

ATHE GREAT DECISION@

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II Cor. 5:17-19

(Note: When preaching this sermon I moved to one side of the pulpit when speaking for the prosecution, to the opposite side when speaking for the defense, and remained behind the pulpit during the introduction, application and conclusion.)

In The Beginning

In the beginning -- God! In making any consideration of the teachings of Christianity we must first begin with God.

A survey of religions of the world will show that many of them resolve themselves into either an ethical system or a man-made way of life. In many, God merits little or no consideration whatsoever. They find their center in man and their hope is in him. Christianity finds its center in God and its hope is in Him. Therefore -- in the beginning -- God.

You will remember that in the beginning God created the heavens and earth. He set the sun and moon and stars on their course in the heavens. He scattered the trees and flowers over the face of the earth to beautify it. He made the fish to swim in the sea. The beasts to roam the hillsides. The birds to split the air. And then, He created man.

Man was created in perfection and in communion with God. Yet, God choosing to make him the highest of His creations -- above the level of dumb animals -- gave man the power of choice. Through this divinely-given free will, man of his own volition, chose to turn away from God.

Thus, was established a deep need for salvation. No longer was man in fellowship with God. No longer did He merit consideration from God. His righteousness, once perfect in God, was now as Afilthy rags@in the sight of God.

God cannot lower His standard of righteousness and justice. It demands to be satisfied. Yet, as a truly gracious and loving Heavenly Father, He yearns that man might be in fellowship with Him.

Here we find a real tension within Christianity. Which shall it be? Shall God forever turn His back upon righteousness and justice and set man free? Or, shall He turn His back on love and grace and damn man for eternity? The Great Decision lies in God's hands. And hear me -- it must be made!

This evening, for a few brief moments, I want you to let your mind wander out of time back into the endless ages of eternity. Picture, if you will, a magnificent court room in all of its grandeur and glory.

Before us, shining forth in splendor and divine majesty, is the Great Judgment Bar of God. Seated behind it is the Ancient of Days. The Almighty Father. The Great Judge. Yea, even God Himself.

On one side are the prosecuting attorneys, God's righteousness and God's justice. On the other are the counsels for the defense, God's love and God's grace. Standing before the judgement bar of God on trial for his sins is the defendant -- man.

Righteousness

Righteousness, the first prosecuting attorney, steps forward to speak --

AYour Honor, You will remember how back at the beginning of time You created man in Your own image. In perfection. It was then You gave him the power of choice. And it was then that, through that power, he chose to turn from You.

ASince that time his own selfish, willful ways have led him deeper and deeper into sin. His righteousness, once perfect in You, can now be only classified as Afilthy rags@in Your sight. He

stands before You now in judgement. I demand that Your verdict be guilty!@

AUpon what do I base my demands? Let me refer You to Your own divine record. Listen to what You have said concerning man's own righteousness, ¶From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it= (Isaiah 1:6).

¶But they are all as an unclean thing, and all their righteousness is as filthy rags, they all do fade as a leaf, and their iniquities, like the wind, have taken them away= (Isa. 64:6). ¶For there is no difference: for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God= (Rom. 3:23). ¶The fool hath said in his heart there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good= (Psm. 14: 1-3).

AAAs it is written,@¶there is none righteous, no not one. There is none that understandeth. There is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way. They are altogether become unprofitable: there is none that doeth goodCno not one= (Rom. 3:9-12). ¶The whole world lieth in wickedness= (1 Jn. 5:19). >There is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not= (Eccl. 7:20).

AAnd what, Your Honor, is Your standard? It is that of unblemished righteousness. You can do no wickedness. You are perfect. You are undefiled. For it is written, >Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty= (Rev. 4:8).

AWhen compared to such perfection, what is man that he should be called righteous? Upon the fact of man's sin in the light of Your divine standard of absolute righteousness, I demand that Your verdict be guilty and the penalty be death!@

Love

At this point, Love, the first counsel for the defense, steps forward to speak --

AYour Honor, we have heard my opponent, Righteousness, as he has condemned man in Your sight and what he has said, I cannot deny. Man is indeed a sinful creature and yet, Your Honor, lest You forget, is it not true, as the Bible says, that <God is love=(1 Jn. 4:8)?

AMy opponent has referred to Your divine record for evidence. Return there with me as I plead man's case, for it is written, <Love is as strong as death=(Song of Sol. 8:6).

<Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things=(1 Cor. 13:4-6).

ALove covers a multitude of sins! Indeed, love covers all sins, for,@>Love never fails=(I Cor. 13:8). AThis, Your Honor, is Love. And >Love is of God.= Indeed, Love is God, for the Bible says, <God is love=(1 Jn. 4:7,8).

AThis, Your Honor, is Your very nature. Upon that fact I plead man's case. Upon the basis of Your unfailing, unconditional love I demand that sin be nullified, and man be pardoned.@

Justice

With that, Love steps down, and the second speaker for the prosecution, God's Justice arises.

AYour Honor, my worthy colleague, Righteousness, has established beyond a shadow of a doubt that man is, indeed, a sinful creature. So conclusive has been the evidence, that even the defense has acknowledged this fact.

AWe have demanded the supreme penalty of death. We base our demands upon Your own divine word, for you have said, <The wrath of God is upon the disobedient=(Eph. 5: 6). And >the wages of sin is death=(Rom. 6:23).

AThe defense has based his argument upon the fact that <God is love.= The validity of this statement I do not question. And yet, Your Honor, examine the characteristics within Your nature. Is it not also true that God is just?

