

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a warning. The sermon you're about to hear may constitute what the United States Supreme Court calls "fighting words." Our Constitution guarantees freedom of speech. Certain kinds of speech, however, aren't protected from criminal or civil prosecution. One of those kinds is "fighting words." A 1942 Supreme Court decision defined "fighting words" as words that **"are likely to provoke the average person to retaliation."** The Court was talking about words that deeply antagonize people. Well, that's exactly how many Americans, some of whom occupy church pews, would react to what I'm going to say today. It would irritate them to no end and they'd call me a religious nut or fundamentalist bigot for saying it. But I'm not. I'm just explaining what the Bible says in the passage I read today, Acts 4:5-12.

The Source of Salvation

We see in verses 1-4 that temple priests arrested Peter and John for witnessing about Jesus. The next day, according to verses 5-7, the priests brought them before the Sanhedrin, the Court of the Jews. The priests, scribes, and Pharisees who comprised it then demanded that they explain themselves. So Peter did just that in verses 8-12.

He talked about what he called **"salvation"** in verse 12. Biblical salvation encompasses two things. The first is sanctification and abundant life now. The second is forgiveness and eternal life forever.

Now, in verse 10, Peter made clear to the Sanhedrin – and us – what the source of our salvation is. It's what we call "the finished work of Jesus." It's what He has done in the past and that never needs done again that enables us to be saved. It's four things. #1 - He came to earth in the flesh, as a human being. #2 - He lived a perfect sinless life for 33 years. #3 – He died a substitutionary death on the cross, for your sin and mine. And #4 – He rose from the dead. Jesus had to do that for you and I to be saved. If He hadn't done it, we couldn't be saved.

The Course of Salvation

Having revealed the *source* of our salvation in verse 10, the finished work of Jesus, Peter revealed the *course* of it in verse 11. Using the metaphor of Psalm 118:22, he said that Jesus is the cornerstone.

Bible interpreters dispute what that connotes but I think it means this. In ancient times, the cornerstone was the first stone laid above the foundation of a building. Thus, it became the one by which all the other stones used were measured or beveled. All the other stones used in the building, in other words, conformed to it. The meaning of the metaphor then is this. Jesus is the cornerstone and we are the other stones. And just as the other stones must conform to the cornerstone, so we must conform to Jesus. To conform to Him means something specific. We try to think, feel, and act according to His word and will in all things.

Now, notice something. The cornerstone metaphor, verse 11, is linked with the subject of salvation, verse 12. That teaches us what the defining issue of salvation is. Who's going to run my life?

Let me ask you a question about salvation's opposite, damnation. What is it that damns us to an earthly and eternal life apart from God? You might be surprised to hear this but the answer isn't "our sins." What is it then? It's rebellion. Read Ephesians 1:20-23 sometime. Jesus is the Lord and Master of the universe and everything in it including human beings. As a practical matter, therefore, we have two options before us. Conform to the word and will of the Lord and Master or rebel against it.

I use the word "rebel" because that's just what non-conformity to Jesus is, rebellion. Oswald Chambers hit the nail right on the head when he said this: **"The essence of sin is my claim to my right to myself. Nothing is so much resented as the idea that I am not to be my own master."** Oswald's statement reveals what *the* decisive issue for each of us is. Who will run my life? Jesus? Or me? If I decide to run it myself, I'm doing exactly what Satan did when he fell and, as he is, am a rebel. And that is the essence of sin, rebellion. So, if I decide to run my life myself, I'm damned. But if I decide to let Jesus run it, I'm saved.

Tragically, my dad was a classic case in point. When I was a little boy, a man whom my sister and I called "Grandpa Peterson" lived with us for over two years. But he wasn't our grandpa. He was a homeless man dad brought home one day. Similarly, we often had a stranger for dinner, a person dad picked up off the street and gave a meal. He owned a small neighborhood grocery store and let people charge food even when their bills were overdue. After he died, my mom discovered thousands of dollars of overdue bills, most of which were of current customers. My dad, in other words, was generous to a fault. He had a big heart and would literally give anyone who needed it the shirt off his back.

But as generous as he was, I'm grieved to say he's spending his eternity in hell. The defining fact about him, you see, wasn't that he was a generous giver. It was that he was a rebel. He wanted to run his own life and did. Rebellion against Jesus trumps generosity, or any virtue, every time. It's the essence of sin and damned my dad.

I share that because he illustrates, by way of contrast, what the course of salvation is. It's conformity to Jesus. It's deciding to let Jesus run our lives and doing so.

Jesus Is the Only Way to Salvation

That then is Peter's message to the Sanhedrin and us in verses 10-11. Both the source and course of salvation are centered in Jesus. Or to say it another way, Jesus is the way to salvation.

Having made that point in verses 10-11, Peter went on to make this one in verse 12. He's the only way to salvation. He isn't just *a way* to it. He's *the only way* to it. There is only one way to salvation. It's choosing to let Jesus run our lives.

Sadly, most people, including the church, don't believe that. They believe just the opposite instead – that there are many ways to salvation. Oprah Winfrey illustrates what I mean. She claims to be a Christian but believes this: **"There couldn't possibly be just one way (to God). I'm a free-thinking Christian who believes in my way, but I don't**

believe it's the only way, with 6 billion people on the planet."

Winfrey represents what most people, even the churched, believe. Last year, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life surveyed 35,000 adults with regard to their religious beliefs. The results are shattering. 70% of Americans with a religious affiliation and 57% who attend evangelical churches like ours believe that many religions can lead to heaven.

But Winfrey and all the rest are simply wrong. No one comes to salvation through Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, a new age channeler, or even Shirley MacLaine. There is only one way to salvation and it's Jesus.

That's the truth and we need to live consistently with it. We live consistently with it by doing two things.

Be Humble

First, be humble.

In preparation for this sermon, I read ten tributes to Farrah Fawcett that mentioned her being in heaven. Actress Jaclyn Smith, for example, said: **"Farrah had courage, she had strength, and she had faith. And now she has peace as she rests with the real angels."** A young man named Kevin Morin said: **"I have never seen a more courageous, brave, intelligent, and fearless woman. You have your wings to watch over those you love now."** Those two tributes are typical of the ten. Notice something striking. All mentioned admirable qualities of hers. None mentioned Jesus. She's in heaven, in other words, because of what she was and did. It had nothing at all to do with Jesus.

That illustrates what most secularists think. They themselves are the way to salvation. They aren't all that bad. So they're able to be and do things that make them good enough to deserve salvation. They don't need Jesus to save them. They can save themselves. They're brimming with pride and don't want any favors even from Him. They'd rather do it themselves. They'd prefer that they, not He, be the way to salvation.

But they, and we, aren't. It's a blow to our pride but we're helpless when it comes to earning salvation. We're so bad that there's nothing we

can be or do that makes us good enough to deserve it. We can't save ourselves. We need Jesus to save us. So let's be humble and rely on Him not us. We do that by making a specific decision, to let Him run our lives. We intend to learn and do all that He says. God then can and does save us even though we don't deserve it.

Be Brave

We live consistently with the truth that Jesus is the only way by doing a second thing. Be brave! It's takes courage, and I mean lots of it, to believe and proclaim that.

That's because you and I live in a culture that is enamored with multiculturalism, diversity, pluralism, relativism, and political correctness. Those things represent a worldview, one that makes tolerance – which is accepting all lifestyles and points of view as equally correct - supreme. Intolerance, therefore, is the worst possible offense. It's so bad in fact that it won't be tolerated. That drips with irony doesn't it. Our culture tolerates everything but intolerance.

An attorney friend once asked me, **“Do you really believe that your way is the only way to heaven?”** **“It isn't my way but God's,”** I answered, **“And, yes, I believe His is the only way to heaven.”** To which he replied, **“That's an arrogant and bigoted point of view.”**

His take on that is typical of secularists, which is why we have to be brave to believe and proclaim it. But intellectually we can be. That is in fact the key to courage. It's understanding that our point of view is defensible, more so than that of the secularists who attack it. There are two things we need to understand about our point of view, both of which I shared with my attorney friend.

First, it isn't arrogant. It's humble. I asked him the question I ask everyone when discussing ideas and beliefs, **“Why do you believe what you do?”**, in his case, that there are many ways to salvation. He candidly replied, **“Because that's what is right and fair.”** I explained in response why I believe what I believe. It's because the Bible, which

claims to be God's word, says so, in verse 12. I then said this: **"Your authority for believing that there are many ways to salvation is yourself – what you think is right and fair. My authority for believing that there is only one way, Jesus, is the Bible – what it says. I submit to an authority outside myself. That is humility. You, on the other hand, make yourself the authority, actually equate reality with what you think. That is arrogance."** Our point of view is defensible because it isn't arrogant. It's humble.

It's defensible for a second reason. It isn't bigoted. It's exclusivistic. I said this to my attorney friend: **"You think my point of view is bigoted because it's exclusivistic, but so is yours. Yes, it's true. My point of view *excludes* yours. If mine is true then yours isn't. But your point of view *excludes* mine as well. If yours is true then mine isn't. You calling me bigoted is like the pot calling the kettle black. It isn't a matter of being bigoted but of being exclusivistic, which every religion and point of view is."**

Do you get what I'm trying to say? What we believe and proclaim has intellectual integrity. So, Christians, be brave. Don't back down. When your demonized and despised, as you surely will be, love people but don't back down. Stick to your guns and boldly declare it, **"There is only one way to salvation and that way is Jesus."**

Conclusion

I leave you with the words of Kuting Theinshcwe, a lifelong Buddhist who became a Christian at the age of 54. His conversion scandalized his family and town and made him an outcast. But Kuting stuck to his guns and declared to anyone who would listen: **"This Jesus – He is something. He is the way, the truth and the light; no one comes to the Father but through Him."** He was quoting John 14:6, which is a companion to Acts 4:12. As Kuting discovered and so will we, those are fighting words. But they're true. So, let's do what he did. Believe and proclaim them anyway. Jesus is the only way to salvation!