

Our All-Sufficient Savior

Part Two

Luke 7:36-50

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This is part two of a three-part series based upon Luke 7:36-50. I have entitled this series, “Our All-Sufficient Savior.” I chose that title because this text presents us with a glaring contrast between the sufficiency of saving faith in Christ alone, and an apostate¹ man-made system of self-justification. It is my purpose to present the glories of Christ as our all-sufficient Savior, and to expose and warn you against those who would rob you of the joy of your salvation. I also want to equip you to defend your faith in these perilous times in which the religion of self is growing in popularity within churches.

A Brief Review

In the first sermon, I addressed this question to you: *Do you trust in the righteousness of Christ alone, or do you profess faith in Christ but trust in your own righteousness?*

This question does not represent the difference between two legitimate but differing forms of Christianity, but the difference between the biblical gospel and a perversion of the gospel. For the second part of this question represents the unbiblical notion that one must contribute one’s own moral righteousness to the work of Christ in order to find acceptance with God. The second part of this question also represents the mindset by which the “leaven” of the Pharisaic teaching has seduced the minds of believers throughout church history.

And this threat remains with us today.

If you are in Christ, the second part of this question represents a threat to your peace of mind and joy in the Lord. If you are not in Christ, the second part of this question represents a gospel perversion which is a threat to your eternal destiny. For it represents a form of religion

¹ The word “apostate” means any person who makes a final departure from the biblical faith, even after many appeals by Christian leaders and others to return. This departure most often means leaving biblical truth in favor of a distortion of the gospel, and not necessarily an embracing of atheism.

which places you *not* under the saving blood of Christ, but under the same divine curse Christ leveled against the Pharisees.

I told you last time that the need for righteousness is due to the fact that fallen humanity is spiritually dead and thus devoid of the righteousness necessary to escape on that Day in which God will judge the world in righteousness (Ephesians 2:1-2; John 3:19; Acts 17:30-31). For while God is love, and he is merciful beyond measure, that mercy includes not allowing human evil to continue unanswered. How can genuine love abide evil? It cannot. God's love, holiness, and justice requires judgment upon evil.

I realize it is out of fashion to speak of sin, and judgment, and righteousness, today. But another great question presses us:

How will an unjust person ever stand before the judgment of a just and holy God?

There is no more urgent matter, for we are dealing with a matter that bears eternal consequences. The simple answer is an unjust person *cannot* stand before a just and holy God. Now, this fact would be cause for great despair were it not for the fact that God has made provision for the perfect righteousness he requires through the death and resurrection of his beloved Son on our behalf. But if you believe you can find acceptance with God by your own program of personal righteousness, you are in a state of grave delusion. You must look to the righteousness which is from God by faith alone, in Christ alone. For nothing less than the righteousness of Christ is acceptable to the Father.

The present crisis in the church today is due to the fact that decades of self-help conversions have filled our churches with people who profess faith in a "Christ" who cannot save them apart from their contribution. In the final analysis, what these people possess is a self-manufactured salvation. And because man-made religion cannot restrain the flesh, and overcome the power of sin, the stage is therefore set for that awful day when the "many" will hear from Christ, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23).

In the last sermon, I also told you that Christ is not indifferent toward those who distort his gospel. I pointed out how Jesus deliberately and repeatedly provoked the self-justifying religion of the Pharisees, and once he had their attention, he pronounced divine woes upon them, and warned his followers against the subtle nature or "leaven" of self-justification. I called you therefore to renew your clarity regarding the contrast between man-made systems of righteousness and the righteousness which is through faith in Christ, alone. For to embrace any

form of self-justification is to find yourself to be opposed by Christ, just as he opposed the Pharisees.

Finally, I told you the battle for your soul begins in your mind, that is to say, how we think about God, *and* how we think about ourselves. This is why we look to the Scripture alone as our final authority. For in Scripture alone is the treasure of the gospel preserved and presented in both its simplicity and its profound depths. The Holy Spirit is the change agent, and the Scripture is the means the Spirit uses to regenerate, renew, and transform lost sinners by uniting them to Christ. The message of Christianity is therefore *not* one of divine assistance in saving oneself; rather, it is a message of divine rescue. I cannot stress this too much.

