

Deeds that Determine Destinies

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Agnostic and celebrity astronomer Carl Sagan used to keep a framed postcard near his shaving mirror—just so he could see it every morning. On the back was a penciled message to a Mr. James Day of Swansea Valley, Wales. It read:

Dear Friend,

Just a line to show that I am alive and kicking and going grand. It's a treat.

Yours, WJR

On the opposite side of the postcard was a color photo of a sleek, four-funneled steamer captioned, "White Star Liner Titanic." The postmark was dated April 12, 1912, just two days before the Titanic struck an iceberg in the Atlantic Ocean and sank with the loss of 1,500 lives, including that of WJR—William John Rogers.

Sagan displayed that postcard to remind himself that "going grand" is a temporary and illusory state. This certainly became true for him. At the peak of his popularity Sagan noticed a black and blue mark on his arm and asked his doctor to take a look at it. He was told he had only six months to live.

Like Sagan, most of us—at least those of us who are over thirty—are seeing some signs of our inevitable ends. We may not have received a prognosis of only six months, but with every year that goes by we're looking more and more like the people we see in caskets. Aging is a subtle and merciful warning from God that the sand is slipping through our hourglass.

A Few Death Facts

The risk of dying actually begins before birth. One of the worst places to attempt to be born is in the state of New York. If you are conceived there, you have only a 50/50 chance of making it out of your mother's womb alive. New York's abortion rate is second only to the District of Columbia (where you only have a 30% chance of surviving the womb). If your mother lives in Idaho, however, you have a 94% chance that she won't have you murdered.

Nationally, you face odds of about 1 to 5 that you'll be aborted. (In Canada, your odds are almost 1 to 3.) Last year 1.3 million American babies were murdered in the wombs of their mothers, many ripped to pieces by the use of suction tubes. (Aren't you glad we don't live in one of those barbaric Muslim countries where people are always killing each other?)

If you successfully escape your mother's womb alive, the odds are still stacked against you: Studies have revealed that ten out of ten people ultimately die.

Most likely, you'll die from something that was rarely known as a cause of death prior to the 1900's—heart disease—which kills one out of five Americans. 40% of all people who die from a heart attack experience no warning signs. Their first symptom is death.

If heart disease doesn't get you, cancer is the next best bet. It kills one out of every seven Americans. Strokes kill one out of every twenty-four. Motor vehicle accidents kill one out of every eighty-four.

But there are many other risks. You have a 1 in 218 chance of dying from falling and about a 1 in 1,000 chance of drowning or dying in a motorcycle accident. One out of 139,617 people in the U.S. die from dog bites, while one out of 269,262 people die each year from spider bites. Your odds of being killed by lightning are 1 in 79,127. But enough of these facts. Regardless of how you die, the fact is, you will (unless, of course, you are alive when Jesus returns).

A Few Judgment Facts

Since no one gets out of here alive, it would seem prudent to prepare for the inevitable—and more importantly—to prepare for what lies beyond it. Of course, if like Carl Sagan you believe that death ends your existence forever, then you have nothing greater to live for than your own temporal happiness. If you work hard, perhaps you can be the richest person in the graveyard.

If it is true, however, that you live on after you die, and if it is true that you will stand before God to be judged soon after you die, and if the outcome of that judgement is either eternal life or eternal damnation, then life takes on a whole new significance. Life becomes a journey to a court date in heaven—a journey during which evidence of our obedience or disobedience is continually amassed. That evidence will ultimately be presented in a courtroom over which God presides. That is a sobering thought.

Tragically, very few are prepared for their day in God's court.

Some are persuaded that God is like a soft old grandfather, who winks at sin and knows that "boys will be boys." Surely, they imagine, he understands their "imperfections." And as they compare themselves with themselves, they assuage their divinely-granted guilt that continually warns them of God's displeasure. How shocked they will be when they hear the voices of the four living creatures who never cease to cry out day and night before His magnificent throne, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty!" (Rev. 4:18). How terrified they will be when they stand before the One whose face shines like the sun (Rev. 1:16) and "from whose presence earth and heaven flee away" (Rev. 20:11).

Others who profess Christ, secure in believing that they are eternally secure, seem to be unaware, or take no thought, that they will one day have their day in court. Yet Paul assured all the believers in Rome and Corinth that everyone will stand before God:

So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God (Rom. 14:12).

