

What Difference Does It Make

July 10, 2016

More than fifty years ago I heard an English evangelist named Leonard Ravenhill tell a story that was so dramatic that I remember it clearly to this day. The setting was nineteenth century England. It was early dawn as a small group of men walked through a prison yard. Several of the men were prison guards. A shackled man in their midst was a prisoner being led to the gallows to be executed.

This was a time of harsh justice in England when even minor offenses were punished severely but this prisoner was no innocent. He'd lived a life of violent crime and had robbed and murdered wantonly. Walking behind the prisoner was a prison chaplain whose job was to quote Bible verses about heaven, hell, and to offer one last chance at repentance to those about to meet their maker. Perhaps it was English society's attempt to salve its conscience over sending so many people out into eternity. The problem on this early morning was that the chaplain had made this walk many times before and would rather have been in his bed so he sleepily mumbled the verses as he trudged along behind the man whose life was about to end. Suddenly the prisoner stopped walking, turned to the now startled and wide awake chaplain, and said "If I believed there was a God and if I believed, as you say you do, that there was a place of fiery punishment waiting for unrepentant sinners, I'd crawl across England on my hands and knees to save one person from such a fate." Then he turned and walked on to the gallows.

What an upside-down contrast there is between the two principals in this story! A believer (we'll give the chaplain the benefit of the doubt) is walking behind a man with moments to go before he drops through a trapdoor into the fires of hell and exhibits no concern. An unbeliever expresses scorn and outrage that a believer could be so callous. His implication: "If you believe this, you should act like it."

Most of us here today would call ourselves believers; that's why we're here. If you are not a believer, it's not my design today to convince you otherwise...that's a topic for another day and, probably, a different speaker. But exactly what is it that we believe? Let me quickly run through a list of things I will call "absolutes." These are things that are at the core of the gospel and to our minds are not debatable.

-By Birth and by choice we are all sinners.

Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

-Sin has earned us eternal punishment.

Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death."

-Jesus, God's son, gave his life to pay our penalty.

Romans 3:24-25 "(We) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood."

-There is no other way of salvation

John 14:6 "Jesus answered, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

That really flies in the face of our culture doesn't it? We're so reluctant to hurt anyone's feelings that we'd like to say "My way is good, but your way is good too." Except Jesus said that's not true.

-Our lives are relatively short and fragile.

James 4:14 "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

-After we die we will face judgment

II Cor. 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

-Heaven awaits those who have been redeemed

II Cor. 5:1 "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."

-There is a place of eternal punishment for those who reject God's plan of salvation

Luke 16:23-24 "In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 'Father Abraham have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'"

We don't talk about hell much today...it's a pretty unpopular concept...but Jesus did.

So when you look at this list of things that are at the core of Christianity I will suggest that there are only two possibilities: either they are true or not true; they can't be partly true or kind of true. And if they are true, as most of us here this morning believe, what impact should that have on us? I've been thinking about that a lot and have come up with five things that I think should result from really believing. Of course the list could include many more than that but, in the interest of time, I'll stick with the five that seem most important to me.

If I really believe the "absolutes" I've listed for you:

I should have a strong motivation to rescue others. We're surrounded by people who need to be rescued from the results of unforgiven sin or they're in real trouble.

When we put things in the simplest, clearest terms, all of us are anxious to help people who need rescuing. If we took a trip to my old home town of Duluth, one of the places we'd stop is the ship canal. Everybody who visits Duluth goes there. Imagine that we're standing by the canal, hoping to see a big ship pass through, when someone, perhaps a young person, leans too far over the wall and falls in. All of us would instinctively raise the alarm. Some would call 9-1-1, someone who was thinking clearly would run and grab one of the life rings hanging along the wall and throw it to the person in the water. If you're a good swimmer and the person in the water is having difficulty getting to the life ring, you might even jump in to help. I should warn you, though; that water is very cold! So here we are: we see that there's a guy in the water who needs rescuing and we want to help him; the person in the water knows he needs rescuing and is completely in favor of receiving help. That's a pretty simple equation.

