

## “Stairway to Heaven?” – Dr. Matthew J. Cassidy

### Romans 3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:21

Good morning.

This time of year we do a start over. We re-boot a lot of the things we do around here. Today, I wanted to share with you a lesson I heard almost twenty years ago, just driving in my car. I thought it was so graphic and clear in explaining what we do here week to week at Grace Covenant Church, that I thought I would share it with you. It was originally done by a gentleman named Bill Hybels [*of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago*]. Interestingly enough, last Easter, he gave this talk or version of it and they had these little cards that you have in your bulletin. They turn into ladders. I called Willow Creek and asked if they had any leftovers. They sent them to us for free. They are a great church.

Take those cards out and do it like this. [*perforated cards which punch out a 5” mini-ladder*]. It is kind of an I.Q. test though. It should just take a second. Watch, I am done. How about you? Anybody else done? Pop it in the oven.

I want you to have that because I want you to leave today with some sort of icon to help you understand what we are talking about when we talk of Christianity.

You can see that ladders are the main prop here. [*There is a 14-foot ladder on stage, a placard is at the top reading “God”.*] Ladders are fundamental in the way we think about life. They serve as metaphors for life because not only do they take us places where we would like to go, they do that in other aspects of our lives. We use this kind of metaphor in climbing in a lot of different ways.

#### **Ladders to the Ground**

Sometimes it is not climbing up, it is just getting out -- getting out of a ditch.

When we are stuck in extreme debt, a lot of time the figure that comes to mind is climbing our way out of debt.

Sometimes depression can come upon us or grief and it gets so deep, if you have ever been in depression, it can feel like you are deep in a pit. You feel like you have to climb out of this situation.

People who have addictive behaviors, addicted to chemicals, it is ironic actually that when you start taking drugs, you do it to get ‘high.’ Then after the addition proceeds, you do it to just get ‘normal.’ You just want to get up to grade level again. You are taking the same drugs that made you high and now you are just trying to get out of a ditch.

So, ladders get us out of holes in the ground.

## **Ladders to the Sky**

Also, metaphorically speaking, ladders get us high into the sky. Again, it is part of our vernacular. It is what we speak about quite often. So, when we are in school, we want to be at the top of the class.

When we are in the marketplace, we say we are climbing the rungs of the ladder. We want to be on top of the ladder.

In sports, we want to be on top of the ladder. If you are on top of the ladder, that means you are seated first in the tournament.

It is a good thing. We use it all the time.

## **Ladders to God!**

The reason I bring this up is because it is quite common for you and I to use that same sort of graphic when we talk about our souls. We talk about the condition of our souls or getting back right with God.

One of the first things that happens to us is we start thinking: *I have got to climb my way out of immorality. I am going to have to work hard and stop doing things like my propensity for drinking or being impatient or angry.*

Then positively speaking, it can be climbing up a ladder and feeling like I need to be more compassionate towards other people; or help those who are impoverished and do what I can to help people who are in need.

The metaphor that keeps coming to our minds is climbing up, climbing out of, and climbing higher and higher still.

So, it was with this in mind that when Hybels was having a conversation with a gentleman on an airplane, and that is what we are going to re-create here, the conversation went from sports and profession and that sort of thing to finally just spiritual things.

Bill Hybels said – *What do you think about life after death? Do you believe in life after death?*

The gentlemen said – *I do. I think there is too much evidence to suggest that man is not merely material. There is something much more to a human being that cannot be contained in synapses firing and that sort of thing. There has to be something non-physical and metaphysical. There is a soul. The soul, since it is not physical, has to transcend the life of the body. There is too much evidence to suggest that people actually live past their bodies. I believe that there is an after life, life after death.*

So, Bill said – *Do you think there is a good place to go and a bad place to go?*

He answered - *Absolutely. There has to be a bad place because there are bills to pay. If there is justice in the cosmos then people have to go there and pay because there are axe murderers and serial killers who would have no business in heaven. If everybody goes to heaven, then all is not right. I believe there is a bad place and I believe there is a good place that is heaven.*

