

**Sermon Series: “The Good News for Life”**  
*The Way to Avoid Death*  
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**Sunday, July 12, 2020**

Have you ever tried to avoid something distasteful? E.g., I recall when I was little one of the foods I hated the most, with great passion, was sweet potatoes with marshmallow on top. I guess the dish had sugar added to it. The whole dish just revolted me. It was weird looking— orange, mushy, and horrible tasting, so I thought. So wouldn't you know it, every time we had a family get-together, like for Thanksgiving, someone would make this dish! And then my parents made sure I had a large spoonful of it on my plate. I think they thought I needed to broaden my horizons past Oreo cookies and Captain Krunch cereal. When the meal was over everyone got up to go to the living room and visit, except for me. My parents insisted that I clean up my plate, which I wish meant that I could dump the sweet potato concoction in the trash. Nope, they expected me to eat it all, and I refused. So I sat there by myself, until I got the courage to take a little in my mouth and get a huge gulp of milk to wash it down without tasting it. I confess that I have been avoiding that sweet potato casserole since then. I would add to that pineapples and celery. So, what have you been trying to avoid in life that you have found distasteful? Perhaps it is not food. Maybe it is a certain class in school. Perhaps the due date of April 15— or July 15 of this week!— to get your taxes in. Today we will find Jesus address a subject that we like to avoid because we find it so distasteful, and in the midst of it He gives us hope.

READ John 8:48-59 (p. 102)

**CONTEXT:** Jesus has just told the Jewish religious leaders who have opposed Him that everyone follows one of two fathers— the Heavenly Father, or the devil. Jesus’ opponents were following the devil, who is a liar and a murderer.

READ vv 48-55. “The Jewish religious leaders are greatly offended by Jesus. He has just told them that those who follow Him have God as their Father; those who oppose Him have the Devil as their father (vv 42-44). Now Jesus tells them two more things which further enrage them. First, He claims that whoever keeps/obeys His teaching will never die. Cf. 6:47-51; 14:15.” We need to consider three things from this important teaching. First, Jesus’ teaching is for those who keep/guard His teaching/word. The verb for “keep, guard” is used in 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep/guard my commandments.” The verb here is also used of those who guarded/kept Jesus’ tomb in Matthew 28:4. How do we guard Jesus’ teaching and commandments, such as loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. The ancient Jews, as some Jews today, would wear phylacteries on their foreheads which a little paper roll of a Bible verse, In Deuteronomy 6 Moses talks about writing Scripture on their doorposts. Those are good ways. E.g., I know of someone who writes Bible verses on index cards and tapes them to her ceiling over her bed so that when she wakes up in the morning the first things she sees is Scripture. E.g., I know of someone who taped Bible verses on index cards or their addresses in the Bible to his mirror so that as he shaved in the morning he could be reviewing key Bible texts in his head and meditate on them. Another way to guard Jesus’ teaching is to act on it. E.g., I recall a guy in college who decided to be sure that he shared the gospel he committed to sharing the gospel with a friend or stranger at least once a week and set aside an hour a week to do so. The second thing to note here is that the person who guards His teaching will “never see death” in v 51, with empathic “never”. This peaks our interest as particularly

