

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Last month, George Sodini walked into a women's aerobics class at an LA Fitness Club just a few miles from where I live. He turned out the lights and began shooting into the darkness, firing fifty rounds. Within seconds, he killed three women and wounded nine others. Then he shot and killed himself.

According to his blog, he had been planning the killings and his suicide at LA Fitness for months in advance. In December, he wrote in that blog of the evangelical church he had attended for thirteen years, saying of the pastor, "This guy teaches (and convinced me) you can commit mass murder then still go to heaven."

Just one day before his murder spree and suicide, he wrote:

Maybe soon, I will see God and Jesus. At least that is what I was told. Eternal life does NOT depend on works. If it did, we will all be in hell. Christ paid for EVERY sin, so how can I or you be judged BY GOD for a sin when the penalty was ALREADY paid. People judge but that does not matter. I was reading the Bible and The Integrity of God beginning yesterday, because soon I will see them.

The book he mentioned, The Integrity of God, is written by an author who teaches that believers cannot forfeit their salvation no matter how much they sin.

A few days later there was an article in our local newspaper titled, "Once saved, always saved' â€” Deacon says killer rests in heaven." Here are a few excerpts:

George Sodini rests in heaven now because he professed a faith in Jesus years before his shooting rampage, a _____ Church leader said.

Jack _____, a deacon at the church Sodini attended for years, said the Bible makes it clear that "professing a faith in Jesus as savior means you will have complete eternal salvation."

"George is going to heaven, but he's not going to get his rewards," _____ said. He said that Sodini won't be offered all of heaven's benefits because of his sin.

"George was a professing believer."

Although many Christians who adhere to the doctrinal position of "once-saved-always-saved" would probably argue that George Sodini was never actually born again in the first place (and they might well be correct), the fact remains that the church he attended for thirteen years made it easier for him to murder three women. Worse, that particular church teaches exactly what a large percentage of evangelical churches do, that once a person is saved, he is permanently saved. Believers are supposedly unconditionally eternally secure, regardless of their lifestyles. No sin can keep them from heaven.

One of America's most well-known preachers, who was twice elected to be the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, who has written scores of best-selling Christian books, and who is heard around the world via his television and radio broadcasts, is a primary proponent of the doctrine of unconditional eternal security. In a book on this very subject, he wrote:

No matter what you do as a child of God, you are forgiven. You say, "Murder?" Forgiven. "Stealing?" Forgiven. "Adultery?" Forgiven. "Worshiping idols?" Forgiven.

Note that he did not write, "No matter what you did prior to becoming a child of God, you are forgiven." He wrote, "No matter what you do as a child of God, you are forgiven." His argument is that Jesus died for all our sins, so there is no future sin we can commit for which He didn't die. Our only danger is that of forfeiting special rewards in heaven.

That is grace gone mad.

And that kind of teaching is what leads people like George Sodini to think they can murder people yet go to heaven, even though Scripture teaches that no murderer will inherit eternal life (see 1 John 3:15; Rev. 21:8; 22:15).

That kind of teaching also leads people to think that their behavior has nothing to do with their ultimate salvation, even though Scripture teaches that no unrighteous person will inherit God's kingdom, which, according to Paul, includes fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, the covetous, drunkards, or swindlers (1 Cor. 6:9-10; see also Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-6). Jesus' own teaching certainly affirms this also.

So the question, "Can a genuine Christian forfeit his or her salvation" is answered by another question, "Can a genuine Christian become an adulterer (or an idolater, or a homosexual, or a thief, or a drunkard)? If the answer is "yes," then a genuine Christian can forfeit his or her salvation. Obviously, any of us has the capacity, as free moral agents, to become an adulterer or a thief and so on.

