# Will Bill Gates Go to Heaven?

**Sermon for the Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo**

**Thomas B. Newman, MD, MPH**

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Good morning!

Before I start, I'd like to give credit to Ike Herman, this week's worship associate, for inspiring the title for this morning's sermon. You see, Ike won a sermon from Joy Atkinson, our regular minister, at our auction last year. That sermon was entitled "Will Ike Herman Go to Heaven?" For those who missed it you'll be happy to hear that the answer was tentatively in the affirmative, subject to the qualification that we don't know if such a place exists.

That title seemed catchy to me. So since I wanted to talk about charitable giving by the obscenely wealthy, I chose the title: "Will Bill Gates Go to Heaven?" I mentioned this title to Ike, and he said he figured Bill was already there.

Now I have to admit to more than a little skepticism about the existence of heaven. But I'm using the words "go to heaven" figuratively. What I mean is: is Bill Gates someone we should admire—someone who is using his energy and talent in a way that makes the world a better place? Is he someone whose reflected light makes all of us shine a little brighter?

Before continuing I'll pause to acknowledge that if being cursed by millions, perhaps tens or hundreds of millions of people around the world is an obstacle to entry into the sweet hereafter, Bill Gates definitely has a problem. In fact, there are probably some people right here in this room, who themselves, faced with a General Protection Fault or some other Microsoft bug, have wished unspeakable things on Mr. Gates. But for the sake of this sermon, I am going to assume that writing buggy software does not condemn one to be damned for all eternity. Instead, I'll focus on Mr. Gates' wealth, and what he is doing with it.

I'll begin by relating why my thinking is starting to diverge from that of Jesus and my grandparents, who did not have much use for the wealthy. Then I'll review for you the impressive amount that Bill Gates has given to charity. Finally, I'll discuss some of the problems with this particular way of doing good, and close with some friendly suggestions to Bill, on how he might do it better.

First, though, just how wealthy is Bill Gates? I recently finished reading a great book my mother gave me, by Jim Hightower, called *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road Except Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos*. There's a calculation in there that is pretty amazing. He says that Mr. Microsoft has been raking in money at the rate of $500,000 an hour, or about $140 per second. Quote "If Gates was striding down the sidewalk and dropped a $500 bill, it would not be worth his time to stop, bend over, and pick it up. That four seconds would actually cost him money."

For those of you who don't know me, my origins were pretty radical. This has been diluted some with each generation (coincident perhaps with each generation being a bit better off), but there was still enough of it intact when I was growing up that I can say I've always felt something less than reverence for the very rich. "Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite?" is a lyric from "Solidarity Forever," which my grandmother used to sing us. In a world where so many people do not have enough, it seems piggy for others to have so much more than they need.

The relevant quote from Jesus, highlighted in the newsletter blurb for today's sermon is: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24)

But a couple of things recently have made me begin to question that deeply ingrained disrespect for the rich with which I grew up. (Besides of course, my family's own upward mobility. What I consider to be more wealth than anyone really needs has a way staying well above my own income.)

One of the things that made me begin to question my distaste for the very wealthy happened when our family took a trip to Yellowstone and Grand Tetons National Parks. Now I have to tell you, I'm a sucker for natural beauty, and my very favorite type of scenery is mountains. In fact, I wrote a lot of this sermon at Tuolomne Meadows last summer. Anyway, there we are in the midst of the most wonderful mountain splendor, and I'm reading about how a lot of it got preserved by John Rockefeller. And it got me wondering—here's this guy who bought politicians, busted unions, and basically used every possible dirty trick to amass an obscene empire, and yet by doing this he was able to help preserve something pricelessly beautiful that I was enjoying 100 years later. Food for thought.

Then there's David Packard. Now Hewlett-Packard is, by all accounts, a far more admirable company than was John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil. I actually was at a meeting sponsored by the Packard Foundation in the Packards' house in Los Altos. It was a very nice house, but really quite modest, considering their wealth. The Foundation gave us all copies of Packard's book, *The HP Way*. It's a nice little book. The HP Way, or what I remember of it, basically involves hiring good people and treating them well. Of course, if there were any dirt on Packard, this little book would not be the place to look for it. But I think it's at least possible that Hewlett-Packard is pretty ethical corporation, and that, even though he was a Republican who supported the Viet Nam war, Packard basically made his money having a creative vision, working hard, and developing a sense of teamwork with his employees. And now his foundation has billions of dollars, and several years ago they gave $250,000 of it to my colleagues and me for our research on jaundice and dehydration in babies. Which, of course raises the possibility that the way to really have a positive impact on children's health might be to make several billion dollars, form a foundation, and then have people use the money to do good work.

