

What's the Catch?
February 20, 2011
John 13:1-30
Peter Hiatt

Offertory

["Saved" by Bob Dylan]

Introduction

We're saved because Jesus the Christ entered enemy territory and sacrificed His life that we might live. Maybe you remember this scene at the end of *Saving Private Ryan*. Tom Hanks plays Captain John Miller, who has entered enemy territory to save the life of Private James Ryan, played by Matt Damon. Symbolically, John Miller lies dying on a bridge where he has sacrificed his life to save Private Ryan. These are his last words:

[Movie Clip – *Saving Private Ryan*]:

Private Ryan: *What, sir?*

Captain Miller: *James, earn this. Earn it.*

"Earn this." We're here this morning because Jesus Christ sacrificed His life for us, forming a bridge from bondage to freedom. Yet Jesus didn't just die a physical death. Jesus "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" Jesus was hanged on a tree in our place. And we are washed clean in His blood, which saves us from the wrath to come, from death by fire. Now we gather to observe a representation of that sacrifice: the tree, a cross, His body broken and blood shed, a constant reminder of the One who sacrificed His life for us.

It reminds me of an interview I recently watched on the news:

[Onion News Clip]

Newscaster: *Last week Carmine, Washington lost a true hero when firefighter Sam Kelty was tragically killed in the line of duty saving the life of Melanie Wilkerson. On the Onion News Network's "Today Now," this morning Jim and Tracy interview Melanie for the first time about her dramatic rescue.*

Melanie: *I'm so thankful to Mr. Kelty for saving me.*

Jim: *Oh, he made such a sacrifice, didn't he? Now obviously a lot of people are hearing this incredible story and wondering, Was it worth it? Will Melanie now become as great a person as Sam Kelty was, or would it have been better if she had died in the fire?*

Melanie: *Oh, um...*

Tracy: *Now Melanie, nothing you've done in your 15 years of life will justify the death of Sam Kelty. What are you prepared to do to show that his death was worth it?*

Melanie: *Um...*

Jim: *Will you maybe want to be a hero, Melanie, or maybe join the fire department and carry on Sam's work?*

Melanie: *I really haven't been thinking about it.*

Jim: *Hmm. You haven't thought about it.*

Melanie: *The doctors said I should focus on getting better.*

Tracy: *Have you ever saved a life, Melanie?*

Melanie: *No.*

Tracy: *Oh...because some would say if you don't save at least one other life at some point, it's a net loss.*

Jim: *Where do you plan to be in five years? What are your goals?*

Melanie: *I want to go to college.*

Jim: *Hmm. How will your going to college help fill the void left in the lives of Sam's widow and his children, who are now going to grow up without a father because of you?*

Melanie: *I, I don't know. My mom said there must be a reason my God wants me on this earth.*

Jim: *Oh, so it's up to you to figure out what God wants you to do, or you'll be letting down God himself. Well, Melanie, of course we can't know yet whether or not your life will measure up to the tragic loss of Sam's, but what we do know is that "Today Now" has commissioned the building of a 20-foot, bronze statue of Sam to be put on your front lawn as a constant reminder of the man who gave his life to save yours.*

Tracy: *You're welcome.*

I love that: "How can you justify Sam's death?" You hear what they are saying: "Earn this."

Is that what the Christian life is all about? Is that what this constant reminder is all about? Do we have to justify the death of Jesus? Is Jesus Christ and Him crucified God's way of enslaving us to shame—like the proverbial Jewish mother, so your whole life is spent writing thank you notes to relatives you don't love? Did Jesus die to enslave us to shame, or set us free from shame?

You're saved by grace...but what's the catch?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would help us to understand or at least see what you have done. We pray that you would help us to preach gospel—good news. In Jesus' name, amen.

Message

You're saved by grace. Salvation is free. You hear it all the time, but don't you wonder, "What's the catch?" Everything has a catch. A couple weeks ago, Susan and I and some friends received a free dinner at Maggiano's. Free, free, free. We just had to listen to a long presentation on fire safety that filled us with fear and shame—shame if we didn't buy a bunch of \$700 smoke alarms that would save our loved ones from fire. Don't we love them? And besides, we just got a free dinner. Everything has a catch.