Bill said – *Well, do you think you are going to go there, to the good place, that is?*

The guy said – *You know – I don't know. I used to go to church a lot. I ditched it in college and got busy doing other things. But listen, here is the thing, I am a good person. When it comes to my professional life, I shoot straight, I keep my promises, I am a man of my word, and I actually have a reputation in my business community of being an honest person and good and fair in what I do. In friendships, I am a loyal friend. You can ask around. I am not a fair-weather kind of guy. Good times and in bad, I will stand behind you and I will back you. You can always call me. In my marriage, as a traveling sales guy, it is very difficult to stay faithful and I have done that for the most part for my entire married life. There is a lot of really bad stuff that goes on when you are on the road and I decided not to participate in that in any way. When the kids came, I thought – Good night, look at the world around us. So, I had my wife start taking the kids to church because the kids need church. Last year, at Christmas time the church needed some money and I wrote them a pretty good check and this Christmas I am going to do the same thing. So, I guess I am doing a good job.*

Bill said – *Well, would you be interested in hearing what the Bible has to say about going to heaven and where you stand and that sort of thing?*

The guy said – *You know that? You know what the Bible says about that?*

Bill said – *Yeah.*

The guy said – *Well, tell me then.*

Bill drew on a napkin this ladder and he called it the 'Ladder of Morality.' That sounds pretty impressive. He said – *Let's pretend this is the Ladder of Morality or Goodness and Righteousness or whatever it might be. We will put God on the top rung and that makes sense. He is a perfect God. He is a holy God, which means perfect. He is set apart. He is not like anything else we can imagine. He rules. The issue here is – How do you have a relationship with God? Not just how do you get to heaven – that is the afterlife – but how do you have an intimate relationship with Him right here and right now? That is the question.*

Bill turns to the guy and says – *Where do you think you ought to put yourself on this ladder?*

The guy said – *I am not sure.*

Bill said – *Isn't this interesting that you would have a view of God such that you would not know for sure. What does that say about God? That you would not know about where you stand in the eyes of God, that God himself is playing the game in your life 'What do I have behind my back?' Whether you go to heaven or hell is like – 'I don't know. We'll see. You will know when you get there.'* That sounds like a very cruel thing for God to do but that is the metaphor of the ladder, isn't it? Where do you fit? How does it go?

Bill said to him – *Where do you think you fit?*

But wait. Before you do that, let's put some other names on that ladder that you are familiar with and people that I know about.

Bill said – *If you can think who would be the most righteous, kind of holy, really good Christian that you could imagine who is on the face of this planet?*

[This was a number of years ago when they were having this conversation.] The man said – *Well, that would be Mother Teresa, hands down. No doubt about it.*

Bill said – *Where do you think she should go on this ladder?*

The man said – *We ought to put her way up on this ladder pretty high.*

[Matt placed a placard with Mother Teresa's name on it about halfway up the ladder.] We are only going to go this high right now for reasons I will explain in just a minute.

Bill said – *I think Mother Teresa is great. We will put her up there. But let me tell you, Mother Teresa works in Calcutta with lepers and an orphanage there. We read a lot about her. She is an incredibly courageous person that never shakes or quakes even in the presence of Presidents and Kings and she tells people what is right and real and true – no doubt about it. But if you read the writings of Mother Teresa, when she writes about herself, or listen to some of her interviews when she talks about herself, she does not speak very highly of herself. It is not like self-deprecation because that is a polite thing to do at times. She really understands herself to be not necessarily a pace setter or a role model. It is common for her to go back to the early days in Calcutta when she was trying to get the leper colony and the orphanage going where she was very impatient with people and was quite pushy. While we want to put her higher up on the ladder, she would put herself less than halfway down, just according to her writings.*

He said – *Okay.*

Bill said – *Let's do something stateside. Who is the most religious person you know who is doing great stuff for God?*

Billy Graham. It just happens, doesn't it? He is American pie, isn't he? He has gone to every major continent inhabited by human beings in his career and lifetime and everything we know about him – he is wholesome and humble and he loves his wife and children and he serves God. You can tell that he does that sacrificially. There is an easier way to live life and Billy Graham has chosen to live his life for God.

