

May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019

## Luke 9:23-26 “What Does It Mean to be Saved?”

So we're in week two of what I've been calling our “Good News Is Coming” series. We're three weeks into Easter season which officially ends on June 9 when we have Pentecost in the Park. I think it's important to spend those fifty days between Easter Sunday and Pentecost reflecting on what it means to be a “people of the resurrection.” Because when we affirm Christ's resurrection, that means we've signed on board to be bearers of the good news. And for those who follow Christ, the good news is that God is reconciling the world through Christ. Reconciling the world to whom ... to what? To God. Again, bridging that gap between humans and God. Making the space between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdoms of Earth thinner. Why? Because God loves us, and sees that we are constantly beat down by the powers of sin and death in this world. God loves us and desires all to be saved, so God sent the Son, Jesus into the world so that the world might *be* saved and experience an abundant and everlasting life. Or as Peyton so eloquently recited last week, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Good news. It's not just coming, its here. And we know what it is.

Our problem is how we have misunderstood “salvation” and what “being saved” really means. We have a hard time reconciling what it *is* with what we *want* it to be. Let's start out talking about what we want it to be. Since the beginning of recorded history, and most likely before, we human beings love contracts. “If you do (x), I'll give you (y).” It probably started out fairly simple. “I've got seeds ... you've got eggs. I'll trade my seeds for your eggs.” Clearly I know zilch about ancient cultural anthropology so humor me. Then later, when people developed a system of land ownership, a contract might look something like this: “If you let me use this field over here to graze my herd, I'll give you a percentage of my herd in return.” Then when civilizations started emerging, contracts became, “If you swear an oath of fealty to the king,

the king will offer you protection” (which of course involves taxes, but we’re not going to go there today). The point is, we like our contracts, and the simpler the better. When we sign on the dotted line, we want things to be done and over, cut and dried, able to be put on the back burner so we don’t have to worry about them anymore. When it comes to our understanding of salvation, we want to say, “Well of course I want to be saved! What do I need to do?” Then we read Acts 2:38 where it says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Sounds like that oath of fealty to the king to me. We repent, we get baptized, and then we receive all the goods and services that go along with that and we never have to do anything again. Sweet! We make a one-time decision, we get dunked in the water, and we’re guaranteed a ticket to the promised land! Or if you want to look at it from the other end, we buy fire insurance. A “get out of hell for free” card because, as I said last week, “Jesus paid the price of admission.”

Here’s something I want you to consider this morning. This might rock your world a bit, but hey ... I wouldn’t be doing my job right if I didn’t do that now and then. This is a hypothetical question for those of you who follow Jesus ... for those of you who identify as Christian ... for those of you who have made a commitment to walk the path of Jesus. Would you still follow Jesus if there was no guarantee of a “heavenly reward” as you understand it? “He speaks blasphemy!” No. Again, this is not a statement to put doubt in your minds. This isn’t meant to shoot a hole in your faith or your beliefs. This is a hypothetical question. And I ask this question because I want you to take a serious look at *why* you follow Jesus. If you are following Jesus for the “reward,” consider *why* that reward is so important. Is it that you miss a loved one and you hope that one day you’ll be reunited with them? Is it that your life has been a series of painful events, or regrets, or losses? Is that reward enticing because you’re so eager to leave this life behind and move on to something better? Are you feeling bitter because you’ve worked hard at making good choices and “doing the right thing,” but you haven’t experience the *earthly* rewards that your parents and teachers said you

would if you worked hard and made good choices? Or maybe you've made some really bad choices and you're constantly dealing with the pain of those choices, and no matter what you do to try to make amends or get your life back on track, you keep getting beat down by those choices. You just want this life to be over so you can start fresh with a clean slate. If any of these reasons apply would you still follow Jesus if there was no guarantee of a heavenly reward *as you understand it*? Some of you might say, "No! This is what I signed on for! If that's not a part of the deal, then forget it!" And you know what? I sure don't hold it against you if that's how you feel. I'm not here to shame anyone for their feelings. My job isn't to tell you how to feel. I'm just here to ask the question.

