

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

March 14, 2017

What follows is part of what I said in a funeral service last week. The four arguments I suggest below for why we are wise to follow Jesus at our first opportunity are things I've been working on for a long time. It occurred to me that these thoughts might be encouraging for a larger audience . . . and I'd like to ask for your help. If you can offer suggestions about more effective ways to present these points, or if you have additional ideas to strengthen them, I would be most grateful for your help.



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As you probably know, we are now in the third week of the Season of Lent, approximately 40 days in which we prepare our hearts for the spiritual journey of Holy Week. Holy Week, of course, came at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Three years earlier, as Jesus began His ministry, He quoted these words from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to announce that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. . . .*

*To all who mourn in Israel, he will give beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair. For the Lord has planted them like strong and graceful oaks for his own glory (Isaiah 61:1-3).*

Keep those promises in mind as we turn our gaze to the end of Jesus' ministry, to three crosses on Calvary's hill . . . .

<sup>32</sup> *Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with [Jesus].* <sup>33</sup> *Finally, they came to a place called The Skull. All three were crucified there—Jesus on the center cross, and the two criminals on either side.*

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.*

<sup>35</sup> *The crowd watched, and the leaders laughed and scoffed. "He saved others," they said, "let him save himself if he is really God's Chosen One, the Messiah."* <sup>36</sup> *The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine.* <sup>37</sup> *They called out to him, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*

<sup>38</sup> *A signboard was nailed to the cross above him with these words: "This is the King of the Jews."*

<sup>39</sup> *One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!"* <sup>40</sup> *But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you are dying?"* <sup>41</sup> *We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man hasn't done anything wrong."* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."*



<sup>43</sup> And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."  
(Luke 23:32-43).

Now this, the penitent criminal's simple request, is Good News indeed! With such a simple request it is possible to enter the Heavenly Kingdom, even in the very last moments of a life that was anything but godly. But this raises a significant question about calculation: if it's possible to enter heaven at the very last moment, why should we not sin boldly now and then repent on our deathbeds?



Let me briefly suggest four reasons why we are wise to choose to follow Jesus at the earliest possible moment and to serve God thereafter as best we can. In the first place, **to live in a way that disregards God's Law and disrespects God's Love until the very last possible moment simply does not work.**

Those who are admitted to God's Kingdom are not admitted because they secured a "fire insurance policy" just in the nick of time. **Citizens of God's Kingdom are admitted because they have a personal relationship with the King, and for no other reason.**

Heaven is populated only with those who want to be there, having made that choice in this life, before they ever see the life to come. Were we allowed to see God in all His glory now, we would be compelled to believe and to worship. But our Creator desires relationship with those who seek Him, not out of compulsion, but out of love. **The first reason to love Jesus is that love for Jesus is our bridge to God.**

A second reason to choose to follow Jesus at the earliest possible moment and to love and to serve God thereafter as best we can is that **we have absolutely no guarantee that we will have any warning that death is coming.** You and I tend to have the idea that death lies out ahead of us, always at some considerable distance, but the truth is that every moment of our lives is lived on the very edge of that boundary, and if at any moment we turn toward it, we have in that moment crossed over it into eternity.

The Winans family has a popular Gospel song that goes like this:

Jesus said, "Here I stand, won't you please let me in?"  
and you said, "I will . . . tomorrow."

Jesus said, "I am He who supplies all your needs,"  
and you said, "I know, but tomorrow, ooh, tomorrow, I'll give my life . . .  
tomorrow. I thought about today, but it's so much easier to say, 'tomorrow.'"

**The second reason to choose Jesus now is that we have no promise of tomorrow. Tomorrow may be too late.**

Third, to think that it would be better to sin now and repent later is to be deceived about the relative rewards of following Jesus as compared with the deceitful glitter of sinful living, which truly is "fool's gold." Satan is a liar and the father of lies, and he is the absolute master of "bait and switch." To embrace those lies is to embrace Death, though this is hardly ever apparent on the front end. **The third reason to choose Jesus now is that**

***“The blessing of the Lord makes a person rich, and he adds no sorrow with it”***  
(Proverbs 10:22).

But as compelling as I hope these three reasons are, the fourth reason to choose Jesus now may be even more compelling, because **while persons who enter God’s Kingdom at the last moment do in fact enter the Kingdom, they miss more of what God intended to give them than they will ever know.**

Let me try to illustrate this. If you or I were to go to a concert or to an art gallery or even to a ball game with someone who was a professional in that area, we could enjoy the music, art, and sport so much that we couldn’t even imagine greater enjoyment . . . but the professional at our side, having given herself to deep study and great preparation in this area, would be seeing, hearing, experiencing and understanding far, far more than we would, as a direct result of the discipline of preparation to which her life had been devoted.



