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Advent 2: Jesus Is Savior
The Proper Way to Receive a Savior
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Have you ever thought about how long *forever* is? Have you ever really sat and just thought about what that means? I want to say, “It’s a long time” but that isn’t a true statement, because it is outside the realm of time. It is *timeless*. A hundred years ... a thousand years ... a hundred thousand years ... a million years ... is merely the beginning of that which will last forever.

It’s a sobering thought that the Bible teaches every person will spend forever somewhere. The Bible is very clear about this. Either people will spend forever with God in heaven, in a place beyond our ability to even imagine, or they will spend forever in a place of torment, separated from God in a place called hell. There is no in-between. I know you are thinking, “Thanks for cheering us up this Christmas season.” But stop and think about it. Isn’t this really the heartbeat of Christmas? When the angels came to the shepherds, didn’t they say, “For unto you has been born this day in the city of David a Savior”? That raises the question: To save us from what? What does a Savior do? A Savior saves. What do we need to be saved from? We need to be saved from the penalty of our sin and from eternal separation from God. That’s the heartbeat of Christmas.

There are some sobering words that Jesus speaks in the Gospels that cause me to think about this. In Matthew 7, Jesus says, “Wide is the road that leads to destruction and many there will be who travel that road. But narrow is the road that leads to life, but few there will be that travel that road.” Jesus was saying that the vast majority of people will not go to heaven. That’s rather sobering, isn’t it? They will spend eternity separated from God. He goes on in that same chapter (Matt. 7) and says that there will be those who will stand before Him and they will say, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we do *this* in Your name? And didn’t we do *this* in Your name? Didn’t we do this and didn’t we do that in Your name?” They will be highly religious people who were absolutely convinced they were going to heaven. But on that day when they stand before God they will hear the words, “Depart from me. I never knew you.”

Can you imagine anything worse than to believe you are headed for heaven and then to stand before God and know that, at that point, you are eternally damned? In Revelation 3 John is discussing an apostate church – a church full of people who don’t believe. In the midst of that discussion, Jesus says, “I would rather that you were hot or cold, rather than lukewarm.” What did He mean by that? “Hot” obviously would refer to those people who are committed to God. “Cold” would be those people who are wretched sinners and know it. But who are the “lukewarm”? Often we make a reference to lukewarm Christians, but it’s not those He is referring to in this passage. The lukewarm are those people who are highly religious, but have no need for a Savior. Jesus says that is the worst category, because those people are the hardest to reach. They are absolutely convinced they are on their way to heaven and everything is OK, but in reality they are on that wide road that leads to destruction.

If you were to play the role of a reporter and you were to go and interview people on that wide road, you would find that a very high percentage of them, especially the religious people, would be filled with an attitude of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. Maybe even the majority of people on that road would fall into that category. In their own mind, everything’s OK. And that is where they make an eternal mistake.

If what Jesus said is true, and obviously we believe that it is, where are religious people going to be this morning? They aren't going to be out in the bars – they're going to be in churches. And many religious people are going to be absolutely convinced that everything's OK, but it's not. As your shepherd, that concerns me. It concerns me that there might even be one person in this crowd who is deluded into thinking that somehow they're headed for heaven, when in reality they're not.

Near the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, Luke records two stories concerning those who chose not to receive the Savior, contrasted with those who did. Luke 18:9: “And He {Jesus} also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt...” So we know who the audience is – the audience here would be those who believe that they are righteous (self-righteous) and, in their mind, everything is fine and they are headed for heaven.

Jesus said, “I want to tell you this story.” Verse 10 says: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer.” It's important to understand who these two people are. When we read the word Pharisee, there's a tendency to think of a villain or hypocrite. But in the first century that's not what would have gone through the mind of the audience. In their minds, the Pharisees were the most righteous of all. They were revered and highly respected and believed to be the most righteous. If anyone was going to get into heaven, it would have been them – that's how they would have been viewed in the first century. On the other hand, the tax-gatherer was far on the other end of the scale. He was the worst of the worst. To be a tax-gatherer, you were Jewish; you betrayed your own people; you worked for the Roman government and collected taxes for the Romans from your own Jewish people. You overcharged them as much as you could and would keep whatever you overcharged them as your own, giving to the government what was theirs. So they were the worst of the worst. Maybe in our culture it would be similar to a drug pusher or a pimp – somebody who uses people for their own gain and exploits the hurts and pain of others. So the tax-gatherer and the Pharisee would have been on opposite sides of those most likely to make it to heaven in the minds of the people, and that's the setting for the story.

Vs. 11: The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me, the sinner!”