Which brings us to Bill Gates, and the latest thing to make me question deeply ingrained disrespect for the very rich. As you may know, I'm a pediatrician and epidemiologist. My friend and fellow pediatric epidemiologist Dr. Regina Rabinovitch, used to be the Chief of Clinical Studies at the Division of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health. Regina is passionate about malaria. She has a little pin with three children on it. She bought it and wears it as a reminder: three children die of malaria every minute. Sixty minutes an hour, 24 hours a day, and so on. Anyway, Regina recently told me she has a new job. She is head of the new Malaria Vaccine Initiative, which was launched with a five-year, fifty-million-dollar grant from the Gates Foundation. And, of course she's excited about it. Three children a minute. Which made me think, maybe this guy Gates is not so bad.

On the other hand, I think we all know how he made his money. I don't know if he broke the law, but he did focus on creating a monopoly for Microsoft, and you don't get to be as rich as he is without a fairly strong emphasis on the bottom line. And although fifty million dollars is a lot of money, it's a drop in the bucket for someone worth sixty billion. Which brings us to point two: just how generous is Bill Gates?

Earlier this year, an online magazine called Slate published a list of the top sixty donors to charity in the United States. I actually first read about the list in a column by Arianna Huffington, who criticized the list for counting all charitable dollars the same. Arianna said she was appalled to find the twenty-million-dollar donation of winemaker Robert G. Mondavi for the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in his hometown of Napa, only a click away from a thirty-million-dollar gift to a scholarship fund for low income children. She writes: "This overemphasis on raw dollars implies some equivalence between these acts of generosity, when we know that one gift advances the giver's personal interests and the other addresses a pressing social need."

Arianna goes on to propose an adjustment scheme, to adjust philanthropic dollars up or downward. For example: "Minus 10 percent for investing in buildings, not peopleMinus another 11 percent if the receiving institution's endowment fund is bigger than the GDP of the poorest 100 countries, and another 15% if the gift goes to a building named after you or a loved one."

OK. So how, you may wonder, did Bill and Melinda Gates stack up compared with other big donors to charity, using this readjusted formula proposed by Arianna Huffington? The answer is that there is simply no comparison. Bill and Melinda's adjusted donation was 1.847 billion dollars, more than 15 times higher than the #2 donors, Warren and Susan Buffet, and more than of all the other 59 donors on the list combined!

Wow. Let me just say that again. 1.847 billion dollars; more than the sum of the next 59 most generous donors.

So that would seem to answer the title question of the sermon. At least, if it's possible to buy one's way into heaven, Bill seems to be quite willing and able to pony up the dough for a first-class ticket. And make no mistake, the kind of money Bill is throwing around could make a huge difference in the world. Even if he didn't do anything else, if his money catalyzed the development of a malaria vaccine, that would be more than enough. Three children a minute.

But this brings us to point three—problems with this particular way of doing good. Of course, let me be clear that Bill didn't HAVE to give anything. I respect and appreciate his generosity. There are plenty of rich people who either keep all of their money to themselves, or spend it on things that make the world a *worse* place.

Nonetheless, something about giving 1.8 billion dollars to charity and buying one's way into heaven, or society's admiration, still bothers me. Perhaps I was stacking the deck against Bill Gates when my definition of someone worthy of our admiration included the phrase someone whose reflected light makes all of us shine a little brighter.

I'm reminded of an excellent book I read a couple of years ago, called *The Politics of Meaning* by Rabbi Michael Lerner. Here is an excerpt from the introduction:

Most Americans hunger for meaning and purpose in life. Yet we are caught within a web of cynicism that makes us question whether there could be any higher purpose besides material self-interest and looking out for number one. We see around us the destructive consequences of the dominant ethos of selfishness and materialism. People treat one another as objects to be manipulated rather than as beings who have a fundamental worth that ought to be respected and even cherished.

Many of our cultural and economic institutions teach us to look at the world from a narrow, results-oriented, materialist perspective. In the process we lose touch with the awe and wonder we experienced as children at the grandeur of the universe. We get rewarded for the degree to which we have been able to put our own interests above those of our neighbors and friends, but then find ourselves in a world filled with mutual distrust and loneliness.