In our daily lives, though, it's more complicated. When I leave here this morning I'll probably do what I do most Sundays. I'll stop at a convenience store on the way home and buy a newspaper. I'm a news junkie and electronic media doesn't do it for me. To me, the man behind the counter will just be "The guy who sells me a paper." I won't see him as someone who needs rescuing...he probably doesn't see himself that way either. I don't know what his spiritual condition is; he may already know the Lord or he may be in the same peril as the prisoner walking toward the gallows. The same thing could be said of most of the rest of the people I'll interact with today.

If we are daily crossing paths with condemned people it really seems that we should care about them; but what can we do? A few Christians have a gift for evangelism. They can strike up a conversation even with people they've never met before and successfully turn the talk to serious spiritual things. But that's not the case for most of us. One thing that's become well known is that most people who are Christians became believers through personal contact with someone: a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker. If you stood before a group of Christians and asked "How many were converted after hearing a gospel message on TV or the radio?" a few people would raise their hands. "How many picked up a Bible and were convicted by something you read?"...another hand or two. But when you asked "How many came through the influence of someone you knew?" most of the people in the room would respond. That means each of us has the responsibility of our own personal sphere of influence. I know people that you will never meet and vice versa.

But we can't rescue everybody; Jesus let us know that when he told the parable of the sower. In his time, as well as in the pioneer days in our country, grain crops were planted by hand. A farmer went out with a bag of seed at his side. He'd reach into the bag, grab a handful of seed, and broadcast it with a sweeping motion of his hand. The sower didn't know which particular seeds would successfully grow. He knew that some would fall on stony ground and not make it. He knew some would be eaten by birds. Birds are dumb...they think you're putting the seeds out for them so they eat them and it doesn't even bother their consciences. But some of it fell on good ground and grew and thrived. That's what made the sowing worthwhile.

So if we must be compassionate but we can't save everybody, what's our responsibility? Three things, I think: We certainly ought to care about the eventual fate of those who are lost. We must live lives that are consistent with Christianity. If we're phony in our walk with God it will cancel out any influence we may have with those who know us. And we should decide in advance that we will never miss an opportunity to share the gospel and what Jesus means in our lives whenever one comes along.

If I really believe what I say I believe it should re-arrange my sense of what's important

If it's true that our lives are relatively short and fragile that should really affect the way in which I view material things. One of the sad realities of my time in life is that you begin to lose friends. In a two week period recently three of my good friends died. I was asked to give the eulogies at two of the funerals. As I thought about what made their lives special...unique...worthwhile my mind didn't gravitate to what they had parked in their garages or what kind of house they'd lived in. And as I listened to their families and other friends talk about them there was no mention of any wealth they'd accumulated. Rather, the talk was about love and character and relationships. For the two who knew the Lord it was all about the joy he'd brought into their lives and their hope for eternity.

I should be calmer about worrisome things

I hate to tell you younger people this, but no one goes through life unscathed. You might go off to college with a plan all mapped out and find out that it's not as interesting as you thought it would be or you can't do the required work. You find the person of your dreams and later realize that they weren't...or you weren't the person of their dreams. Jobs are lost, sickness strikes. Here's a big one for parents: you put your heart and soul into raising your kids, putting all the right stuff into them and then you see one or more begin to go astray...sometimes to "a far country," as in the parable of the prodigal son. Here's the good news: they can come back.

Things come into our lives that we never would have chosen to experience and have difficulty seeing any reason for them. My wife and I never could have imagined that we could lose a 26-year-old grandson this year. When our daughter called one evening in February to tell us he'd died, we almost couldn't comprehend it. Now his brother, a marine machine gunner, is about to be deployed to the Middle East. If we're of a mind to worry we have plenty of material to work with. Here's the thing that gets us through these hard times: the understanding and belief that God really does care about us and that He can use difficult things, situations that scare us and scar us, to work out good outcomes in our lives.

