

WHEN GOODNESS MEETS GLORY

Turning Points (Part 1)

Text: Mark 10:17-21

Of Racquets and Reality

I was a freshman in college when I took up the game of squash. For some reason, I seemed to pick up the game with remarkable ease. Playing almost any chance I got, it was only a matter of months before I could crush any of the guys on my floor. At Christmastime, I took on my step-brother, Kip, who'd played squash for several years at prep school, and even he fell to my ruthless racquet-work. Clearly I had found a sport at which I was a natural. I began to feel so confident about my play that it wasn't long before I thought: *"It's crazy to waste all this talent. Maybe I ought to go out for the Yale team."*

I was *obviously* too good for the Freshman squad, and probably for the Junior Varsity too. But since I'd only been playing the game for six months, I *humbly* thought I wouldn't presume to approach the Varsity coach without some kind of endorsement. I decided to ask my father. He was a lot older and slower now, but he'd been *captain* of the squash team during college days. We'd never played together before. In fact, he hadn't been on a squash court in years. But since he was coming up for a visit a few weekends from then, I figured we'd play a game, I'd wow him with my skill, and he'd probably *insist* that I carry on the family tradition and try for a spot at the top of the Varsity team.

The way I figured it, I'd whip him about 15 to 8 before he'd suggest that I consider turning pro. In actuality, the score was 15-5, *his* favor. I had never seen that little black ball move so fast or so low before. My neck is *still* sore from watching it whiz past the reach of my pathetically flailing racquet. The next game was worse -- 15-1 -- as the old man began to warm-up and surgically dissect me at the points of weakness he'd spotted in the game before.

By the time my father mercifully called a halt to the carnage, I felt like I'd been through a Cuisinart. He, on the other hand, hadn't even lost the part in his hair. Between gasps, I asked him just how he thought he'd compare with someone on the squash team today? *"Well, I'd like to think I could get a couple of points off one of these Freshmen,"* he said. And against someone on the J.V.? *"He'd probably take me 15-zip."* What about against a Varsity player? *"I'd never get a chance to serve,"* my dad said, *"And he'd be nothing compared to a real pro."*

I was struck silent by these words. Half-an-hour before I had been wondering where I'd rank on the *Varsity* team ladder. But I had just been repeatedly annihilated by a guy who said his game wasn't even up to *Freshman* standards anymore. It suddenly hit me: Lacking a truly reliable standard by which to assess my performance, I had wildly overrated myself... never even dreaming how self-deceived I really was.

Making the Team

It's easy to do that, and not just on the athletic court. The Bible says that **"As Jesus started on his way,"** one day, **"a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"** My father, a litigator by trade, once told me that a lawyer never asks a question in court to which he does not already have the answer. We don't know the occupation of this man whom tradition has dubbed "the rich young ruler" but, on the basis of the exchange that follows, it's not a bad guess that he was an attorney.

"You know the commandments," said Jesus, **"Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother."** **"Teacher,"** the rich young ruler declared, **"all these [commandments] I have kept since I was a boy."** We get the feeling that he is not at all surprised by the list of qualifications Jesus supplied. He's been a good Jew. He knows the rules of the religious game and he's practiced enough to be, in his mind, a pretty good player.

And maybe he was. That he'd never literally killed anyone else or stepped out on his wife is a possibility we can grant. That he'd never stolen a cookie as a kid, or bent the truth, or in any way disrespected his parents seems harder to believe, but let's give him that too. Let's assume that he never told a client that the check was in the mail when it wasn't or fudged on his income taxes or gave himself a better lie when no one was looking.

Maybe he'd even managed to go through life with an unbeaten record on those other 4 commandments Jesus doesn't mention explicitly here. Perhaps he'd somehow amassed a small fortune and at the same never put anything before God on his priority list. Maybe he'd never let his house or his car or his career become an idol that got an unhealthy devotion. Perhaps he'd never slipped up and taken God's name in vain, or passed a Sabbath without completely resting in God's sufficiency.

Or maybe he simply over-rated himself. As I said, it's easy to do that. A lot of us go through life feeling, fairly sure that from a moral standpoint we are playing the game of life pretty well. We may not picture ourselves playing number one on the Varsity morality team, but most of us are certain we can at least make the squad. And if not the Varsity then surely the J.V. Very few people, see themselves as struggling even to play at the Freshman, much less a lower level. Now rapists, and child-molesters, and terrorists -- *their* performance is obviously unacceptable and they are *extremely* unlikely to find their name on the Team list come Judgment Day. But the average, decent, "moral" person is not particularly worried about standing before a holy God or inheriting eternal life. If we're ruthlessly honest – many of us think we are *"good enough."*

Where Are You In The Rankings?

