

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of choices and today I want to talk to you about "Life's Greatest Choice." When I was growing up in south Alabama you went down to the local drugstore if you wanted ice cream, but you only had three choices: chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. Today we live in a Baskin & Robbins society where people walk into an ice cream store and can't even decide because there are so many choices! When I was a kid there were only three channels on television: ABC, NBC, or CBS. Today it is amazing how many channels there are, and they keep on adding!

When I was a kid, you had only one long-distance service. It was just called "long-distance." And today there are a lot of different options and choices. Life is full of important choices. You are going to choose where you live; you will choose if you're going to marry and to whom you will be married to; you will choose some kind of career; and those choices involve commitments. Maybe you've heard the story about the man who was performing a marriage ceremony. A preacher and the bride and groom were standing there and the preacher said to the groom, "Do you promise you'll take her for better and for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health?" And the groom thought for a moment and said, "Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes." That's not commitment. Choices involve commitment.

The big choices in life are ones you'd better pay attention to. Awhile back, there was a time management consultant speaking to a group of CEOs about managing their time. To illustrate his point, he had a large clear Plexiglas container and he placed several large rocks in it until he couldn't fit another large rock in there, I guess there were 6 or 7 large rocks in there. Then he turned to the CEOs and asked, "Is the container full?" They answered, "Yes," and the consultant said, "Not quite." Then he poured pea gravel in until it was full to the top. He asked, "Now. Is the container full?" They said, "Yeah," and he said, "Not quite." He then took very fine sand, and poured it into the container. It was amazing how much sand he could get in there. He filled the sand right up to the top and said, "Now. Is the container full?" By now, everyone figured out where he was going so nobody said yes. And he said, "You're right." Then he took a pitcher of water and he poured it into the container and it was amazing how much water went in there! He then asked, "What is the lesson that we're learning about time management?" And a number of the CEO's immediately said, "Well, this teaches us that no matter how busy you are, no matter how full you think your schedule is, there is always room for something else." The consultant said "Absolutely wrong! You've missed the whole point." The point of this lesson is this: "Unless you put the big rocks in first, you never can fit them in." In your life and in my life, there are some big choices. There are some big rocks we'd better put in our lives and pay attention to because if we don't pay attention to these big decisions, we'll never have room for them again. And, I suppose the greatest choice you'll ever make in your life is "What are you going to do with Jesus Christ?" "What are you going to do about your relationship to God?"

Now Romans 6:23 is one of the most evangelistic verses in all the Bible because it tells the person simply how to be saved, to become a Christian, how to go from East Texas to heaven, how to go from a miserable life to an abundant life. Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death." Has anybody ever read that and wondered why it's not grammatically correct? It should read "The wages of sin are death," right? But no, this is correct, and I'll show you why it is correct in a moment.

I. THE PAYCHECK WE HAVE EARNED: DEATH

"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." These are two contrasting truths. First of all, look at the bad news. Here's the thing we need to understand. Number one: We need to talk about the paycheck we have earned and that paycheck is death. Now you all understand "paychecks." You understand "wages." You understand about "getting a salary," getting paid for work you have performed. That's something you've "earned."

Death = Eternal separation from God

The Bible says because I am a sinner, and because every one of you in this room is a sinner by nature and by choice, you have earned something because of your sinfulness and that is the paycheck of death. So you say, "Well okay. I'm going to die—big deal. Everybody's going to die." But that's not the kind of death that it's talking about. It's not talking about just physical death – kicking the bucket – it's not talking about expiring, it's talking about *spiritual* death. Do you know what death means here? It means eternal separation from God. The Bible calls that place "hell."