- In Islam, you get 72 virgins, but there's a catch: martyrdom and sharia in service of Allah.
- In Judaism, you enter the land, but there's a catch: You must fulfill the law, which is stricter than even sharia.
- In Hinduism and Buddhism, you reach nirvana, but you must sit in a cave or appease 10,000 gods. I'm oversimplifying, but you get my drift.

What's the catch? What's the catch in Christianity? Shame? Guilt? Good deeds? Making good choices? Is faith the catch? Trying to have faith? What's the catch? Christian TV? There must be a catch. We say, "You're saved by grace; it's free, free, free," yet on resurrection Sunday, one guy is missing. Judas is missing. Why? There must be a catch.

John 13 is the last supper, the night before Jesus dies.

John 13:1:

Now before [or just before] the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Literally, "He loved them into *Telos*." Some translate it, "He loved them to the utmost." How does God love us?

An old, Dutch priest used to tell about the day, as a child, when he overheard his father talking to a neighbor in the kitchen. The neighbor said, "Joe, you've got 13 children. Which is your favorite? Which do you love most?" As a boy with his ear pressed to the door, the priest heard his father answer:

Oh, that's easy. It's Mary, my 12-year-old. She just got braces, and she feels so awkward she won't leave the house. But the one I love most is Michael. He's uncoordinated and terrible at sports. So the other kids tease him. He feels so ashamed. But the apple of my eye is Susan. She's 24, living in her own apartment. She's developing a drinking problem. I cry for Susan. But I guess of all my kids....

The old priest said his father went on to mention each of his children by name. The priest said, "I learned that the one my father loved most was the one who needed him most at the time."

Well, I don't know that we can quantify God's love like that, but Jesus does leave the 99 in the wilderness to search for the one that is perished, that is lost. And I know how I feel about my own kids.

I remember a day about 18 years ago. I was at a lovely, backyard, dinner party in Northern California. I was dressed up, socializing and enjoying drinks and hors d'oeuvres, when I heard something and happened to glance at the pool. All at once, all my desires, all my thoughts, all my energy, all my love was focused in one direction. For at the bottom of the pool, in the deep end under the water, was my two-year-daughter Elizabeth. Without a hesitation, without thought, I dove into that pool. For at that moment, it was impossible for me to enjoy the banquet or remain at the party. Everything in me wanted to be at the bottom of that pool with Elizabeth.

And please understand: It was her fault. I had lectured her, warned her, and laid down the law. She chose it. But none of that mattered now. I would give everything to save her. So in 15 seconds, I was drenched but holding my daughter to my chest, praising God for her breath through shaking, sobbing, tears, and snot. At that moment, I loved her most, and saving her was my favorite thing.

One day, when my son Coleman was little, his Sunday School teacher asked each child to share their mom's favorite thing. (I think it was Mother's Day.) And Coleman said, "My mom's favorite thing is cleaning me up." According to John (in Revelation 7:14, 22:14), we are washed in the blood of the lamb. It's how Jesus cleans us up.

In the 14th century, in her famous vision, Julian of Norwich heard Jesus say, "To have ever suffered the passion for you is for me a great joy, a bliss, an endless delight; and if I could suffer more, I would do so."

Maybe He loves to love.

Suffering hurts, grace is costly.

Diving into swimming pools at nice parties gets you wet.

But maybe cleaning us up, saving us, is for Jesus an endless delight.

"He loved them to the utmost." He loved them into perfection, into *Telos*. And on the cross, He cried, "*Tetelestai!* It is *Telos!*" It is perfected, finished, completed. *Complete*. That would mean there's nothing left to earn. All that's left to earn is *nothing*.

So what's the catch?

John 13:2-3:

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands...

Remember in John 6:37, Jesus says, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out."

John 13:3-5:

...and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

In that day, people would bathe before a feast, but their feet would get dirty on the way to the feast. At a formal feast, guests would recline on their left elbow with their feet stretched out behind them. It was usually the job of a Gentile slave to wash the guests' feet. Luke records that the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest, and now Jesus becomes a slave.

John 13:6-12:

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?"

Do you understand?

Knowing all things are His, He takes off His robe and takes the form of a slave, washing their feet. In the morning, He'll be stripped of His robe and crucified as a slave, washing away the sins of the world with His blood.