But that's simply because we're very slow to realize what **"good"** really looks like. That's the point that Jesus makes here, so simply that most of us read right past it. **"Good teacher,"** the man says – giving Jesus credit that he might actually be even a little bit *more good* than normal -- **"Good teacher, what must I DO to inherit eternal life?"** What must I DO to make God's Team? Did you hear Christ's answer? He says: **"Why do you call me good?"** Now, don't be confused here. Jesus is not saying He's not good; HE is. He's simply asking, "Do you know what you're talking about when you use that word 'good.'" Then, to make the point, Jesus says: **"No one is good--except God alone."**

Think about that for a moment: **"No one is good—except God alone."** Imagine there was a "goodness" scale that ran from the floor under your feet to the top of the steeple of this church – about 150 feet up. Imagine that Hitler and bin Laden and Idi Amin and others who are *very bad* are right down here in the grime at floor level; and way up there in the tower, just below the steeple, are those people who are *very good*, almost perfect. Just picture where you see yourself floating on that goodness continuum.

As you start to picture that position, I should tell you where people like Mother Theresa and Billy Graham or Mama Maggie see themselves. They picture themselves as somewhere below the level of the bottom of that pew you're sitting on. You see, they're aware that when it comes to goodness, we have two major problems: First, we overrate the goodness of our game. We think we're doing dazzling racquet-work, or at least better than most. We assume our acts of charity or church attendance or above-culture morality put us up reasonably high in the rankings, certainly impressing the Coach. But we would be utterly speechless if we could see how atrocious even the very BEST human player is when compared to the staggering glory of God's moral goodness.

Secondly, we consistently underestimate how serious our relatively poor performance is to God. We lie, hate, steal, gossip, destroy, distort, lust, covet, betray, flaunt, forsake, and harm so subtly and so frequently -- and surrounded by so many others who do just the same -- that we don't even recognize that what we're doing is a problem. We don't even remember a thousandth of the sins we've committed. As the Book of Romans puts it: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God¹... There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away... The way of peace they do not know... [For] there is no fear of God before their eyes."**² Many don't see that this gap between our version of "goodness" and the reality of God's "glory" doesn't mean that we might *only* make the J.V. or Freshman team. This reality means being cut altogether. It means the hell of eternal separation from an absolutely perfect God, for **"the wages of sin is death."**³

Entering the Court

At some point in life, every one of us has got to come to a point where we reckon personally with this reality. We've got to stand at a fork in the road where the choice we make, as Robert Frost once said, "makes all the difference." The road to the left is the road of continued self-deception, the road of self-righteousness. It is a wide road and

there are many who travel it and it leads, says Jesus, **“to destruction.”** Some of us are still on it today. Some are still like me, walking onto the court with my father in blissful pride and utter ignorance.

But off to the right there runs another road. This one is narrower and there are **“few who find it,”** says Jesus. For this road runs past a shadowed hill and an old rugged cross. The Bible teaches that God saw that no one could possibly make the team on their own merit. Everybody was falling short. He couldn't change the standard of his glorious perfection. He couldn't shrug sin away. But because God **“so loved the world,”**⁴ He did something absolutely mind-boggling. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to walk in human shoes, and to die on a cross. On that cross, God took responsibility for all of the moral failures and active evil of this world -- even yours and mine -- off of our backs and put on his Son's. Seconds before Jesus died, he cried out -- **“It is finished!”**⁵ -- meaning: "I have paid the consequences and absorbed the punishment for all the sin of the world. Father, let them on our Team."

Romans 3:23 says: **“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** At some point in our life we have to choose which road we're going to walk. Are we going to walk the road of self-righteousness or of Christ's righteousness? Are we clinging to *our* racquet prowess or to the gift God offers at the Cross? The rich young ruler couldn't make the right turn that day. He still trusted too much in his own good and goods. What about you? What are you trusting in? Which way have you turned?

The Bible has a word for the act of turning off the wide road and onto the way of the Cross. It's called “repentance.” The most important act we ever make in this life is the decision to turn right at the Cross. Those who do find that the journey of decision continues. There are multiple turnings along the way after that – many places where Jesus calls us to repent in some other way, and we'll explore them in weeks ahead. But with each right turn we make, one thing is certain. By God's grace, we get closer to Home.

Please pray with me...

Lord God, some of us here today have been overrating ourselves, or underestimating the seriousness of sin, or maybe both. We don't want to do that any more. We finally have some better sense today of the gap between our goodness and your glory, and so we want what you did on Calvary to take effect in our life. Change our eternal destiny, Lord. Blot out the debts and wipe out the trespasses of all who are joining me in this prayer. Help whoever will today to let go of the racquet and take hold of the gift of your forgiveness, and walk with you from here. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

I'd like to acknowledge Bill Hybels for the inspiration and some of the best ideas in this message, as inspired by his sermon, *“Christianity's Toughest Competitor: Moralism.”*

¹ Romans 3:23

² Romans 3:10-18

³ Romans 6:23

⁴ John 3:16

⁵ John 19:30