Sometimes people say, "Isn't hell a lake of fire, a place of torture and torment? Isn't hell, as Jesus described it, a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?" Well, all of that is true. The Bible says these things about hell. But to me, the greatest tragedy about this place called "hell" is because the souls of people there exist forever and they are separated from God. If you don't understand how tragic that is, you need to understand that right now on planet Earth the presence of God is here. From the moment you breathe your first breath until today, you have been enveloped in the presence of God on planet Earth, whether you are a Christian or not. And, 'hell' is the place where God's presence is not there in the sense of His sustaining presence, His protecting presence, and His restraining presence. But you know what it is that keeps every woman from being raped every day? What it is that keeps you from having all of your possessions ripped off every day? There is a restraining force in the world today which is the presence of God. But in hell there is separation from God.

People today want to deny death. They try to avoid it. They try to put it off. That's why people want to look younger and they tie this in and tuck this in and lift that up and poke that out – they're always trying to change their appearance to avoid getting older. When men reach their 50s and 60s, they go through what I call "sports car menopause." They try to drive something that makes them feel a little big younger or look a little bit younger. Everybody's trying to avoid death. I read that the rock star, Michael Jackson, has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in his own personal cryogenic container. This means that when he dies he's given instructions that he wants to be frozen and kept in this freezer until they discover a cure for all the diseases of the world – then they can thaw him out and cure him of his diseases. I thought "If that was me in that thing somebody'd come along and knock the plug out of the wall!" But everybody's trying to get away from death! Well, physical death is not nearly as bad as what this is talking about – "eternal separation from God."

1. Sin holds back our wages for a payday someday

Now you may say, "Okay – my paycheck – I've earned it – death." What's this paycheck like? Well let's learn two things about sin and its payoff. Number one: Sin holds back our wages for a "payday someday." The reason why wages is singular? The "wages of sin **is** (instead of are) death?" Here's why. There's only *one* payday, only *one* payoff. You don't receive the wages over and over again. You get that payoff one time only! It's singular. The wages of sin is death. The truth is nobody in this life receives it. It is a "payday later."

Isn't it strange how we sometimes look around at people who aren't Christians, like some celebrities, rich people, the jet set, the upper crust? The upper crust is a few crumbs held together by a bunch of dough. You know—the upper crust type of people. We look at those people and we say, "They seem to be better off than I am!" They seem to be really enjoying life! I don't believe that the wages of sin is death – I mean, they seem to be materially happy; they seem to be making it. Well, but you've got to understand that their payoff hasn't come yet. Their payday hasn't arrived – it's a 'payday someday.'

My first job when I was growing up in south Alabama was at the local seed and feed store. Vester Gambel, my eighth grade Sunday School teacher owned the FlorAla Seed and Feed Store and I asked him if I could help him on Saturdays. So on Saturday mornings, I went in at 7 a.m. and worked all day until 5 p.m., and he'd pay me \$4 for the whole day! But I learned something on the first Saturday I worked for him—I didn't get paid anything! It wasn't until the end of the second Saturday that he paid me for my first Saturday. I didn't understand why he did that – he "deferred" the payoff. Later, when I got a "real job" I worked at the sawmill. I was making minimum wage, back then \$1.60 an hour. I was getting rich quick, I guarantee you. But I could not wait for Friday, payday, when I'd go and get my paycheck. I don't know if the law even allows them to do this now but I didn't get paid for that first week of working. They made me work two weeks and then they paid me for my first week. I don't know why they did that, but I was looking for the payday that was deferred a little bit later.

2. Sin pays off in worthless currency

Truth says the payoff, the payday for sin, is a "payday someday," it's coming in the future. I want you to see something else about how sin pays off. Number two: Sin pays off in worthless currency—always. There are several bad bargains in the Bible. There's the bad bargain Esau made when he sold his birthright for a bowl of chili (basically). But the very worst bargain the Bible ever talks about is what Jesus says in Mark 8:36, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet to forfeit or lose his soul?"

