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Soul.Harvest: Invited

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Colossians 2:13-17, Numbers 10:29-32

INTRODUCTION

We live in a day of OPTIONS. So many that it makes your head spin.

“How do you want your hamburger?” can be quite a daunting question. Anybody ever eat at **Blimpy Burger**—Ann Arbor’s (and my) favorite greasy spoon? There are more than 1,245,760 possible combinations of patties, cheeses, buns & toppings. Talk about options! ☺

One time, Marcie & I stopped by **Wendy’s** on our way out of town on a vacation. We went to the drive-thru, and I started to read all the possibilities on the big menu board. There were so many...and the voice over the loudspeaker kept saying, “Can I take your order”. After about three times, I had gotten so overwhelmed that I said, “No thanks, we’ll come inside”. ☺

Wow, do we have options. We have options in what we eat / wear / listen to / watch (e.g.: “I don’t want to watch anything; I just want to see what’s on” ☺) / drive / do / think.

It hasn’t always been like this. When Henry Ford began selling the Model T, he often said, “*You can have any color you want as long as it’s black.*” The Industrial Revolution changed all that.

Now that we have become so accustomed to an “options” way of thinking, it is not surprising that the words of Jesus almost seem limiting to us. We want to call them into question. But:

- He says quite clearly: “*I am the way, the truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except by me.*” [John 14:6]
- Peter reinforces that when he says: “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we may be saved.*” [Acts 4:12]

As Matt said last week, Jesus allows us to choose. But the choice isn’t *multiple-choice*. It’s not a smorgasbord of saviors / prophets / religious leaders / gurus / philosophies / spiritualities. It’s a *true-false, yes-no* choice: choose me or reject me.

But that claim offends many in a culture that values options. In our culture, everybody gets to live as he/she chooses. Everybody gets to do his/her own thing. It’s cool to put Jesus in there as one option among many, but we can’t have Him being the only way. It’s not inclusive! It’s not open-minded! It’s not optional!

That makes many of us afraid to share our faith. Aren’t all “ways” valid? How can I present Jesus as “the only way”? Shouldn’t we just let people believe the way they want to and leave well enough alone? Why should I try to force “my religion” down someone’s throat?

Good questions! Not easy to answer. There's a hidden assumption in that line of thought, however, that's very dangerous. And that's the idea that everybody's going to go to heaven, right? No matter what they believe. I mean, God's love is so infinitely great and His grace in Christ Jesus is so awesome, that everyone will be saved in the end. Even those who openly reject Jesus, those who have committed hideous crimes and died without repenting, those who have lived basically decent lives—all will enjoy a future with God.

This is a dangerous (and false) teaching that goes by the name **Universalism**. It simply states that all people, regardless of their persuasion—regardless of whether they have accepted or rejected Jesus as “the Way”—will eventually be saved through the atonement of Christ.

Sounds nice, doesn't it? What could possibly be wrong about believing this? It seems logical. . . and certainly in keeping with God's character. What are the dangers?

It can give us a false sense of security about our eternal destiny. It can remove the need for accountability / for repentance. I can live any ole' way I please. *“I don't have to worry about any kind of 'eternal punishment' or 'judgment'. I already know I'm going to heaven no matter what. I don't have to give up drugs, sleeping around, stealing CD's from the store, cheating on my taxes or in business. Man, how cool is that?”*

Not everyone who embraces Universalism goes out and lives that way. They may live a very “moral and upright” life. Still, if we do not recognize Jesus for who He claimed to be—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—then we are still in our sins no matter how “good” a person we may be (**cf. John 8:24**)¹.

ILLUSTRATION> You've got a debt to pay. Let's say you owe the government \$1 million in back taxes. I come along and say, “I forgive you of the debt”. That's nice, but I have no authority to do that.

In the same manner, you & I have a debt to pay. We have offended a holy God. Who's going to pay it? I can't; I'm too “spiritually poor”. You can't. Pastor Matt can't. The Pope can't. The Dalai Lama can't. The Buddha can't. No religious leader can forgive your sins and take away your guilt. Only Jesus can—because *“salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved”* [**Acts 4:12**].

And all He asks us is to acknowledge Him for who He is—the ONE who provided a solution for the problem WE caused, the ONE who paid the debt WE created. Isn't that amazing?!

Universalism says you can profess Christ as the Son of the living God (or not). You can be cleansed of your sins (or not). You can be justified by faith—made right in your relationship to God (or not). It doesn't matter. In the end, everybody'll be saved no matter what. It's a feel-good theology, but it's as phony as a \$3 bill.

