

Deathbed Confessions

Philippians 1:21-30 & Matthew 20:1-16

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Philippians 1:21-30 (NIV)

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved — and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV)

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ “About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ⁷ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ ⁹ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.

¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Deathbed Confessions

Did you know that Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis and one of the most important figures of the early 20th century was a teller of jokes? He was. In fact, way back in 1915 he told a joke about a minister who was summoned by a group of anxious relatives. They wanted him to extract a deathbed conversion from an atheistic and unrepentant insurance salesman.

The meeting between the minister and the insurance salesman took place, and the longer the meeting continued behind the hospital's closed doors, the more the family members took hope. When the door finally opened, however, the salesman had not been converted. However, the pastor went away with ample insurance to cover any eventuality.

There was a time when so-called deathbed conversions were taken quite seriously. It was important to people that their loved ones sign on the bottom line to become Christians, even if it was at the last minute. This was to ensure that their loved one avoided the fires of hell.

When I did my Clinical Pastoral Education training at Saint Joseph Hospital, at the request of a family, I did a baptism for an older gentleman with dementia who was dying. I did this because the family wasn't sure if he had ever been baptized, and he was no longer able to answer for himself. As to its efficacy, that's between this gentleman and God. As a pastor and a human being, I don't get to, and don't want to, make that call.

Yet this type of practice led other Christians to ask an important question concerning faith in Christ: “Can you really live a terrible life, wait right up until the last minute before you die, then ask forgiveness for your sins, make a confession of faith in Christ and still be received into the Kingdom of God as if you had been the greatest saint who ever lived?”

From a reading of our lesson from the Gospel for today we would have to say that if you are sincere the answer is “yes.”

Jesus told a parable about a landowner who went into the marketplace early in the morning to hire laborers — a common practice in rural communities even in recent times. Those he hired he agreed to pay the standard wage for a day's work. Three hours later he saw that he was going to need more laborers if the work was going to get done. He returned to the marketplace and hired more laborers.

About noon he again found it necessary to hire more workers, then again at three o'clock, then again at five. Quitting time was six o'clock. At six o'clock he had his foreman line up the laborers to be paid. He began with those who had worked but one hour. He paid them for a full day.

Watching this were those who had worked since six in the morning, twelve full hours. They rubbed their hands in delight. “Wow,” they thought to themselves, “If he pays them a full day's wage for

working just one hour, think how much he will pay us!” When their time came, however, they also received the standard wage for one day’s work.

They were infuriated. They had worked all day and they were receiving the same amount as those who had worked just one hour. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t just. But the landowner said, “Didn’t I pay you what we had agreed on? If I want to be more generous with these others, is it not my right? Is it not my money to do with as I please?”

SINCE MOST OF US HERE TODAY FEEL THAT WE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE LABORED SINCE SIX O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING, THIS MAY BE ONE OF JESUS’ MOST DIFFICULT TEACHINGS TO ACCEPT.

Is it true? Can a person be an absolute scoundrel right up until the moment of his or her death and then repent, confess faith in Christ and receive the gift of eternal life as if he or she had been a saint all their lives?

Why not then, someone might ask, go ahead and live a life of sin and wait until the last moment to repent? Of course the danger in that is a lot of people who think they want to wait until the eleventh hour to receive Christ, end up dying at ten thirty.

ACTUALLY THE QUESTION ITSELF IS MORE TROUBLING TO ME THAN THE ANSWER. WHY WOULD WE ASK SUCH A QUESTION IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Does not such a question indicate that we think that we would rather live a life of sin than a life of faith? Why else would we be concerned about waiting until the last moment? Are we praying Augustine’s prayer, “Lord save me, but not yet” because deep in our hearts we believe that giving in to God will spoil our fun? That living a life of faith will be a burden rather than a blessing?

Let me ask you a serious question. What would you change about your life if you knew there were no heaven and no hell? Would you be less loving toward your family? Would you cheat on your spouse? Would you be dishonest in your business? I don’t think so. The old saw that ‘virtue is its own reward’ is true.