AYou have promised man <a just recompense reward=(Heb. 2:2), for it is written, <As a man sows, so also shall he reap (Gal. 6:7)=

AMan has chosen to turn from You. His own path has led him farther and farther away from You. You cannot lower Your standard of righteousness to meet the standard of man. Man must meet Your standards, and this he cannot do!

ATherefore, You have no choice but to judge man upon the basis of his sin in the light of Your standard of absolute righteousness and justice.

AAAs a just Judge, You cannot, by a single act of Your own power, set man free. If You do, what assurance do we have that You will not, at some future time, reverse Your decision and damn man for eternity.

ANo,@ Your Honor, Aman has sinned. The penalty which you have set is death. In the light of Your justice, I demand that your verdict be guilty and the debt of death be paid. Your Honor, the prosecution rests.@

Grace

The courtroom is tense with expectancy as the final attorney for the defense, God=s Grace, steps forward to speak --

AYour Honor, I have listened as man has faced the charges made by Righteousness and Justice. I, too, must admit that what they have charged is true. But, please, Your Honor, before You pass

sentence, review once more Your nature and tell me, is it not also true that You are gracious?

AWe know you are a gracious God, for it is written concerning you, >Thou art a God ready to pardon=(Neh. 9:17), >gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness=(Joel 2:13). You have said of man, <When he crieth unto me, I will hear, for I am gracious=(Ex. 22:27).

AMan stands before you in judgment, a sinner. Your righteous standard demands that he be sentenced to death. But, has God forgotten to be gracious? Is it not true that Your one desire is that man might be in fellowship with you? Where, O God, is Your love? Where, O God, is Your grace?

As you make Your Great Decision, I plead that through Your love and grace, man might be pardoned. Your Honor, the defense rests.@

God=s Response

Now, it may not have happened like that. But I hope that in these few moments I have painted a worthy picture of The Great Decision God was forced to make. I hope I have helped you feel the weight of the problem He had to bear.

How He must have wrestled with these warring forces within His very nature. For, here to make, was truly AA Great Decision.@ Man=s eternal destiny lay in the balance. Which would it be?

As God considered man in the light of Righteousness and Justice, He realized His only choice was to condemn man to death. Therefore, in Love and Grace was man=s only hope. The debt of death must be paid. Could Love and Grace fulfill it?

It is here that the shadow of Another comes into view, as Jesus Christ, God=s only Son, steps forward and offers to pay the debt. Here, truly, is Love amazing and Grace divine. What Love! What Grace! That God=s own Son should pay man=s debt of death. And so, AGod so loved the

world that He gave His only begotten Son@ (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus left His home in glory to come and dwell on earth. He lived a sinless, perfect life. He was tempted like us, but chose not to sin, thereby fulfilling God's standard of absolute righteousness. In due season He was led away to Calvary and there He paid man's penalty of death and Divine Justice was satisfied as His very life's blood was poured out on the cross.

He was buried, and, on the third day, God raised Him from the grave, thereby putting His seal of approval upon the death of Jesus as full and final payment for man's penalty of death. After that, He dwelt among people for a while as proof of His resurrection and then, He left to return again to His Father's bosom. He is here tonight acting as man's Advocate, holding eternal victory over sin, death and the grave. God's Great Decision had been made, and Jesus paid it all!

Summation

Oh, how I wish I could stop there tonight. How I wish we could stand and I could pronounce the benediction. How I wish I could hear the sound of God's gavel ring in my ears and I could hear His final verdict -- NOT GUILTY!

But I can't! One Great Decision stands yet to be made. That decision must be made by you. For as we step up and look closer, we see that the one standing before the Judgment Bar of God is none other than you.

As you stand there, God's Righteousness and God's Justice step forward to condemn you. But, as they condemn you, Christ Jesus, representing God's Love and Grace steps forward, points to the cross, and God's Righteousness and Justice are satisfied.

You, in yourself, cannot meet God's standard of absolute holiness. Your only hope is in Him. By choice you turned from God. By choice, you must accept or reject Him. If you accept Christ tonight, God's gavel will ring down and His eternal verdict shall be NOT GUILTY!

Your inheritance will be eternal life.

If you reject Christ this morning, God's final gavel shall ring down and His only verdict can be, GUILTY! The eternal penalty is death. Your soul's destiny beyond the grave lies in your hands this morning. Yours to make, is The Great Decision. What will you do with Jesus? And . . . what will you do without Him?

There once was a wise man who lived in a far distant land. It was said that he had the answer to all questions. In a far distant corner of that far distant land lived a little boy. He had heard of the Wise Man and wondered if, some day, he could outwit him.

After giving it much thought, the lad conceived an idea. I know what I'll do, he said to himself, I'll capture a bird and carry it to the Wise Man. When I reach him, I will put the bird behind my back and ask him this question. A Wise Man, what do I have in my hand?@ And he will reply, A My son, you have a bird in your hand.@ Then I'll say to him, ATell me, Wise Man, is that bird dead or alive?@ If he says the bird is dead I will open my hand and let it fly away showing the bird to be alive. If he says the bird is alive, I will squeeze my hand, choke out its life and show it to him dead.

Well, the boy seemed to have the perfect question, didn't he? It was a question the Wise Man could not answer. At last, his opportunity arrived. The boy captured a bird and putting it behind his back, he approached the Wise Man with his first question, A Wise Man, what do I have in my hand?@ A My Son, you have a bird in your hand.@ ATell me, Wise Man, is that bird dead or is it alive?@

The Wise Man searched the face of the boy for a moment and then answered, A My son, that depends on you!@ My friend, will you live or die? Will you be saved or lost? Will your destiny be heaven or . . . ? That . . . depends . . . on . . . you!