

How to Control the Future

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So Jesus is at a dinner party — typical for him, really.
(The guy didn't have a place of his own, so we find him eating out a lot.)
But then, the meal gets interrupted.

Luke 7:

37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, 38 and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them....

Here was a person like many of us. She's fallen short. She's goofed up her life. She's me. She's you.

Or, maybe she's in a category that says, "Hey, I'm doing all right, but then I keep stumbling in this one area." Maybe it's as simple as, "I keep failing to trust God in a certain aspect of my life."

In any case, Jesus cuts her a lot of slack. He reads her heart; he sees that she longs to please God. And he cuts to the chase — he goes directly to the ultimate need of her life: **"Your sins are forgiven,"** he says to her (**Luke 7:48**).

Which, let's face it, wasn't exactly typical dinner conversation. It was like turning to a party guest and saying, "I've fixed your bad judgment on business deals." It's not in the realm of what one party guest would normally say to another party guest.

But then Jesus doesn't stop there.

He goes a step further.

He says eight more words.

In **Luke 7:50**, Jesus says to the woman, **"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."**

What did he mean? Was it actually her faith that saved her? Wasn't it Jesus who had forgiven her sins? Isn't it Jesus who saves us?

This is one of the richest, most densely packed statements in all of Scripture.

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

With these eight words, Jesus has painted a picture of our life. He has painted a picture of what it means to be a true Christian.

The phrase **"has saved you"** is really amazing. Yes, when Jesus came into your life, he changed everything. But *when* did he do the work? By the time you got to

Jesus, he was already there. **Romans 5:6,8** says, “**At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**”

Jesus did the work in advance.

It's no accident that Jesus used the *present perfect tense* when he spoke to the sinful woman at the Pharisee's house. The phrase he employed, “**has saved you,**” indicates something already done. Jesus already gave the gift of life. It's finished.

So when I came to Christ, what changed? Did he do something different?

No, he was already done.

The only thing that changed was *me*.

He created me, he made a way for me to have a beautiful, never-ending relationship with him; and then he gave me the most incredible gift of all: control. That's why he could say to the woman, “**Your faith has saved you.**”

He gave me freedom — so I could choose my own path. “This is your deal,” he said.

“You write your own ticket. I've paid your fare in advance. Sure, I could force you, manipulate you, whatever. I want you to spend eternity with me more than anything else in the world — but I'm leaving it up to you, because I love you that much.”

Sadly, even though Jesus has already done the work of forgiveness, many people don't activate that forgiveness.

Christian television pioneer Jerry Rose illustrates this point by telling of his father's final days in a Texas nursing home. The workers organized bingo games for the residents, and the winnings — in “bingo dollars” — could be spent at a little store inside the nursing home itself.

So one day Jerry was visiting his father and searching for a handkerchief or what-not, and he came across a stash of bingo dollars in his father's dresser drawer.

“Dad, why don't you spend these bingo dollars?” he asked.

“Aw,” the old man growled, “their prices are too high down there.”

“Dad, spend these dollars,” Jerry protested. “They have value. There's a fortune in bingo dollars in here! They're not doing you any good in the drawer.”

But the old man was resolute.

Months later, he died, and Jerry returned to collect his father's belongings. In that same dresser drawer, he found the same hoard of bingo dollars — but even larger now. The price had been paid in advance, but the old man had never cashed in.

The forgiving work of our Lord is already done. Whether we realize it or not, whether we access it or not, it's done — it can't be more *done* than it is.

Jesus forgives, and our faith just *activates* that forgiveness.

He gave us the power to blow him off — the freedom to leave our bingo dollars in the dresser drawer. The power to reject him.

We control our future. We choose to give our lives to Christ. We choose to turn over our past, our present, our future to him.

Or we don't.

It's up to us.

One day a young man came to my office and asked me a very revealing question: "If I want to trust my life to Christ, what should I do?"

It's a revealing sentence because of the verb: *do*.