Today I want to help you understand your place in church history. This will further help you clarify your faith in Christ alone, and also equip you to defend your faith against the growing number of false teachers touting alternative gospels to the wayward masses.

The Battle in Church History (II Corinthians 11:1-5, 12-15).

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes of his godly jealousy for these believers. He reminds them that as their spiritual father he had betrothed them to one husband in order that he may present them as a chaste virgin to Christ. But he feared that just as the ancient serpent deceived Eve, so also the *minds* of these believers were being corrupted from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ (II Corinthians 11:1-3, NASB). He says the corruption comes from those who preach “another Jesus” whom he had not preached, and the receiving of “another spirit” which they had not received, or a “different gospel” which they had not accepted — and the Corinthians were putting up with it! (v.4-5). Take a moment to consider what you just heard: Another Jesus, another spirit (demonic), and a different gospel, and, he adds, they were putting up with it “beautifully” (NASB). Just as so many are today, these believers were proud of their tolerance for Christ-diminishing, soul-damning error.

It is a staggering reality.

Later in the chapter, Paul identifies the source of this seduction as Satan who appears as an “angel of light” working through false apostles who transform themselves into “ministers of righteousness” and whose end, he says, will be “according to their deeds” (v. 12-15). I realize this is not the stuff of nice, Sunday sermons, but it is biblical truth that is critical for you to know because this diabolical deception continues throughout global Christianity. The devil is nothing

if not persistent. Paul's admonition is designed to sharpen your discernment, and to enable you to preserve your joy in the Lord by remaining true to Christ, just as a chaste bride remains faithful.

Throughout the history of the people of God, Satan has acted to deceive. His deception led national Israel into centuries of idolatry. And then Satan led the religious leaders of Israel to adopt a system of work-righteousness which blinded them to their need for Christ's teaching on sin and salvation. Therefore, when Jesus exposed and cursed the Pharisees, he was condemning an ancient propensity to rebellion in the form of idolatry. However, the idolatry of the Pharisees was not an idolatry of stone and wood, but the idolatry of the self. Earlier I told you of how the "last days," said the apostle Paul, would be characterized by a religion in which the love of self would supersede the love of God. A religion from which the apostle commands his readers to "turn away" (II Timothy 3:1-5). No dialogue. No co-existence. No compromise.

Every generation of believers must meet, discern, expose, and then overcome false gospels. We must, as Jude writes, "contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude v.3). The gospel is not an evolving message which we can mold to the demands of the changing times. It is an eternal gospel (Revelation 14:6-7), grounded in a new and better covenant (Hebrews 8:6-13), a new covenant sealed in Christ's own blood (Luke 22:20; I Corinthians 11:25). If there is anything subject to change, it is the faithfulness of those who profess Christ. This is another reason why I am preaching this series: to call you to faithfulness to Christ and his gospel.

If we have temporarily lost the advantage in our day, it is because we have forgotten the truth that the Lord Jesus and his church has always been on the offense against Satan's kingdom of lies and distortion. What is more, we have forgotten that Satan's primary means for advancing falsehood is religion. Satan's best work is found not in the low things, like bars and brothels, or in the wars and violent crime in our streets, but within seminaries, universities, and houses of worship, especially in the pulpits. The battle, said the apostle, is not against low things, but against every "high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" (II Corinthians 10:5).

Let's consider now how this has played out in church history. This is important to you because as a believer, church history is truly your family history, and this history plays a critical role in helping you understand your identity in Christ.

The Cruelty of Heresy

First of all, during the apostolic era, certain men known as the “Judaizers” entered the church touting “another gospel” (Galatians 1:6-7). These were professed Jewish converts to Christ who actively sought to corrupt the gospel by insisting that Gentiles must be circumcised and adopt other Jewish identity markers in order to be saved. Faith in Christ alone, they insisted, was not enough. Even though this false teaching was condemned at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-35), the teaching of the Judaizers nonetheless spread like a cancer throughout the apostolic mission field. The New Testament records how the apostles repeatedly condemned these men and their doctrine. For instance, at Galatians 1:8-9, Paul leveled a double apostolic curse upon them. At Philippians 3:2, he referred to them as “evil workers” and “dogs,” and the “mutilation” because of their demand for Gentiles to be circumcised (see also II Peter and Jude).

