

It's often said we'll be met at the gates of heaven—usually by “St. Peter” in the jokes. Ever wonder what he'll say to you when you get there. I know exactly what he'll say to me. “You look just like Uncle Buddy!” That's my chief characteristic. And I do see it in the mirror every morning. I look more like him every year, especially on top!

What I wish people could say is that I *am* like him. Somebody said yesterday he expected me to crack a joke or say something silly. He was saying, “you look like him, but you're not like him.” I wish I were. Especially that I'd lived my life like he did.

When Janie asked me to speak this morning, I was honored, though I didn't know what I'd talk about. Some of you have asked me if I'd be preaching today. Well I'm not a preacher. I'm a computer guy. So I decided I'd tell you something about this guy—you don't know very well—who just looks like Uncle Buddy. And I want to tell you about something important I learned, maybe the *most* important thing I've learned.

When I got to age 39, I'd had a lot of experiences—had a lot of success—made a lot of mistakes. I'd been raised in a Christian home, a very strong Christian home. I knew a lot about the Bible before I could read, from the Bible stories Mother read to me and Dan. And we went to church at least three times a week.

I was baptized when I was eleven. But it wasn't real. As a teenager, I started to do and think things contrary to that teaching, and I found I could get away with it. I could be one way at home and another away from home. And over a short time, my conscience got dull. It didn't bother me much at all.

In high school, I fell in love with a girl at Church, and we hit it off great. But just before Christmas in our senior year, she got pregnant. I was actually happy about that. We did love each other, and we had no idea what hardships lay ahead. And the son we had was and is a real blessing.

After college and a year of graduate school, which were exhilarating though very taxing and hard on my family, I got a job with IBM. I can't imagine a more perfect career match. I was fascinated by computers—still am—and I worked very well in

Big Blue: got raises, won awards, got promoted—and commanded respect from my friends, who mostly didn't understand the “electronic brains.”

I was *too* fascinated by them. The job absolutely consumed me. I spent way too much time at work—far too little with my family. I didn't have any balance, and I didn't have any margin. It was exhilarating—most of the time—but in the grand scheme of life, very counterproductive.

But between high school and college, I'd started to outgrow God. I went to College as a hypocritical, wavering believer, but by the end of the first year, I was a convinced agnostic. Lots of teachers encouraged that, even in those late 50s. Then one day a friend said “Come on, Bob, an agnostic is just an atheist who's afraid of goin' to hell.” Well I couldn't be that, so I stopped calling myself an agnostic. I became an atheist. Some people say there's no such thing. They're wrong. I was firmly convinced there is no God. And I tried to convince others of that.

A few years into success with IBM, I decided I'd outgrown not only God, but my wife. We divorced—or rather I divorced her—for no good reason, and after doing some pretty bad things. She never wanted it, and it took her a long time to recover. (Praise the Lord she found a good man and has been happily married a long time.) And, of course, it did great damage to our boys.

Then, I did all the things you'd expect from an atheist who'd been married all his adult life, and it was great fun—for a while. Fortunately, I met Barbara, and she rescued me from all that. We married after a six-month courtship, merging our families—her three girls and my two boys. We had a good time with that, and my family has been a wonderful blessing to me. Barbara and I have been married almost thirty-four years now—but not because I've been a wonderful husband and father. I surely haven't, but I have worked hard to provide for them and loved them deeply. We're all pretty close today.

So at 39, I thought of myself as a pretty cool guy: successful in business, at least OK as a husband and father. I'd rationalized most of the mistakes of my life, and all in all, I was fairly happy and secure. I wasn't in trouble or searching for a solution to a big problem, feeling guilty or a failure, worried about the future, or looking for any kind of psychological crutch. And I certainly wasn't looking for *God*.

I'd been in management eight years by then. People who worked for me thought I was pretty harsh. The best performers liked working for me, but most people thought I was unreasonably demanding, short tempered, intolerant of even small failures, and sometimes pretty abusive. They were right.