But again, if you listen to interviews with Billy Graham, about himself, or read his autobiography, you will find that Billy Graham does not speak very well of himself. He talks about himself being dreadfully sinful. When Billy talks about himself being sinful, he is not reflecting back a number of years; he is talking about in the recent times. So, if Billy Graham were here, he would probably put his name certainly past halfway down here.

[Matt places the placard with Billy Graham's name underneath Mother Teresa on the ladder.]

Bill Hybels says: *Let's just talk about me. ....*

[We here will have to talk about Matt Cassidy because that is the guy teaching today] He thrusts himself into the discussion and says, *personally, for about 30 years I have been doing whatever I can and making choices according to one core value and that is just to serve God and to tell people about Christ, about what He has done for me. Once they come to an understanding in having a relationship with Christ, I want to help them know more and more about Christ. I have taught the Bible in many places and I love to be with people. I have arranged a lot of my life around just serving God and doing the right thing. ... But when the lights are bright on my soul, there is no rung on this ladder for me. I was intending to put my name placard down here but too many sound speakers block it and so the guys in charge of props this week put me here – not because they wanted to because they know me -- so that you could see it. There is a loathing inside of me that is healthy and true because I know myself. I know what motivates me and it is really difficult.*

So now, Hybels turns to his buddy and says: *Where are you going to put yourself on that ladder? Mother Teresa is less than halfway down and Billy is underneath her and I am down here. Where are you?*

He said some version of: *Well, I am stuck. I am not scoring strong on this ladder of morality. Trying hard is not getting me very far.*

Bill said the obvious – We are all stuck, aren't we? If the people we exalt can't get halfway up that ladder, then where do we stand? That is why the Bible says: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [Romans 3:23] All of us have fallen from God's holiness. See, the glory of God is up there on

that top rung of the ladder – no doubt, that is appropriate. And all of us fall short. The ladder metaphor fits perfectly.

Here is the deal. The solution of trying to climb the ladder and work harder, again, it is exhausting but most importantly, it says a lot about God if we cannot know for sure where we stand with Him.

Have you ever been in a dating relationship where you do not know where you stand with them? That is not a good time. Now what if that relationship is eternal and it is everlasting in its consequence? That is not right.

### ***The Christian Solution***

So what I would like to do today is talk about the Christian solution to the problem of the Ladder of Morality. The solution that Jesus Christ offers is different from every single religious claim in the world in the history of faith claims. It is essentially this.

God did the work in dealing with the Ladder of Morality. Jesus Christ climbs down from that top rung, grabs us and drags us back up to the top. Every other religious claim and even our intuitive sense says that we have got to keep climbing. Christianity says this, described in a whole chapter of the book of Philippians in the Bible, dedicated to this understanding, that Jesus Christ is God Himself. Put himself in skin to look like us, to be completely like us, to climb down here, to work this planet and then to die and to be raised again to be exalted and worshiped. He did that to bring us back up that ladder. He did the work for us.

### ***Substitutionary Atonement***

In theology, when you go to graduate school of theology, they teach you big phrases and I am going to teach you two phrases that distinguish Christianity from every religion in the world. It defines what Jesus did 2000 years ago. It expresses itself on this Ladder of Morality.

The first one is **Substitutionary Atonement**. Substitutionary – substitution – we know what a substitute teacher is, we know what a substitute pitcher is who comes in on the 7<sup>th</sup> inning. I think it is quite graphic and all of us have watched professional wrestling – come on. It is that tag team thing where one guy is on the turnbuckle. *Will someone come in here and take the beating?* That is a substitute.

