

**“God Remains Loyal”**

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I've said before that I believe in Universal Salvation. I'm trying to figure out exactly what that means and how to convey that to you from a biblical perspective. So, when I need help I turn to theologians, and so I'm going to turn now to George Carlin. [Laughter.] Now, I'm not going to talk about the seven words you must never say on television, so don't worry; but George Carlin once said, "Most people work just hard enough not to get fired, and businesses pay you just enough that you won't quit." I thought about that and it seems to have some kind of relationship to what we are talking about today, because a lot of people go to church just enough so they will get into Heaven, and they hope to get just enough to stay out of hell. [Laughter.]

But we don't have to talk in those terms anymore. If you really delve into the Bible, it's not about who is in and who is out; it's not about keeping yourself out of hell and keeping yourself into Heaven, because if God's mercy is limited by our sin then God can't be omnipotent. If we have the power to control our destiny then God is not all powerful. God is the one that defines our destiny. God is the one who determines where we go and who we are - and God is a merciful God, not a God of judgment. God is a grace-filled God who created us each and every one in God's image. Now we have warped that image sometimes, but that is what grace and mercy are for.

Now, you can find places in the Bible where it talks about judgment and that is fine. Let's have that conversation. But there are just as many places in the Bible that talk about *all* of God's children being forgiven - being filled with grace and mercy. Why are we choosing this damnation path, when we could equally be looking at a Universal Salvation path? And, if there are both and we are struggling to decide which one to pick, then I keep turning back to who God is. If God has the ability to look you in the face and cast you into hell, then God is not all-loving and all-merciful, and therefore could not be the one true God.

Now, God is our loving parent. I have been around some pretty despicable people in my time. I wish I had a dime for everyone who has lied to me when I have gone to the prison to visit them, through my years of ministry. But there has always been a loving parent who cries over them, who forgives them, who wants the best for them, and would give their lives to be in their place, so that their child would not have to go through what they have done and who they have been. Now if a human sinful parent has that kind of love for their child, then why in the world would we think that God would be less loving than that? God is always more loving than any human being could ever want to be. Think of the most-loving, caring person you have ever met; God is infinitely more loving than that. So how could God ever give up on someone and cast them away?

So we have to make a paradigm shift. We have to shift our thinking from a God who is waiting to cast us down, and now view a God who wants and desires us and will lift us up. But, Universal Salvation is not an easy thing. I have had people tell me "You are just one of these lovey, dovey liberal Christian people who just want everybody to love each other and be happy." Well, is that such a bad thing? But I also say to them in response, but not with

quite the same vitriol they were spewing back, “It’s awfully hard to believe in Universal Salvation.”

It is very difficult when you look at the most horrific people in our society and you say they are going to be in Heaven. I don’t like saying that. There is a part of me that wants God to be judgmental. There is a part of me that wants to decide who gets into Heaven and who stays out of Heaven. When you look at the horrible white supremacists and the Nazis and the race haters, and to think they are going to be in the same Heaven as Dr. King, Mahatma Gandhi and my grandmother, I’m not real happy about that. [Laughter.] It is a whole lot easier to cast them into hell, turn your back and forget about them, and get on with my really nice Sunday day.

My Heaven would be a whole lot better, but my Heaven would be empty because every single one of us sins. And every single one of you would disappoint me, and I know I would disappoint you, because we are all sinful and fall short of the glory of God. Not one of us in this room has not hurt and disappointed someone. None of us deserve to be in Heaven. So are we going to put it on a pendulum? What sin is bad enough that you get cast out? What is good enough that you just get in? You work just hard enough to get your paycheck into Heaven, as Carlin would say. I don’t think there is that line. I don’t think God works that way. I hope God doesn’t work that way, or we are all in a heap-load of trouble.

God has a long history of irrational love. Jesus was placed on that cross, and rather than condemning the people who just beat him, who just whipped him, just hung him out there to dry; the last words Jesus says were, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Even in that moment when Jesus had every right to cast them out, Jesus would not do that. He kept on loving them, when they didn’t deserve a lick of it. Jesus said, “I have a New Commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my Disciples, if you have love for one another.” It doesn’t say, “Just love them until they sin badly enough that you can cast them into hell.” It just says love them.

Now Paul was facing the age-old question “Who is my neighbor?” when he wrote this passage of Scripture. And he was dealing with the church in Rome - Emperor Claudius had just reversed the edict that said that Jewish people were kicked out of Rome. But in the years when Jews were kicked out of Rome, the Gentile Christians kept the church in Rome going, and they started feeling like they were the true people of faith. They were the ones God blessed, because they weren’t the ones being ridiculed.

If your political system is picking on the Jewish people, then God must not be blessing them. God blesses those with perfect lives, with a lot of money with opportunities and prosperity. God blesses those people. We have heard that prosperity Gospel before, and now Paul has to fight against it. Paul’s response was to say that “All are worthy of salvation and you Gentile Christians [should] get off your high horse. There is room for the Jewish people whether or not they have called Jesus Christ their Savior. They are acceptable anyway.” And, Paul got his words from the same place that Jesus did: the Old Testament.

Now a lot of churches want to talk about the New Testament replacing the Old Testament, and I say, “No. The New Testament just builds on the richness of the Old. [It does] not

replace it.” That’s why just about every Sunday in this church whether the Old Testament has any relationship to the New Testament, there is an Old Testament and New Testament reading, so that we never forget the Old is part of the New.

And, on this issue of Universal Salvation, the Old Testament agrees with the New: God’s word to Abraham includes the promise: “All peoples of the earth will be blessed through you - all people.” From the very first book Genesis - some of the earliest parts - chapter 12 verse 3, when Abraham was being called by God, says “all of the people, not just the faithful, not just those who believe all people.”

Then you move ahead to the book of Isaiah, chapter 65:1, and God said, *“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.”*

Notice you did not have to write the Salvation prayer; you didn’t have to give your life to Christ. *“...all of those who did not ask for me. I was found by those who did not seek me, to a nation that did not call on my name; I said, ‘Here am I. Here am I.’”*

You move ahead to Jeremiah: *“I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer will a person teach his or her neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me; because from the least of them to the greatest I will forgive their wickedness, and I will remember their sins no more.”* He wasn’t just talking about a few at some point and time. Everyone will know God, and it’s not our responsibility alone to change people’s hearts and lives. Ultimately God will reveal God’s self, and all will know. God doesn’t give up on anyone.

Now these Old Testament examples provided the understanding that motivated Jesus and later Paul on an understanding of Universal Salvation. Let’s turn to the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:22 it says: *“for all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”* All. Paul’s comparison with Jesus and Adam is so important because where all die with Adam, all will be saved with Christ. Those who would deny that all is every single person in terms of Salvation, would have to also argue all would be taken from Adam. That means that all do not sin.

We all sin. We are all in need of Christ and we are not good enough. We are too sinful to have control over our own Salvation. (If any of us can say that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, is by the very hand of God - speaking to your heart - and how blessed are we - that we know that already.) But I believe that one day everyone will know that. You say that’s not fair. How come somebody can live their entire life being just a jerk, deny God, hate other people, and get into Heaven?

I still feel - as universal as I am – [I still] believe in a judgment day; but that judgment day doesn’t kick people into hell. That judgment day is the day when you look back on your life. And for some it will be, “Oh, my gosh, I just wasted my entire life denying the God who loves me so much that no matter what I did, in this awful waste that I called a life, that God is going to love me anyway.”

The judgment is going to be in the despair of the time that was wasted in their time here; not the judgment of being cast out, but a judgment that means: “Look what you’ve done, and I’m going to carry you in anyway.” Think about how awful it would be to know you

have lived your life so poorly - and how grateful you would be (or will be) on the day that Christ carries you home.

Now, some might say if we are all going to Heaven then why bother to even evangelize? Well, my argument is we don't evangelize just to save somebody from hell and damnation. We evangelize so that other people can see the glory that Salvation is already taking place in our world. Salvation isn't something that happens after you die, Salvation is something that is happening to us right now, and it is joyous. We are living like we are never going to die for eternity. How sad it is for those people who think at the end of this life that they are going to be dust in a jar, buried in the ground or sprinkled in the water. They need to know and experience that utter grace, mercy and joy of knowing it [life] doesn't end there.

That is our job. And, beyond that, we owe God something, for the grace and mercy that God gives us. So, we have an obligation to get on our knees and say, "Thank you." You come to Church not just for what you receive, whether the sermon today is any good or just reeks to high heaven - [that] doesn't matter. [Maybe] you heard a great song. But even more important than that, whether you got something out of today or not, you honored God by being here; God is praised, God feels blessed because you came here - on the last day of the Iowa State Fair [laughter] - and, God says, "Thank you." That is what you did today. That is why we evangelize. So that all people may come and imagine how filled with joy God would be if every single person were in church this morning. That is why we evangelize! God's grace and mercy is not limited. We evangelize Universal Salvation so that all might know that they are worthy.

Most people that I know who have done the most despicable things have had despicable things done to them; so it is not fair to judge everyone by the same ruler. We all have hurt each other, and those who have hurt the most, have been hurt by others the most, almost always. They just need more grace and love - and God always has enough.

So I say, we should all memorize Romans 8:35 and [verses] following, because it is the answer to any question: *Who will separate us from the love of God? Will hardship, distress, persecution or famine, nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life...nor powers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Nothing will separate us - not our own sin, not the wrong church, not the wrong religion, not the wrong upbringing. *Nothing* will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is the final answer and it is biblical. So we need to stop worrying about who is in and who is out, and we need to start worrying about how we respect, love and give mercy and grace to others the way God has given it to us. That is our call, and may we be faithful through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.