I got promoted to IBM Branch Manager in Chattanooga, TN. I loved that job, and that town. We lived in the best neighborhood, joined the club, all that. And the business did well. Branch of the Year in the Southern Region my first full year. I continued to overwork, and that caused some real tension in our marriage. But overall, life was good. It was what I'd planned, what I'd chosen. I could never have imagined the turn it would take.

One day I went to be introduced to a customer, John Wright, the president of a bank. After the pleasantries, he handed me a laminated, computer printed IBM card. Its title was "The Creed of American National Bank." Ten items. I remember only the first one: "We want to run this bank according to Christian principles." I didn't ask him to explain that; in fact, I chuckled to myself and thought, "Boy, this really is the Bible Belt." But I thought a lot about it later that day. What did they mean? Just a Bible Belt PR gimmick? If not, how would it matter to their people, their customers, their suppliers like me?

As an atheist I hated to admit it, but I knew it *would* make a difference. At least I knew it meant John would be honest, ethical. I could trust him. I thought about my father and the difference his Christian faith made in his life, the Beaver family and the values their faith and living their faith had passed on to their children. I realized I hadn't passed those values and principles on to my kids. I hadn't even thought they were good. I wondered

what they'd pass on to their children—without any of the base I had, and my cousins had.

But it also meant John would be in church. In fact, a lot of my customers would be in church. In fact, some had asked me what church I went to, and been obviously sorry to hear me say I wasn't a "religious person." I wondered if that would be a business problem.

Maybe I could handle that problem by just going to church. I'd been a church-going atheist before; why not now? And I could surely make some good business contacts if we went. Barbara was quite surprised when I said, "Let's go to church next Sunday." She'd been a believer all along, but the subject was off limits in our house. ("Don't try to talk us out of it." "OK, don't try to talk us into it.")

That's right, I went to church to solve a business problem and to make business contacts. But I also kept thinking about John Wright and the real value of Christianity to my family.

It was a beautiful day and a pleasant experience. At the coffee time, I did meet some of my customers, and they seemed very pleased to see me. This just might work! It meant no more than that.

The next Monday, Barbara called my office to say some people from the church wanted to visit us the next Wednesday night. "Oh no, not that," I said. "I don't want them to try to convert me. I just want to go to their church." "What'll I tell them?" she asked. "They just want to welcome us." "Well, OK, but I'm not going to lie to them. I've got to tell them what I think." She said, "OK, just don't embarrass me too much."

I did tell them, and they just took it in stride. We talked about an hour and a half, and toward the end, one of them, a young woman named Katherine Kelly, told us how she'd met Jesus, knew him personally, and how much peace and joy she had in her life since that time. Now, I couldn't repeat much of what she said, but I was impressed by it then. I didn't have what she said she had. Was she telling the truth? Why would she want to make such a thing up? And

come to my house to tell me? Could there be something to this Christian stuff after all?

Sunday morning, I woke up with a headache. That was a perfect excuse, but somehow I wanted to go to church again. During the first hymn, Jesus introduced himself to me. It wasn't an audible voice, and I didn't see any light or anything, but he was there with me, at that moment. Inside my head, as clear as any voice, I heard him say, "I'm real. It's all true. I'm alive, and I love you. I want you back. I've been waiting for you." That's all he said. That's all he had to say.

You might say, "Well, you were feeling good about being there. How do you know you didn't tell yourself those things?" First, it was a total surprise. I would never have come up with any such thoughts on my own. Second, it had no relation to what I'd been thinking about Christianity. Nothing about the practical significance of living right, or about my Dad or Mom's family or John Wright. Nothing about science vs. the Bible or any of the intellectual problems I had back in college. Third—and you just have to trust me on this one—it wasn't like the normal thoughts I have. It was a communication from another "being," another person. John Wright had helped me get ready to hear him, but Jesus did the talking.