Heaven is like that. God’s eternal Kingdom is the goal of and the primary reason for our existence, and God has intended to share that glory with us since before the creation of the universe. Every moment of our lives here is preparation for that Kingdom, and all the moments of our lives, taken together, are no more than the preface to that Great Story, “which goes on forever, and in which each chapter is better than the one before.”

Now it is, of course, far better to enter that Kingdom “by the skin of our teeth” than not to enter it at all, but how much more wonderful it will be if we have prepared ourselves to more fully understand the gift when we receive it! How much more wonderful it will be if we have prepared ourselves to be in God’s Presence by living year after year in joyful obedience to and passionate love with God on this side of eternity!

What all this comes down to is a conscious decision on our part, recognizing that *“each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God”* (Romans 14:10). Jesus himself said, *“I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God”* (John 3:3).

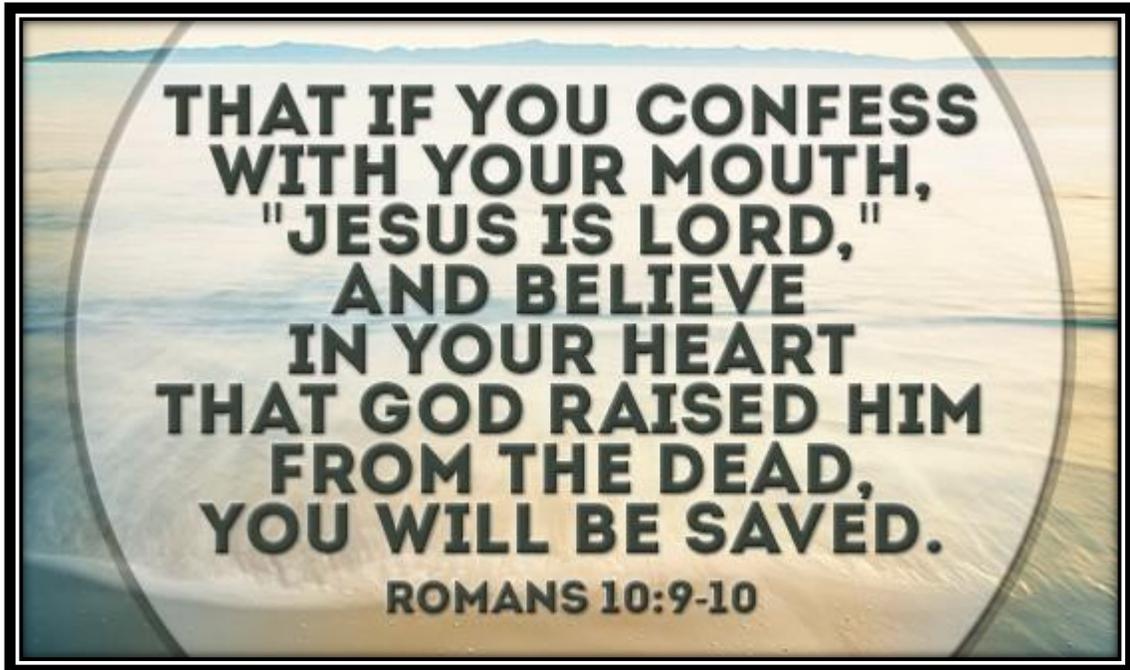
My friends, the Bible tells us that it’s not enough just to be “a good person.” The Bible tells us that there is no way in which any amount of good deeds in this life is going to be able to cover over the wrongdoing of even the most upright person. To offer up our own good deeds in such a bargain is like comparing the light of one tiny birthday candle to the light of the sun.

The Bible also tells us that *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”* (Hebrews 9:22). The Bad News is that the price for our forgiveness is death. The Law of the Universe is that only blood pays the debt for our Sin. Someone has to die. Now I don’t like that anymore than you do; but this is not our universe.

That’s the Bad News, and it is Bad News; but happily, there is also Good News—and it’s Very Good News indeed. The Good News is that God’s own Life has been given in our place: *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). As Jesus put it, *“those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent*

me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death to life" (John 5:24).<sup>1</sup>

My friends, the Good News is that "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). [the name of the deceased] has finished his earthly journey. He has finished his race. For us, though, the journey continues. If you have not already done so, choose Jesus *now*, my friends. Don't miss God's gift!



**Suggestions Welcome.**

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<sup>1</sup> This word from Jesus is Good News, past, present, and future:

1. Jesus told us that once we believe that He is Who He said He is—and His resurrection on Easter morning proved that identity once and for all—when we have believed this, we are given eternal life in the **present**, being transferred at once, immediately, from the realm of darkness and judgment into the joy of the Kingdom of Light;
2. Jesus told us that after being "born again" in this way (John 3:3), we no longer need to fear being condemned for our sin in the **future**, when each of us stands before God, because the blood of Jesus covers every last bit of our sin (1 John 1:7); and
3. Jesus told us that when we choose to trust in Him, our **past** is already covered by that blood and we have already, in that very moment, crossed over from death to life.