

# Faith Like Balloons

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Sermon prepared for **5 August 2007**,  
Nineteenth sermon<sup>i</sup>.

**Luke 12:13-21; Col 3:1-11**

(15 minutes)

Theme: *"Our eyes look down from eternity at our earth-rooted faith"*

**Introduction.** Most children love balloons. It would be hard for my son Erin to walk past someone holding a bunch of balloons without asking for one. Especially those helium-filled balloons that float above your head on a piece of string. Of course, the problem with helium balloons is that inevitably, sooner or later, the child will let go of the balloon, leaving it to float up into the sky, never to be seen again. So, many of us tie the string to the child's wrist, to keep the balloon tethered to the earth – earth-bound.

Our faith is a bit like these balloons. On the one hand, our lives are rooted in the earth. This is where we live, this is where we engage in work and relate to family and friends. But on the other hand, we are Christians, and we think about God and about heaven, and we want our spirits to soar above this world. Sometimes, there is tension between these two. Do we remain earth bound? Or do we escape the earth and float away into the heavens?

**Statement A.** The apostle Paul grapples with this question in many of his writings – the question of how to live in on earth when he wants to live in heaven. In today's reading, Paul says, "Set your hearts on things above where Christ is." And then he repeats himself, "Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things." Here Paul seems to say that we should separate ourselves from the earth, and allow our thoughts to be dominated by heavenly things – a heavenly mindedness.

Paul uses a number of metaphors to explain this. He talks about the old self and the new self, drawing a contrast between these two, creating a dichotomy. He talks about our former way of life – before we became Christians – and contrasts this with our present way of life – after we've met Christ. He talks about the sinful man and the spiritual man. In all of these metaphors, he is trying to explain that we need to shed an old way of living and take on a new way of living – a new way of being in the world, one in which we are focused on heavenly things.

In this passage he lists all kinds of behaviours that are associated with the old self – greed, envy, lying, broken relationships. He describes these as belonging to the sinful nature, and then talks about them as belonging to the 'earthly nature'. Here he shows how these sinful things, which are associated with sin, are grounded on the earth – they are earthy, soiled, dirty.

In the following passage, which we did not read, he contrasts these earthy behaviours with heavenly behaviours – compassion, humility, love, forgiveness and harmony. These behaviours belong to the heavenly nature, to our spiritual ways of being in the world.

So Paul argues that we should shuck off the earthly nature, and take on a heavenly nature. He says we must set our minds on things above, on heavenly things, for that is where our life is.

**Development A.** Jesus echoes this idea in the story that we read from Luke. Jesus had been teaching about the Kingdom of God, about heavenly things, about the Holy Spirit. This incident took place shortly before Jesus was crucified, and so he was preoccupied with teachings about eternity. And in the midst of this teaching, a bloke stands up and introduces something quite out of place – a request that Jesus tell his brother to split his inheritance with

him. Jesus is understandably irritated. In the middle of his preaching about heaven, this man introduces something earthy, something trivial, something that feels tainted and out of place.

Jesus uses the intrusion to tell a parable that emphasises the distinction between this man's earthly-mindedness and the heavenly-mindedness he wants from us. There is a rich man, who comes into a windfall. Now this windfall came in the form of a bountiful harvest. Jesus describes this as coming from the ground, from the earth. This is not wealth that dropped out of the sky, out of heaven. Rather, it is earthly wealth, something that emerged from the soil.

And the man is very happy about his wealth, and pulls down his old barns and builds new ones – bigger and better. He stores all of his grain and then settles back, content and satisfied – eat, drink and be merry. All he thinks about are his immediate needs, he is stuck in the here and now. He has no sense of the future or of the world around him. It's like he has mole vision – he can see only a few centimetres in front of his face.

And so Jesus introduces the voice of God to provide a contrasting perspective. "You fool!" says the voice of God, "Don't you know that this very night you will die, and how will your barns of grain help you then?" God helps us step up to a higher perspective, a wider perspective. Instead of being aware of only our immediate needs for security and contentment, we suddenly become conscious of a bigger picture – of the future, of the world, of eternity. It is this eternal perspective that Jesus wants us to get out of this story, to recognise that there is more to life than just earthly things. We need also to be aware of heavenly things.

