

This morning we're going to talk about one of the most important subjects in the whole Bible, the doctrine of salvation. It's a challenging assignment for a couple of reasons:

1. Any discussion of salvation can get very theological. Before long we are using big technical words like justification, redemption, regeneration, conversion, repentance. We could spend the whole morning explaining complex terms and missing the simplicity of the gospel. There is a well-known Latin expression that warns against over-complicating things:

Sibili si ergo fortebus en ero.

Nobili no demis nobuses demis trux.

Sewatis enem cowsen dux. (Words are not always as complicated as they look!)

2. The second reason this is a challenging topic is the danger of confusion. I don't want to contribute to some common misunderstandings about salvation. This doctrine should be the source of great joy and not confusion. Even the way we talk about salvation can be puzzling. If someone were to ask you how you met Jesus, what would you say? "I got saved?" "I asked Jesus into my heart?" "I accepted Christ?" "I have a personal relationship with Jesus?" "I am under the blood?" "I repented of my sins?" "I became a follower of Jesus?"

If I only had one verse in all the Bible to clear up the confusion, I would use Eph. 2:8-9. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." This verse helps correct a common evangelical heresy, namely that we are "saved by faith." No one is saved by faith. We are saved by GRACE, through faith. God's grace is the root of salvation, faith is the fruit. God initiates our salvation, we simply respond by faith.

Why is this such a big deal? Because if we believe that salvation is dependent upon our faith, we hang too much weight upon our own human understanding and effort. When we do this, one of two things will happen and both are bad.

First, there are some who are plagued by incessant doubts about their salvation. They constantly wonder if they are good enough, sincere enough, repentant enough. This is often in response to some preacher who says, "Are you absolutely sure you are going to Heaven?" The pastor means well but absolute certainty? That's a pretty high bar. Jordan in Jr. High...

Those who doubt their salvation get saved over and over. Churches that use an invitation system inadvertently promote doubt so that people will come forward at the end of the service. Just the right music, just the right persuasive words, just the right story about the guy who got hit by a bus on the way home from church who didn't respond to the invitation and now is lost forever. Sing the chorus enough times and someone begins to think, "No one is coming forward. They must be waiting for me. Maybe I wasn't old enough when I walked the aisle? Maybe I wasn't emotional enough? Maybe I need to be baptized again." There are some people who should have their own lockers in the baptism changing room. An overemphasis on the human side of salvation has led to modern evangelistic methods designed to produce results to satisfy the ambitions of men. This inadvertently leads to doubt and confusion. I'm convinced there are some who will be surprised to find themselves in heaven. Church of Christ man...

A second unintended consequence of our emphasis on “saved by faith” is just the opposite of doubt. It is false assurance. Again, an unintended consequence of modern evangelistic efforts is that we have made the process so user friendly that all you have to do is repeat a prayer and you can punch your ticket to heaven. Did you know that 50% of Americans have prayed some kind of sinner’s prayer yet two-thirds of them are not active in any church not to mention that their lifestyles don’t differ from those who haven’t prayed the prayer. A younger generation of pastors look out at the state of the church today and are rightly concerned that many people with cultural Christianity in their background cling to assurance they are saved despite an overwhelming lack of evidence of genuine conversion. You are not saved by some magical prayer. It is not the prayer that saves.

Tragically, there are some people who think they are going to heaven but they are not. Mt. 7:21-23 records Jesus’ stern warning to those who think they are saved but are not. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*.²² Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” These people cast out demons and did miracles. This is not exactly the religious JV team, yet they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

How can I gain the assurance that I am truly saved? Can I even know for sure that I am going to heaven?

1. Salvation is an expression of God’s love. John wrote a whole letter explaining how God’s love is demonstrated in our assurance of salvation.

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 Jn. 4:10

“We love because He first loved us.” 1 Jn. 4:19

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 1 Jn. 5:13

He wants you to know you are saved because He loves you. When you love someone, don’t you want them to feel secure? God is not like Darth Vader who strikes fear in your heart and then one day says, “Oh by the way Luke, I’m your father!” God knows that the only way we will ever develop a deep love for Him is when we are sure of His love for us. Love has greater power to convert our hearts than the Law. The Law can coerce behavior but it can never change a heart. One of the motivations for the Reformation was what Martin Luther referred to as “the damnable doctrine of doubt.” The church was capitalizing on people’s doubts to make money. They sold people indulgences that would make them feel more secure about their eternal future. The fear caused by doubt produced the money to build St. Peter’s Cathedral but it also produced a harvest of self-interest, pride, fear, resentment. God wants an obedience that grows out of love.

2. Salvation is a gift that only God can give. “By grace you are saved,” means God initiates the relationship. There is a big word for this – regeneration. The Bible says... Eph. 2:1-5. Before we could ever respond to God’s love we had to be “made alive.” Then Eph. 2:8-9 says, “that (salvation) not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest anyone should boast.” If we

were “saved by faith” some would have an advantage over others. Have you ever met someone with great faith? You realize that you have the faith of a mustard seed. Well, the faith of a mustard seed is all you need to respond to God’s work of salvation. “By grace we are saved.” God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. “God’s acceptance is the power that liberates us from sin not the reward for our having liberated ourselves.” J. D. Greer

3. The only proper response to a gift is to receive it. A gift, by definition, cannot be earned. That’s a wage. Once you realize that salvation is a gift and you simply open your heart and receive it, you can be assured that you have eternal life.

I know there are some who believe you can lose your salvation but let me see if I can settle that issue for you. If you can do anything, any sin, any despicable deed, any hateful act, that requires God to withdraw salvation from you, then it wasn’t a gift and God is a liar. If God says you’re saved, you’re saved. “But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13

My goal this morning has been to comfort those who are unnecessarily troubled and trouble those who are unjustifiably comforted. If it is true that there is no more important biblical subject than the doctrine of salvation, it stands to reason that the enemy of our souls would like us to be confused about the subject. The devil wants you to doubt your salvation. If he can’t keep you out of Heaven at least he can make you miserable on earth. So let’s settle the issue.

Do you want to be saved? You can’t be saved if you don’t know you’re lost. “Saved from what?” Saved from spending an eternity separated from God and His kingdom. If you like it here, if you like the chaos on planet earth where people have rejected God’s rule, then you can look forward to an eternity of all this AND SO MUCH MORE! If you are tired of all this, accept God’s gift of eternal life. I know, you don’t deserve it. You can’t earn it. But you can receive it...right now by faith. Finally, what is faith?

A certain Roman soldier had a servant who was deathly ill. Being a Gentile, he sent some Jewish friends to Jesus to ask Jesus to heal the man. Jesus headed for the sick man’s house. Before he arrived, the soldier sent another group of friends to say, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, “I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.” Lk. 7:7-10

True saving faith involves a recognition of authority. “Lord, I am not God, You are. I don’t determine my future, You do. I can’t save myself let alone this world but You can. I resign as General Manager of the Universe and I accept your gracious provision for my sin, Jesus Christ.” If that is the attitude of your heart, then you are saved.