When we're baptized, we profess that cleansing. When we celebrate communion, we constantly remember that cleansing. John says Jesus did this during the last supper. John already revealed that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood. And now he's revealing what it means. But it's not just some theological concept. When we see it, it will change every moment of our lives. It's a revelation of love; it's grace.

But there's a catch.

John 13:13-14:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Like Jesus washed their feet.

Like Mary washed Jesus' feet with perfume in the last chapter.

Like the prostitute washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair.

Like that, and none of them did that out of shame or obligation or fear.

Those women weren't earning anything, and it was not required of them. So being required to wash people's feet is *not* the catch. Yet do you remember how offended everyone got? So there must have been a catch.

John 13:15-18:

For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant [literally a slave; slaves don't own anything so slaves can't earn anything] is not greater than his master, nor is a

messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen.

Jesus chose all the disciples. Every gospel makes that clear, yet one of them is not clean. His feet have been washed, but he is not clean. In a little while, Jesus will say to the eleven, "You are clean because of the Word I have spoken to you." But in this one, it appears that the Word (the eternal seed) had not yet found a place in him. Maybe he was full...of himself.

John 13:18-21:

But the Scripture will be fulfilled. "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me [Paradidomai]."

Paul reveals that actually we all betray Him...every time we sin. And what is sin? Well, it's like taking the good from a tree as if it were your own. Remember what the snake said: "Take and make yourself in God's image." In other words, "Judge yourself, save yourself, create yourself, justify yourself according to the law in the power of your flesh." That is, "Earn it," your own self, and be proud.

John 13:22-25:

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, who Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?"

Isn't that amazing? They didn't know. This person didn't look like Adolf Hitler or Hugh Hefner. This person looked just like everyone else. So John, lying on Jesus' right, would have leaned back and asked, "Lord, who is it?"

John 13:26:

Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.

Judas appears to have been on Jesus' left. And it was customary to place the honored guest on the left of the host. It was customary for the host to honor him with a choice morsel. Do you get the picture? Judas was at the last supper. And Jesus washed his feet just like He washed everyone else's feet. And Jesus served him communion, the body and blood, just like he served everybody else (Luke 22:21). And Jesus even gave him the choice morsel. And I'm sure He didn't say, "Earn it," for He knew Judas couldn't.

It is astounding, amazing, limitless love with no catch, and yet it's like judgment. What a catch! Remember Paul taught that the Lord's table is judgment. Well, Judas takes the bread and despises the bread.

John 13:27-30:

Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

- Judas leaves to betray Jesus.
- Next Peter vows to never deny Jesus.
- Before the night is over, all the disciples abandon Jesus.

Why does Jesus love them?—traitors with stinky feet? Which one do you love the most, Jesus?

Oh, that would have to be John, Son of Thunder. What a temper!
Actually, it would be Peter. He's as stable as a bowl of Jell-O.
But most? Well, it would have to be Judas...

You think? When Judas comes to Gethsemane with soldiers, remember what Jesus calls him? "Friend." "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend." It's like the love of God in Christ Jesus has absolutely nothing to do with the merit of the person that He's loving. If anything, their lack of merit just seems to draw love out of Him...like He bleeds love.

So... if He loves you most, what's the catch?
if He seats you in the place of honor, what's the catch?
if He reveals the depths of His love for you, poured out, like a crimson fountain flowing from His throne—His tree, what's the catch?
if He washes you in His life's blood, what's the catch?

That night Peter understood the catch. And when the rooster crowed, he really understood and came undone. Remember what Peter said when Jesus came to wash his feet? "You'll never wash my feet." How many of you have been to one of those foot-washing services where you knew that your feet would be washed? And how many of you washed your feet before you went? If so, it wasn't a foot-washing service but just the opposite. It was a foot-displaying service, an exhibition of pride—proud feet. How many of you have ever been to communion, and how many tried to wash yourself before you came to the communion table? If so, perhaps you didn't discern His body and blood. Perhaps you spurned His body and blood, trying to earn His body and blood. Perhaps you drank judgment on yourself.

Do you think you can earn this?

