

There are several versions of the story of the man who travels far, far away to Nepal or Tibet seeking wisdom or peace or salvation from the wise monk sequestered in a hermitage at the top of a perilously high mountain.

My favorite version of the tale comes from the 1980 movie *Caddyshack*. Bill Murray is a manifestly deranged groundskeeper at a country club's golf course. He tells the story of traveling to Tibet and caddying for the Dalai Lama at a Himalayan golf course.

*"So, I'm on the first tee with him. I give him the driver. He hauls off and whacks one - big hitter, the Lama - long, into a ten-thousand foot crevasse, right at the base of this glacier. Do you know what the Lama says? Gunga galunga... gunga, gunga-lagunga. So we finish the eighteenth and he's gonna stiff me. And I say, "Hey, Lama, hey, how about a little something, you know, for the effort, you know." And he says, "Oh, uh, there won't be any money, but when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness." So I got that goin' for me, which is nice."*

The apostle Paul gives quite a different account of the quest for wisdom or peace or salvation or total consciousness, for that matter, in our account from his letter to the Romans this morning. It appears that the trek for salvation is much shorter.

Stringing together some quotes from Deuteronomy, Paul says, *"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven (that is to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss (that is to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.'"* There is no need to ascend into heaven or even ascend a mountain to go looking for salvation, because salvation has come looking for us. The word is near – so near that it is on your lips and even nearer – in your very heart.

When I was a fairly new convert to Christianity, my friend Drew and I were explaining what we thought were the ins and outs of the faith to a mutual friend. I went on and on about what she needed to do and not do to be a real Christian – do read your Bible every day, do memorize Scripture, do pray for at least 30 minutes each morning, don't hang out

with the wrong crowd, don't read certain kinds of books that will lead you astray.

Drew, on the other hand, simply told our friend about the God who loved her in her sin and about the God who would never forsake her no matter what she did. At one point in this conversation, our friend held her hands over her head and said, "Paul, you make Christianity seem like it is up here, hard to reach." Then she brought her hands down in front of her and opened her arms wide and said, "Drew brings God right down here." Well, she and Drew were exactly right. As Paul says, "*The word is near you.*"

Clearly, this word of salvation is not achieved by the law, by do this or not doing that, as I was indicating. This means that our salvation doesn't come from any kind of personal quest or achievement. Or as the scripture describes the law, "the person who does these things (follows the demands of the law) will live by them." This road to salvation all revolves around the self – how do I justify myself?

It may be, in fact, good to do all those things that I told our friend. And surely it is good to follow the Law that God gives. But the problem is that we either can't follow all the demands of the Law perfectly, or we think we have followed them enough to justify ourselves, or we won't follow them because there is something in us that wants to do the exact opposite of what we're told. Anyway, it never works.

I'd like to share a really pathetic domestic scene by way of illustration of how the law plays out in a regular life way. Several years ago I was yammering away at my then 7 year old daughter about what she needed to do. Get ready for bed, finish up your ice cream, get in the bath, stop messing around, don't chew with your mouth open, get your elbows off the table, stop interrupting, leave your brother alone, stop feeding the dog from the table, for heaven's sake stop yelling - we can all hear you, clean up your room, feed your bunny, and hurry up, right now, get a move on. (As you can see, I hadn't learned much since my newly converted days!) She interrupted my harangue and said, "Dad, Zip it!" At the time her comment cost her 5 days of no TV. But in retrospect, I really don't blame her.

I was the law to my daughter. My voice of demand and accusation came at her non-stop. After awhile, all she wanted was the voice to shut

up – zip it. Sadly, much of Christianity has turned into “do this and you will live.” The good news has become yet another version of behavioral bookkeeping. This is why the verb “to preach” is now uniformly pejorative. “Papa, don’t preach” (as the song goes).

I understand that everyone, including me, is on the lookout for a way to regulate behavior, but the problem is that if that way had worked, we would have arrived at the mountaintop of wisdom and peace and salvation a long time ago.

Salvation, then, doesn’t come by law. It comes by faith. And it comes to you. It comes close to you, near to you, on your lips, in your heart. Paul’s use of lips and heart is interesting. What do our hearts and lips do? Usually, our lips proclaim what is in our hearts. And our hearts are a veritable factory of self-justification, open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, not even taking Christmas off.

In a book called *“Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)”*, researchers asked husbands and wives what percentage of the housework they do. The wives said, “Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent.” And the husbands said, “I do a lot, actually, about 40 percent.” Although the specific numbers differ from couple to couple, the total always exceeds 100 percent by a significant margin. It’s tempting to conclude that one spouse is lying, but it is more likely that each is remembering in a way that enhances his or her contribution...

The heart that salvation by faith comes near is the heart that recognizes that the whole game of self-justification is a ruse. It is a heart that recognizes that salvation by law is to walk the way of Sisyphus, the mythological Greek king who was punished by being compelled to roll an immense boulder up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this to eternity.

It is a heart that recognizes that the person that does these things will live by them, because the voice of the law never ceases. The law is a shape-shifter, always taking on another form, offering you no rest. I was recently sent a “Handy Map of Hell” whose sleeping quarters were located right in between the “crying babies room” and the “room of loud snoring demons”, which was next to the room where you lost your contact lens and have to find it. There is no rest there!

Rest and salvation comes from escape from the self. Rest and salvation come from dis-attaching from the dead end game of self-justification. The Bible calls this dis-attachment, “death to self.” The heart that dies to self is the heart that is raised to new life. As the theologian Robert Capon says *“grace cannot prevail until law is dead, until moralizing is out of the game. The precise phrase should be, until our fatal love affair with the law is over — until, finally and for good, our lifelong certainty that someone is keeping score has run out of steam and collapsed.”*

Paul says, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and is so justified... and the Lord is generous to all who call on him.” Do you notice that none of this has anything to do with your behavior, your good, your bad, your very self? It has everything to do with the God who came near to us because all our efforts to draw near to him have and always will be sabotaged by our sin. Ours is just to say “amen” or “yes, that’s right” or “thank you, God.”

God has come to you. Because when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, He drew all the world to himself, we’ve all got salvation goin’ for us – “which is nice,” as Bill Murray said. You can almost picture Jesus, the friend of sinners, holding his hands out in front of him, arms open wide, when he says to all who are weary and heavy laden “I will give you rest.”

Amen.