I'd be less than what God called me to be if I didn't say to you this morning: There is a hell to be shunned and a heaven to be gained—however you conceive of “heaven” & “hell”. The Bible likens “hell” to a garbage dump (Hebrew “*gehenna*”). . .and heaven to a city with streets of gold. However literal or symbolic, I just know I want to be in that “better place” with my family, my loved ones, and everyone of you. . .and as many more as we can take with us.

It is important for you to know that God does not send people to hell. He has sacrificed His Son so that all may enter the gates of heaven. He has thrown the doors of heaven wide open and shouted, “Come one, come all”. All may come. But God does not force anyone. One of the most compelling images is found in **Revelation 3:20**.....

¹Jesus said in **John 8:24** – **“If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be (i.e.: the Son of God), you will still be in your sins.”**

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (i.e.: we will be friends).”

~ Show picture of Jesus standing at the door knocking [PowerPoint] ~

Who opens the door? WE do; Jesus doesn't even touch the handle, much less force his way in.

Ours is not a cruel, tyrannical God who sends people to hell. He is a gracious, just, merciful God who has done everything within His power to provide eternal salvation for everyone.

Now let's look at our Scripture for this morning.

SCRIPTURE – Colossians 2:13-17 [NIV]²

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in your sinful nature (which leads us to live exactly the opposite of how God has asked), God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins (and gave us a new nature). ¹⁴He canceled the record of charges that was against us (all our sins, all our falling short, all our breaking of God's law in our heart + in outward behavior; it's all like a big huge unpayable debt). He took it all away by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them on the cross (we no longer live under sin's power).

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths (it's not outward observances-traditions-ceremonies that make us holy). ¹⁷These are but a shadow of the things that are to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ (In Him we have all we will ever need).

What a wonderful story this is! What wonderful news it is! But we have such trouble sharing it, don't we? We have a hard time telling people that “the reality is found in Christ”. . .that He is the Son of the one true & living God. . .that the solution to our sin problem (our debt) is in Him.

But sharing your testimony and a word on what it means to follow Christ (and how to begin that journey) is only “shoving” when someone is not ready or receptive. Remember, it's news you are sharing, not a debate you are trying to win OR a wall of resistance you're trying to break down.

Just as Jesus does not break the door down (cf. Revelation 3:20), neither do we. We don't compel / oblige / force / coerce / push / press / break down or break open anyone to the Gospel. But we can share some good news. . .sow some seeds. . .raise a few “faith flags” that God can use to draw people to Himself. After all, Jesus said: *“When I am lifted up (referring to His death), I will draw all men to myself”.* [John 12:32]

My question to you this morning: When the time is ripe, when the opportunity presents itself, when the Holy Spirit prompts you, **will you be ready to be that beggar telling another beggar where to find food?**

What a privilege, if ever God uses you to influence another person to accept Jesus Christ. Most of us want to be involved in sharing our faith, but it's scary. Let's see how it plays out in this vignette.

~ The Visitation, a play by the Covenant Players ~

CONCLUSION – Numbers 10:29-32 [NLT]

² My comments are in red.

²⁹One day Moses said to his brother-in-law, Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, “We are on our way to the place the LORD promised us, for He said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised wonderful blessings for Israel!”

³⁰But Hobab replied, “No, I will not go. I must return to my own land and family.”

³¹“Please do not leave us,” Moses pleaded. “You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes. ³² If you come with us, we will share with you all the blessings the LORD gives us.”

In these verses, we find Moses talking with his brother-in-law, Hobab. Moses is leading the Children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt to the Promised Land, and he extends an invitation to his brother-in-law to go with them.

You can easily apply this invitation to the faith-sharing we do today. All of us are strangers and pilgrims passing through this world—on our way to live eternally in the presence of Jesus Christ. We are in a wilderness here, but we’re part of a band of believers *en route* to the “promised land”. Our invitation to others is the same invitation that Moses gave Hobab: “*Come with us.*”

This is not a *protest* march. It is a *salvation* march, a *redemption* march. It is the march that is going to Zion: not the *earthly* Zion (i.e.: Jerusalem and the land of Israel), but the *heavenly* one (i.e.: the city that will someday come down out of heaven, the place where God will dwell with His people).

All of those who are among the redeemed are a part of that march. And our “evangelism” is an invitation to those who are not yet marching with us: “*Come with us. Come walk with us. . .and let’s share together all the blessings the Lord gives us.*”