

Date: September 24, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 20: 1-16

Title: THE MOST DIFFICULT TEACHING TO ACCEPT

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 the last minute. This was to ensure that their loved one, avoided the fires of hell.

Yet, this 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?” Well, reading the lesson for today, we would have to “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 into recent times. Those he hired he agreed to pay the standard wage for a day’s work. Three hours later, if the work was going to get done, he was going to need more laborers. So, 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 an hour. He paid them for a full day.

Those who had worked since six in the morning were watching. They rubbed their hands in delight. They thought to themselves, “Wow, 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, 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? Isn’t it my money to do with as I please?”

Since most of us here today feel we are those who have labored since six o’clock in the morning, this may be one of Jesus’ most difficult teachings to accept. **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?** Actually, the question is more troubling to me than the answer. Why would we ask such a question in the first place? Doesn’t this question indicate, 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 was no heaven or hell? Would you be less loving toward your family? Would you cheat on your wife? Would you be dishonest in your business?

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. Deep in our hearts, we know that a life of sin, leads only to dissolution and destruction. God is not our enemy. We know that deep in our hearts. God created us to be beautiful, whole, healthy, loving children of God.

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, you wouldn't sit through any more boring sermons. Actually, if it's the fear of judgment that brings you to church, you probably don't get much out of worship.

When we come to the mature realization that we seek to do right, not to please an angry God, but because it's ultimately in our best interest. Then, we will no longer envy the scoundrel who makes a deathbed confession. In fact, we will pity him for taking so long, to see what we have known all along.

A few years ago, shock rock Alice 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.

Cooper experienced every pleasure that money could buy, but he found it didn't satisfy. He said in an interview, "I was the prodigal son. I left the house, achieved fame and fortune, and found out that, that was not what I wanted. 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 I'm something new. I'm a new creature now. 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." 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. 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 to 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're wise enough to have a strong anchor that will withstand any storm, we will not need to make a deathbed confession. We're not perfect, but we're wise enough to see that there are certain laws, moral laws, spiritual laws, that govern this universe, just as the law of gravity does. By the grace of God, we will seek to do right, because in the long run, it's in our best interest and in the interest of those we love.

There's 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, shouldn't we rejoice as well? Those who had worked in the vineyard wouldn't have been dissatisfied with what they had received, if they hadn't compared their wages with what the others had received. 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? When that gift happens to be the gift of salvation, the principle is even more critical. We who have been saved by grace, rejoice whenever any person receives that grace as well! We rejoice whether they receive grace as a child, as a teenager, or late in life as a senior!

What we often fail to see, is how valuable a human soul is to God. God's primary passion is to save people, whenever that might happen. That's 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." Weatherhead said, "Pete didn't have much going for him as far as appearances were concerned." The dog tottered about, had a raw spot on his back, and some suggested that the dog should be put to sleep.

Weatherhead was about to suggest that to his hosts. But then he learned 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 down 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 HE 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 about. 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! We belong to Christ, and so, are of infinite worth.

That’s 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’s nothing He will not give to save us from the powers of sin and death. But why make him wait that long? Make that confession of faith today, following Christ doing ministry Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.