There are other reasons that we maintain our wedding vows, run our businesses in an ethical way, and love our families besides the fear of hell. We seek to live virtuous lives not out of fear, but because we have looked around and seen that the moral life is truly the best way to live in this world.

We can’t imagine a world without moral values or family ties. We may joke about the attractiveness of sin and sing with the teenagers, “I was sinking deep in sin — Whee —“, but deep in our hearts we know that a life of sin leads only to the dissolution and destruction of everything that is good and lasting and ultimately satisfying in this world. God is not our enemy! Deep in our heart we know that! Satan is the enemy! Anything which tempts us to be less than the beautiful, whole, healthy, loving children of God, God created us to be is our enemy!

WHAT WOULD YOU HONESTLY CHANGE ABOUT YOUR LIFE IF YOU KNEW THAT THERE WAS NO HEAVEN OR HELL?

I suspect very little. Some of you are probably thinking that you would not sit through any more boring sermons if you had that knowledge. Did I hear an ‘Amen’ from the back? Actually, if it is the fear of judgment that brings you to church, you probably do not get much out of worship anyway.

When we come to the mature realization that we seek to do right, not to please an angry God, but because we have experienced God’s love and found that it is ultimately in our best interest to do right; it is then that we will no longer envy the scoundrel who makes a deathbed confession. Indeed, we will pity them for taking so long to see what we have known all along.

If you don’t believe me, would you believe that spooky granddaddy of shock rock Alice Cooper? A few weeks ago I shared a Breakpoint commentary by Steve Beard about Bob Dylan. Beard did another column about Alice Cooper, who is a much more bizarre character. A few years ago, Cooper stunned the London Sunday Times by stating, and I quote: “Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that’s a tough call. That’s rebellion.”

Cooper practically invented the word rebellion. Even today he travels with a stage show that features guillotines, electric chairs, fake blood, deadly snakes, baby dolls, and dueling swords.

Beard notes that at the height of his worldwide fame Alice Cooper drank a bottle of whiskey a day. But the bottle almost destroyed his marriage to Sheryl, his wife of twenty-five years. But then, when he realized he was in trouble, Alice Cooper started heading off to church with his wife and there he felt God speak to him.

Cooper experienced every pleasure that money could buy, but he found they did not satisfy. “I was the prodigal son. I left the house, achieved fame and fortune, and found out that that was not what I wanted,” he said in an interview. “Now I read the Bible every day, I pray every day. That’s really what I’m about.” He continues: “I was one thing at one time, and now I’m something new. I’m a new creature. Don’t judge Alice by what he used to be. Praise God for what I am now.”

In describing the importance of his Christian faith, he says, “It’s everything. It’s what I live for. If you gave me a choice between rock and roll and my faith, I’d take my faith,” Cooper told a newspaper. “Rock and roll is fun — it’s what I do for a living. But it’s not what I live on. I believe in classic Christianity. I’ve given my whole life to the Lord. But I don’t think that means you can’t be a rock and roller.” After all, as Cooper has said, “I must be the only father that bangs on the bedroom door and says, ‘Turn that music up!’”

Ask which is more satisfying — a life of sin or life as a follower of Jesus, and Alice Cooper will tell you that following Christ is far superior. And it’s true. Some of you, like Cooper, have learned that the hard way. But you know it’s true.

In his book, *Six Hours One Friday* Max Lucado tells the story of how he and his boat once survived a hurricane. An old seaman advised Max to take his boat out into deep water, drop four anchors off each corner of the boat, and pray that the anchors held. Max survived that storm, but he says that he learned an important lesson: all of us need an anchor that will hold during the storms of life.

If we are wise enough to have a strong anchor that will withstand any storm, we will not need to make a deathbed confession, and we will not envy the person who does. None of us are perfect, but we are wise enough to see that there are certain laws — moral laws, spiritual laws, if you will— that govern this universe as surely as does the law of gravity. By the grace of God we will seek to do right, because in the long run it is in our best interest and in the interest of those we love.