Sometimes people get so materially rich and so materially selfish they forget about the deeper more important things of life. I think most of you realize Bill Gates, the creator of Microsoft, is the richest man in America and some have predicted that in just a few years Bill Gates is going to become the first "trillionaire" in American history. I don't know if Bill Gates is a Christian, I've never heard him talk about his relationship to God or his spiritual condition—if any of you know, please let me know—but all I want to say is this. Bill Gates could die the first trillionaire in American history but if he doesn't know Jesus Christ he's poorer than most of the people

listening to me in this room. Because he could gain the whole world, but if he doesn't take care of his relationship with God, he's lost it all.

Probably one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century is a man who is dead now; his name was Dr. R. G. Lee. R. G. Lee had a famous sermon he preached almost 2,000 times and the title of the sermon was "Payday Someday." I heard him preach it two times in my life. He preached it many, many times. He preached it once a year at his church in Belleview, and everywhere he went he preached "Payday Someday." It took him almost two hours to preach that sermon. In that sermon, he was talking about exactly what I'm talking to you about – and that is the payoff for sin comes later. Dr. Lee always told the story about when he was pastor of First Baptist Church in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was there for three years, and they had a radio broadcast. He said he would receive letters every week from someone who was caustic, critical, cursing – used vile, scathing language about Dr. Lee, about First Baptist Church in New Orleans, about God, about anything good and spiritual. Dr. Lee said he received these letters every week and this is the way the writer would sign his name: "The King of the Kangaroo Court."

Dr. Lee said these letters were so vile and full of such hard things he didn't show them to anyone. They were always signed "The King of the Kangaroo Court." Dr. Lee said one afternoon his phone rang and it was a nurse calling from the Charity Hospital in downtown New Orleans. The nurse said, "Dr. Lee, there's a man here that's not a member of your church and he's asked to see you." And Dr. Lee said, "Well, who is it!" And the nurse said, "He told me to tell you that he is the King of the Kangaroo Court." Dr. Lee went downtown to the Charity Hospital. He said he went into a ward of terminally ill patients and said he'd already envisioned in his mind this man would be an old, mean, aggravated soul. But, he said, there lying on that bed, curled up in a fetal position was a young man he estimated to be no more than 18 to 21 years old. He said the boy's body was emaciated and eaten up by some kind of disease. Dr. Lee said, "I'm Dr. Lee. Is there anything I can do for you?" The boy responded with a scowl on his face and with a sneer and said, "NO, there's nothing you can do for me! Unless you want to throw my body to the buzzards after I die – if the buzzards would have me!"

Dr. Lee said he spent quite a while trying to talk to this young man about the love of God and about Jesus Christ, but he would have nothing to do with it. Dr. Lee said just before the boy died, this "King of the Kangaroo Court" said, "Dr. Lee, I know that you go all over America and you talk to young people." Dr. Lee said, "That's right." Then the boy said, "Will you do something for me? I want you to tell people wherever you go that the devil always pays off with counterfeit bills!" And Dr. Lee said that young man reached out his hand as if he was reaching for a life vest and said, with a rattle and a gurgle and a wheeze with black spittle that was coming out of his mouth, he breathed his last breath and died right there in front of Dr. Lee.

Dr. Lee said the nurse rushed over and said, "Let me wash your hands. What he's got is a dangerous, dangerous infection!" Then, Dr. Lee always said something like this. He'd say, "Sin always pays off – but its pearls are clay pearls, its diamonds are lusterless plastic, its nectar is hog slop." And then Dr. Lee would quote stanzas from a little poem, and here's what he would say:

This is the price I pay

just for one riotous day
years of regret and grief
sorrow without relief.
Small was the thing I bought
Small was the thing at best.
Small was the debt, I thought.
But oh God, the interest!"

You've heard me say it before, but sin will take you farther than you wanted to go. It will cost you more than you wanted to pay. And, it will keep you longer than you wanted to stay. There is a payoff for sin and it is death, but the payday is someday.