relevant. E.g., as the old saying goes, there are only two things we can count on in this life— death and taxes! And of course allow me to remind us again that July 15, this Wednesday, is our new tax day! Now, what is Jesus talking about here? He speaks about this elsewhere, as in 6:47-51; READ. This is a spiritual death. The New Testament speaks of two deaths, the physical death and the spiritual death. Interestingly, we live in a culture that is so terrified of death that we are death-deniers. E.g., I recall talking with a man in his 30s or early 40s years ago and sharing the gospel with him, and he said he did not want to follow Jesus, and in fact he really did not think of spiritual things and the message of Jesus, it just was not relevant to him. I said actually, the message of the gospel is extremely relevant to us. He asked me why I said that, and I said because we all die; there was a moment of silence and then he tried to explain it away, almost as that was such a far off event that it really wasn't relevant. That was about 20 years ago, and I wonder what he is thinking now. But Jesus is talking about the death we really try to ignore— the spiritual death, a death of judgment. It is this death that those who guard Jesus' teachings will *never* see! We will live forever. What will it be like? The third thing to consider is one word comes to mind that Jesus uses in some form— noun (δόξα) or verb (δοξάζω)— four times, and it is “glory”. God the Father and Jesus share an exceptionally close bond of love and trust and mutual honoring, as in vv 49, 54-55— and this bond is glorious, full of glory. Jesus promises that believers will escape the second death and share in Jesus' glory; READ 17:20-22. What experience have you had that you would characterize as glorious? E.g., I recall when I was in college my Mom treated my Dad to a Father's Day lunch at the Hilton Riverside; it was a beautiful day, and there was a buffet lunch with wonderful food, seafood aplenty, and I recall walking to our table after filling my plate, and the joy and peace I had on that special day. That day was glorious. I think when we come in Jesus' glorious presence, those of us who have guarded His teaching, it will be like that, but

better!

READ vv 56-59. “Second, Jesus claims not only pre-existence, but also to be Abraham’s God! Cf. 1:1; 20:28; Exodus 3:13-14; Isaiah 41:4.” Here Jesus uses the name for God in the Old Testament, where God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:13-14 as the “I Am” “I will be Who I will be” (אֶהְיֶה) and we see that name in Isaiah 41:4. It is clear that Jesus means this because of the context of the saying and because the Jews pick up stones to kill Him because He has blasphemed and Jesus does not take it back. John’s gospel begins with this (1:1) and ends with it (20:28). This idea— Jesus as God— has troubled and challenged New Testament scholars— many or most of whom are not believers— to try to understand how monotheistic Jews, which the first Christians were, see Jesus as God alongside God the Father and still maintain their belief in only one God. The usual thought in much of New Testament scholarship was, for the last two centuries, that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke we have a human, prophet, Messiah Jesus, and in John’s Gospel, written toward the end of the first century AD when the Church was mostly Gentile/pagan, Jesus was seen as God. The problem with this is that from the earliest Christian writings, such as Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), Jewish Scriptures used exclusively for Yahweh are used for Jesus, such as “every knee bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord”. There is a movement in New Testament scholarship to see the first twenty years of the Church as having seen Jesus as God. E.g., Dr. Larry Hurtado has written, “. . . An exalted significance of Jesus appears astonishingly early in Christian circles. Well within the first couple decades of the Christian movement (i.e., ca. 30-50 C.E., to make at this point in the discussion a deliberately modest chronological claim), Jesus was treated as a recipient of religious devotion and was associated with God in striking ways. In fact, as we will see late in this study, we probably have to posit a virtual explosion of devotion to Jesus toward the earlier end of this short period” (*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*

[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], p. 2). This belief in Jesus as God allows us to have confidence that what Jesus is saying about eternal life and not seeing the second death to be true— after all, He is the Authority on the matter. Have you ever talked to an authority on a matter? E.g., I recall a few months back Elena and I were driving in Oklahoma in our minivan which has over 200,000 miles on it, and a light went off on the dashboard. I looked it up in the owner’s manual, and it said that this could be a very serious problem and take into a mechanic. I called a Honda dealer and they took us in quickly, and they told us everything was going to be ok— a mechanic saw it and gave us the green light, so to speak, to drive home. And we did, and arrived safely. If we keep Jesus’ teaching and commandments, He gives us the green light to come home, and be there forever.

“What affect does Jesus’ words have on us in the way we view death?” It is true that death is distasteful like sweet potato casserole! And with COID-19 hanging in our nation’s, and world’s, consciousness, death seems to be a clear and present threat. What would Jesus say to us today about the threat of COVID-19? He would have compassion on those suffering with it, and those families who have lost loved ones. And He would tell us not to fear— for those who keep/guard His commandments are safe from the more significant death, the second death of God’s judgment. Thus He would want us to let His peace to reign over our hearts.