

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Dostoyevsky's onion

Presented by Harry Goodhew

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be speaking to you once more. I've a question? Have you ever heard of Dostoyevsky's onion? Maybe you have; maybe you haven't.

Dostoyevsky lived and wrote in his native Russia during the 19th century. Some consider him to be one of the great psychologists in world literature. In 1849, as a young man, he was, along with others, imprisoned and sentenced to death by Tsar Nicholas I for what were considered to be politically dangerous views. A mock execution before a firing squad was staged, but at the last moment the condemned men were spared and sent off to prison in Siberia. The experience of facing death, and the rigours of imprisonment in extremely harsh conditions, brought about something of a conversion which greatly strengthened his personal faith and his commitment to the Faith of the Orthodox Church.

His 'onion' is an element in one of his great stories. It caught my imagination when I read it. See what you think

SEGMENT 1

Well, I'm talking about onions – really just one onion in particular – the writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky's onion. Here is the story from his novel "The Brothers Karamazov" as translated by David McDuff.

"Once upon a time there was a wicked-wicked woman' who died. And she left behind her not one single good deed. The devils seized her and threw her into the fiery lake. But her guardian angel stood, and thought: 'What good deed of hers might I remember in order to tell God'. He remembered, and told God: 'She pulled up an onion in the kitchen garden,' he said, 'and gave it to a beggar woman.' And God replied to him: 'Very well, take that very same onion and offer it to her in the lake, let her reach for it and hold on to it, and if you can pull her out of the lake, then let her go to heaven, but if the onion breaks then let the woman remain where she is now.' The angel ran over to the woman and offered her the onion: 'Here you are, woman,' he said, 'reach for it, and hold on' And then carefully he began to pull her, and soon she was nearly right out; but then the other sinners in the lake, when they saw that she was being pulled out, all began to catch hold of her, so that they should be pulled out together with her. But the woman was a wicked-wicked woman, and she began to kick them with her feet: 'I'm the one who's being pulled out, not you. The onion's mine, not yours'. And no sooner had she said that than the onion broke. And the woman fell back into the lake and burns there to this very day. As for the angel, he began to weep and left the spot."

I don't recommend the story as an example as to how to avoid the fiery lake. Our God has provided something far better than an 'onion' for that purpose. He sent his Son into our world to die for our sins and raised him up so that we could be right with him. As the Scriptures say: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16 KJV). It is God who saves us through the faithfulness of Jesus. We trust in him for our deliverance. But I think the onion story makes an important point. What about you?"

SEGMENT 2

Now back to Dostoyevsky's story of an onion. The theme of his onion story resonates with the words of Jesus in Matthew 25.

³¹ "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? ³⁸ And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? ³⁹ And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' ⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

So what do we have here in Dostoyevsky's story and in the words of Jesus? Is it that our actions towards others either save us or damn us? Perhaps we should answer with a very determined No, and then, with a sober Yes.

SEGMENT 3

So, we're considering the question "Do our actions, especially our actions of caring love to others, save us or damn us? And I have just answered "No" and "Yes". Why so?

Well the Bible could hardly be clearer when it says that we are saved by the grace of God, through the faithfulness of Jesus in his obedient life, his atoning death, and his resurrection from the dead, and by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Remember these words?

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—⁹ not because of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:4-10 (RSV)).

But the Lord Jesus was equally clear that a good tree will produce good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit. Recall his words about false teachers:

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every sound

*tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.*¹⁸ *A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*²⁰ *Thus you will know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)).*

Not only spurious teachers but spurious disciples demonstrate their lack of authenticity by their actions and in the same fashion true disciples demonstrate their authenticity by the character of their actions.

Both Dostoyevsky's onion and the Master's picture of the sheep and the goats turn on the nature of actions that express loving concern for others. With respect to the Lord's story, Bible scholars debate the meaning of the phrase "the least of these my brethren". Does it refer to fellow believers or to sufferers in general? While I have my own opinion on that matter I think, in the end, the question is not of great consequence. If I am to love my enemies then I will need not only to act in love toward my fellow believers but also to those beyond that circle.

So, there you have it. Are we saved by our actions? Answer, No and Yes.

CONCLUSION

Well, to conclude: God is love and God's people declare who they are and whose they are by being like him. Dostoyevsky's onion and the Master's sheep and goats teach us that a truly renewed heart will show itself in active love for God and active love for others in their need. Jesus laid down the great witnessing strategy for his church when he said "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 (RSV)). As a member of God's new humanity I am called to live in love towards all. In the community of that new humanity – the local church - I am to give, and to receive from others, that which defines both me and them as children of God – that is, love, active and sustained love.

God be with you.