The answer to the question, "Can a genuine Christian forfeit his or her salvation," is also found in many other places in Scripture (see Matt. 18:21-35; 24:4-5, 11-13, 23-26, 42-51; 25:1-30; Luke 8:11-15; 11:24-28; 12:42-46; John 6:66-71; 8:31-32, 51; 15:1-6; Acts 11:21-23; 14:21-22; Rom. 6:11-23; 8:12-14, 17; 11:20-22; 1 Cor. 9:23-27; 10:1-21; 11:29-32; 15:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:24; 11:2-4; 12:21-13:5; Gal. 5:1-4; 6:7-9; Phil. 2:12-16; 3:17-4:1; Col. 1:21-23; 2:4-8, 18-19; 1 Thes. 3:1-8; 1 Tim. 1:3-7, 18-20; 4:1-16; 5:5-6, 11-15, 6:9-12, 17-19, 20-21; 2 Tim. 2:11-18; 3:13-15; Heb. 2:1-3; 3:6-19; 4:1-16; 5:8-9; 6:4-9, 10-20; 10:19-39; 12:1-17, 25-29; Jas. 1:12-16; 4:4-10; 5:19-20; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; 2:1-22; 3:16-17; 1 John 2:15-28; 5:16; 2 John 6-9; Jude 20-21; Rev. 2:7, 10-11, 17-26; 3:4-5, 8-12, 14-22; 21:7-8; 22:18-19). Clearly, our eternal security is conditional, not unconditional. That is why we should, as the Bible teaches, "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12) and "pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Nothing is more important.

There is a correlation between holiness and heaven because there is a correlation between belief and behavior. We are saved by grace through faith, but faith without works is dead and cannot save us (Eph. 2:8; Jas 2:14-26). I can't help but wonder how many people, just like George Sodini, are now in hell, when they fully expected to be in heaven, because they were trusting in a grace that God has never offered, a grace that is little more than a license to sin.

The Technicalities

Among those who are convinced that genuine believers can forfeit their salvation, there is sometimes debate over some technicalities. For example, some on the extreme fringes maintain that a Christian who lusts instantly forfeits his or her salvation since (1) no adulterer will inherit God's kingdom, and (2) since Jesus equated lust with adultery (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Matt. 5:28).

The plain fact is that there is no scripture which teaches that the moment a Christian lusts the Holy Spirit departs from him, or that he forfeits his sonship and salvation in Christ, or that if he were to die one second after his sin that God would cast him into hell. Rather, Scripture leads us to believe that God disciplines His wayward children---whom He loves so much---in order to lead them to repentance, and that He often succeeds. When Paul warns that no adulterer will inherit God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10), he was clearly talking about future, not immediate, consequences. The words "will inherit" are future tense. To claim, based on that warning, that any Christian who lusts or commits adultery instantly forfeits his or her salvation, is unwarranted.

So the Christian who commits adultery places his future, ultimate salvation in jeopardy. The Holy Spirit who indwells him, however, does not abandon him, but rather convicts him to bring him to repentance, a wonderful indication of God's grace. You may recall that God went to great lengths to bring David to repentance after he committed adultery and vicarious murder, and He succeeded. You may also recall that David, under conviction, prayed to the Lord, "Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psa. 51:11). David believed the Holy Spirit was still with him. The prophet Nathan's divine exposure of David, and David's Spirit-induced conviction were both indications of God's continued love for him.

Concerning David, no scripture states that he forfeited his salvation during that time. And what would be gained if we could ascertain with certainty that David did forfeit his salvation for a time? The fact is, if he did forfeit it, he got it back! Why even debate the question of whether or not David would have gone to hell if he had died one second after he lusted after Bathsheba? The fact is, he didn't die then. God, who holds the power of life and death in His hands, kept David alive long enough for him to repent.

When a genuine believer sins, God does not rub His hands together and laugh with glee over another opportunity to disown one of His beloved children. Rather, He grieves and loves, and goes to work to bring a wayward child back to Him. Anyone who is truly born again is indwelled by the Holy Spirit, and because of it, he experiences an inward resistance to sin whenever he is tempted. If he yields, he immediately feels conviction and guilt. If he softens his heart, he feels remorse which results in confession and repentance. The Holy Spirit never left him the entire time. He has not been "un-born again" and then born again again! No such concept is

taught in Scripture.

I think it is interesting that those fringe folks who claim that such teaching "gives people a license to sin" often teach that a Christian who falls into adultery regains his salvation if he repents. Isn't that just as much a "license to sin"? Should we not be concerned that some Christians, upon hearing such teaching, might think that they can commit adultery as many times as they want, as long as they confess and repent after each immoral act?

Of course, such a concern is nonsense, simply because no true Christian is looking for ways to commit adultery with impunity. The imaginary Christian who commits adultery without concern is indeed a straw man if there ever was one. Likewise, teaching what Scripture teaches, that the Christian who falls into adultery forfeits inheriting God's kingdom if he doesn't repent, yet does not instantly forfeit the indwelling Holy Spirit and his sonship and salvation in Christ, is not giving any true Christian a "license to sin." True Christians don't want to sin.

