

“Raise Your Price”  
Ron Hallman

At the beginning of an Ethics class I teach at Roberts Wesleyan College, I start off by asking the students for a show of hands from those who think they can be bought. That is, do you have a price for which you would do something you ordinarily wouldn't consider; something illegal. Generally there is silence as students look at one another and occasionally one or two students may raise their hands. I will then raise my hand, which really brings quizzical looks to the faces of my students. Finally, I will call on the one student that may have raised their hand and he or she will say something like; if I stopped someone to give them a traffic ticket and they offered me 10 thousand dollars not to give them a ticket, I would consider doing that. I make a mental note of that student's name and pray they are in the wrong class. Then the students ask why I raised my hand. I go on to explain that if one of my children were kidnapped and I was told to come up with 50 thousand dollars in cash or they would be harmed, I would seriously contemplate doing everything I could to get that money, even if it meant stealing. The life of my child would be of greater value to me than the value of not stealing: life more important than property. I then go on to tell the class that in truth, everyone can be bought; indeed everyone has a price. The Ethics class is not about people achieving perfection in their ethical and moral lives. Rather, success in this class will be achieved at the end of the semester by each of you Raising your Price.

To take this concept in ethics and apply it to our spiritual journey I would assert that we are also capable of raising our price when it comes to our relationship with God. Relationships are not static. As one sage put it, the only thing permanent in life is change. Change is everywhere and it is ubiquitous. Our physical appearance changes, our life experiences are constantly changing, the weather changes, technology changes, even Batavia changes, and certainly our relationships change and evolve. A recent study indicated that many people develop a new circle of friends every 5 years. Rudolph Steiner said that humans go through 7 year cycles in life. He went on to assert that if we don't recognize these changes it is hard to understand the relationship of any given individual with his or her environment. Our relationship with God is also changing and evolving through the years. I think if we all reflect on that relationship we can recall times in our lives when that relationship was stronger or weaker, depending on a variety of factors. To use a stock market analogy, we could be in either a bull or bear market in terms of our relationship with God, often depending on our current life circumstances and the strength or weakness of that personal relationship. Current life experiences can be very different for people. For example, I was blessed to be born into a solidly upper-middle class, white family in Brighton. I had two loving parents, a stable household, opportunities that came with being a member of the dominant race and gender. College was never a question in that the expectation was that I would go to college and enter some profession. Contrast that with someone being born into poverty, perhaps in a household where substance abuse and/or selling drugs was common practice. Perhaps there was one parent at home and there was little, if any encouragement to learn to read or even attend school. There are no expectations for college education in this household, and even if there was, how would it be financed? There is a great myth in our society that everyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The truth is that, if we are honest with ourselves, that we usually use other people's bootstraps, along with our own, to get ahead in life. Of course there are always examples of people who have raised themselves by their own bootstraps under incredibly trying circumstances, but the point to keep in mind is that the exception doesn't prove the rule. I recall back in 1975 when I was about to teach a class for Genesee Community College in Attica Prison to the inmates. Before teaching, I was given a tour of the facility by the Deputy Superintendent for Programs. As we passed one

particular cell, he pointed out to me that the older white gentleman sitting in the cell had been a Medical Doctor from Long Island who had been convicted of murdering his wife. He went on to say that this proved the point that anyone, regardless of race or social status, could wind up in prison, just like this Doctor. My impression was far different. I had passed cell block after cell block of predominantly black and Latino faces. It was obvious to me that out of the 1200 or so inmates confined at that time I only saw one white medical doctor. Prisons are filled with mostly poor minorities. The exception does not prove the rule. People born and raised in abject poverty and with other multiple challenges can also raise their price, but we have to understand the limited choices they have compared to many of us. I always thank God for my birthright.

The question I pose to you this morning is this: How would you compare your relationship with God today compared to what it was last week, last month, last year, 10 years ago, etc., and what direction is this relationship headed in? Can you honestly say to yourself that that this relationship is growing stronger and there are fewer things in life interfering with or inhibiting this relationship or are you feeling more distant in your relationship with God?

If we look back at today's scripture from First Kings, chapter 11, we can clearly see King Solomon, a man noted for his great wisdom, turn away from God. He made a choice to marry seven hundred princesses and also had three hundred concubines. Elliot Spitzer and Mark Sanford had nothing on King Solomon. Solomon began to worship foreign Gods. Here was someone who essentially had it all; power, great wealth, a 40 year reign as King over all of Israel, yet he allowed his relationship with God to slip away over time. The fact is that our relationship with God, just like other relationships in our life, continue to evolve and change and it is hard work. A good long lasting marriage is hard work. A friendship over many years is hard work. Family and sibling relationships are hard work. And the same applies to our relationship with God. God has expectations of us and they are not always easily fulfilled. God expects the best from us and looks for improvements every day. Again, I am not talking about perfection here, just improvement. In the world of sports, a good quarterback has something like a 60% completion rate. That means that 40% of the time something bad is happening. A good hitter in baseball is batting 300. Think about that. Over 2/3rds of the time they are not getting a hit. That's hardly perfection is it? The great American Philosopher and Humorist, Will Rogers said that the problem with human nature is that too many people have it. Well, if you have human nature, like I do, you realize that we are imperfect creatures.