Do you ever meditate on scripture? I'm not talking about something mystical...just taking a verse of two from the Bible and pondering on a phrase at a time. One I often go to when thinking about life's difficulties is found in Proverbs 3: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart...and lean not on your own understanding...in all your ways acknowledge him...and He will direct your paths."

I will understand Paul's meaning when he said our citizenship is in Heaven (Phil. 3:20)

I'm not a very enthusiastic traveler. Left to my own devices I'd probably stay around home most of the time and just do the things I like to do. I do try to be a good husband, though, so when my wife, Liz (that's not her real name...it's an Americanized version of her middle name), asked me to go on a trip to Finland with her a few years ago, I said "Sure." I knew it meant a great deal to her because she was born there and immigrated to America as a young girl. She came with everything she owned in a cardboard suitcase. She couldn't speak a word of English (a lack she has made up for many times over since then).

I found that Finland was a nice place, other than the 9 dollar-per-gallon gas and everyone speaking a language with far too many double consonants. Liz's relatives were very gracious to us and we got to visit Voikka, the small town she came from, even seeing the little house where she had lived with her grandmother. It was a pleasant trip and it meant so much to Liz that I was really glad to have gone. There was something that was true for me, though, the whole time we were there: I had an enjoyable time, but I knew that this was temporary and I had a vague sense of being out of place. When we arrived at Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport and got through customs, the official handed back my passport, smiled and said "Welcome home." That's what had been missing for me.

If I really believe what the Bible teaches about life and eternity then I will understand Paul's meaning.

God has said "Welcome home" to a lot of people I love. One day he'll say that to me.

Finally, if I really believe what the Bible teaches I should **be touched by the sacrifice Jesus made for me.**

I heard a man give an account of a tragedy that happened in his family as he was growing up. I'll tell it as he did (understand this is his story, not mine). He said "I grew up on a farm in Wisconsin. It was a wonderful place to live. We enjoyed the outdoors, we learned to do hard work, and we had a lot of freedom. We did have rules, though. One of them was that we could only ride our bikes down to the end of our driveway. We were told to stay off from the blacktop county road because some cars came by going too fast. One day a terrible thing happened: we heard the screeching of tires and a sickening thud. We ran down to the road and found, to our horror, that my ten-year-old brother had disobeyed, ridden his bike onto the blacktop, and been hit and killed by a car.

Some hours later, when the sheriff had left and the neighbors had gone home, my dad picked up the mangled bike and, with tears streaming down his face, carried it down to the barn and left it in a part of the barn that we didn't use very often. From that time on," the man said, "until I left home, I never saw my dad go to that part of the barn and see the twisted bike without getting tears in his eyes." That's the way I'd like to be when we have communion and I'm reminded of the tremendous sacrifice Jesus made for me.

I want to close with an illustration I've borrowed from Francis Chan. This rope is a timeline of your existence. The six-inch red part at the leading end represents your few short years on earth. The white part that stretches across the platform and out of sight represents all of eternity somewhere else. If we're really going to accurate, of course, we have to imagine that the white part goes on forever. Pretty much all we think about is the red part. We think, "I'll work hard here and save a lot of money. I hope by the time I get to this part I'll be able to do some travelling and really enjoy myself..." But what about this? (the white part) The Bible teaches that what I do during the red part determines what happens for eternity. We only get one chance at life on earth. Further, we never know how close we might be to the end of the red part.

If Paul, the apostle, was alive today we might advise him to take it easier on himself. "Paul," we might say, "you're battered and bruised, you've already done much more than your share. Why don't you retire and take it easy?" I could imagine him replying "Are you crazy? I'm going to keep pressing on 'til I cross the finish line. Until then, I'll live my life for that moment!" There's a number that only God knows. It's the number of minutes left in your life. It might be a big number; it might be a small number. One day for every one of us it will get down to single digits. We'd be wise to live our lives with that in mind.

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