And so he concludes with a warning, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God."

**Contrapuntal.** But I hear you say, Ja, ja, but we've heard all of this before, especially during stewardship month. You know, cash in your pension schemes and give the money to the church. Don't worry about your needs now; live by faith and focus on eternal rewards.

Maybe some of you are thinking of that saying, "Too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use". You know people like that, hey – people who are so preoccupied with the things of God, with heavenly things, with the spiritual world, that they are oblivious to the realities of life around them.

Perhaps you're thinking, but I live in the real world. I have bills to pay and a family to take care of. I can't just forget about these earthly things and think about heaven all of the time.

Or perhaps you are concerned with the many needs in the world around us, where we ought to be ministering – the many orphans in South Africa, the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe, conflict in the Middle East, global warming. Surely, we can't just ignore all of these needs, while we contemplate the bliss of heaven?

**Statement B.** Well, I think that both Jesus and Paul would have agreed with you. We cannot just think about heaven all of the time, we need to live our lives in the earthly world. Indeed, this is exactly what Paul grapples with. How do we remain heavenly minded in the midst of the earthly world?

I think that Paul's solution is to describe a faith journey that moves upwards and then downward – a two staged journey, up and then back down.

We start off as the old self, a person who is unconscious of God, unaware of the spiritual world around us, a person who is aware only of ourselves and immediate world and our earthly needs. We have mole vision – we see only what is close by.

But when we meet Jesus, when we are saved, we die to that self, we crucify that self – that self dies, and we are resurrected into Christ. This is an upward journey, as the old self dies and we are resurrected up into heaven, into Christ, into the spiritual world. Paul says that because we have died, our life is now hidden with Christ in God. Well, Christ and God the

Father are in heaven, and so that is where our life is also – in heaven. Hence, we become heavenly minded.

But we cannot remain in heaven, like a balloon that has lost its mooring and floats off into the sky. It is not God's plan that we should stay there – that will come later. His plan is that we return to the earth, a kind of incarnation back into the world. This is the downward journey. We descend back from heaven into the world as a new self, a transformed self, a spiritual self.

Both the old self and the new self are earthly selves – they both live in the world, on the earth. But the new self is heavenly minded, has an eternal perspective, while the old self is early minded and has a mole's perspective. What has changed is our perspective. It is as if our mind is still in heaven, even though the rest of us is on the earth. Or perhaps our eyes are still in heaven.

And so we look at the world differently – we look with the eyes of eternity, rather than the eyes of the temporal. How different would our lives be if we could view our lives from an eternal perspective – if we thought about our money from the perspective of heaven, rather than the perspective of now; if we engaged with our own needs with the eyes of God; if we viewed the world around us through the lens of eternity. How different life would be, how differently the rich fool would have treated his bumper crop.

**Conclusion.** So when Paul says that we should set our minds on things above, he is not saying that we should float up into the sky like a stray balloon. Rather, he is saying that we should remain rooted in the soil, grounded on the earth, established in the world around us, like a balloon that is tied to the ground. And he is saying also that we should retain the eyes of heaven, the mind of God, the eternal perspective as we look around us and engage in our daily lives. Set your mind on things above, where Christ is.

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<sup>i</sup> I had been studying David Buttrick's seminal "Homiletic", which argues for a different structure to sermons than I've been using so far. The focus is on moves, which I think I've always done. But he introduces lots of rules for how to construct these moves in order for the message to penetrate people's consciousness. I find his approach somewhat stilted and am not convinced I like it. But it did influence a somewhat different style to this sermon.

In the contrapuntal – his term – I introduced a shift of perspective – also his idea. Instead of speaking from my own perspective, or on behalf of Paul and Jesus, I shift to the congregation's perspective and anticipate what they may be thinking about what I'm saying. And then in the final section I respond to this thinking. This seemed to work quite well.

The metaphor of the balloon was pulled through and created a bit of a thread throughout the sermon.

The sermon was shorter than usual.

The title, which was not advertised at church, is a bit of a play on the title of a currently popular book and movie, "Faith like potatoes". In that story, our faith is likened to potatoes that grow quietly and hidden, before being revealed to the world. In my sermon, faith is likened to a helium balloon, tethered to the earth but floating in the heavens.