

# Things You Can't Do For Others No Matter How Badly You Want To

Self-sacrifices are the stuff of movie legend. Gandalf kept the Balrog from crossing the bridge so Frodo and the fellowship could continue the quest. Obi-Wan Kenobi distracted Darth Vader so Luke and the rebels could escape the Death Star. Spock absorbed the radiation of the warp core so that power could be restored to the battered Enterprise.

The Apostle Paul considered a great sacrifice, too; and one far greater than the giving of one's physical life. He said in Romans 9:1-5, I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law...

That the thought of taking someone else's place in Hell (even a whole nation of someones) entered Paul's mind shows his depth of love for lost souls. But, "I could wish..." is the key phrase here. It's simply not possible.

This is first on a list of things that no person can do for any other person, no matter how badly he would like to.

## **You can't switch places.**

Let me say off the bat that this is a terrible notion anyway. When we study what the Bible teaches about the awful nature of Hell, and comprehend the eternal duration of Hell, we must bury all romantic thoughts and admit that this is not a decision we would ever make.

Sacrificing a life is noble (John 15:13). The group 21 Pilots sings in a popular song "...we have a list of people that we would take a bullet for...", and I suppose that might be true for a few select individuals (Rom. 5:7). I can say a lot of romantic things, but "I'll go to Hell for you," is not one of them. In fact, if someone ever said that to me, I would think they were such a poor judge of reality that I would immediately lose all interest.

As an aside, this is exactly what we contemplate when we give in to someone's yearnings that we join them in sin. When someone says, "Hop in bed with me," and we say, "Yes," it's the same as saying, "Sure, I'll go to Hell for you." When someone says, "Tell a lie to keep me out of trouble," and we say, "Ok," it's the same as saying, "Sure, I'll go to Hell for you."

Instead, let's get bold about saying, "I love you, and I'll do anything to serve you, but I won't go to Hell for you!"

Back to the main point. Taking someone's place in Hell so they can escape eternal condemnation is not possible. It's not the way God set it up. "The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:20). God is the judge of each soul individually, and we have no authority to stand in His place.

This truth is driven home in the passage about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-26,

There was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom, and the rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame."

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us."

The rich man wanted a little help from Lazarus. But even if Lazarus was in a helpful mood, he had no means of providing it. No matter how deeply our hearts break with the thoughts of the condemned in Hell, we can't alleviate their suffering once the sentence is handed down.

Transform that concern into speech and action here, in this life, while something can be done! Now is the time!

**You can't trick someone into repenting.**

It's heartbreaking when someone we know and love refuses to give up a bad lifestyle. It is good to exhort and appeal with every fiber of our being. As Paul said, "we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor. 5:20).

But we cannot use trickery to impel repentance. We might be tempted to lay on a really thick guilt trip, or even try to bribe an adult child: "Start coming to church again and I'll buy you that car you've always wanted." Perhaps you've heard of the church that simply paid all visitors \$5 for showing up on Sunday morning, saying that it was cheaper than advertising. These things are doomed to fail as soon as the car loses the new car smell and the \$5 is spent. If someone won't repent because he appreciates the cross of Jesus Christ, he will not truly repent.

Even threats are of limited value. We might warn our children, "If you keep on behaving promiscuously, you're going to get pregnant or get a disease!" This might even be true, though mankind has developed technology to prevent many of the natural consequences of sin, and sanitize immorality. Soon, there will likely be a pill that will prevent all unwanted pregnancies and all STDs.

But here's the thing—sin will still be sin! No man can erase the spiritual damage of ignoring God's word! Perhaps the best sermon on modesty is a reminder of Jesus' love on the cross. Perhaps the best sermon on avoiding profanity is just to think of Jesus' love on the cross. And again to deal with pornography, immorality, drug abuse, anger issues, and on down the whole

list to every sin you can possibly imagine. We can carp about physical consequences, but the greatest motivation to stay true to Jesus is His love.

**You can't make someone be saved.**

Have you heard this proverb?: "A man convinced against his will is of the same mind still." How about this one?: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Let us beg and please with all diligence and emotion, even as Paul did (2 Cor. 5:20). Let us keep our example upright (Rom. 2:21-24). But we must admit that we are simply messengers (1 Cor. 3:5-7). Each person must make his own decision to believe and obey. It is God who must use the good news of the gospel to convict the heart. -- *John Guzzetta*