THERE IS A SECOND REASON WHY THIS IS A TROUBLING QUESTION. IF GOD REJOICES WHEN ONE LOST SHEEP, ONE LOST COIN, ONE LOST BOY IS FOUND — AS LUKE’S GOSPEL TELLS US HE DOES — SHOULD WE NOT REJOICE AS WELL?

Those who had worked in the vineyard would not have been at all dissatisfied with what they had received if they had not compared their wages with what the others had received. There is something very human about that.

Some of you are familiar with the motion picture, *Amadeus* — an entertaining dramatization of the life of Mozart. The central figure in the drama is a composer who was a contemporary of Mozart, Antonio Salieri. In the motion picture Salieri is a man whose life is devoted to music. Indeed, early in life he made a promise to God that he would give his entire life to God if God would simply allow him to write sublime music.

Salieri’s prayer is answered. He writes beautiful music and is a success in his chosen vocation. He earns a place as chief composer in the emperor’s court.

One day, however, he hears the music of Mozart and he recognizes, even if many of his contemporaries do not, that Mozart has gifts far superior to his own. Something happens within Salieri. He becomes obsessed with the desire to destroy Mozart. He even rails against God. He believes that God is mocking him through Mozart — even though God has answered his prayer and given him great gifts, those gifts were not as great as Mozart’s, and Salieri cannot forgive God. His own composing career is put on hold as he obsessively seeks ways to undermine the career of his younger rival. The ending to the movie is a tragic portrayal of the power of envy to destroy a person’s heart and soul. As one cynic has put it, “It is not enough to succeed. Our friends must fail as well.”

What is there within us that judges our lives not on the basis of what we have received, but on the basis of what we have received in relation to others? Of course, when that gift happens to be the gift of salvation, the principle is even more critical.

Shall we who have been saved by grace not rejoice whenever any other person receives that grace as

well, whether they receive it as a child, as a teenager, or at 98 years of age after a life of total degradation?

IN QUESTIONING GOD ABOUT SUCH MATTERS, WHAT WE FAIL TO SEE IS HOW VALUABLE A HUMAN SOUL IS TO GOD.

That is the important truth here. God's primary passion is to save people — whenever that might happen. That is the Gospel.

Leslie Weatherhead puts that truth in a beautiful way in his book, *Key Next Door*. When Weatherhead was visiting some friends he noticed that they had an old dog named "Pete." Pete, Weatherhead said, "did not have much to commend him as far as appearances were concerned." The dog tottered about, had a raw spot on his back, and some had suggested that the dog should be put to sleep.

Furthermore, Weatherhead was about to suggest the same thing to his hosts. But then he learned that the dog was MIKE'S DOG. Mike was the son of the hosts, and the parents were keeping the dog for Mike. They admitted that the dog was somewhat of a bother, but after all, they said, "He is Mike's dog, and we love the dog for Mike's sake."

They saw the dog as Mike's dog and they couldn't have him put to sleep, because Mike and the dog and their love were all bound up together. They could see Mike coming home from the University and saying, "Where's old Pete?" And they couldn't see themselves saying, "Oh, we put him away because he was such a bother and he wasn't worth saving!"

"Not worth saving?" That was a label that Weatherhead could put on old Pete, but not the parents because PETE WAS MIKE'S DOG. Weatherhead adds at this point: "Can't you just imagine some angelic cynic looking down on the world and saying, 'I can't imagine why God keeps those mangy humans around. Why doesn't God just wipe them off the face of the earth? Look how they disobey. Look how wretched most are!'"

But God can't do that, can He? We belong to Christ, and so, we are of infinite worth.

That is why even a sorry old deathbed confession is enough for entry into the Kingdom of God. God is foolishly, hopelessly in love with humanity. There is nothing God will not give to save us from the powers of sin and death. After all, He's already given us His Son, Jesus Christ. But why make GOD wait that long? Why wait until the jungle has ensnared us and defaced our divine dignity? Why not make that confession of faith today?

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