The greatest lie that Satan has sold to human beings down through the centuries is that you have to *do* something to get forgiveness for your sins and get right with God. *Do this, don't do that. Do good deeds. Avoid this list of activities. Act right. Be a good do-bee. That's what it's all about.*

Organized religion has played into the devil's hands on this: What do you have to *do*? Be a member of this church. Subscribe to this doctrinal statement. Give a certain amount in the offering. Put in a certain number of hours volunteering for good causes. Don't wear this kind of clothing. Don't wear your hair a certain way. Obey this policy on jewelry and makeup. This kind of entertainment is okay, this kind isn't. These foods are OK, these aren't.

All of these stipulations may be well and good — may be healthy, may be constructive — but they don't have the tiniest effect on your forgiveness from sin.

Jesus says it's all about *faith*.

In fact, **Ephesians 2:8,9** specifies that it's all about faith, *not* works. **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works..."**

Jesus minces no words with the sinful woman at the Pharisee's house. **"Your *faith* has saved you,"** he tells her. It wasn't the expression of remorse she had engaged in, slathering his feet with her tears, her hair, her perfume. It wasn't any ritual that had saved her. It wasn't a recital of certain magical words. Her salvation came — and our salvation comes — through an act of the heart, pure and simple.

The sinful woman had simply acknowledged that she was a sinner. That she needed a Savior, someone to save her, someone to help her. And that *only Jesus qualified*. In other words, she believed that what Jesus said was true. She was willing to take him at his word. She trusted him to be telling the truth. With that realization, that act of the heart, she could say, very simply, *I see that you love me; I know I don't deserve it, but thank you.*

That's faith. That's all it is. Taking Jesus at his word. Trust him to be telling the truth — about your sin, about your need for repairs, about his desire to fix you, about his *ability* to fix you ... if you simply let him.

From that moment, your faith has saved you.

I'm glad Jesus said it's faith, and not church membership. Not bloodline. Not education. Not adherence to the rules. Just faith. I'm grateful that it's so simple. It's something anyone can do. I don't need a college degree, I don't need a church background. I don't need to be a certain color, or dressed to a certain fashion standard.

Do you have a friend who feels they need to be "better" before they can follow Christ? Maybe God will arrange an opportunity for you to tell them what Jesus said to the

woman in Luke 7: Your faith saves you! Only faith can make it happen — and faith *alone* is what makes it happen.

But then what?

My faith saves me. Jesus draws a line through the calendar of my life. And—?

I retreat into my former life?

I go about my business as if nothing is different?

I slip back into my job and hope nobody notices I've changed?

Or maybe my salvation is just fire insurance? When I die, I have the confidence that I'm going to heaven, but day to day, it's no big deal?

Did Jesus forgive the woman's sins and then say, "Okay, that oughta do it for ya, see ya in heaven"?

No, that's not God's idea.

The incredible gift of forgiveness — the horrible price Jesus paid in order to buy it for us — isn't only for our benefit later on. This isn't just about forgiveness for sin and making it to heaven. It's also about the supernatural power that he gives me to fulfill my divine potential every day. This gift is for *right now*.

Which is why, after Jesus told the woman, "**Your faith has saved you,**" he proceeded to tell her, "**Go....**" There was *immediate* benefit to the gift Jesus gave her!

The forgiven life — a life in Christ, under the covering of the gift of his grace — is a life with *power*. Not just the power of a thrilling testimony, but the supernatural power of Almighty God.

The Bible gives us abundant evidence of the day-to-day life-changing power that Jesus makes available to us when we give our lives to him — although not many of us access that power. But still, the power that *raised Christ from the dead* is the *same power* by which he forgives your sins, and that is the *same power* by which he guides us into wise choices and helps us achieve the fullness of our divine potential in everyday life.

The resurrection of Jesus was a feat of incomprehensible force — and that same unfathomable force is dwelling within us every single day!

Romans 8:11 declares emphatically that "**the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, [and] he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies [in the here and now] through his Spirit, who lives in you.**"

This means we have a readily available and incredibly effective weapon against the life-draining influence of sin. "**Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,**" **Romans 6:4,6** tells us, "**we too may live a new life.... Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.**"

Jesus didn't tell the sinful woman that her faith had saved her, so now she could enjoy the luxury of sitting tight — a perfect, sinless statuette on a shelf, never again risking failure.

