

## Draining the Swamp

*Matthew 6:19-34 ~ November 20, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

Recently there has been a fair amount of conversation about “draining the swamp” on the national news. This buzz relates to how decisions are made in government. The swamp means that sometimes government decisions can be highly influenced by special interest lobbies that prevent lawmakers from keeping the best interest of the people uppermost in their minds. In an odd way this is precisely what Jesus is talking about in today’s text. Not on a national level, but on a personal level. But the label, “draining the swamp,” applies quite well to the way Jesus calls us to carefully consider how our ambitions guide our life. So today we are going to talk about “Draining the Swamp.”

Now I actually know something about the process of draining a real swamp. I learned about this at age eight. My Dad had a hayfield that was bordered by a small stream. It was little more than a wet drainage ditch, but there was a constant flow of water in it. Early one spring a family of beavers decided that this stream was the perfect site for their new home. Their ambitious activity all along the stream clogged it with downed trees and brush. And they also installed a significant dam at a strategic point that turned Dad’s hayfield into a swamp.

Now as an eight year old boy I had mixed feelings about this development. Naturally I supported my Father’s concern for his hayfield and the need to restore order on his property. But on the other hand the beavers had done a lovely job creating a beautiful dam and a body of water that could perhaps have become a great fishing pond or a backyard swimming hole.

As you can probably guess, such considerations were not uppermost in my father’s mind. The swamp needed to be drained, and that was that. One day my dad showed up with a mysterious wooden box that we children were solemnly warned to never go near. As we watched from afar we saw dad take red tubes of dynamite and prepare them for the process of draining the swamp. Sticks of dynamite were placed at careful intervals along the little stream below the dam. Then additional dynamite was placed into the dam itself. We children were allowed to watch the spectacle from a safe distance behind an earthen embankment. Father warned us not to move from our safe location while he lit the fuse and ran back. I’m pretty sure that no one bothered to warn the beavers. What followed was the loudest and most dramatic explosion that I’ve ever seen. A wall of water erupted from along the course of the stream. There were sticks

and mud scattered all over the landscape. However, quite suddenly the course of the little stream stood clear and open. The dam was gone. And sure enough, slowly at first, but then in a rushing torrent, the swamp drained and the hayfield reappeared.

***Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth,... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. ...No one can serve two masters ... You cannot serve God and money.***

Jesus lays out a picture of our lives that looks a little like the situation for my father's hayfield. We find ourselves caught between competing options for our lives. That land could either be a beaver pond or a hay field. We can either lay-up treasures in heaven or on earth. We can either be filled with light or darkness. We can either serve God or money. It boils down to some very practical choices.

At first, the choices seem really clear, don't they? Obviously heaven is the place we want our true treasure to be. We want to be filled with light, not darkness. And of course God is a better master than money. But if these choices are so clear, why do the right ambitions seem like an impossible dream instead of a way of life? If it is easy to live for God and to prosper the kingdom, then why do we find ourselves living in the swamp so much of the time?

Well, there are two parts to the answer to these questions. The first part of the answer has to do with **why** we find ourselves living in the swamp. The second part of the answer has to do with **how** the swamp gets drained.

So to begin with let's talk about **why** we keep ending up with our lives becoming a swamp. It all really relates to a little thing called ambition. Ambition is like a bridle's bit for a horse. A bit is really a small thing compared to the size and weight of a horse. But a bit completely determines the direction a horse moves when it is being ridden. In the same way ambition is what directs our path in this life. Most people make the mistake of thinking that problems arise from the amount of ambition we have. For instance we worry equally about someone who has too much ambition and someone who has too little. This is not where the real problem lies. The real problem lies in what direction our ambition takes us. It is like a bridle's bit that way.

Let's look at a couple of practical examples to see how this works. Think for a moment about food. It's a popular subject. Let's take the example of the ambition to eat food

that tastes good and gives pleasure. How would life be different if instead the ambition was to eat food that provides good nutrition for the body? Most of us know enough about this situation to see the very great difference in the way these two ambitions will guide eating. And over time we know what the effects will be on our physical health. That is simple enough to understand.

A similar example is the situation for how ambition motivates spending. If our ambition is to use our money, including money we borrow from others, to purchase things that make us happy, we will get a certain type of financial result. If on the other hand our ambition is to use our money in the wisest ways possible to provide for our lives and our family's financial security, a different set of scenarios will emerge. Our ambitions about spending have a dramatic impact on our financial well being.

Hopefully these examples give us a perspective on what Jesus is saying in this text. Are our ambitions about earthly things or heavenly things? Do we care that we are filled with light or is darkness acceptable? Who is our true master? Is it God or is it the almighty dollar?

It is our ambitions that lie at the root of why we find ourselves in a spiritual swamp. It is true that ambition is deeply compromised by sin. We are never going to be able to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Life does not work that way. But it is fair for Jesus to ask us the question, what is truly in our heart? What do we truly want to happen in our lives? Do we actually want the swamp to be drained?

Now we come to the second matter. If we want the swamp to be drained **how** does that happen? This is a really tricky point. Like the situation with my Dad's hayfield, it is going to take a lot more power for change to take place than we first imagine. It might take something like dynamite. Even more distressing, we might not live through the experience. In fact I can almost assure you that draining the swamp is something that will eventually involve our dying. As St. Paul says in Romans,

***We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.***

But even though swamp draining is a terminal activity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a game changer. The resurrection is the power under this whole affair. The resurrection is the dynamite that drains the swamp. The resurrection is **how** the swamp gets drained. What does this mean in practical terms? It means that each day you are

called to walk in newness of life. Specifically this means that you are invited to live your life led by the Holy Spirit. You have a resource that comes to you through the resurrection of Jesus that is more powerful than any swamp. You may feel overwhelmed as you look out across the fetid water and ruined land that has come into your life. But God has a plan. Call upon His Holy Spirit to guide you this day. Call upon him to put into your mind the next move that he wants you to make. Don't try to follow some set of legalistic principles about stuff you think you should do. Don't reach for self help books. Just stand before your loving savior in prayer and ask him to take your hand and lead you one step at a time.

When you think you know what he wants you to do, then for heaven's sake do it. You may fail miserably. Don't worry about that. A failure attempting to follow God's Holy Spirit is a treasure in heaven. It means you are on the right track. As you turn to the Holy Spirit to guide your life you will be filled with light. God's word becomes central for you. Its wisdom and guidance infuses your thoughts and dreams. Its power takes hold of your ambitions. And like a miracle, the swamp gets drained. This does not mean that everything will go perfectly, but you will be in the right place. You will be going the right direction. With God as your master, money can become your servant. God's gifts to you will flow freely in ways that build up the kingdom. **How** does the swamp get drained? God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit accomplishes it; starting now and completing it in your resurrection from the dead. As Jesus says:

***Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. ... seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.***

Let your ambition for the kingdom of God rise above every other ambition in your life. Trust God to use you in his plan for the world. And trust him to take care of you in everything you need. Trust him to show you the way into life everlasting. Trust him to deliver you from sin. Trust him to grant you salvation in Jesus name. Trust God to raise you from the dead. Trust God to give you eternal life. Trust God above everything else. God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is worthy of your trust and He will not let you down.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.