Well, to have his feet washed, Peter had to admit they were dirty. But it wasn't just that, it was that Jesus did the washing. The King of Glory became a slave and washed Peter's feet. That's an insult to Peter's entire view of reality. So it's not just Peter's feet that are dirty; Peter's heart, mind, and soul are dirty or have been dirty. So he cries, "You shall never wash my feet!" And

Jesus says, “Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.” Then what does Peter do? He invents religion. He says, “Then not just my feet, but my head and hands too!” In other words:

If humility is the name of the game, I'll do it best! I'll pay for my foot-washing with great repentance. I'll earn it with shame, guilt, and self-loathing. I'll be your prisoner of shame, and to you I vow my obedience.

The next thing Peter vows is that he will never deny Jesus. And in a few hours, Peter denies Jesus three times. The cock crows, Jesus looks at Peter, and Peter comes undone.

Jesus said, “Later you will understand what I am doing.” As the cock crowed and Jesus glanced at Peter with eyes that still washed him with grace, I think Peter realized that Jesus loved him and washed him when he was at his worst. So he did not earn it. He could never earn it. Peter saw grace, and it killed him. It killed the Peter that Peter had made. He was undone. And scriptures says, “He wept bitterly”—sobbing, shaking, tears, and snot.

When Elizabeth was in grade school, she got mad at Susan and me. She lied to us and with her friend next door ran away. When I learned she had disobeyed, I was angry. When I realized she was gone, I was distraught. Fortunately, they only made it a few miles and had already turned around when the sheriff picked them up on Highway 285. After he dropped the prodigals off and asked some questions, I took Elizabeth inside. She was acting tough. She had wanted to go to her own place—away from me. Now she figured she'd be grounded for life. But for me, none of that mattered. I just picked her up and held her to my chest, just like that day beside the pool ten years before.

So at her moment of deepest failure, my love was most intense. It burned her pride, and all at once she cracked: sobbing, shaking, tears, and snot. It looked like she was dying as she sobbed, “I love you, Daddy. I don't ever want to do that again.”

Well, Peter saw grace, and it killed him.

- It killed the Peter that believed he could earn anything.
- It killed the Peter that thought he could justify himself.
- It killed the Peter that Peter had build—his own place—his prison of pride, fear, and shame.
- It killed him and set him free.

And that's the catch: Salvation is free, grace is free, and we don't want to be free.

We want to pay. We want to earn it. And with every fiber of our flesh, we believe we must earn it. The evil lie has become imbedded in the very fabric of our world and in every cell of our body. We talk about grace, yet every time we compete, every time we're resentful, every time we're offended, every time we're anxious, every time we defend ourselves, every time we judge ourselves and judge others, with every bit of energy given to justify ourselves, we reveal this fact: We do not believe that we're created by grace or saved by grace. And thus we deliver grace up for crucifixion.

God is grace. The Good is grace. It's impossible to do the good if you think the good is something you can do. “No one is good, but God alone,” said Jesus. God is the Good. So if you think you make the good, you take the Good and crucify the Good on the tree. It's impossible to

be saved by grace through faith if you believe you are responsible for making that faith. For then, you have earned that grace. It's impossible to earn grace, for then it's not grace by definition. Grace is free, and that's the catch.

The catch is that there is no catch.

The judgment is mercy. "Salvation by grace," and what's the catch? Salvation by grace. You cannot earn salvation, or it's not salvation. Yet the lie that you can earn salvation is profoundly seductive. It is what drives this fallen world and what this world calls "good."

[Movie clip – *Saving Private Ryan*]:

[The camera focuses on Private Ryan's face as it changes into an old man. He kneels before a cross gravestone.]

Ryan: Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I've earned what all of you have done for me.

Ryan to a woman: Tell me I'm a good man.

To kneel in front of a cross and say, "Tell me I've earned it," is the very heart of old Judas. Are you offended? Well, that's the catch—the offense of this world—the scandal called grace.

Do you realize that on that night, except for their names, you really couldn't tell St. Peter and Judas apart?

- They were both thoroughly loved by Jesus.
- They were both led astray by Satan himself (Luke 22:31, Matt. 16:23).
- They were both offended by grace.

Both sinned, and if it weren't for the fact that you know the rest of the story, I bet you'd consider Judas the better of the two, for he was more responsible. When Judas sees that Jesus is condemned to die, he takes the money back to the temple and repents, telling the priests, "I've sinned in betraying innocent blood." But the priests say, "That's your responsibility." And Judas believed them. He threw the money into the temple and went and hanged himself on a tree in the potter's field. In the Valley of Gehenna he tried to pay. He earned his own way; he earned nothing; he earned darkness, death, and the void. Acts 1:25 says he went to his "own place," the place he owned.