Now you know I can't let the morning go by without throwing the other obvious question out on the table too, right? I would not be doing my job if I didn't ask, "Would you still follow Jesus if you found out that there was no eternal punishment for *not* following him?" Notice I didn't say "might not" nor did I use the caveat "as you understand it" like I did concerning the reward. I know way too many people who would say, "Better to be safe than sorry." If you found out there was no eternal punishment, how would you live your life? Would you say, "Woo-hoo! Party time! I'm going to live for me and me only! I'm going to go out with a bang and take as many of the people who I don't like with me!"? Or would you say, "No! That's not fair! There's no justice in this universe if Charles Manson or Ted Bundy or Adolph Hitler don't have a place to suffer and burn for eternity. And if the universe is that unjust, then why follow Jesus?" And again: I wouldn't hold it against you if that's how you feel because I'm not here to shame anyone if that's how you do feel. My job isn't to tell you how to feel. I'm not here to poke holes in your faith or minimize your beliefs and convictions. I'm just here to ask the questions. As some of you learned from our wisdom literature Bible study, there are a lot of question marks punctuating Jesus' teachings. He asked questions to get his followers to think.

Maybe you want to ask me a question. If I were you, I'd ask something like, "Okay Reverend Smarty-pants, why do *you* follow Jesus?" Okay, if you insist. I follow Jesus because this world is messed up. Like I said earlier: Every day I see the byproduct of the avalanche of sin that threatens to bury this world. I see people in power who do horrible things to others to stay in power. I see how envy and greed have become almost laudable virtues. I see how abuse, despair and addiction have led human beings to live a sub-standard existence. I see so many things unraveling and falling apart. And in the midst of it, there's Jesus saying things like, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" in John 10:10. And on multiple occasions in almost all of the gospels he says, "The kingdom of God is at hand." And in Luke's Gospel, the one we have in front of us today, but 8 more chapters ahead, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is *within you*." That's from Luke chapter 17 verses 20 and 21. And of course, the promise in Revelation 21 is that the old heaven and earth shall pass away and the new one will come like a beautiful bride adorned for her husband as a voice announces, "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away." When you put all of these things together, it sounds a lot less to me like we're going to get a ticket out of here ... it sounds more like that what we have here already will be overhauled and made new.

My problem is that I'd much rather have a plan where I can say, "So long sucker" to this world and all the good kids get to go to the amusement park and all the bad kids get to go to jail. I don't have to do anything. All I have to do is sign the contract. "I'll follow Jesus, and God will make sure I get the ticket to the park and the ones who don't sign the contract lose out." Not my responsibility. Not my problem, or as somebody said to me yesterday, "Not my monkey, not my circus."

But here's Jesus in a passage that we touched on last week, but Tom read this morning saying, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me." This says to me that salvation isn't a one-time sign on the dotted line and be good to go forever and ever deal. To me salvation is a way of life. Not a process either ... that's what some folks will say, but I don't like that. Because you can get mired down in what they call a "works-based" faith. In other words, you've got to always be working to level up so that you can eventually get the prize. No, I say it's a lifestyle because when we choose to follow Jesus, we're saying that we're allowing God to transform our lives into the image of Jesus. That's where the work of salvation takes place. We're not working to gain it, we're allowing God to do the transformative work in us. Salvation is a daily thing. It's not a contract that you sign one day then you're good to go on with your life however you want to live it afterwards. It's letting the Holy Spirit mold us into the image of Jesus who calls us to proclaim by word and deed that good news – God is reconciling the world through Christ. Then Jesus' work becomes our work, and by doing this work ... by proclaiming the good news ... we become part of this salvation lifestyle too. Out with the old world order, in with the new. Just like that last chapter in the Book of Revelation. And as I said last week, I think at some level we know this too. At some level we know it's not some easy contract where we just sign on the dotted line. We know there's more to it, and that it takes denying ourselves, taking up Jesus' cross *daily*, and following him to make it happen.

So that question I laid out on the table this morning? "Would I still follow Christ even if there was no guarantee of a heavenly reward *as I understand it?*" My personal answer is, "Yes." Because I know that there is something better than this ... broken kingdom. And I know that there are a lot of things that I *think* I understand ... that is until I prayerfully read and re-read my Bible, open myself up to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and realize that things aren't always as easy ... or as hard ... as I think they are. Let God's saving work begin. Amen.