II. THE GIFT WE MAY ACCEPT: ETERNAL LIFE

Well that's the bad news. The bad news is what makes the good news good! Good news isn't good unless it's against the backdrop of something awful and terrible, and that's pretty bad. But the second thing that I want to talk about is not the paycheck we have earned, but two – I want to talk about the gift we may accept. And what is that? It is eternal life. If you still have your Bible open to Romans 6:23 look at the second half of the verse. It says, "But, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Now, please don't ever say something like this to God. "God, you're not giving me what I deserve!" Or, don't say something like this, "God I deserve better than this!" Because the truth is you and I deserve death and hell. That's what we have earned. You don't need what you deserve – you and I need a gift. And you can only accept or reject a gift.

1. The "Gift" of Eternal Life is free to us—but costly to God

Let's talk about eternal life a little bit, because a lot of people don't know what it is. There are three things about eternal life. Number one: Eternal life is free to us, but costly to God. We get a lot of catalogs in the mail and I don't know why we got this one, but we got one of the Neiman-Mark-up, (I mean Neiman Marcus) catalogs the other day. I think my wife ordered some stationery from them awhile back. Anyway, in this gift book for suggestions for Christmas giving this year do you know you can give to someone you love? You can give them a personalized Astin-Martin sports car – handmade in England! It's personalized, with the owner's name engraved on the dashboard. By the way, the price, if you're interested, is \$148,580! That's the price for that gift, so if any of you are interested, that's a great gift. But did you know that the gift that God has given to me and to you is much more priceless than that – much more costly than some sports car. It's free, so sometimes people think that because it has no dollar value it's just the opposite. It's free. And it's the most valuable gift you'll ever receive.

Look at what it says in Romans 8:32. It says, "He (that is God) did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Look at the first line, where it says, "gave him up for us." That's a word that means he lavishly spent. God went on a buying spree, a spending spree, a giving spree when he gave his Son Jesus. The most precious thing to God was his Son and he was willing to give him for me and for you. I'm a dad. I've got two daughters and everyone of you in this room who is a parent or perhaps

even a grandparent, knows what I'm talking about when I say how precious our children and grandchildren are to us. What if someone came to me and said, "David Dykes, I've got a deal for you. There's a man down here in Huntsville on death row who is a murderer, he's guilty, and he's scheduled to be executed in the electric chair next month. But we've got a deal to offer you David Dykes. We know you have two daughters. If you'll give us one of your daughters and you'll let her go into the jail cell and be the substitute for this murderer, we're gonna release that murder and he can live – but your daughter has to get on death row, and she has to sit in the electric chair and have those things attached to her and she has to have her life electrocuted out of her. That's the deal. That's the offer. Are you interested?"

It doesn't take me long to say, "Absolutely not. What do you think I am crazy or something? There's no way – no way I would give one of my children for some criminal." But you know what, if the deal was offered to me to save the life of perhaps my very best friend – somebody who was good and kind and noble and honest and loving – I still wouldn't do it. You know why? Frankly, I don't love anybody that much. I don't love anybody so much I would sacrifice or give up one of my children so they could live. But God loves you that much! God loves you so much, he gave the most precious thing to his heart, his Son.

During World War II, a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and put in prison, because he tried to organize some ministers to overthrow Hitler. While he was in prison, he wrote a classic Christian book some of you have read. The title of this book is "The Cost of Discipleship." Friend, the cost of salvation is free but the cost of discipleship requires our commitment. It requires our very lives. But in his book, Dietrich talks about something called, "cheap grace." What is "cheap grace?" It's the attitude of a Christian who says, "Oh, salvation – free gift – yeah, I'll take it!" But then their life never shows evidence of change or repentance and they make a mockery of the free gift of grace if you think it's cheap. It's free, but it's not cheap.