Jesus contrasts the two. Jesus said that the Pharisee wasn't praying to God, but rather was praying to himself. He was praying to be seen – it was an act of self-righteousness. Also notice that in his prayer the personal pronoun “I” shows up 5 times. He's the subject of his own prayer – the source of his own righteousness. Again, in the minds of the people, he is revered as a righteous person. But Jesus contrasts that with the tax-gatherer, who doesn't even fully come into the presence of God – who stays a distance away because he is so unworthy. He can't even look to God because he's so ashamed, and all he can do is beat on his breast and cry out for mercy because he's the sinner. In the minds of the people they would have said, “OK, that's probably right. The tax-gatherer is a wretched sinner and the Pharisee is righteous.”

Therefore what Jesus says in verse 14 would have absolutely knocked the wind out of them: “I tell you, this man {*talking about the tax-gatherer*} went down to his house justified

rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” To be justified means to be declared legally righteous. Jesus would have absolutely shocked them when he said to them that the tax-gatherer went away declared righteous by God; and the Pharisee did not. In other words, the tax-gatherer is headed for heaven – the Pharisee is not. That would have been a shocking revelation to these people. Jesus was identifying that one of them needed a Savior – one of them did not. One of them believed in his own heart that he measured up himself. That is self-righteousness – the danger of religion.

Did you know that every world religion offers a means of self-righteousness, except for Christianity? In other words, people feel there is something they can do to earn favor with God. There is something deep within our heart that is drawn to that. We want to believe there’s something we can do – that somehow we can do it ourselves – so the danger of religion is convincing us that somehow we measure up. I know it’s easy to somehow dismiss this, but we are a lot more self-righteous than I think we care to admit.

I have a very low tolerance of politics, I have to be honest. But on those occasions when I can bear the pain of watching this election fiasco in Florida, one of the things I find interesting is that everyone thinks they are taking the high road. The Democrats think *they* are taking the high road, and the Republicans think *they* are taking the high road. I don’t think either of them believe that they are wrong. They both think, in the best interests of our country, that they are taking the high road. We tend to sit back with a high degree of contempt and disgust and think that we would never be like that. We think *we* are taking the high road. But isn’t that self-righteousness, really? I’m convinced that I would never be like that, because I’m ... what? Apparently, more righteous. We can see that it isn’t that hard to fall into self-righteousness, especially when we are so religious. As I look around at all of the bad things happening in the world, I can have a tendency to think that, by comparison, I’m taking the high road. I can convince myself that I’m really quite a bit more righteous than that. Sometimes I can conclude that *that* is the basis by which I earn favor with God. Jesus was using a radical illustration to say that it doesn’t work that way.

He goes on in Luke 18:15: And they were bringing even their babies to him, in order that He might touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, “Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.

Of course a child enters in humility and total dependence. A characteristic of a child is that they know they are dependent on a parent. Let’s imagine Pastor John Matzke and I are at the mall Christmas shopping together – I can’t imagine why we’d be doing that – but pretend we are. Suppose that suddenly there are all kinds of people crowding around, and John becomes fearful of getting lost in the crowd, so he reaches up and wants to hold my hand because of the crowd. Now what would you think of that? I know what I would think of that – I would think, “John, you’re a big boy. You don’t need to hold my hand.” But a week ago in the mall the exact thing happened. There *was* a big crowd and I *was* there with somebody. That somebody I was with was getting separated from me, and all of a sudden I felt a hand. But it was a little hand. It was the hand of my youngest daughter, Jayme, as she feared she was getting lost in the crowd. Without hesitation she reached out and took my hand. And I didn’t think that was strange at all, because we understand that children are dependent, and they know that they are.

That's the point Jesus is making here. A child understands their need for help. The Pharisee didn't need any help – he was self-righteous. But the wretched tax-collector had no hope apart from the Savior.

All this discussion raises a certain question in the mind of a rich, young ruler. This rich young ruler, as he's described in the text, would have been considered a very good person. He would have been considered very sincere, very religious – a decent guy. But he was filled with his own self-righteous and his own self-sufficiency. He could make his own way in the world. But here, in this conversation with Jesus, he wonders if maybe there is something he's missing or failing to do, so it raises the question found in verse 18:

And a certain ruler questioned Him {Jesus} saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone."

Jesus was not denying His deity here, but rather the rabbis taught that no man was to be called good – only God is good. So why was this rich young ruler calling Jesus good? I think what probably is happening in this text is that the rich young ruler was looking at Jesus as kind of a standard, saying, "You're a good man." What is implied in that is: "And I'm a good man." Jesus, knowing that, said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good." So Jesus was taking the bar and raising it much higher and saying, "If you want to compare yourself, then compare yourself with God, because He is the standard of goodness."

That is the problem with self-righteousness and self-sufficiency – it's based on comparisons. I'm good compared to whom? I can always find somebody I'm better than, like all those confused people down in Florida. It's using a relative standard and I can come out ahead. But Jesus was saying, "No, the standard is God, so let's put the bar way up higher and then you don't measure up so well." The problem is that the rich young ruler still thought that he did.