What can we do then to raise our price in fostering a closer relationship with God? Paul gives us a pretty good idea of what we need to do when we look back to Romans chapter 12. "Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. Love one another warmly as Christian brothers, and be eager to show respect for one another. Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times. Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers." And then we are also asked to bless those who persecute us, be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep, have the same concern for everyone, don't be prideful, accept humble duties. Do your part to live in peace with everybody. Do not let evil defeat you; instead conquer evil with good. That is a great laundry list for us in terms of strengthening our relationship with God. Often small steps can lead to a greater sense of success than trying to change everything at once, falling short, becoming frustrated, and giving up. Perhaps something like picking up a telephone and calling a sibling or friend you haven't talked to in a long time, a call you have been putting off because of a strained relationship. Perhaps it is visiting someone in the hospital or a nursing home that you know to be lonely. Perhaps it is simply endeavoring to smile and say hello to a stranger that you pass

on the street. Maybe it is refraining from saying something bad about Uncle Bill or Aunt Sara. These are simple examples but by taking these actions we reduce the number of barriers that separate us from God and permit us to raise our price.

We know that God is always active. God is always making overtures in trying to build a relationship with us. We don't invoke God. God anticipates us coming to him. Abraham Lincoln, at a time when the country was involved in the great Civil War, answered a remark from someone who said to the president, isn't it great that God is on our side in this struggle with this comment. No, what I really worry about is whether we are on God's side. I think maybe 5% of the time in our lives we may be on highs or lows and at those times we tend to connect more directly with God, either through praise or beseeching help. In the book "Walking after Midnight", Katy Hutchison, a woman who lost her husband to a senseless murder in Canada back in the early 1990's talks about the long road back to recovery and reconciliation for her and her family because of this horrific event. She says "I believe life is a series of crises. We all have them. But it is important to remember that in between those crises are wonderful celebrations and opportunities to learn. I believe that the real measure of people is how they move between the crises, celebrations, and learning opportunities that punctuate their lives. It is on this journey that resilience is born and grace flourishes". The 95% of the time that we are not in crisis or on a high we need to take more time to listen: to hear and see what God is doing in our lives and the lives of people around us.

Following ethical principles such as being truthful, keeping our word, being humble, loyal, can help with this process of relationship building with God, though we don't want to confuse following principles with always doing the right thing. On occasion, doing the right thing means not following a principle. Some of you may be old enough to remember the old movie "Bridge on the River Kwai", which was released in 1957, based on a book written in the 1940's entitled "Bridge Over the River Kwai". In the movie the famous British actor Alec Guinness, played the role of a British Colonel who was captured in Burma by the Japanese in WW II and was placed in a POW camp. The Colonel resisted being tortured by his captors, but when the Japanese commander of the Prison Camp decided to torture some of the soldiers who had been under the Colonel's command, he agreed to help the Japanese build a railroad bridge over the River Kwai so the Japanese could complete a supply route. The Colonel prided himself in keeping his word and his allegiance to that laudable principle ended up nearly being his undoing. When a couple of prisoners escaped from the prison camp and reported back to American and British authorities what was happening, a plot was hatched for these soldiers to lead a party back to the prison camp and blow up the bridge on the very day that the first train carrying Japanese troops was to cross the newly completed bridge. The charges were all placed the night before and on the day the crossing was to occur, the Colonel, walking along the bridge and admiring the work he and his soldiers had accomplished, noticed the wires and at that point he tried desperately to pull out the wires to keep the bridge from being destroyed. His allegiance to keeping his word no matter what, led him to nearly betray his own country's interests in favor of the enemy. In other words, following his principles caused him to take the wrong action. Of course, in good old Hollywood style, at the last minute he recognizes his mistake, and when shot he falls on the detonator box intentionally, blowing up the train as it crosses the tracks. During WW II Dutch fishing vessels were stopped by Nazi patrol boats and boarded. The Dutch fishermen were asked if there were any Jews on board and of course, they said no. In the hold, under many pounds of fish, were Jewish families being transported from the Continent to England. While truthfulness is a principle we can all agree is a worthy one, we can certainly understand why the Dutch fishermen lied to save the lives of these Jewish people. Principles are like guideposts, but they should never be worshipped.

As we reflect today on where we stand in terms of our relationship with God, perhaps you can say that the relationship has never been stronger or perhaps you can see where the relationship is frayed and needs some work. Wherever we are in our spiritual lives, know that we can take specific actions in doing the right thing, as God would have us do. Even small changes in our behavior, over time, can produce wonderful results. Let us endeavor in the coming week to take a step or steps, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, to raise our price in our relationship with God. I gave my students a semester to raise their price and I'm only giving you a week. However, the good news for you is that there will be no final exam. By raising our price, we will take down a barrier that keeps us from having a closer relationship with God or take an affirmative step that enhances that relationship. Raising your price might seem inflationary, but this is the type of inflation we can all live with. Amen.