrims.” I really don’t remember much about the book, but I do remember that title. We often forget that heaven is our true home. This world is not. **Hebrews 11:13 These all** (the Old Testament patriarchs) **died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.** Other verses use the words nomads, sojourners, foreigners, pilgrims. Folks, this isn’t our home.

But we tend to forget that. Instead, getting a good education, finding the right spouse, advancing in a career, raising a family, accumulating wealth, enjoying the grandkids, maintaining our health, or just having a good time, are the type of things to which we often devote our time and energy. If we are not careful, we may stop (Hebrews 11:16) desiring a better country, a heavenly one. We may forget what really matters, and what really has only short-term value. In other words, unless we make a conscience effort to set our minds on the things above, that heavenly reality can very easily be put on the back burner and be given very little, if any attention. Let’s say there is an ideal balance where thoughts about our eternal home, our true home, should take up 10% of our time. Unless we are very intentional and set our minds on the things above, that 10% will quickly go well below 1% and we may go days or even weeks without thinking about heaven at all.

Folks, the fact is that not thinking enough about heaven, being too earthly minded, is a far bigger problem in the church, including Chisholm

Baptist Church, than having folks who are too heavenly minded. John Piper puts it this way: “I suspect that for every professing believer who is useless in this life because of other-worldliness, there are a hundred who are useless because of this-worldliness.” I suspect the apostle thought the same was true in the First Century Church and would be true in every century. That is why he said **Colossians 3:1b,2 (NLT)** **Set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.**

Now, despite what the bible says, and our tendency to focus too much on the things of earth, there are still plenty of folks who say the church and individual Christians are too focused on eternal salvation and don’t spend enough time and energy on the things God wants us to be doing right now.

For example, folks, on the religious left insist the kingdom of God is not about saving souls, as much as it is restoring the earth. They say this means bringing about justice, social justice, economic justice and climate justice. This criticism does contain some truth. As God’s people we should certainly “do justice.” **Micah 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?** It should trouble us greatly when people around us are treated unjustly. It is important, however, that we look carefully at what biblical justice involves. It is a bit different than the “justice” some talk about today. For example, the bible is not troubled by an unequal distribution of wealth. It is okay if some have more money than others. However, the bible is concerned that people are not acquiring wealth through deceptive, coercive or just practices. We should be concerned about that as well.

On the other side of the political spectrum, some on the religious right criticize the church for being too complaisant and for not being fully engaged in the political process. They usually acknowledge the importance of eternal life but insist we must work just as hard to gain political power to make our current society more righteous and honoring to God. And friends, we do want our society to be more righteous and honoring to God. Though the church is not a political entity, I do think it is

important for Christians to be involved in the political process. Loving other people, the second of the great commandments, “Love your neighbor as yourself” means we want to make life better for people right now, today, in this life. A big part of that is encouraging to make Godly choices and helping make sure people enjoy religious freedom and liberty of conscience.

And then there are advocates of prosperity theology. They too emphasize the importance of experiencing the kingdom of God now, not in heaven. They say that means Christians should experience physical healing and financial prosperity today and should not have to wait for some time in the future. They want a bit of heaven on earth. Well, as a church we love to pray for people who are sick, asking that God will heal according to His will. It has been wonderful to see God answer those prayers. Some people in this room can tell magnificent stories of how the Lord has healed their bodies. Again, love for our neighbors means we want people to experience whatever blessings the Lord has for them right now, today.

Yet, we always need to keep in mind the simple, but powerful logic in what Jesus says in Mark 8:36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Friends if you help someone experience justice on this earth, but he then enters eternity without Christ, the help you have provided is marginal. If you work hard at making our society more righteous and Godly, but many of your friends and family members miss out on God’s eternal salvation, you likely have not used your time in the best way. If you have perfect physical wealth for 99 years, and enjoy great financial success, and have many good friends, but are one day cast into the lake of fire, eternal hell, your life is really a disaster. That is why I believe that at the top of the list of all the things the Lord calls us as a church and individual Christians do is proclaim the gospel. Make disciples. Help other people trust and follow Jesus. Help them make sure they will enjoy eternal life in heaven. Because what good is it to gain the whole world, but lose your own soul?

However, thinking about the things above and having a gospel focused, disciple making ministry as our top priority, doesn’t mean we ignore other responsibilities the Lord gives us. C.S. Lewis wrote this in “Mere Christianity.”

“A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not, as some people think, a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought the most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set out on foot for the conversion of the Roman empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become ineffective in this one. Aim at Heaven and you will get the earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

So how do we make sure we aim at heaven, that we think about the things above, rather than the things of earth? Well, we need a continual stream of biblical truth flowing in and through our minds. A daily quiet time, taking time each day to read and reflect on what a portion of scripture says, being part of a small group bible study, paying attention to the sermon on Sunday mornings. These can all help you develop and maintain a heavenly perspective. And whether you have never really read the bible before or whether you have been studying for decades, we all benefit from continual exposure to God’s word to keep us from slipping into the trap of being preoccupied with the things of earth and making them our focus. If you are not in the habit of reading the bible regularly, but would like to get started doing that, or if you are interested in being part of a small group bible study Pastor Mark or I would love to talk to you about these things.

Also important in developing and maintaining a heavenly or eternal perspective is to have people in your life who encourage you to do that. This is something good Christian fellowship provides. **Hebrews 10:25 Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.** A big part of that encouragement is to remind each other to keep an eternal perspective. It is so easy to get bogged down in things happening in your life right now that you forget about that “better country” the Lord has promised us. When you are experiencing opposition at work or school because of your faith

in Jesus, it is important to have someone in your life who will remind you **Matthew 5:11,12a** “**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven.**” When you are anxious and worried about a situation in your life, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, it is good to have a Christian brother or sister who will tell you, **Philippians 4:6,7** **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** When you have been betrayed by someone close to you and feel very alone, it is important to have a Christian friend who will come beside you and share truth and encouragement from God’s word, such as **Hebrews 13:5b,6** **Be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** So we can confidently say, “**The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?**” When your body is weak and ravaged by disease, and the doctors say there really isn’t much more they can do, and you begin to think about your own death, it is so important to a fellow believer in Christ to remind you of the promises that Jesus gives us. **John 11:25,26** “**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.**”

Friends, those are the type of relationships and the type of conversations that help us keep an eternal perspective. Unfortunately, much of what we call Christian fellowship, whether it is experienced in the church gym in between worship services, or when we are getting together for dinner with Christian friends, frequently lacks those type of conversations. We talk about family, football, fishing, the fair, furniture, food, fall sales, and hundreds of other things, but far too often we don’t talk about the things above. We frequently fail to encourage each other and help each other to have an eternal, heavenly perspective.

Folks, by God’s grace that needs to change. In the midst of all the confusion, conflict and chaos that surrounds us, we, believers in Jesus, all of us at Chisholm Baptist Church, need to keep our

heavenly home, that better country clearly in view. It is only with that eternal perspective that our own souls will be strong, full of grace and truth, and it is the only way we can bring light and hope to folks who have darkness and despair seeping into their souls. May the Lord help us to be truly heavenly minded, for our sakes, for the good of those around us, and for the glory of God.