
SHEER PROMISE

What's the difference between a promise and a threat?

- This may seem a simple question, but consider that sometimes a threat *is* a promise.
 - "If you do this, I'll get you," is both a threat and a promise.

Consider that, "I will always love you," is a promise, but not a threat.

- That seems clear enough.
- But what if one says instead, "I will always love you if you love me."
 - This still seems to be a promise, but now it is a conditional one.
 - And lurking behind the promise is an implied threat: "And if you don't love me—of perhaps even, love me as I think you should—then I won't love you."

I raise this because something like that is going on in this going on in this gospel reading.

- "Though I go away, it is to prepare a place for you in the presence of my FATHER, and I will come back to you, and we will be united again forever."
 - That, Christians, is sheer promise.
 - There is nothing conditional about it.

But, as is often the case, the disciples don't understand what JESUS is saying.

- They mistake HIS reference to a place as a physical location, HIS FATHER'S house, a geographical, worldly space.
 - So, Thomas asks for directions that he can plug into his GPS.

JESUS then responds, "I am the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE," one of those "I AM" statements I talked about last week.

- This also is sheer promise.
- JESUS is telling Thomas and the others that they already know the way.
 - Not because they have a physical map to follow, per se.
 - But simply because they know JESUS.
 - Precisely because Thomas knows JESUS, there is room enough for him, and for them, and for all who know JESUS,
 - and that they can't get lost.

Then, however, comes the next line: "No one comes to the FATHER except through ME."

- And here's the question: Is that a promise or a threat?

This is where context and grammar become important.

- "No one comes to the FATHER except through ME."
 - A lot of people today hear this mostly as a threat.
 - And a lot of people use it as a threat against others—you know, the ones who aren't part of their group, or team, or tribe.

Sure, within these words of JESUS there is a promise about being joined to the FATHER, but that promise is immediately exclusionary and conditional.

- If you don't believe in JESUS, you're finished.
- Or even, if you don't believe in JESUS the right way (which often happens to be the way we think the right way is), your salvation may be in doubt.

Have you said “the prayer?”

- You know, the one asking JESUS into your life as your personal LORD and SAVIOR?
 - Because if you haven’t, some would say, “You’re not saved, even if you think, even if you believe that you are.”
- Of course, there is no such prayer in the Bible.”
- And there are at least eight different versions of “the prayer.”
 - But some, those who have said such a prayer, would say that if you haven’t said it, your out. A threat.

At various times in my ministry, I’ve had conversations with those who have lived with this passage as a threat,

- and, as a result, fear for the salvation of a loved one now lost to them because they are not sure they believed “the right way.”

But here’s where context matters.

- Because JESUS doesn’t stop there.
- HE continues, “If you know ME, you will know my FATHER also. From now on you do know HIM and have seen HIM.”

Grammar matters because in the Greek, the tense is not conditional, but rather is talking about an already existing state of affairs.

- The force of the sentence is promissory.
 - “If you know ME...and you do know ME...you will know my FATHER.”
 - JESUS’ words are not intended to keep people out.
 - Rather, they are to assure HIS followers that they are in, really in.

And in case we have any doubt, JESUS spells it out in further detail:

- “And from now on you actually do know HIM and already have seen HIM.”

To say it one more time, this passage is not about who’s out; it about who’s in.

- All who have seen JESUS or come to know and believe in HIM, these are the ones who have a place in HIS FATHER’S house.
 - Again, sheer promise.

But, wait a minute—the disciples have already seen the FATHER?

- When? Where?
- Isn’t that a way-out-in-the-future kind of thing?

This, perhaps, is also what Philip is thinking as he jumps into the conversation, asking to see the FATHER.

- And JESUS responds, “If you have seen ME (and let’s add that promissory character to HIS SPEECH: ‘and you really have seen me’), then you have seen the FATHER.”

And with that one statement, we are suddenly back to one of the singular themes of John’s Gospel, all the way back in John 1:

- “No one has ever seen the FATHER, except GOD the SON, the WORD MADE FLESH, who is at the very bosom of the FATHER, HE has made HIM known.” (John 1:18)
 - JESUS’ incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension are essentially about one thing:
 - revealing the loving nature of GOD (for GOD so loved the world...) in order that we may all have access to GOD’S abundant grace and life.
 - And if you believe that about the SON, then you have seen the FATHER.

See, here's the thing: John's Gospel was written at a time of theological debate over whether JESUS was the MESSIAH.

- And at times, it can feel rather exclusive.
 - But, at its core, the larger gospel which to which John gives witness resists all our attempts to make it too easy.
 - This passage, finally, is not about who's out, but who's in—all who have seen JESUS or who have come to know JESUS through the testimony of HIS disciples.
 - These are the ones who are in.
 - Sheer promise.
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And, just in case we're not sure, JESUS heaps on another promise to boot:

- "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in ME will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the FATHER."
 - All of which adds a twist to our usual conception of heaven.

When JESUS talks about going to prepare a place for us, we tend to think in very far-off, eternal terms.

- And yet, JESUS' departure to the FATHER secures our place in GOD'S presence in the future,
 - but also creates the possibility to follow JESUS, to do HIS work, and even greater works right now, in this very real and present time and place.

Heaven, for John, is as much a present-tense possibility as it is a future one.

This, then, leads me to another question, one with which I think we all need to consider today.

- Is there room enough for JESUS?
 - Is there room enough for JESUS in my life now?
 - Am I making space for JESUS in each moment of my day?

Too often, we just wait for JESUS to do something in our lives.

- Too often, we passively delay taking any action to further our relationship with HIM until HE does something for us.
 - We would do well to ask, "Have I invited HIM in?"
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Most of us are familiar with the picture of JESUS knocking at the door.

- Many recognize that it is the door of our lives?
- But, while knowing that, we wait for HIM, not just to knock, but to open the door.

If you look closely at that picture, however, you'll note that there is no door knob on the outside.

- Access to the interior requires action by someone on the inside to let JESUS in.
 - Do we want HIM to come into our lives? Really come in?
 - Is there room in our lives for HIM to enter?
 - What will we do to make room for JESUS?
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There are many that have affiliated with a church.

- They go each week...or some weeks...or sometimes.
- They give some money and attend an occasional other event.
 - But they haven't really made a commitment to CHRIST'S church.

"I have a place that I have prepared for you. I will come and take you to be there with ME. All you have to do is believe in ME and you will do greater things than even I have."

- There's a place for you here.
- JESUS offers it to all who truly seek to know HIM.
 - "If you know ME, there is a place both now and for eternity for you, and for them, and for all who know me."
 - Sheer grace.