

**“BRAND BELIEF OR LIFE STORY?”**

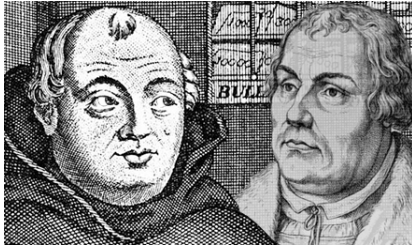
**Matthew 20:1-16; Philippians 1:21-30**

***16th Sunday After Pentecost; September 20, 2020***

We all desire to be desired. That’s why people form clubs. I don’t mean churches — but clubs, cliques, councils, boards, fraternities, sororities. To exclude some and include others. To be chosen is to be cool. There are those that choose, those that are chosen, and those not chosen. Once chosen, even within our chosen-ness, we form “pecking orders” to our coolness. There is a hierarchy of chosen-ness: plateaus of paradise, plains of prestige, and places of purgatory.

Next month, a significant milestone will be celebrated by some Protestant denominations. On October 31, 1517, a decidedly “unpopular” monk and irritating theologian named Martin Luther “published” his long and increasingly incendiary grievances against some of the most “popular” practices of the Catholic church. Among his “95 Theses” that were “published” — by first mailing them and then nailing them to the church door for all to read — Luther dared to be different and stand up to the most powerful religious, political, and economic forces of his day.

One of Luther's most pointed battles was against a highly



respected, very popular Dominican preacher named Johann Tetzel. Tetzel was tagged by the Vatican because of his enormous preaching

skills. He conveyed church teaching with such eloquence that the pope recognized his ability to reach out to the everyday person with fire and fervor.

What did the church use Tetzel's gift of preaching for? It chose him as its #1 fund-raiser. The pope was trying to get funds to complete St. Peter's Basilica. Gobs of money were needed. So Tetzel, with his golden tongue, became the golden boy in this capital improvement campaign to sell "indulgences." The message that Tetzel was instructed to preach was that a contribution of money to the church could "bail out" the soul of a loved-one from the torment of purgatory.

Purgatory was a kind of no-man's land for the soul — neither in this world nor in the next, but in a holding-pattern awaiting further instructions from the divine control tower. In the words of the jingle that circulated everywhere, although we have no direct evidence that Tetzel

ever used it: “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

An indulgence is like the concept of “compound interest.” A big chunk of money just sits there and generates more big chunks of money. The theological basis for this idea was that Jesus, Mary, and all the saints had offered so many good works during their lifetimes that there was a super abundance of leftover goodness, or what was called “works of supererogation.” This excess goodness could be made available to sinners still scuffling about on earth. For a price, of course, always a price: “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

The deal was simple: You give money to the church for its building campaign, you get something: someone you love gets sprung from jail. Purgatory was a never-never-land not in hell, not in heaven, but a purification zone where you were trapped because of your earthly sins. Again, there’s no written evidence that Johann Tetzel ever used that slimy slogan, but it was definitely “on-line” for all 16th century church

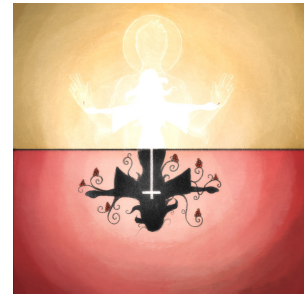
people. Me trying to sell you indulgences to pay-off the Family Life Center mortgage probably wouldn't work, would it?

A no-doubt “apocryphal” story about the dangers and dregs of this practice remains well-known to this day. It seems that Tetzel was approached by a band of ruffians who asked the preacher, “If we buy indulgences, will that sum settle future sins as well as ones we have already committed?” Tetzel, who was more anxious for gold than the gospel, supposedly replied, “Of course. Just give me the money.” The ruffians obliged. They paid Tetzel for their immortal indulgences and went on their way. Later that night they returned and robbed Tetzel of all the money everyone had given to him, secure in their “knowledge” that they were safe from that sin and any future condemnations.

And this is the real reason many Christians celebrate the Reformation. Luther had problems with the practice of indulgences, but he even had more problems with preaching indulgences rather than preaching Christ. Friar Tetzel was a prince of the pulpit. His preaching could sway vast crowds. He was mega-church. But what offended Luther so much was that Tetzel was moving the masses, not toward the

gift of the gospel, but toward gifts of gold. Luther was ticked-off because Tetzel was so successful in emptying people's pockets of gold when he should have been filling their hearts with the Lord.

Here's where St. Paul's letter to the Philippians starts ringing in our ears: "...for me to live means the Messiah; to die means to make a profit" (1:21). This is where we hear loud and clear Paul's admonition to these new Christians: "your public behavior must match up to the gospel of the king...[and] that you are standing firm with a single spirit, struggling side by side with one united intent for the faith of the gospel, and not letting your opponents intimidate you in any way" (1:27-28).



Paul asks this community of Christians to reimagine what is a "win" and what is a "loss." Remember where Paul is: in prison. He was a respected Pharisaic Jew, a recognized community leader, and a Roman citizen. Prison was a horribly shameful situation for someone of this stature. To achieve the status of "Roman citizen" took considerable clout and chips. In 21st century lingo, Paul would have had that blue check

after his name on Facebook and Twitter indicating that he's a verified someone. But now Paul was nothing. Paul had nothing. He was imprisoned, belittled, criticized, weak, and cast-out by all those with power, all those who were members of the "in" group.

But you know what? Paul didn't care. He didn't care because kingdom people were his "in" group, a group that had spiritually and theologically morphed into a whole true vision of what is "gain" and what is "loss." The majority of Paul's former colleagues and contemporaries could only see his arrest as an unrecoverable devastation of social standing and significance. Paul was on the "outs" forever, but no matter. Paul knew that he had the ultimate "in."

Paul wasn't worried about his reputation. He was wholly concentrated on the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Paul was wholly focused on living in the Messiah who completed the story of God's people, Israel, and making Jesus the author of his own personal story. One of the biggest life questions every person must answer is who gets to author the story of one's life. Whomever you choose to author your story is also your authority. If you say, I'm going to author my own life

story, then you're your own authority. Paul's claim is that asking Jesus to author your life story is to "gain," no matter what "losses" it may bring.

This true reality of living the Jesus Story so changes every life story, so that what the world wrongly sees as a plot-line of loss is not really loss — but gain. Losing status, losing power, losing influence — those are not losses when measured against the "gains" that life in Jesus the Messiah brings. So what if Paul had been arrested and publicly humiliated? So what if he was convicted or exonerated? Paul only cared that the message of Jesus living his resurrection life in-and-through us might stand firm and true to all those who hear the gospel.

Paul was a true disciple. He was willing to give up everything in



his life, and even his life itself — his social position, his political

clout, even his Roman citizenship — in order to continue preaching the odd and oddly-moving gospel of King Jesus, the Savior, and the

Redeemer of all creation. All the while Paul was grinning, shaking his head, and saying to himself, “How odd of God to choose me.”

Each one of you here this morning has been chosen. God chose *you*. God chooses *you* at this moment. You may now start smiling to yourself and shaking your head, just like Paul did, saying, “How odd of God to choose me.” Maybe we American Christians have lost a sense of the oddness of the gospel, the weirdness of our belief that Jesus the Messiah is alive, and that he wants to live in us.

How “weird” was St. Paul? How “weird” were the 1st century Christians? They were very weird. Many were well-respected, religious and community leaders who gave up their local community prestige, even possibly their entitled safe-guard of Roman citizenship, to confess their faith in a Jew from Nazareth who died on a cross, who was raised from the dead, and who promises to return...someday. They were considered “atheists” for believing this story instead of the story of empire. Surrendering all to a crucified Messiah and to live his gospel story was more than odd. The cross was considered a foolish “belief



brand” and story system that was mocked and maligned. It could get you killed. That’s how odd it was.

What is the #1 “belief brand” today? What’s the story system that sways the day and swivels the headlines? What are you willing to put down top dollar on and invest your future in because you think it has earned your trust? Think about that because if you don’t, there are well-invested powers that will gladly do that thinking for you.

For a whole lot of people it’s all about Apple’s iPhone. Apple calls itself just that: a “belief brand.” Apple boasts to being the #1 “belief brand” that people trust. This past week the announcement of new iPhone 12 with 5g capabilities was much anticipated. Apparently people will now have to wait until Christmas. Many can’t imagine life without an iPhone. It challenges my imagination as well. The first one was unveiled in 2007. It’s now been 12 years of carefully choreographed media events designed to convince us that those “old” iPhones are now obsolete.