Peter and Judas were so much alike yet as different as heaven and hell.

One had faith in grace, and one did not.

One died to himself, and one killed himself with himself.

One trusted Christ to bear his curse on the tree, and one trusted himself to bear his curse on the tree.

One learned he couldn't justify himself, and one tried.

Peter let Jesus wash away his pride, and Judas did not.

Some folks say that's the end of Judas. I doubt that, for Jesus chose Judas, and Jesus loved him to the end. Jesus *is* the End, and Hades comes to an end in Him. With the blood money—money purchased with Jesus' blood—the priests bought the potter's field in the Valley of Gehenna. And in the New Jerusalem it lies within the city walls (Jer. 31:40). I suspect that Jesus seeks and saves the lost until there are no more lost, for He cannot enjoy the party while His loved ones drown in the deep.

I'm just saying I don't think Jesus was done with Judas. But, no matter what, I'm sure of this: You can't come to the party unless Jesus washes you.

Nine years ago, I preached a sermon on grace, and we had communion. At the end of the service, Sheila Corley came and got me. She said, "Peter, something's really wrong with Jason. He's so shaken up...I don't know what it is." Jason was her husband, one of our interns, a mild-mannered and level-headed sort of guy. I walked over to where Jason was sitting, and sure enough, he was doubled over, shaking, weeping, sobbing, with snot all over. I thought, "Oh, great, what now?" But I said, "Jason, can I pray for you?" He moaned, "Oh man...yeah." I said, "Well, what's wrong?" Through his sobs he told me:

Oh, Peter, I was just sitting here at the end of the service, and I looked up at the cross and saw Jesus there, and then He got down off the cross, walked over to my seat, knelt down in front of me, and started washing my feet. He washed my feet, and then He wrapped His arms around me and hugged me.

Then Jason just looked up at me and bellowed, "I don't deserve that!" You see, it was the judgment of grace. Peter surrendered to it; Judas ran from it. Jason looked up at me and bellowed in beautiful agony, "I don't deserve that! And now I don't know what to do!"

I looked at him a moment, laughed, and said, "What do you *want* to do?" I wasn't trying to be a smart aleck; I just knew that whatever Jason wanted to do at that moment, it would be good, for he'd want to do it with a clean heart.

Just imagine what's true. With every attempt to justify yourself, you crucify grace. You sin. And now you see Him, kneeling before you with bright eyes and crimson wounds. He has a basin and towel. Don't vow anything; don't promise anything; don't try to earn anything. Just let Him wash you.

Communion

As St. Paul writes, "I took from the Lord what I also delivered up to you, that on the night He was delivered up, He took bread, and having given thanks, broke it saying, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And in the same way after supper, He took the cup saying, 'This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

Later that very day, as Jesus hung on the tree forming a bridge with his dying breath, He did not say, "Earn this." He said:

"Father, forgive them."

"It is finished."

"Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Benediction

I think it was St. Augustine and also Martin Luther (and a whole bunch of others) who said this: “Love God and do what you want to.” You see, if you love God, you fulfill the entire law. So if you look around and realize, “Gosh, I’m not fulfilling the law,” well, you don’t love God. But don’t panic! He loved you. You don’t love Him very much, and so what do you do at that point? Do you try and try and try to earn it? Well, with everything you try to earn, you see, you’re stealing glory from God, your very creator. No, you can’t earn that. So what do you do? You let Him wash you. You cannot earn a new heart. He gives you a new heart as He washes you, and He will finish what He started, because He loves you to the end. He loves you to perfection. He’s good. So in Jesus’ name, believe the gospel and live free. Amen.

Footnotes

1. Some argue that John places the Last Supper on the night before Passover (such that the supper is on Wednesday night, or Passover is on Saturday), such that Jesus is crucified as the Passover lambs are slaughtered. Whatever the case may be, all Scripture depicts Jesus as our Passover Lamb.
2. Jesus became a slave; He chose to “own nothing” and “earn nothing.” It was the Father who “purchased” our redemption with the blood of Christ and then gives us to Christ as a “glorious inheritance” (Phil. 2:5-11, Eph. 1:18).

Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.