2. The "Gift" of Eternal Life is received only by receiving (accepting) Jesus

Here's the second thing about this gift of eternal life. Number two: Eternal life is received only by receiving Jesus. That means by accepting Jesus. Look at what it says in John 1:12, "Yet to all who received him, (meaning received Jesus) to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God" Why are we talking about receiving Jesus? Because I believe the greatest fallacy in America today is those who think all you have to do is believe there's a God. Believe in some Supreme Being, and you're going to be okay. Surveys have shown us, over and over again, that about 95 percent of Americans believe there is a Supreme Being, that there is a God. But let me ask you. Do you think that that's enough? Do you think it's enough just to believe there's a God, that that will give you eternal life? Well, the Bible says just the opposite. The Bible says, in James 2 that even the devils, or the demons, believe in God and they tremble – but that doesn't mean they have eternal life. So, it's not just about believing. You must *receive* Jesus Christ. And, by the way, the only way you *receive* Jesus Christ is being willing to turn from your sinful lifestyle. Do you know what repentance is? In the last few weeks we've heard a lot about what it means to repent from sin, and what it means is you're going in one direction – and it's the wrong direction – and you realize that you're wrong, that you're a sinner, and you do an about-face. You do a 180-degree turn and you turn from your sins and you turn toward God's

forgiveness. That is repentance. And the only way you can *receive* Christ is to turn from your sins.

Let me try to illustrate this a little bit. On this little card I’m holding I want you to imagine with me that this card is a \$50 bill! I wish it was a \$50 bill, but my wife doesn’t let me carry that much money! So, let’s just imagine this card is a \$50 bill. Let’s say I wanted to give it as a gift to Jim. “Jim, here’s this \$50 bill, and I want to give it to you as a gift, but I’m going to take this \$50 bill and I’m going to put it in this book and place it securely in there, and so the only way you can receive the gift is by receiving the book.” And the truth I’m trying to convey to you is this: That eternal life is the gift, but it is in Jesus Christ, and so the only way you can receive the gift of eternal life is to receive the gift of Jesus himself. There is no other way. No other way to accept this gift except to receive Jesus. Are you following me so far? “So Jim, this is a \$50 bill and it’s in the Bible and I want to give it to you, it is a gift. Here, it’s yours.” The illustration I just made is this: I offered the gift to Jim, it was sincere, but it was not until he did something very important – until he reached out and received, claimed it – that it became his. Here’s the simple truth: God says to everyone in this room, to everyone in the world, “I’m offering you a gift. It’s eternal life, because I love you!” Our response is we either reach it out and receive it by faith or we say, “No, thank you.” What is eternal life? The third thing we learned is eternal life is having a personal relationship with God, now. That’s the difference between sin’s payoff and God’s gift. Sin’s payoff is a payday someday down the road, in the future, but eternal life is received right now. It’s something we get the moment we trust Christ. Salvation is not a reward you receive at the end of the race, rather salvation is the gift you receive that enables you to run the race. That’s the difference.

3. The “Gift” of Eternal Life is having a personal relationship with God–NOW!

What is eternal life? You ask most people and they say, “living forever, existing forever.” The only thing wrong with that is that some of you are so miserable right now in your life the idea of existing as you’re existing right now forever – that’s eternal misery. No, eternal life is not a quantity of life, it is not how long it is, it’s how deep it is, how wonderful it is, how good it is. If you want to know what eternal life is, look at John 17:3 where Jesus says, “Now this is eternal life. That they may know you, the only true God, and know Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” What is eternal life? It is knowing God; it is knowing Jesus Christ.

Do you want to know if you have eternal life or not? Here’s the question: Do you know God? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? As I’ve said many times before, some of you know Jesus the same way you know Abraham Lincoln. You know him as an historical character – someone who lived and died and did great things. Do you really think that’s going to bring eternal life? No. In fact, I’ll even bring it up to date. I have a personal relationship with my wife. I know her. She knows me. We relate to one another on a daily basis. But you know what? I don’t know Mark McGuire. I believe he hit 70 home runs; I’d like to know him. I’ve read about him in *Sports Illustrated*, I’ve read about him in the newspapers, I’ve watched him on television, but I don’t *know* Mark McGuire. I don’t have a personal relationship with him.