Even before the details of this new “iPhone 12 with 5g capabilities” are particularized, people are flocking to sign-up for this

newest version of connective technology. Whatever the purchase price of this new gadget is (a “Pro-Max 12” will be over a \$1,000), hardly anyone will balk. It’s the price of the new “indulgence,” the price of admission to the newest level of reality. To indulge in a grand for a “Pro-Max 12” is more than an indulgence for this culture. It’s an indulgence out of a “purgatory” of some second-class access to the digital world, a world where, the more adept we are at being connected in our communications, the more inept we are at presence and paying attention.

People are more than willing to spend a grand on a phone. Apple is a “belief brand.” A grand is a lot of money. If you ordered everything on the Cracker Barrel menu — something Joanne and I have often fantasized about doing — it would be far less than a grand. Apple has reached the pinnacle of trust when claiming to be a “belief brand.” A “belief brand” means you have bought into the story of the product. You are somehow in a relationship with it, whose story you are committed to passing on and telling, and you are an evangelist for the company. This is the intention of every commercial: to tell you their story so well that you will make that product’s story your story and then write your life

story around their story. No one is selling a product anymore. Everyone is selling a story, trying to get you to evangelize their story as worthy of you, making it central to your life story. “Trust your life to the story we tell,” every commercial sermonizes. “Build your identity around our story,” we are told. “We are your indulgence that springs your soul from a purgatory of form-less, soul-less, story-less, aim-less living.” Every other brand evangelizes us the same way. Build your identity around the Disney story. Build your identity around the Budweiser story. Build your identity around the Ford or Chevy story. Identity building is also the stuff of politics. Political slogans evangelize partisan “brands” in much the same way.

But where are we today? What is our story? Christians, like the



majority of Americans, are having a story crisis which bleeds into a crisis of faith. Do you find the narratives of media pundits and politicians to be

more urgent for your life than the story of Jesus? If so, that’s a deep spiritual problem. Our dominant story appears to be statism rather than the gospel. Statism refers to the idol of making a human, an office, a

seat of power, a particular nation — the world's true ruler. Statism exalts human and human plans and law and order and government. Statism centers its faith in the future on whoever rules in Washington. Statism makes politics our god. It's the new religion for those who have



left their childhood religion behind. It makes for a mesmerizing narrative. It's



all consuming. We're passionate about our belief brand. Dare to question someone's candidate, and their blood pressure pops or their mouth spews or their mind runs into a wall of exasperation — which validates the point. Political narratives (whether red, blue, purple or whatever) are not the Bible's narrative. The original claim placed upon our lives is Jesus Christ and his life-saving gospel. No-thing, no-tribe, no-one — no other story has that right. I stand firm in saying that any deterministic ideology that replaces or even supplements the pure gospel is idolatry. Idolatry is giving to an idol that which belongs to God alone. To cynically wrap any deterministic ideology inside a bunch of pious religious rhetoric is utter heresy. Someone may have their preferred

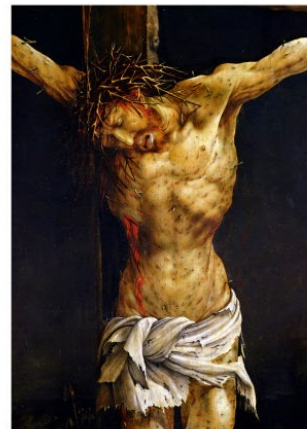
deterministic ideology, but the Lord is not to be co-opted in any such human agenda. Faith in the gospel alone, according to Paul, “is a sign from God: one that signifies their destruction, but your salvation.”

So back to the question you were asked to think about: What are you willing to put down top dollar on and invest your future in because you think it has earned your trust? Who gets to author your life story? Again, this is where the faith-crisis in much contemporary Christianity lays. Choose wisely, brothers and sisters.

Paul is telling the church from his cell in prison that the only story worth trusting your life to is the Jesus story: “...for me to live means the Messiah; to die means to make a profit.”

May God have mercy if I hand over my life to any brand belief concocted by man. There’s a better life story and it’s called the gospel of Jesus Christ. King Jesus chose me (how odd of God!), so I’m choosing him.

I stand under the cross of a crucified Messiah — a loser in the eyes of the world. That One is my God, and there is hope and



salvation by no other name. Only Jesus.

The Bible is the story of the God who so loves every blessed person in this world — no exceptions. God gave — himself. Let us live in peace and receive our place with him in his kingdom.

Amen?