No. He said, "**Go.**" Finally, for the first time in her life, this woman had the potential to

make excellent choices — life-enhancing decisions, informed by the Spirit of God himself!

The day Jesus saved me from my sins was the same day he saved me from the power of the enemy to control my actions and my choices. Spiritual seekers control the future — they can choose to trust Christ. In the same way, followers of Christ can decide — every day we live, every step we take — to rely on Christ’s Spirit within us for direction. Or we can decide to reject his direction. In fact, we can ignore him altogether — we don’t even have to ask his opinion. **Joshua 24:15** says I choose whom to serve. Nobody forces me. It’s an option; it’s an opportunity. It’s up to me.

But the more I rely on Christ’s Spirit for direction, the more fruit my life bears. The more valuable I feel my life becoming. The more rewarding my day-to-day existence becomes. I achieve things according to his design for me. I accomplish things he designed me perfectly to accomplish.

I wish I could wave a magic wand and persuade my non-Christian friends to jettison the most widespread lie about the Christian life, and embrace the truth: Life doesn’t stop when you come to Christ. Your *real* life *begins* when you come to Christ. You look back at your life before Christ and you say, *Wow, this is better. My life has value; it has purpose. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is flowing through me every step of the way. My life counts. It’s finally truly satisfying.*

Jesus puts it this way, in his final words over dessert at the Pharisee’s house: “**Go,**” he tells the woman, “***in peace.***”

Well, that kind of sounds like all my problems are going to evaporate when I place my faith in Christ, doesn’t it?

What *is* peace, anyway?

“If only I had a little more money, I’d feel at peace.”

“If only I could find a wife, I’d feel at peace.”

“If only I could lose my wife, I’d be at peace.”

“If only I could have a baby.”

“If only my baby would sleep through the night.”

“If only I could get that vice-president’s position.”

“If only I could be in business for myself.”

Sadly, none of these achievements leads to real peace. Each accomplishment gives way to some other need which leaves us restless.

As it turns out, peace isn’t a feeling at all.

Jesus didn’t forgive my sins and fill me with his power for the sake of a warm fuzzy feeling. He didn’t die on the cross just so I could have higher status in my social circle or greater success in my career. He didn’t sacrifice his life for me just so I could get a bunch of earthly goodies.

Jesus paid the ultimate price for the sake of getting me the one thing God wants to be sure I have: true peace of mind. This is alignment of my heart with God’s heart. A clear, open channel of communication between him and me. A perfect fit

between the life I'm living and the way he designed it to work.

I imagine life the way I wish it were, and I say "That would give me peace." I place those missing possessions and those unsatisfactory circumstances first, and peace comes second.

But God looks at peace of mind from the other direction. He says, "I can give you peace *first, regardless* of whether you get that stuff you crave, or regardless of whether your circumstances change the way you want them to."

His paradigm is disturbingly different from mine:

If you truly had peace of mind, you wouldn't need a little more money.

If you truly had peace of mind, you wouldn't need to find a wife, or lose the one you've got.

If you had real peace of mind, you wouldn't need a baby.

Imagine having such genuine peace of mind that even getting up with the baby in the middle of the night didn't rattle you.

If you had the kind of peace that I want you to have, you wouldn't crave that vice-president's position; you wouldn't be restless and discontent.

If I could experience the kind of peace God has in mind for me, I could still have ambition, I could still have hopes and dreams and goals, but without all that anxiety, without all that ill ease, that emotional stress — because the Spirit of Jesus himself would be guiding me every step of the way, leading me into exactly the roles he designed me for, changing the longing of my heart. Not changing me into someone I'm not, but changing me into the person I was designed to be, the only person I *can* be *and still experience* true peace. True rest. True joy.

Romans 8:6 puts it very simply, almost elegantly: "**the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.**"

True peace comes from life in Christ because a life in Christ is the only life you're perfectly designed to live!

God had a dream. It was you. In the dream he was walking with you, giving you wonderful gifts. No matter what junk life threw at you, he gave you exactly what you needed in order to deal with it. You had a beautiful life together. It was a beautiful dream.

But he's given *you* the power to make the dream come true.

I control the future.

Am I making God's dream come true?