So which one is it for you? Can you honestly say you have the kind of relationship with God that you have with someone on earth you relate to on a daily basis or on a regular basis? Or do you

feel Jesus Christ is some superstar somewhere that, "Oh it would be nice!" but you don't really know him. Well my friend, you can know him. And here's life's greatest choice: God loves you so much he's not going to override your will. He's not going to violate your ability to choose and he says, "here it is," on one hand and yet you can take the paycheck of sin. Your name's already filled in on the check, and what you will receive is exactly death and hell. Nothing less. Nothing more. But you know what? You can reject that and say, "I don't want that." Instead you can receive real life, the free gift of real life, that Jesus Christ can give you.

CONCLUSION

I was talking to a man whose wife was a Christian. She was concerned about her husband who wasn't a Christian, so they came to talk to me and at least he was willing to listen. I pretty much described salvation to him the way I've described it for you this morning, and I said, "Gary, I want to give you an opportunity to invite Jesus to come into your heart. I want you to bow your head with me, and we're going to pray. If you want to invite Christ to come into your heart and if you pray to receive him, I'm going to ask you take my right hand. But, Gary, if you don't want to receive Christ and you don't want to trust him today, I want you to take my left hand. The choice is yours!" Gary was an honest guy, because I remember he looked at me and said, "Well then, I just won't take either hand." And I said, "Whether or not you've done it with your hand, you've done it with your heart, because it's not a matter of the head and it's not a matter of the hand or the feet, it's a matter of the heart."

How can you receive Jesus and the gift of eternal life? In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door (talking about the door of your heart) and I'm knocking. If any person will hear my voice and open the door, I'll come in to them." He says, "I'll fellowship with them and they'll fellowship with me." As simple as I know how, that's what it means to be a Christian.

OUTLINE

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1. Sin holds back our wages for a payday someday
2. Sin pays off in worthless currency

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" *Mark 8:36*

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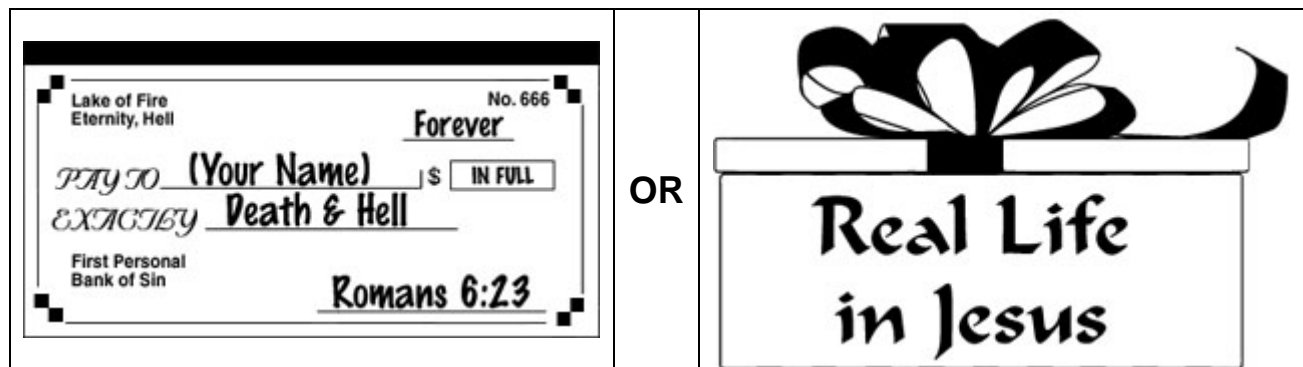
2. Received only by receiving (accepting) Jesus

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God... *John 1:12*

3. Having a personal relationship with God—NOW!

"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." *John 17:3*

YOUR CHOICE





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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes