



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

April 16, 2017

More Than You Know

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

More Than You Know

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2017 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: April 21, 2017

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:39-42).

In a fine little book called *You Are What You Love*, Professor James Smith quotes David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College a few years ago. Wallace had no particular religious axe to grind, but he was a keen observer of human nature, and this is what he told the bright young graduates:

There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.... If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough.... Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.... Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.¹

¹ Quoted in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 23f.

Wallace went on to say that the thing about all these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful, but that they're unconscious and insidious. They become our default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

We all worship something. The question is, what do we truly worship, and how does what we worship manage to shape our soul?

Most people think of worship as something that goes on for an hour each week in church. But worship is ultimately about whatever we think is worthy of our deepest commitment, and where we devote our time and talent and treasure. What we worship calibrates the compass of our heart and lays out the direction of our life. You can tell what people really worship simply by watching the way they live.

Our lives and our souls are shaped by what we do, day after day. Activities, attitudes, thoughts, and values turn into habits, until we become one kind of person or another without even meaning to. We just follow our interests, and over time they determine who we are. As Smith says, we become what we love because we live toward what we want, and the things that we do, do things to us.

Most of us have some idea about what we *should* do, what kinds of values we *ought* to have. We know it's better to be generous than selfish, to care about others rather than being indifferent to their plight. We know it's not good to be

judgmental or prejudiced or bigoted, that love and mercy and forgiveness are better than hate and revenge and bitterness. And because we know the right answers on the morality test, we tend to credit ourselves with right actions as well, without looking too closely to see how accurate our self-assessment really is.

A striking thing about the saints, the people the world admires most, is that they never talk about how good they are, while ordinary folk are often quick to say, “I’m a good person.” If humility really is a virtue, as most people seem to think it is, the surest sign that it’s missing is when somebody claims to have it. Goodness in general is like that too. The better people claim to be themselves, the more likely it is that they’ve set the bar pretty low. Jesus says that what God wants is for us to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors—all our neighbors—as fully as we love ourselves. Who among us measures up very well, according to that standard?

Now all of this brings us around again to Easter, in at least two ways.

First, we’re tempted to think that we already get the point of Easter because we’ve heard the story so many times before—as if the point were just to hear some claims about Jesus and death and resurrection, and decide whether or not we believe them, then go on about our business as usual. But the great irony is, we may be missing the point altogether, precisely because we think we already know it.

Lots of sermons today will talk about Easter as “Good News,” when truth be told, it really doesn’t sound like news to most of us at all. We think we know the story. But two thousand years after the fact, Easter is not so much news as

an invitation to new life. It's an opportunity to ask what we really do worship after all, and whether the objects of our devotion are big enough to be God. It's a time to ask what kind of heart our habits are forming, and how the pursuits of everyday life are shaping our soul.

Are we getting closer to God—imperfectly of course, with all sorts of failures spread among small victories, but with faith and hope and love growing stronger, little by little, within us? Do we see ourselves more honestly now, and are we less likely to excuse in ourselves the faults we judge so harshly in others? Do we care more about other people than we used to—not just our family and friends, but those we don't know very well? When we see people in need, is our conscience awake and active, prodding us to look for ways we can help, instead of merely rationalizing complacency in order to fall back to sleep?

Easter is not just about finding a way around death, so that we can go on living the same old life indefinitely. It's about growing into an infinitely greater life, one that's really worth living forever. Easter lifts up a rich, abundant life that gets better and better for all eternity, through habits we begin to form here and now, by the grace of God. But habits only grow with practice and devotion, which is why an hour in church might mean next to nothing unless it's part of our deeper desire to learn to love God.

So the first thing to say about Easter this morning is that we'll miss the whole point if we think it's just about repeating a story we've heard before. And the second thing is, we'll miss the point, too, if we think that Easter, or the Christian life in general, is mainly about conjuring up some kind of good feeling.

We all like to feel good, of course, but lots of things go into the way we feel. If life is hard right now, we may not be able to feel good at all; but that doesn't mean God is not with us, or that Jesus himself is not walking beside us every day. The death and resurrection of Christ remind us that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, and that's true whether we feel it or not at any given moment.

That said, it's also true that some feelings can tell us a lot about the quality of our heart, as long as feelings don't become an end in themselves. If someone else's happiness makes us happy too, that's a sign of a soul that knows what love is. If compassion helps us to feel another person's pain so that we want to do what we can to help, that's a good feeling as well, even if their suffering also makes us sad. In fact, if we don't share other people's joy or pain, there's something cold and lifeless about us. On the other hand, the wider the reach of our love and compassion, the larger our soul turns out to be.

But when feelings become an end in themselves, when we love *feeling* good more than *being* good, that's the kind of misdirection that can lead to all sorts of addictions. People are literally dying these days in a quest to feel good through some artificial high. We hear about it all the time in the news. And long before a body dies, a soul may die a thousand deaths of disappointment from craving good feelings rather than living the kind of life that produces its own deep joy.

Jesus invites us exactly to that kind of life. The deeper meaning of Easter is that Christ will go all the way to death and back in order to draw us into so rich a life. If that's the kind of life we want, it's ours for the having, if we're willing to cultivate the habits of the heart that can make it real.

The message and the promise of Easter are not just for isolated individuals. They're for the whole people of God, because we can't become what we're meant to be all by ourselves. The life Jesus offers comes through what we learn together in the church, in his own beloved community. That's why we say again, as we say together every Easter: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org