Atonement is a legal term. It is not just a church word. It is a legal term that means justice has been paid for. Or, justice has been satisfied. So you go tearing down Highway 183 and you get a ticket; let's say it is for \$100. Good luck with that. It is not \$100 but that is a round number. When you go and pay that fine, justice is atoned. It is paid for. The debt is cleared. The crime is done away with.

So, when we say that substitutionary atonement is attached to Jesus Christ, that is Him coming down the ladder and saying – *I will tag in for you and pay that debt* – that debt being the crimes against God.

Here are some verses in the book of Romans to help us understand this. Look at how atonement is the theme of that.

Romans 3:23, 24 For all have sinned [that is easy] and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [that is the legal term] freely by His gift through the atonement [the payment] that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood.

That blood that He shed was a payment, a substitutionary payment, so that we could have our sins paid for.

### Extreme Makeover Home Edition Illustration

We see this every week, believe it or not, a version of this, a spectacular expression. On ABC there is a show called “Extreme Makeover Home Edition”. I don’t like shows that are predictable and if there is a predictable show it is this show. I don’t like watching it because I saw it once already. But if I want to be with my family, I will watch the show. Every time, it is the same story and every time, I am crying at the end. I know what is going to happen. You guys know; you have probably seen a few episodes. This bus full of carpenter and construction people with a lot of money show up to a house that ought to be destroyed and demolished because it is unfit for living in. Then the head guy, Ty, gets out and he starts the morning off with screaming into a bullhorn, saying “Good morning, Cassidy’s.” Then everybody comes pouring out of the house and they tell this dreadfully sad story of unfortunate circumstances on why they cannot afford to refurbish this house. They recover some sentimental things from the house and then they absolutely demolish the house. The family is on vacation; they go to Disneyland for a week. They start on Tuesday with a house unsuitable for living, spend a week at Disneyland, and when they get back, they literally have a home beyond their dreams.

In the early phases of Extreme Makeover Home Edition, the guys would get the house and love it but then the tax man cometh. They could not afford the house. So now the updated version is beautiful because they have a house they can’t live in; they go on vacation; they come back the next Tuesday. Ty gives them the keys to the place and then the construction company shows up with a big check and says, ‘I will atone for the payment of this house.’ It is paid for. The house is paid for. Substitutionarily speaking, someone else came in and paid it off, completely.

I watch it because I love to see people freak out. I want to see the different types of cultures and the different types of people and different income brackets – I want to see how they all express their spas-ness because that is the appropriate way to respond to somebody giving you a house for free.

There was a house done here in Austin. Some of you might have gone by it. We went by when it was being constructed and I still go by it about every four months. I just stare at this house into the windows; the windows have the shades down all the time. A lot of people are looking in on them. The reason I do that is I stare at that house and think – What is that like? What is it like to live in that house and to eat at that table where somebody gave them the keys and then someone paid for everything? They atoned for the debt, substitutionarily speaking.

I wonder sometimes if people who really know me drive by my house and stop and look inside my window and say – What is it like to be Matt Cassidy? What is it like to be free from debt to God? He must be joyful all the time because Jesus Christ substitutionarily paid his debt to God.

When we are here and if you are new to church and you see people raising their hands and sometimes they are swaying back and forth, sometimes they are just crying, it is Extreme Makeover Soul Edition. People don't know what to do. *He is holy – I am not worthy – but He still loves me.* – You can't sing that very long without weeping. That explains that.

Substitutionary Atonement only gets us to ground level. That is the ladder that gets us to nothing. When He pays our debt, He pays it all off and we are debt-free at zero. So I want to introduce you to another phrase in theology that helps us understand what Jesus did.

## ***Imputed Righteousness***

It is called **Imputed Righteousness**. The first phrase was Substitutionary Atonement and this one is Imputed Righteousness. Let's define some terms.

Imputed is an accounting term, not a legal term, that means to be credited to your account. It means to be considered or ascribe to (some translations of the Bible will say ascribe to). It means to give in that ledger an amount. What is the amount? Righteousness. It is imputed or credited righteousness.