Paul warns believers:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

Those are not my words, but the apostle Paul's words. Notice he says that those who "practice such things" will not inherit God's kingdom, not those who commit one sin in that list one time. He was writing about people whose lives are characterized by the deeds of the flesh.

Similarly, John wrote,

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God (1 John 3:7-9).

The new birth changes us so that we have an inward resistance to sin. For that reason, no true Christian could fall into adultery without a huge degree of inward resistance beforehand and an equal amount of conviction afterwards.

So let us maintain balance in regard to the holiness and grace of God. There is nothing more dangerous than someone with two verses of Scripture that he has strung together to create a doctrine. We need to take the whole Bible into consideration.

This balance was perfectly revealed in Jesus, the perfect representation of His Father, who was amazingly longsuffering with sinners.

For example, Jesus solemnly warned, "Whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (10:33). Remember that Peter denied the Lord three times before men. Did Jesus instantly disown Peter because of it? When the cock crowed after Peter's third denial, did Jesus look up to heaven and say, "Father, I deny that I know that wicked man who just denied Me"?

No, Jesus simply looked at Peter, and He didn't even silently lip the words, "I told you so," (which is no doubt what I would have done). When their eyes met, Peter was crushed. He went out and wept bitter tears. Scripture says, "A contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

It seems that a few days later Peter was still drowning in his remorse. When Jesus appeared to him and the other disciples along the Sea of Galilee, He went to work on restoring Peter, first through an affirming sign of a miraculous catch of fish and then by providing a good breakfast. The message? "Peter, I still love you."

Then, thoughtfully taking Peter apart from the others, Jesus asked him the question that Peter had surely been asking himself: "Do you love Me more than these?" (21:15). Remember that Peter had boasted that his love for Jesus was greater than the other apostles. He had said, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (26:33). His boast, followed by his utter failure, surely haunted him.

In most translations it appears that Jesus asked Peter the same question three times, but He actually didn't. The first two times, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him using the Greek verb *agapeo*, which each time is translated "love." The final time, He used the Greek verb *phileo*, which is also translated "love." *Agape* is a self-denying, sacrificial love, whereas *phileo* is a lesser love based on common interests and mutual benefits.

Interestingly, when Jesus first asked Peter if he loved Him with an *agape* love, Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, You know I *phileo* You." It was probably said with sigh of regret, and it meant, "Yes, Lord, You are well aware from my actions that my love for you falls short of *agape*." Jesus repeated His question a second time, and Peter responded with the same answer.

The third time, however, Jesus literally asked him, "Peter, do you love me with *phileo* love?" That is likely why Scripture tells us that Peter was so grieved at the third question (John 21:17). I don't think Jesus asked him this because He Himself didn't know the answer, but perhaps because He wanted Peter to affirm it to help lift him from his despondency. Sometimes when we fail, we give up, which is a greater failure. Failures should make us more determined to do better, rising up in God's grace. Peter replied, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I *phileo* You" (21:17). Peter needed to hear himself say that. It was true, and it was something affirmative.

More importantly, after each of Peter's three replies, Jesus gave him a commandment: "Tend My lambs...Shepherd My sheep...Tend My sheep" (21:15-17). Surely these commands were also intended to encourage Peter. Even though he had failed the Lord, Jesus had not given up on him, and there would be plenty of future opportunities to prove his love for Jesus. The Lord had work for him to do.

I suspect that is also why Jesus then told Peter, "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18). John knew that this was a reference to Peter's future martyrdom. We might wonder why Jesus foretold Peter then about that. Personally, I think it was also meant to encourage him. Peter was so disappointed in himself. He had shown by his actions that he was not willing to die for Jesus. Jesus assured him that would change. He would glorify God in martyrdom. Tradition tells us that Peter requested to be crucified upside down, considering himself unworthy to die in the same position as Christ.

When we fail and our hearts are not contrite, God works to bring us to contrition and repentance. When we are contrite, He works to affirm and restore us, just as He did with Peter, and just as does any good parent. Our God is in the redemption business. He's our Father, not a cold-blooded probation officer who is hoping to put us away for good.

Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103:13).

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:15-16).