But then, as early as the second century, many of the so-called apostolic church fathers, integrated Greek philosophy into the gospel of Christ, and like the Judaizers, distorted the gospel of grace into a system of self-justification. Thomas F. Torrance writes of these men saying,

Law and obedience, reward and punishment, these were the themes of their preaching. The center of gravity was shifted from the mainspring of the Christian life in the person of Christ Himself to the periphery of outward conformity and daily behavior . . . grace was something given by God to those who worthily strive after righteousness to enable them to attain their end. It [righteousness] was something to be acquired.²

The key point Torrance is highlighting is that righteousness was shifted from faith in Christ alone, to a spirituality of striving after an *accrued* righteousness based upon works of piety and duty. As with the Judaizers, Christian righteousness “was something to be acquired.” Such teaching represents an utter denial of the Christian’s status of union with Christ and his righteousness. These men effectively reduced Christ’s saving work to an element in self-salvation — a necessary element to be sure — but not all-sufficient.

In the fifth century, a monk by the name of Pelagius became dismayed by Augustine’s famous prayer, “Lord, command what you will, and grant what you command.” In this prayer, Augustine was emphasizing his desperate need for grace. But Pelagius denied such need for grace. He began to teach that supernatural grace was not necessary to obey the commands of

² See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace and the Apostolic Church Fathers* (Eugene, OR: WIFP and STOCK publishers, 1996), p. 139.

God. According to Pelagius, sinful man retained the moral ability to choose to obey God, or not to obey. Pelagius denied original sin, teaching that Adam's fall did not affect mankind, except as a bad example; Christ came, said Pelagius, merely to teach and provide a good example.

Augustine rigorously opposed Pelagius by defending the biblical view of man's fallen condition and the absolute need for sovereign grace. Eventually the wayward monk was condemned and his teaching was declared heresy by the undivided church. But that did not end what came to be known as Pelagianism. The leaven of this teaching continued. In the 19th century, theological liberalism picked up the mantle of Pelagius in their denial of original sin, and the need for supernatural grace. In its essence, Pelagianism is a human alternative to the New Testament gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles.³ Today, Pelagianism defines 90% of Protestantism, as well as all Unitarian groups. Much of what is called Christian psychology is also Pelagian in its basic premise.

Not long after Pelagius, another 5th century monk by the name of John Cassian sought a compromise between Augustine and Pelagius by teaching that supernatural grace is necessary, but not sufficient. This is always the crux of the matter: Is grace sufficient? Cassian taught that grace is necessary, but the sinner's effort is also necessary to make grace effectual. Once again, grace was reduced to functioning as simply a divine appeal, which could not in itself effect salvation. Cassian taught that salvation or damnation rests with the sinner's choice and initiation. According to Cassian, fallen mankind is not dead in trespasses and sins, but merely wounded. Fallen mankind retains an "island of righteousness" within the sea of depravity out from which the sinner could initiate faith and repentance to which the Holy Spirit responds to bring about the new birth. In effect, Cassian made faith and repentance a work of merit which was rewarded by the Spirit's response. This means Cassian's teaching would place God in a reactive state to the sinner, rather than an active state toward the sinner. To put it another way, Cassian would have us believe it is Christ's work *plus* human faith and repentance that saves you. Faith originates within the sinner, and not God. Now, if this teaching sounds familiar, it is because it pervades most of evangelicalism.

³ I attended a seminary that commended and advanced Pelagian teaching. It was shocking for me to hear professors openly advance this heresy. I wrote a major paper in rebuttal and in defense of Augustine and the biblical doctrine, which was not well-received. I learned also that much of "Christian psychology" is based on Pelagian teaching. I also once listened to an Episcopal priest denounce original sin and the need for regeneration from the pulpit, during a service. Today, I understand this woman was simply espousing Pelagian doctrine.