Righteousness, a perfect synonym for righteousness is *perfect*. The word *perfect* means *righteousness* and righteousness means perfect. It means infinity. Cars now are trying to attract you by naming the entire brand Infinity. Lexus, their motto is “The Pursuit of Perfection.” Righteousness is that perfection.

Imputed Righteousness means that when Jesus Christ came down and did substitutionary atonement to pay off the debt, He did not stay down – He went back up and imputed or credited to us righteousness. He gave us in our bank account a lump sum of His standing before God.

Again, we see this in regular life. Last April a gentleman had \$150 to his name and that was all he was worth. Then on one Friday, he checked his account and because of some computer glitch, he had 89 billion dollars in there. There were ten 8's in a row and I am just rounding up. 89 billion dollars are imputed to him. That is righteousness imputed in an accounting context and for five hours he was one of the richest men in the world. It was a good afternoon for him.

This is what it means to our souls to have imputed righteousness. What does Scripture say? That Abraham believed and it was credited to him [imputed to him] as righteousness [as perfection]. [Romans 4:3]

It is more descriptive in the next paragraph.

However, the man who does not work by climbing ladders all the time but trusts in God to justify the wicked [that is substitutionary atonement] you don't get your bills paid only, his faith is credited to him [imputed to him] as righteousness. [Romans 4:4, 5]

That is why David said the same thing later when he speaks of the blessedness of man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. [Romans 4:6]

This is what gets us up to God. His righteousness, the perfection of God, is given to our bank account. Substitutionary Atonement got us to zero. Imputed Righteousness gets us to infinity. That is why some people in a crazy expression of God's love for them and what He has done in these two phrases, want to get baptized right after they trust Christ. Here is why. Baptism is this picture of giving up on the ladder and saying 'I will die with Christ' and they go under the water 'and that means He is going to pay my debt. I will rise again a new person and I will receive His righteousness.' If you want to get baptized, we are going to do that in October. Sign up, by all means.

Let me share with you one of the most intelligent human beings who has ever lived. He is like the DaVinci of science and his name is Blasé Pascal. While he was not discovering things like Calculus and Chemistry or inventing a computer, he was studying theology. He would have these thoughts. Here are a couple of thoughts about the condition of man and this whole ladder of morality. The first one is this:

Man is not worthy of God [The ladder is too tall and we can't get to the halfway mark.]  
but he is not incapable of being made worthy.

Let's take out the double negative.

Man is not worthy of God but he is capable of being made worthy somehow.

How? How could that happen? There are some laws that must be obeyed here and the first one is this: It is unworthy of God to unite Himself with a wretched man. God can't just come down here and walk among us and have a relationship with us. It is a violation of His perfection to do that. But it is not unworthy of God to pull man out of his misery. It is unworthy of God to unite Himself with the wretchedness of man but it is not unworthy of God to pull him out of his misery.

It is okay if God comes down here to pay the debt and then to drag us back up there. Then He can have a relationship with us because then He is righteous.

Christianity says this. In the big phrase Substitutionary Atonement, it is God through Christ coming down. It is through Imputed Righteousness that Jesus Christ is bringing us back up.

It is Substitutionary Atonement where Jesus Christ comes and pays our debt – gets us out of the ditch up to ground zero. It is Imputed Righteousness where Jesus is bringing us back and making us wealthy, indescribably wealthy.

Substitutionary Atonement is Good Friday. “The Passion of the Christ” – if you didn't see the movie, I bet you saw pictures or saw a preview. That beating was tagging in. He will take that beating for us. Then Easter is Imputed Righteousness and that is why we celebrate that day. That is why Easter is the center of the religious beliefs of Christianity because it proved everything that He said was going to in fact happened.

There is a verse in the Bible, interestingly enough, that is the most compressed and articulate expression of these two phrases. You tell me what it says here.

Substitutionary Atonement and Imputed Righteousness:

He made Him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin on our behalf...

Which one is that? Substitutionary Atonement

...so that we [you and I] might become the righteousness of God in Him. [2 Cor. 5:21]

What is that? Imputed Righteousness.

