

One of my favorite cartoons shows a man being greeted into hell by the devil, who remarks to him “Oh, by the way, on your way down here your lottery ticket came in for seventeen million dollars.” The devil, of course, was just rubbing it in, but the sentiment echoes what we heard in the readings. It’s all too easy to place our hope in things that don’t matter in the long run, and lose sight of what’s important in the eyes of God.

Jesus and the prophets sum up exactly what’s important in the eyes of God in three short sentences that anyone can easily memorize.

1. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength;
2. You shall love your neighbor as yourself;
3. You have been told, O man, what the Lord requires of you: to do what is right, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

That’s it. Notice that love appears in all three sentences. Nothing surprising there, since love really is the most important thing.

How about a short definition of love then, to go along with those three exquisitely short sentences. Simply put, the core of love is treating God and others as if they were number one, and trusting that they will look out for you as if you were number one. It simply won’t do for any particular number one to look out exclusively for himself or herself. That happily gives us a nice, simple test to determine whether we or anyone else is a loving person or not. A selfish person cannot, by definition, be a loving person.

Let me tell you a story that shows what this might look like in ordinary life. Once upon a time there was a little boy in a town not too far from here who greeted his type-A, workaholic father as he returned home from work one evening with a question: “Dad, how much do you make an hour?”

His dad was astonished and said, “Look, son, I don’t even tell your mother how much I make. Don’t bother me now, I just got home from work and I’m tired. Go watch TV.” But his son didn’t give up. “Dad, please just tell me, please – it’s important - how much do you make an hour?” To get rid of his son, his father just scowled and said, “Twenty dollars.” He actually made considerably more than that, but he shared information about his money as reluctantly as he shared the money itself.

His son wasn’t quite done with him. “Okay, Dad,” he said, “Could you give me ten dollars?” At that, his dad blew up and yelled at him, “Is that why you wanted to know? So you could figure out how much you could get out of me?” The rest of his tirade isn’t worth repeating except to say that the little boy was sent to bed crying and without supper.

Over dinner, his wife suggested to her furious husband just a bit fearfully that perhaps he had been too tough with their son. Maybe he just needed the money for school or something. Her husband wasn’t hearing a bar of that song, but his wife continued, trying to convince him of their son’s essential innocence, and Dad began to feel a little guilty.

After dinner he grumpily went to his throne and watched TV by himself for a while, but his wife’s words bothered him. His conscience wouldn’t let him rest and he finally decided to go to his son's room, give him the money and find out why he needed it.

So up he went, found his son, and asked, “Are you asleep?”

“No, Dad. Why?” his son said.

“I thought about it some more. Here's the money you asked for,” his Dad muttered, throwing a ten dollar bill on his son’s bed.

“Wow - thanks, Dad!” his son said, eagerly taking the money. Then he quickly reached under his pillow and took out some more money – mostly crumpled dollar bills and small change. He handed it all to his father and said “Now I have enough!”

Puzzled, his dad asked “Enough for what?”

“Now I have twenty dollars!” he said to his father. He looked up at his dad with wide, hopeful eyes and asked: “Dad – can I buy an hour of your time?”

His dad was stunned. “You want to buy an hour of my time?”

“Sure, Dad,” his son said with a hopeful look on his face. “All I want to do is have an hour to play together with you and laugh and talk; just you and me; and this way you won’t lose any money because of me.”

His dad covered his eyes, excused himself quickly, got up and told his son he’d be right back. It took a while before he regained his composure. Then he went downstairs and told his wife what had happened. She began to cry too. Together they decided what to do next.

Dad went to his desk, took out his checkbook and wrote out a check to his son. There was no amount. He had crossed out the word ‘Dollars,’ since this check wasn’t about money. The date said ‘Anytime,’ and it was signed simply, ‘Dad.’

Then he went back to his son’s room, handed him the check and explained what it was. “You don’t have to pay me, son,” Dad said. “I’d lost sight of what’s most important in life and forgot what a father’s most important business really is, but you reminded me. I’m giving you this special check. Whenever you need me and I tell you I’m too busy, just show me this check and I promise I’ll give you all the time I can. I’m glad you woke me up before it was too late. I love you, son.” His son simply looked back at him with a big smile and said: “I love you too, Dad – let’s play.” And so they did.

It might be time for you and me to check the barns of our lives and see whether they’re filled with stories of awakening, mercy and love like that, or perhaps with something else a lot less important. If any of us happens to find a seventeen million dollar lottery ticket lying around in there next to the money bags, it’s probably a sign and maybe even just in the nick of time. Indeed, none of us really knows when we’re going to be called to provide explanations for what’s inside our barns.