This excerpt captures some of my concern about Bill Gates being not just part of the solution, but also part of the problem. Does Bill Gates accumulating billions of dollars contribute to this way of looking at the world from a narrow, results-oriented, materialistic perspective? Do we see Bill being rewarded for the degree to which he has put his interests above ours? Is there something about making billions of dollars, even (perhaps especially) if you give some of it away, that demeans the more quantitatively modest contributions of others?

Lerner continues:

At the same time that we are caught in cynicism, however, we are desperate for hope. We hunger to be recognized by others, to be cherished for our own sakes and not for what we have accomplished or possess, and to be acknowledged as people who care about something higher and more important than our own self-interest. It is this sense of the intrinsic worth of human beings and of our connection to something higher to which biblical religions refer when speaking of human beings as created in the image of God.

Entrepreneurs who make millions and billions of dollars make great contributions, but what about the inherent worth and dignity of the people who pick the food they eat or care for their children? Or for that matter, what about everybody else on the planet, whose contributions, if we rate them quantitatively, are individually insignificant compared with those of the big boys? For the rest of us, I think, the key is not to think about our contributions individually, but to feel connected to a bigger process of making the world a better place. And to realize that money is only a tiny part of that process—it's time, energy, and heart that are needed more. That, I think, is a lot of what congregations like this one are about.

Nonetheless, since the focus this morning is on money, I think there are some ways for entrepreneurs to channel their money to charity that build community—that allow us non-billionaires to feel connected to the process, rather than on the sidelines; to feel like light is reflected back upon us, rather then sucked away from us.

Let me give you some examples. I think Target has the right idea. Rather than some millionaire owner of the chain creating a foundation and donating his money, the Target corporation itself gives 5% of all profits to charities. And they publicize this, so when I go to Target I see a big banner that says that some of the money I spend is coming back to my community.

Here's an even better example: Paul Newman. Paul Newman, despite being quite busy with his acting career, somehow managed to set up a company to produce and sell his recipes of spaghetti sauce, salad dressing, and so on. And the wonderful thing about it is that it says right there on the bottle—all profits go to charity. So all of the people buying that spaghetti sauce can have that connection to where the money is going, rather than have it just go to Paul Newman. And to me, this feels very different.

I was discussing this example with my sister Cathy, and she anticipated the next paragraph. She said, "Yes, and the best thing is, when he comes out with a new kind of spaghetti sauce, the old ones still work!"

This is the contrast to the money I pay to Microsoft. When I buy Microsoft products, it's not just because I like Microsoft products. Often, thanks to Bill Gates' monopolistic brilliance, it's because I don't have much choice. And I have to keep buying more of these products, because every year or two they come out with new versions, and in order to share with people who have these later versions, I need the newer version, too. Thus I am constantly being sold products designed to become obsolete in a few years. My money to Microsoft in an ever-flowing stream.

If we had as much choice about software as we do about spaghetti sauce, and knew that our money going to Microsoft was helping make the world a better place, we would feel a part of the process. Instead, because so much of the money is first channeled into Mr. Gates, not only do we not feel particularly connected to the resources going to charity, we get the messages that what really pays is looking out for number one, and that compared with the very wealthy, the little we can do doesn't amount to that much.

These two messages come across loud and clear in politics, and they are ruining democracy in America. Of course in that instance you also have the other problem, which is that the big money tends to go to the wrong people. But that's the topic of another sermon, and it's time to wrap up this one.

Will Bill Gates go to heaven? I have to admit that my view of him is much more favorable than when I began working on this sermon, and definitely more favorable than my grandmother's would have been. In fact, what I've been trying to do is see Bill Gates as a fellow traveler on the planet, who contains his own spark of the divine and who also, as Lerner puts it, hungers to be acknowledged as a person who cares about something higher and more important than his own self-interest. I've come to realize that how I feel about Bill Gates is up to me, and I can choose to welcome him to my side in the fight to make the world a better place, rather than viewing him with disdain. And that feels nicer.

Nonetheless, in my new role as his collaborator in the important task of improving the world, I do have some suggestions for him. Instead of continuing to amass billions of dollars yourself, which you'll never be able to spend anyway and which just grosses out the rest of us, try this. Why not put a label on Microsoft Office like the one on Newman's Own spaghetti sauce: "All profits from this item go to charity"? Or perhaps more directly—"Use Windows and help us find a vaccine for malaria." And then give us a little more choice about whether to buy Windows! Then maybe next time I get a little message that my application has stopped responding to the system, I'll think, "Oh well. At least I'm contributing to the eradication of a tropical disease!" And if there is a heaven, Bill Gates should find a place there. Although I suspect that he won't be in charge of the operating system.