That is what Christianity is in one sentence; it is 2 Corinthians 5:21. Jesus took the sin and gave us His righteousness.

So, here is the thing. In the ladder metaphor here, when we keep looking at it this way, we keep trying to climb up to see God. But in the Christian view of looking at things, literally looking at things, when God sees us, He does not see this [‘Matt Cassidy’ placard]. When God looks at this fellow, Matt Cassidy, He sees this from His point of view [‘Jesus Christ’ placard]. He looks down and He sees a blood stained soul and the blood belongs to Jesus and the debt is paid. Then He looks at the account and the

account has infinite righteousness on it because it is Jesus' account. That is what Christianity is. It is Substitutionary Atonement; it is Imputed Righteousness.

### ***What are you going to do about the ladder?***

I wanted each and every one of you to have a ladder because I want in your mind before God and then literally to answer this question. What will you do with your ladder?

I have had one of these little ladders since April and it sits on my desk. I start each day and look at that ladder and I say – *Okay, how am I going to look at myself before God? How am I going to evaluate my life?* – There are days where I just say – *You know what? I am trying to get Him to like me. I am trying to earn my way into some kind of goodness.* Then I stop and reflect and I think about these two phrases. I am not kidding. Substitutionary Atonement – it is paid for by God. It is infused righteousness and I just put that ladder down sideways and lay it flat on my desk. Then I begin my day, reminding myself of what happened 2000 years ago.

So here is what I am asking. We are starting the fall off and a lot of times that is the new year in the mindsets of a lot of us. I want you to ask yourself this question.

What are you going to do with the ladder in your mind in how you estimate your relationship with God? Are you going to keep climbing, keep struggling, living your entire life in doubt as to whether or not you made it? Are you more than halfway up? Is halfway up the standard? – that is every other religion in the world, an expression of it. Maybe in your next life you will be able to get higher.

Or, you must lay the ladder down flat, you let Jesus Christ do the work, and put your trust and faith in Good Friday for Substitutionary Atonement and in Easter Sunday for Imputed Righteousness.

Some of you have been going to church for a long time. Maybe now the lights are coming on – that all religions are not the same and all gods are not one. This is what makes Christianity different. I would like for you today to entertain this thought: Let this day be the first day that you lay your ladder down. You start this relationship with God based on His terms and His work.

Some of you who have already made that decision, I want to remind you that love will compel you, not duty. Love will compel you to do the things God would have you do. That is why around here you see people do crazy things with their time and their money. They are embarrassingly generous and they just do things they could not do otherwise because life has been transformed from the inside out, from a gift from God. -- I am just trying to remind you of how to keep score today – that second group.

So for ten seconds, I am going to ask all to bow our heads and make a choice. What are you going to do with your ladder? Are you ready? Let's do that.

Dear heavenly Father,

First of all, for the people hearing this and this is new information, again, they have it all blurred and it just makes sense that they would go to this idea that You have us on this Ladder of Morality and we are trying our best and doing what we can. Maybe now we realize that is not even possible and it is cruel to keep score that way, not even knowing what the rules are.

God, on this day, [and I am leading you all in prayer] I trust that Jesus Christ, His death on that Friday, that beating was a substitution for the payment for my sins. I just trust that blood was shed for me.

Then on Easter Sunday, when He rose victoriously, that in that moment, there was a transaction made and in my moral account I didn't get a rung on a ladder that I could not obtain, I got an infinite righteousness account balance. I am trusting the promises that are made in the Bible. I am trusting in the words of Jesus Christ. I am believing in that one sentence in the book called Corinthians. This day, I am now a child of God. So there.

For those of us who have made that decision, Lord, I ask that You help us recommit to the way we live our lives. You cannot love us any more and you have demonstrated that. You cannot believe in us any more. You can't do any more. So we are going to live in the freedom and the joy that comes as an expression of love. We have been set free and paid for and given this amount of righteousness. We praise You and thank You for that.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen