

Matthew 4:1-4; 12:25-30;  
Acts 26:16-18; John 8:44;  
I Peter 5:8

## THE POWER OF POSITIVE DENIAL

You know you're getting old when you go to the movies and it seems like "Previews of Coming Attractions" should be renamed "Previews of Coming Repulsions." Some of you know that I love movies, but I find that I love fewer and fewer of them more and more, and more and more of them less and less. I had a college professor who claimed that there are only seven stories in the world. All the rest are just variations on one of those seven storylines. At the time I thought he was just being grumpy. Even though I agree with him more and more (though I still think there are ten), it seems to me like many of today's movies cannot even make it into one of the seven. And my own private opinion is that no amount of visual effects can make up for the lack of a good story.

Beyond the stories this professor knew about, there is the story of how one day God came to visit us in person – in the flesh – to see if he could make it clearer for us what was really going on here: why it was so hard, and where and how we could get real help if we really wanted it. While at first we might assume that this would be a very welcome event – that we would appreciate and rejoice in it – the whole affair went really sideways in a hurry. No surprise to God, since this animosity was an integral part of the problem in the first place. So our final, overwhelming response was to crucify Jesus, the Lord of Glory. "We don't want your help, dear God, and we particularly don't appreciate your trying to tell us that we are doing life wrong, or that our only hope is to make a radical change – so radical in fact that it's called 'conversion.' And most especially we don't want to turn our lives over to you, or come with you and start living your way instead of our own."

So then God, who is not into coercion like most people assume, raised Jesus from the dead. Now, this was not to impress or control anybody who had rejected Jesus. That was not the purpose – not then; not now. It was to allow and invite anybody – who still wanted to follow Jesus – to come with Him and live for Him, despite the world's anger and rejection. In other words, God opened for us this incredible New Way, but left it up to us to choose or reject it.

By the way, there is no punishment for rejecting this New Way – except that you do not get to live in it. The "Fires of Hell" and the "Second Coming" thing were honest but tragic misunderstandings. (Unless you

translate them to “true remorse” and “meeting Jesus in the next realm when you die.”) For those of you who care, I have tracked this in study groups and classes where there is time to go over the information and evidence. But I don’t have to convince or persuade anybody. Time itself makes it clearer and clearer. There is no way to get off the hook or to duck the issues. We do not get to skip boot camp. God is not “closing it down” here – and Heaven is an entirely different realm, not a reconstituted earth. Instead of the Second Coming, we get the church – and the mandate to live the New WAY in the here and now ... *starting* now. Naturally we don’t like that conclusion nearly as well as the one we made up – the one where God beats the hell out of all our enemies and tells us we’re the good guys, then whisks us off to Disneyland In The Sky without our having to deal very much with all the real issues of love, repentance, transformation, and character-building.

We like the push-button version of salvation a whole lot better. Who can blame us? Satan is always a shortcut artist. Only, just because we like fast food does not make it good for us. Just because we want instant salvation with a nice beat and a fast prayer does not make it true. So no matter how many novels they write, we are still here. We either turn our wills and our lives over to Jesus, or we do not. God works with us according to whatever our choices will allow. If our choices do not let him in far enough to allow him to help us very much, he waits. But God does not have to punish us. We have that part covered. We do that to ourselves, and we do it to each other. And if I understand Jesus at all, God does not like that part, not one little bit.

In any case, as I keep telling you, the New Testament does not support the “modern” construct that life is pretty good here – neutral at worst – and that if we live a good life we go to Heaven, and if we live a bad life we go to Hell. That is a recent fairy tale which vast throngs of people now assume is essentially true, whether biblical or not. Seeing themselves in this relatively pleasant – or at worst, neutral – territory, most people assume that they have quite a bit of leeway. They haven’t done anything terribly wrong. At moments they may pray for forgiveness for their errors and mistakes, but pretty much they figure they can go on doing their own thing their own way, because they haven’t done anything bad enough to get thrown into the fiery pit. The church constantly tells them that God loves them, so it is only logical that in all likelihood they will pretty much automatically make it into Heaven when they die. Especially if God grades on a curve.

If you read the New Testament, you get a very different picture. This realm – this world – is separated from God. We are not in neutral territory – we are in bondage. Satan and Satan’s principles rule here. That is what “separation from God” means. (SIN, in biblical language.) We live in bondage, and the bondage will continue unless something or someONE frees us – releases us from bondage – and sets our lives on a New Path. Jesus came to free us – to save us from this bondage. And that is not just about “after”; it is not about *only* later, though the Life He offers and invites us into does continue.

Jesus never ever talks about “If you are good, at the end of your life here I will save you.” Jesus never implies in any way that He will help or save us later. The bondage is now, and the release from bondage that Jesus offers is now. But it is release into a New WAY; it is not about keeping your nose clean and you’ll get rewarded at the end. You must be born anew – a whole New WAY of Life. His WAY – the Life He offers – is release from life as you know it and experience it here. The reward is the New Life itself. It is not geisha girls (or boys, as the case may be) for later. It is not wealth or fame. *“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life.’”* (Luke 18:29-30) If we enter a New Life, live in a different WAY, start living to please and obey the Holy Spirit of Jesus instead of ourselves, will we not notice the difference immediately? At every fork in the road, we try to go where we think Jesus wants us to go, instead of the way we think would most please our own desires or our own intelligence. Will that not very quickly put us in a very different place?!

If sacrifices must be made to enter the New Life, when are they to be made? When we die? And when does the reward of living this New Life begin? When we die? Dear friends, the bondage is *now*. The release Jesus offers us is *now*. The New Life is ours whenever we will choose it. If you wait until you die, you might just as well never have come here. I am not suggesting that Jesus will not find some other way to get to you. But if that’s the way you call it, He surely did not get to you here. He did not reach you – He did not get to walk with you here.

*The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Norman Vincent Peale, is one of the most successful self-help books ever written. For every person I have tried to help, Peale has helped thousands, maybe tens of thousands. Because of the sermon title, I thought this should be mentioned. Peale’s name is no longer a household word, nor is his book in most everyone’s

home, as it surely was when I was young. His legacy continues however, most obviously in our area at the Crystal Cathedral (recently sold to Catholics). Dr. Robert Schuller and many others carry on Peale's tradition. Though there may be new "visual effects," the plot has not changed all that much.

I have some animosity toward some brands of Christianity that subvert the Gospel and reverse the Message of Jesus (as I understand it, of course). I do not have a lot of animosity toward Peale or Schuller. They do not understand or present Christianity in the way I try to, but not a lot of people do. And you could do worse. In its heyday, the Crystal Cathedral claimed over ten thousand members; we claim just over two hundred. If you have any respect for the American wisdom of success – end of story. On the lists of highly successful evangelists, Schuller is often the last one mentioned, in terms of income and adherents. But I think he is the best of the bunch.

Some pastors have animosity toward mega-churches out of jealousy or because some people are always badgering them to emulate these success stories. Not that it matters, but I have had very little pressure of this kind from Schuller's ministry, except up in Washington. One friend was always sad that I would not pay more attention to Schuller and pattern my ministry after his methods and approaches. Every time Schuller came out with a new book, I got a free copy. (Schuller has written a lot of books – over thirty at my last count.) Well, from my perspective, the Crystal Cathedral offered a fairly high quality of "humanism" dressed up in Christian clothing and language. It seems perfectly logical to me that this would be far more appealing to American culture and attitudes than anything I would identify as essentially Christian. "Hour of Power," "Houses of Power," and being positive and confident and optimistic are certainly more appealing than humility, repentance, talking about a broken world, surrender, and turning will and life over to the Holy Spirit.