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10).

Still others find security in a prayer they once prayed to "accept Jesus as their personal Savior," but who never repented, "performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20) as Paul warned deceived and religious folks in his day. They may be "Bible-believing," "evangelical," "fundamentalist," "charismatic," or even supposedly born-again. They may call Jesus their Lord. But they are unprepared to stand before God. Jesus warned about this very thing:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter (Matt. 7:21).

And He elaborated even more, foretelling of the many who will be utterly shocked when they're denied entrance into His kingdom:

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:22-23).

Here then is the most important fact that everyone needs to know about the future judgment, a fact that resonates within every human conscience and is repeatedly confirmed by the Word of God: Every person will be judged according to his deeds. And although what I'm about to say may sound like I'm endorsing a salvation that is achieved by one's works (but I'm not)—our deeds determine our eternal destiny.

Take note of what Jesus said:

Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment (John 5:28-29).

Paul concurred:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no

partiality with God (Rom. 2:5-11, emphasis added).

Of course, the only people who are truly doing goodâ€”from God's, not man's, perspectiveâ€”are those who have been cleansed of their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who have submitted to Him from their hearts, as evidenced by their obedience to His commandments. This is not "salvation by works" but "salvation unto works." Our deeds reveal if we believe in Jesus or if we do not believe in Jesus. They reveal if we have been born again or if we have not been born again. They show if we are walking in the Spirit or in the flesh.

As James warned, faith without works is dead, useless, and cannot save anyone (see Jas. 2:14-26). Paul, too, wrote of those who "profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him" (Tit. 1:16). Genuine faith always produces holiness. And that is precisely why we will all be judged by our deeds. Our deeds are a safe measure of whether or not we have been touched by God's amazing grace.

The Kind of Deeds that God is Looking For

John foresaw a great judgment when everyone will be judged according to their deeds, deeds of which God has kept a written record:

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds (Rev. 20:12, emphasis added).

Jesus also foretold of a great judgment of the sheep and the goats, a judgement when everyone's eternal destiny will be determined by deeds (or lack of deeds) that reveal their love and self-sacrifice for fellow suffering believers (see Matt. 25:31-46). Jesus never said a word about the faith or unbelief in this instance. Each person's eternal salvation or damnation will be determined by what each person did and didn't do.

The deeds that will ultimately determine our eternal destiny will also include our words. Here is a scripture that you rarely find posted on anyone's refrigerator door:

But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt. 12:36-37, emphasis added).

Not only will our deeds and words be recalled as evidence at our judgment, but so will our thoughts and motives:

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Cor. 4:5).

This is the aspect of everyone's judgment that will condemn do-gooders who have never repented and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their "good" deeds will be exposed as self-seeking, most often done for the praise of people rather than for the praise of God.

Rewards and Punishments

But there is more to say about the significance of our deeds. All future rewards and punishments will also be precisely meted out according to what we have done. Everyone will ultimately reap what he or she has sown:

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds (Matt. 16:27, emphasis added).

Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done (Rev. 22:12, emphasis added).

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10, emphasis added).

I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds (Rev.

2:23, emphasis added).

Is there any possible way to escape being recompensed for your evil deeds? Is there a refuge from the perfect justice of God? Amazingly, yes. That is what the gospel is all about, and it is marvelous. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered" (Rom. 4:7). Through Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice, God offers forgiveness—but only to those who repent (see Luke 24:47), and to those who "perform deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20).

Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come (see Rom. 5:9; 1 Thes. 1:10). For the true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ there are no future punishments, only the potential of the loss or gain of rewards. This, too, is determined by our deeds. Jesus promised to reward us for every prayer, persecution, gift, fast, and act of kindness, as long as our motives are pure (see Matt. 5:10-12; 6:2-6, 16-18; 10:42).

All of this being so, how wise it is to fill our days with good deeds, particularly those that we were foreordained to walk in (see Eph. 2:10). Jesus is keeping track of it all, which is why the very first words that He spoke to five of the seven churches of Asia was, "I know your deeds" (see Rev. 2:2, 19, 3:1, 8, 15, emphasis added).

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil (Ecc. 12:13-14, emphasis added).

As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away. Who understands the power of Thine anger, and Thy fury, according to the fear that is due Thee? So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:10-11).

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them" (Rev. 14:13, emphasis added).