I felt like such a fool. I'd denied his very existence for twenty years. I'd rationalized away all my mistakes and wrongs. But I suddenly saw how I'd messed up my life by ignoring him, deliberately doing things I knew he wouldn't want. I knew for the first time what the word "sinner" means, and that I am one. I felt a deep, deep sadness, remorse, guilt.

But I remembered what to do. While everyone kept singing, I told him that I saw, I felt, I knew what a sinful man I am, not deserving of his favor at all, not fit to be a man of God. I asked him to forgive me and to come into my heart and my life, to clean me up, to make me his man, to show me what he wanted me to do.

Then I felt such joy—like I'd never felt before. A warm, peaceful sensation started at the top of my head and flowed down through me. My headache went away. My eyes filled with tears, and through

the rest of the song I just thanked him for showing himself to me, the last one who deserved his forgiveness.

That feeling of peace and joy hasn't left me. Sure, I've been down many times in these last twenty-six years and had some serious disappointments. But Jesus has never left me. He's been there to talk to, to guide me, to take care of me and my family, to help me become more like he wants me to be.

And it set me on an entirely different course. I've been changing ever since, but the changes were mostly not gradual. I needed to study and learn from others what to do, of course. But I didn't have to figure out what to be. No attitude adjustment period. No behavior modification training. The Holy Spirit began acting immediately.

At work, people saw a radical change. Overnight, I went from caring about the business above all to caring about them, individually, personally. Several of them told me I was like a different person. My secretary said she'd never seen a person change so much.

And I really mean a different course. I went from pursuing success to pursuing goodness—not my own, but that of Jesus. I wanted him to become the master of my life. I wanted to be with his people, the church, and to study his word, the Bible. I wanted to live my life his way, not my way, whatever that meant. That's led to the most incredible freedom—from worry, from pressure to achieve, from fear of death, from doubt about myself.

Well, not completely and not immediately. I had another big lesson to learn. Something I'd never learned despite years of Bible study, Sunday School, and hundreds of sermons.

When I was a little kid, I thought Christianity was an ethnic group. We were all Christians, weren't we? But a little later, I came to see it as a code of conduct—do's and don't's—mostly don't's it seemed. A set of rules that have to be obeyed, and I wasn't very good at obeying them.

And for some time after that day in Chattanooga, I worried about how I'd measure up...knowing in my heart that I wouldn't. I'd heard many sermons from the book of James: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ... In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." What I heard was that my actions—my performance—are of prime importance to God. Jesus told the young rich man he must sell all he had, give to the poor, and follow him. The Apostle Paul said he had to strike his body daily, to bring it into subjection. Moses tells us in Genesis that Abraham would *actually* have sacrificed his son, Isaac, just because God told him to. As a young Christian, I felt like Timothy, when Paul told him, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed." I expected to be ashamed.

And then that parable, the one in Matt 13:45. Don't turn to it, because I'll read it from The American Guys' Version:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a sports entrepreneur looking for winning teams. When he found one team with great talent, first-rate coaches, in a big city full of avid fans, and a new stadium—the perfect team—he went and sold all his other teams and bought it."

Maybe you're more familiar with the old translation.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he sold everything he had and bought it."

I found that parable quite disturbing. Maybe you do, too. The kingdom is *very valuable*. No problem with that. But the parable said to me that those who would possess the kingdom must give up *everything* for it. Would I ever be able or *willing* to do that? Would I ever measure up to God's demands? Jesus said his burden is light—that he will give us *rest*. But in my heart, those promises were always obscured by *the price of that pearl*.

Do you feel that way? Maybe you're trying to buy the pearl, but you're falling short, so your enthusiasm is flagging. Maybe you've given up on it, like

I had. Resisting its demands, you've found a way to believe it's not true. Maybe you're having trouble trusting a God who'd ask you to do the impossible. Maybe you're a somebody who's looking at Christianity. It looks attractive—you might even call it the perfect ball club—a pearl of great value. But you worry about the cost, about "selling all your other holdings" to buy it. Why attempt something you know you'll fail at?

One evening I was talking to my friend Melanie about our Christian lives. She's a dear friend whose wisdom has helped me a lot. Melanie told me something pretty personal, about a struggle she'd had a few years ago, and that somehow opened the door and gave me the courage to tell her my problem—how inadequate I felt in the face of God's expectations. She said, "Oh my, we're all inadequate, aren't we? But praise the Lord our performance isn't what it's really about."

"It's not?" I thought. "I think the Bible says it is?" And all those scriptures came to mind. I said, "How can that be, Melanie? The kingdom is a pearl, isn't it? So valuable we have to sell all we have to buy it."

What she said then is that most important lesson I said I'd share. It changed my life forever. "Oh, dear friend," she said, "No wonder you're feeling inadequate. You've got that parable *so wrong*. No one could ever raise enough to buy the kingdom of heaven. You're not the merchant wanting the pearl. It's just the other way round. *He* is the merchant. *You* are the pearl! The Kingdom of Heaven is like that."

We can't even imagine what he gave up to come here that morning in Bethlehem, to be one of us. But we know it was all he had. Whatever the Son of God had in heaven, he gave it all up. There in that manger he had nothing at all—no possessions, no abilities. He couldn't stay alive without the care of a teenager and her bewildered husband. For at least a week, he couldn't even see. And he did it to pay my debts, to buy eternal life for me. For *you*. The creator of the

universe traded everything he had...to have *you*...with him *forever*.

If that's news to you, you have to admit it's pretty good. If you're honest, you know it's better than anything else you can imagine.

It's the good news people have celebrated for centuries—not that God became a man to lay rules on you, to give you impossible ideals to strive toward, to tell you how to get through a tough boot camp of life—but that he traded everything he had, to have *you* with him *forever*. He bought you—like that pearl—to love, to care for, to enjoy. He bought your freedom. Your freedom from guilt for your mistakes and deliberate wrongs. The right to join him in a wonderful, peaceful, joyful, eternal life.

All you have to do is deliver what he bought. It's your choice. For my part, I wanted to give him what he bought, and it was the best decision I've ever made, by far. It will be your best decision, too. If you're losing heart because you don't measure up; if you've given up because you feel his de-

mands are unreasonable; if you've left him; if you've never accepted his gift at all; for whatever reason you feel *you* want to give him what he bought, pray this prayer with me.

Lord Jesus, I marvel that you could think of me as a pearl, much less one of great value. But I marvel more that you would give up all you had to buy me. What an overwhelming thought! Thank you for showing me how deep your love for me really is. I know I'm guilty of all kinds of wrongs, and there's no way I could, on my own, make myself right with God. So I want to accept your gift—to let you pay my debts—to give my life to you—to let you buy this pearl. Come into my heart and change it. Clean me up. Make me the person you want me to be. Show me how to live better, and prepare me to live with you forever. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer for the first time, tell somebody. Let's talk about how you can take the next steps, and start *being* and *feeling like* the pearl your Lord gave up everything to buy.

Now, we're going to celebrate this great gift he gave us, in the way he asked us to. The wonderful wisdom of this memorial, and its great superiority over other monuments is expressed in this little poem:

Men have often tried to be remembered long by posterity.
They have built in stone, but time goes on, and their names are gone,
Except in books no one reads.

We see the works of sculptors' hands standing everywhere in the land,
But they look the same. Do you know their names or why their fame?
Strangers ask, "Who was he?"

But one memorial has survived. It towers over these wrecks of time.
People everywhere stop and stare and its meaning share.
It's fresh and shining and clean.

This monument that's stood so long is not made of anything men think strong,
Just some daily bread, table wine, and a single line:
"When you do this, remember me."

Communion