By the way, the Crystal Cathedral folk talked a lot about prayer. There is power in prayer, and God (or Jesus) will help you: help you get out of loneliness; help you get out of depression. But I always hear a subtle note that God helps those who help themselves; that we are not going to live *God's* way, but God is going to help us live *our* way. I think the Holy Spirit helps us when we scrap the old life, give up on this world as we know it, and let the Holy Spirit guide and direct our lives down to any and every level that comes into focus. If you really want to know, I think the Crystal Cathedral way of thinking represents a Christianized form of Stoicism. I also happen to think that Stoicism is the highest

religion to come out of Greek culture and history. Zeno had a huge impact on Greece and an even greater impact on Roman culture, but he probably had far more influence on Christianity itself than we have ever fully acknowledged. Just trying to be fair. And despite all rumors to the contrary, I do not expect everybody to agree with me.

But never mind all that. I suspect we never give Jesus a real chance in our lives – or *with* our lives – until after we recognize and admit the bondage we are under. Saviors are needed when we need saving. And as long as we think the bondage is small or is something we can handle ourselves, we do not need a Savior. Maybe in our culture Jesus is still honored to some degree – as a good example, a good teacher, a good friend, maybe even a source of wisdom and inspiration. But that is a far cry from choosing Jesus as my Savior! And so The Power of Positive Denial is the power that Satan uses to keep us under bondage. The Power of Positive Denial is the insistence that we are not in any serious trouble: It may be tough, but we can handle it. Maybe we haven't tried our best to handle it yet, but when we get around to it, we can take care of these problems that plague us. A little more focus, a little more concentration. We can do anything we really set our minds to. Isn't that right? Isn't that what we have been taught? Yes, well, that is a massive denial of Satan's bondage.

I can stop drinking whenever I decide to. I can stop smoking whenever I decide I really want to. I can stop whoring, or being greedy, or being anxious or fearful or angry – whenever I decide to really put my mind to it. And I can start loving my neighbor or start being wise, patient, humble, and relaxed – whenever I really put my mind to it. I can be a better Mom or a better Dad or a better friend ... you just wait and see. I will *show* you. I will prove it to you (for at least two or three days). I have every confidence that life can be better. Meanwhile, *you* need to be less judgmental. You need to check your expectations, and be a little more grateful for the good things and overlook some of the minor stuff.

The vast majority of mainline Christians in our time do not connect any of these issues with Satan. Satan is perhaps a symbol of evil but is not connected with any of our familiar or normal patterns or problems. Satan is not about our addictions, our bad habits, our flawed attitudes, all the things that make us less than we want to be, or all the ways in which our homes, our lives, our careers, and even our recreation get cut to shreds.

In short, we deny the bondage. *Ipsa facto*, we do not need a Savior. Separated from God? I don't see any signs of my having any alienation from God. Actually, I've been able to pay all my bills lately, and the weather has been really lovely. Of course, I wouldn't mind if God made the elections come out the way I think they're supposed to, but I don't see any reason to talk about sin or evil ... unless you want to talk about some of those other folk in places and religions that really *do* have evil intentions.

It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you. Our pace is pleasant, our fear is small, our relationships are healthy and unstrained. We spend our time doing things we love, and we know how to help others into good, satisfying, and productive lives. Isn't that nice? Who needs a Savior?!

I was talking to an acquaintance the other day and we got into a discussion about Martin Luther. This person informed me that Luther was mentally unbalanced, that he fought depression all his life, and that he and the entire culture he lived in were fixated on Satan and frightened about going to Hell. Thus he wrote Luther off as having nothing to do with us, and as being mostly a victim of religious aberrations.

It was interesting to me that this person did not seem to know anything about Luther having one of the best marriages in recorded history, or that he was a great musician, or that he had a marvelous sense of humor. He did not seem to know that countless students would drop everything to come eat or chat with Luther, or that common peasants would show up in droves and stand for hours in freezing churches to listen to him preach. He did not realize that the Bible was never available to anybody who was not a priest or a scholar – not ever – until Luther came along. Luther's life and writings changed the face of Europe and inspired a Reformation that opened prayer, singing, Scripture, and worship to Christians everywhere – even reforming the Catholic church, in many ways.

