# Pastor Tim’s Message Notes from 10-1-2023 Good for the Garbage Dump

Several years ago I remember a Jehovah’s Witness knocked on our door hoping to speak with us. Has this ever happened to you? What do we do in those situations, right?

Well, Kara and I decided to speak with her. We had a few minutes of friendly conversation. And we agreed that she could come back to speak with us again on a certain day.

A week or two later, this person arrives again at our home. But this time, she brought a few people with her. I remember that I was sitting down at my kitchen table with 2 or 3 Jehovah’s Witnesses and I began to gently and lovingly push back a bit on what salvation is really all about.

I remember at one point in our conversation, one of the ladies asked me, “what do you think it is needed for someone to be saved?” It was like a moment right out of the Bible.

I pointed out Paul’s words found in Acts 16:31 “**believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.**”

The woman’s reply was telling. She said, “That’s it? Do you think that it is that simple?”

You see, in the Jehovah’s Witness understanding, salvation is anything but simple. Salvation is not as simple as repentance of sins and surrender to Jesus. It is not seen as something that is received by faith on the grace of God offered to all humanity through Jesus.

Instead, salvation is understood as something that is achieved through doing enough good works. Specifically, salvation is understood as something to be achieved through things such as membership in their Watchtower Society, adherence to the teachings of the Watchtower Society, doing a certain amount of evangelism (which is what they were trying to achieve in meeting with us) and by avoiding various behaviors. And finally, they are required to be actively distributing Watchtower literature, which was again, what they were in the process of doing with Kara and I. They were trying to meet their quota.

The belief in these requirements for salvation may help explain why so many people assume that those people knocking on their doors are Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormon’s. Both of these cults fall into the same category in that salvation is understood as something one works for to achieve.

I think of the Apostle Paul before his radical encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. Like Jehovah’s Witnesses today, Paul wanted to be a witness to Jehovah, to the LORD, but he did not truly know God. Salvation for him and other Pharisees was understood as something attained through strict adherence to God’s Law, rather than as an act of God’s grace to be received by faith.

But thankfully, Jesus touched Paul powerfully. His understanding of being saved from his sin and being brought into the family of God became radically different. And he understood that his efforts to earn salvation and God’s favor are really something that would be more fitting for the garbage dump.

So let us read about this transformation in today’s reading from Philippians 3:1-9.

# Philippians 3:1-9 New International Version (NIV)

1 Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

So what is happening in this passage? Paul begins by saying “**further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord**!”

Rejoicing was no small thing to Paul. **\*\*\*Joy and rejoicing flow from a thankful heart! From a life that is not striving to achieve right standing with God, but a life that rests in God’s mercy and grace found in Jesus Christ.**

It is different to rejoice and celebrate when you are on the performance tread mill, trying to earn God’s favor through good works.

Paul then makes a very interesting statement. He says, **Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.**

What does this mean? What is going on here? Paul is speaking of certain people that were twisting the good news of Jesus and trying to make salvation something that is achieved rather than received.

Dogs were considered wild animals in Israel during that time. These would be dangerous creatures to avoid. And Paul is basically telling the Christians in Philippi to watch out for them in a similar way that they would be watching out for wild dogs.

Sadly, even from the early days of the church there were people that sought to complicate God’s simple and beautiful plan for humanity’s salvation. In this case, these people were going to different churches and telling people that in order to be saved they needed to put themselves under the Law of Moses. The males need to be circumcised, for example. And the Law of Moses needed to be strictly adhered to in order to achieve salvation. Again, the key here is achieved.

And Paul is basically saying that this message is totally against God’s plan and needs to be soundly rejected. Salvation is about responding to God’s actions on humanity’s behalf, not trying to twist God’s arm to try to earn His favor through certain behaviors.

And Paul was warning the Christians in Philippi to not fall for that trap, to not fall for that lie.

If you are into Star Wars, if you are familiar with Admiral Ackbar, he would say, “It’s a trap!” As Christians, we need to be aware of this trap as it will help us to avoid falling into it or being pushed into it.

And then Paul humors the church in Philippi a bit. It shows how foolish it was to be trying to earn one’s own salvation. Tongue and cheek, of course, Paul then rolls out some of his “credentials” if we are to try to earn salvation.

He says in verses 4-6: **Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**

In other words, if anyone could achieve salvation through striving, it was Paul. Paul is basically saying that I am a true, blue, Jew. I can trace my ancestry all the way back without any intermarrying with non-Jews.

I, Paul, served as a Pharisee, one of the religious leaders of Israel. And not only did I serve, but I was so zealous for how I understood things that I persecuted the church.

But as we read about in various places in Scripture, Paul was dramatically transformed! Paul encountered the risen Lord Jesus while he was on his way to round up more Christians to imprison. And it was during this encounter and following that Paul’s life took a 180. And with the same zeal that he sought to persecute the church, he now became a leader within God’s church.

Paul writes, 7 **But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.** **8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ** **9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.**

Paul is saying that all of his strivings and achievements were basically as valuable as garbage. That is quite a statement!

The Christians in Philippi were familiar with accomplishments. Remember, Philippi was filled with former Roman soldiers. I trust that many retired soldiers in Philippi would look to their own efforts and accomplishments and achievements.

But Paul was saying that no one can achieve salvation through their own strivings and achievements. Instead, being made right with God is by God’s grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, as we ponder this passage and its relevance for our lives today, what is the main thing to take with us? I believe it is this. We are not to put our confidence in our works, but in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Paul teaches that salvation is NOT about what we can do for God! This is what makes Christianity different from the religions of the world. Christianity is not about making someone a better person and trying to earn one’s way to eternal life.

Christianity is about making new people, new creations in and through Jesus Christ. Christianity is not about trying to get cleaned up and presentable enough to gain the favor of the divine. Rather, Christianity is about admitting one’s need for God’s grace to forgive, to cleanse, to make new, to transform.

Paul realized that all his achievements before he became a Christian were fit for the garbage dump.

If you find yourself on the performance treadmill, running hard and not really going anywhere, trying to earn God’s salvation. If that is you, it is time to get off the treadmill and rest in God’s grace and free gift of salvation meant to be received by faith in Jesus the Savior.

Paul understood that a saving relationship with God must be established on receiving and resting in what Christ has done for us and submitting to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Yes, God has many good works prepared for us to do in this world. The Lord loves to work through people. We are all called to be God’s vessels. We are all called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. But we do not earn salvation or strive for salvation. Salvation is by God’s grace meant to be received by faith.

Brothers and sisters, it is so easy in our performance driving culture, to find our value and worth in what we may or may not achieve.

But Paul is teaching the church in Philippi and us today that righteousness and salvation from God does not come through successfully keeping a list of do’s and don’ts. It does not come from our family background or from our level of education.

No. It comes through simple faith in Jesus Christ demonstrated in surrender and submission to Him and what He did for us.

Our role is to believe. So what does it mean to believe? To believe involves two aspects of the same coin. First, it involves acknowledging that something is true. In this case, that Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead. The second aspect of belief is the more difficult one. It is submission to what is true. In this case, surrender to Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior.

Again, when this is done, there is true joy. Joy overflows from a thankful and grateful heart. As we walk with Jesus each day, may we overflow with joy and may the joy of the Lord be our strength.

Let’s pray…

Resources:

<https://www.watchman.org/articles/jehovahs-witnesses/jehovahs-witnesses-working-out-their-salvation/>

Biblegateway.com

Star Wars line “It’s a Trap”