In verse 20 Jesus says, "You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother.'" The rich young ruler asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus isn't saying here to keep the law, but rather Jesus is saying, "Recognize your need." We are to look at the law, because the law is supposed to provide a mirror. When I look in the mirror (the law) I realize that I really don't measure up. And because I don't measure up, then I know I need help – I need a Savior.

This young ruler looked in the mirror and he measured up in his opinion. Vs. 21: "And he said, 'All these things I have kept from my youth.'" I think the reason Jesus went through the second half of the ten commandments is because those are the commandments we violate against one another, and they're easier to measure. The first half of the commandments are somewhat abstract and sometimes hard to measure. So Jesus is starting with the bottom half when He says, "Look at yourself." The rich young ruler looks at himself and says, "I don't think I've ever violated any of those. I think I'm self-righteous." Jesus responds to that in verse 22:

And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich.

What was Jesus saying here? Jesus was saying that, until you look in the mirror and recognize that you are a sinner, you will have no need for a Savior – therefore, there’s no hope of salvation. He is telling the rich young ruler to look in the mirror. The ruler looks in the mirror and says, “I think I look pretty good.” So Jesus comes back and starts with the very first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Jesus was going back to the rich young ruler and saying, “You know, you haven’t even made it through the first commandment, and I’ll prove it to you. Your money is your god. Let’s figure it out – get rid of your money and follow Me.” And the rich young ruler went away sad because he was unwilling to let go of his god. He was not even able to keep the first command.

The point that Jesus is making is that, until you recognize your need for a Savior, there is no hope for salvation. So far we’ve looked at two very good men in the eyes of the world – very self-righteous and very self-sufficient. Both of them are on the wide road to destruction. The only one so far who is making it into heaven is this poor, wretched tax-collector who recognizes his need for a Savior.

There’s another familiar story in Luke 19 about a short, little guy by the name of Zaccheus. Beginning in verse 1:

And He entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich.” {*The chief tax-gatherer would have been the worst of the worst – he managed other tax-gatherers. He was extremely wealthy and would have been very, very hated.*} And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they {*the crowd*} saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is the son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Zaccheus was an extremely wealthy man – a very self-sufficient man. Whatever was going on in his life, we really don’t know. We only know he reached this point where he knew that he needed Jesus. In the first century culture a wealthy man of position did not run in public and certainly did not climb trees. Zaccheus, in a sense, was abandoning everything that he held dear and was simply going to do whatever was necessary to somehow get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus, knowing his heart, invites him down and the key phrase is: “Zaccheus *received* Him.” Jesus was not saying that because Zaccheus gave back all this money that somehow he was saved. Jesus was saying that Zaccheus received salvation that day because he recognized his need for a Savior. The key verse (v. 10) explains it: because Jesus came, the Son of Man {which is a statement of His deity} to seek and to save that which is lost.

What does a Savior *do*? A Savior saves. *Who* does a Savior save? Those who are lost. The problem is that most people don’t believe they are lost. They are steeped in their own self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, traveling down this wide road thinking everything is OK. The Pharisee thought that, and the rich young ruler thought that also. But it was the tax-collector (Zaccheus, the chief tax-collector) who recognized a need for a Savior and experienced salvation.

Are you absolutely sure that you have come to a point in your life where you have recognized your need for a Savior? Have you recognized the fact that no religion, no religious works, no church attendance – nothing that you can do yourself – can merit you favor with God? Instead, you must acknowledge that you are a sinner in need of a Savior and must be willing to put your trust in Jesus' death on the cross in payment for your sin and to receive His salvation. We go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and see that the original sin was thinking: "I can be like God." There is a big part of that in all of our hearts and that's what causes us to be drawn to self-righteousness and self-sufficiency: "I can do it myself. I'll do it my own way."

Jesus says it does not work that way. Imagine this contrast: Imagine standing here on one side of me is Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer who cannibalized his victims, which is about as bad as it gets. And imagine on the other side of me stands the nicest, friendliest, highly moral person that you know. Jesus is saying that on that day in his prison cell, shortly before he died, when Jeffrey Dahmer acknowledged his sin and confessed his need for a Savior, he was radically changed at that moment and will spend forever in heaven. That's almost scandalous. And that nice, moral, caring, kind, compassionate person will spend forever in a place of torment if he or she doesn't admit a need for a Savior.

Everyone comes to the Savior the same way – desperately in need of salvation. Are you absolutely sure you've come to that point in your life? There can be no self-righteousness – no self-sufficiency. There must be just a total dependence upon Jesus as Savior.

That's the message of Christmas.