

When the Good News Seems to Good to be True

Recently, I was having an interesting conversation about the work of Jesus. It occurred to me afterwards that there may be others who have had the same thoughts and the same questions. Consequently, I thought that it might be useful to all of us to share what we discussed that afternoon and expand upon it. And it just so happens that the text that we studied two weeks ago and which we just read again moments ago gives us insight into the same topic. The issue can be stated simply. We know that Jesus did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. We know that Jesus emptied himself. We know that Jesus humbled himself - even to the point of death on a cross. The Son of God in his eternal, pre-incarnate life enjoyed a glory beyond all our comprehension. And yet he submitted himself - bearing our nature - to violence and degradation of which we have little experience. We are told in the New Testament that he did this to save us from our sins. And this brings us up to the central question: How could we accept such an extravagant and profound gift? How could we accept something of such magnitude? If a dear friend came to me this afternoon driving a perfect-condition 1985 Mercedes 300TD Wagon (Don't ask me why I like this car. It is not a rational thing.) and said, "Go ahead and take it. Here is the paperwork. It is all yours," then I would have a hard time either believing or accepting the gift. "This is for me? How could you possibly give something like this to me?" And how much greater a gift is the humiliation and death of Jesus, which was done for me.

How can you and I ever think that something like that was really for us? We hesitate before such a gift for many reasons. One of the most common reasons we pull back is we think that we are not worthy of such a gift. Not too long ago, there was a meme that circulated on Facebook. It was a picture of actor Jim Caviezel dressed as Jesus, covered in blood and speaking with a clean, normally dressed Mel Gibson. The caption read something like, "Me, trying to talk to Jesus about my little problems." We laugh a little, but it is important to remember that this is exactly what the New Testament commands us to do. Peter writes, "...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). God wants you to speak with him about your anxieties and problems.

He commands you to cast your anxieties upon him. But we too often shrink back from the gift.

Another reason we feel uncomfortable in the presence of the cross is that we have a hard time admitting our true moral condition apart from the Lord. In our culture, we tend to think in terms of failures of judgment and mistakes. These are the kinds of things that you correct with a little effort. A mistake is something that you may indeed admit, and yet expect the people around you to be willing to let it all go with relative ease. The gift of the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus seem like such an extreme solution to our problems. We love to hear Jesus say that he has not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), except we translate it as “Hey, nobody’s perfect!” More accurately, we should take Jesus’s words as, “I have come to call sinners and you are a sinner. And yes sin is really as bad as I say it is. So, you, you self-righteous Pharisee, need me desperately.” We think we are misguided, just human, or just as bad as everyone else (which isn’t so bad, right?). But Paul taught that, apart from Jesus, everyone is dead in sin. This is our true moral condition, and this is why we need the cross.

Some people who tremble before this gift are not authentic Christians. They have never honestly taken that full step of faith and repentance. Some people who tremble before this gift are indeed followers of Jesus. But their hesitancy leads to low expectancy of what Christ can accomplish in and through their life, as well as low assurance of eternal life in heaven. Why should both groups, and indeed all of us, wholeheartedly embrace the gift today? Allow me to share two reasons:

Jesus wants to give it. The gift of the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus is a gift that he wants to give. In our passage, there is no mistaking the idea that Jesus intended to do what he did. It was his will to act for us and to be our savior. He chose this course of action in eternity past. He chose to take up human nature and veil his glory. He submitted to death on the cross. He wanted to do it, and he wants us to accept this gift. It honors the giver to accept the gift that he offers. To accept the gift is the only real way we possess of valuing the gift. To do anything other than believe it and accept its reality is to demean the gift. Francis Schaeffer once shared the gospel with an elderly man as they walked in the English countryside. The man was distraught. “How could a worm such as I ever be able to accept such a thing?” Schaeffer responded,

“How could a worm ever do anything else?” It does not honor the gift to refuse it. We cannot pay for the gift. By receiving it, we properly esteem it.

Jesus knows we need it. The story of Schaeffer and the man leads us to remember the events that took place at the garden of Gethsemane. If there had been another way for Jesus to save us, I think he would have done it. As he contemplated his soon-to-be suffering, Luke tells us that he was in agony, with sweat like drops of blood, as he asked the Father to take the cup away from him. But he submitted to his Father’s will. He had come to win salvation, and there was only one way to do it. The cross was the only way to deal with the reality of our sin. When we look at the ugliness of the cross, we are seeing the ugliness of our own rebellion against God. The cross is God’s final statement about both the absolute horror of human sin and the absolute glory of his own love. The gift is almost unbelievable, but it is the only cure. You could not have been saved by any other means. You may think of yourself as a basically good person, but the teaching of the New Testament is clear that your basic goodness is far below the standard of God’s goodness. If Jesus only suffered a small amount, if he only took upon himself some of God’s anger at sin, then you and I would be lost for all eternity. Jesus knows we need his humiliation. His humiliation is the path to both his exaltation and our exaltation with him.

We may tremble before the gift, but Jesus is calling us to lay hold of it completely today. **He wants to give us this gift, and he knows that we need it.** Someone who hears these words may need to receive this gift for the first time. Others may need to consciously embrace what they have already received. The benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection were promised to his people. If you are a baptized person, the promises have been sealed to you personally. And yet there is **an active need to embrace the promises in faith.** This gift is for you.

How can you know that you have received this gift? Have you responded personally to Christ’s invitation as represented in Matthew 11:28 - **“Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest”**? I find it helpful to engage in a thought experiment at this point which suggests something of what it means to respond to Jesus’s invitation. Imagine that you are carrying three very large bags, and you are struggling beneath their weight. More than once, you have nearly collapsed under the load. Now imagine that Jesus comes to you. For the sake of the thought experiment, let the scenario

play out and don't get too hung up on the question of what Jesus looks like. Imagine that he comes and reaches out his hand to you, saying, "I will gladly shoulder the weight of that bag for you." The bag he indicates is the one that holds all your heartbreak and suffering. It has been far too much of a burden for you to carry. You give it to him, and he loads it upon his own shoulders. Then, he turns and asks for the next bag. It is the bag that is full of your rebellion and sin. You are crushed by this bag, as it carries the weight of your violations of God's law and your poor treatment of your neighbors. You hand it over, and he straps that one on his back as well. Finally, there is one more bag. This bag is full of all your good works and commendable characteristics. You are proud of this bag, but oddly enough, it is also too much of a burden to carry. Jesus asks for this bag as well. For whatever reason, this one is the hardest to give away. You want to cling to it. But eventually you hand it to him as well. He picks it right up and straps it on his back. You are free. The weight has been lifted. The burden is gone. Jesus carries all the weight for you.

What is holding you back and holding you down today? Maybe life has been hard. Your suffering has become a kind of identity. You don't know how to let go and move on. Give the weight to Jesus. Maybe you are walking outside of the Lord's will. You know that you should live in a different way, but it is hard to change course. The Bible says that we can turn from our rebellion and turn toward God's will. This is called repentance. Give the weight to Jesus. Maybe you are clinging to your respectability or your success or your reputation. It is hard to describe, but there is a rift between you and God because you don't know how to be you without the image. But the truth is that you can't bear the weight of your own supposed goodness. Give the weight to Jesus. To give your suffering, your sin, and your supposed goodness to Jesus - to give yourself to Jesus - is the way to know that the gift is yours. Don't hold back on the edge, hesitating before the glory of the cross. Move forward. Enter in. Fully embrace. Jesus wants to give you this gift that he knows that you so desperately need.