That's not bad ... for a depressed, mentally unbalanced, fixated person. Isn't it a shame that more of us cannot be so depressed, mentally unbalanced, and fixated on Jesus? For indeed, while Luther wrestled constantly with Satan, he was fixated on Jesus. He did not shy away from the conditions and horrors of life in his time, and this made him incredibly sad at times. His world was not just falling apart, it was falling down around his ears! Only, Luther was not into denial. He did not try to pretend that being optimistic – or just trying to think positively –

would solve everything. But he also got up from his sadness often enough, and spent time and energy enough, to write hymns, translate the entire Bible into German, write sermons and Bible commentaries, teach classes – and guide countless thousands into a new hope and light. Few humans have been more productive than Luther was with the time he was given. How could Luther do all that, when he was so depressed and mentally unbalanced?

Luther was not in denial. He looked at life like it really was. He did not try to pretend that Satan was a fiction or a pushover, or that he could handle it all by himself. Luther did amazing things *because* he also knew a Savior. When Satan had done his worst, his worst was not good enough to stop Luther – because Luther knew Jesus was even stronger than Satan. You can hear it all over his hymns, sermons, commentaries, and recorded conversations:

Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing,  
Were not the right man on our side,  
The man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is he!...

And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure:  
One little word shall fell him....

The Spirit and the gifts are ours  
Through him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go,  
This mortal life also;  
The body they may kill;  
God's truth abideth still,  
His kingdom is forever.  
[For thine is the kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory, forever ...]

("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God")

Dear God, please let *me* be that depressed and unbalanced.

Are you in denial? Do you think it is really pretty here and that our problems are few, and that mostly it's other people who wrestle with evil and disintegration and falsehood? Do you think Satan is a figment of medieval imagination? Do you think community is a good idea and you like some of the people here, but you can take Jesus or leave Him alone? Do you think you do not really need a Savior?

I do not think most of you are as ignorant or thoughtless as this "friend" of mine who does not like Luther. But it gives me an opportunity to mention something, in case you have not put it together before. Up until the phenomenon of the liberal church in the twentieth century, Satan and Satan's bondage – including all of Satan's ploys, human agents, lies, temptations, and accusations – had been very real to Christians.

Up until then, the relationship between Jesus and the individual Christian was personal, powerful, and specific. Prayer was the core of the Christian Life. Each individual's personal response back to Jesus' love and presence was the very essence of the Christian Life. And a *huge* part of the gratitude and thankfulness and response was *because* Jesus was freeing and releasing them from Satan and his bondage. For years they had found no release and, try as they might, they could find no way out from under the control of Satan and his wiles. Finally – at last – they had found a champion who was stronger than Satan. Finally – at last – they could live a Life out from under Satan's rule. The warfare was not over and the wrestling with Satan was not at an end, but Satan could not win anymore – not if they stayed close to Jesus and constantly called on Him for help.

Some people imagine that Jesus is called "Savior" because He will "save us" – that is, when we die He will take us to Heaven. I can see how people might think so – if they have never actually *tried* the Christian Life, and only think of it as a historical or cultural curiosity to be viewed from an objective and detached point of view. But people who are themselves Christians call Jesus "Savior" because He saves them from Satan, releases them from bondage, and calls them into a different Life *here and now*. They do not have a very active gratitude for what might be coming in the distant future. Not that the promise of Heaven is a matter of indifference, but their real gratitude is huge and active and very, very current – because of all the ways in which Jesus is protecting, freeing, and releasing them from Satan's bondage ... here and now.

## THE POWER OF POSITIVE DENIAL

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The Power of Positive Denial leaves us in a realm of pretend love, pretend happiness, pretend confidence, pretend freedom. It really sucks. If we do not want to be puppets on Satan's strings, we need a Savior. And joy of joys, God sent us one.