Like Pelagius, Cassian's compromise of biblical doctrine was declared heresy by the universal, undivided church. But like Pelagianism, this doctrine has also continued. In the 16th century, the term semi-Pelagianism was coined to define Cassian's teachings. So persistent and prevalent is this heresy that Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and much of modern evangelicalism and Pentecostalism now hold to this view. Most all of modern evangelism is based upon semi-Pelagian teaching. But this *synergistic* (Christ, plus you, saves you) approach to justification is wholly unbiblical, and although popular today, it is no gospel at all because it places the focus upon what you do, and not on Christ alone.

Now let me summarize here.

After the groundwork laid by the apostolic church fathers of the second century, three traditions developed: 1) Pelagianism (preserved in modern Liberalism); 2) Semi-Pelagianism (Preserved in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as most of evangelical and Pentecostal churches); and 3) the biblical gospel of sovereign grace as defended early by Augustine, and later recovered by the Reformers. It may be estimated today that 90% of professing Protestantism is now Pelagian, and 8% is semi-Pelagianism, with only 1-2% of evangelical Protestantism teaching the biblical gospel of grace. This means 98% of what we call Protestantism is teaching heresy in regard to how a sinner is reconciled to a just and holy God! I realize this is big statement. But I do not make it flippantly. It comes after 20 years of theological and biblical studies and pastoral work. But it is a crisis few want to talk about, let alone do anything about. Paul Washer once compared those who deliberately avoid this crisis to those who witness a violent crime but refuse to intervene. Both the criminal and the passive observers are equally guilty. Washer is correct.

Please note: There is a world of difference between defining the gospel unbiblically as an *offer* of grace subject to your cooperation, and defining the gospel biblically as the *application* of sovereign grace which raises a dead sinner to new life and saving faith in Christ, alone. What I am calling you to do is embrace the glorious, biblical truth that God himself is the sole cause of your justification. This is a pastoral truth intended to bring great comfort and solace to troubled souls. Let me say it again: God alone is the initiating, and preserving, and consummating cause of your salvation. Let me explain.

The Source of Genuine Faith and Repentance

To those laboring under semi-Pelagianism, let me be clear. It is true that the sinner must exercise faith in Christ to be saved, but the sinner does *not* initiate that faith. Regeneration (being born of the Spirit) precedes *saving* faith (John 1:12-13; I Corinthians 1:28-30; James 1:18). What I am saying is the originating cause of your salvation is God's gracious action, and not you. May I suggest you mark the following words down in the cover or note pages of your Bible:

"Regeneration precedes Faith" The Bible is clear, saving faith is not of ourselves, it is the *gift* of God and springs from the regenerating work of the Spirit (Ephesians 2:1-8).

What is more, the great characteristic of saving faith is that Christ is the sole focus of that faith, as opposed to Christ *and* your efforts. The great, damning error of Cassian (semi-Pelagianism) is that the responsibility for salvation remains with the sinner, both in initiating faith, and maintaining that faith so as to remain saved and avoid once again becoming lost. A man named Jacob Arminius reintroduced this heresy into the churches of the Reformation, and though it was condemned by the Synod of Dort, like the proverbial bad penny, it has become the teaching in most evangelical churches today. Why is this? There are two causes: the nature of remaining sin in our flesh, and the prevalence of false teachers. But today I want to add a third cause: The aversion of modern preachers to preach the whole counsel of God.

But none of this changes the objective truth that saving faith has its exclusive focus on Christ, and is the sovereign, gracious work of the Spirit (John 3:3-21). "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," Jesus told a stunned Pharisee named, Nicodemus (John 3:6). No one initiates or facilitates their own spiritual birth any more than one does his own physical birth. True life is always a gift of God.

Evangelicals Deserting Christ

Within the last several years, large numbers of evangelicals have deserted Christ by converting to either Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Among converts to Roman Catholicism are such notables as former president George W. Bush, and Francis Beckwith, the president of the Evangelical Theological Society. Perhaps most astonishing is Hank Hanegraaff, "The Bible Answer Man" from the Christian Research Institute who in 2017 converted to Eastern Orthodoxy; a process which required he openly renounce justification by faith alone. And yet, Hanegraaff still holds his radio show. On one hand this is tragic, but on the other hand,

it only makes sense. If you are an evangelical, and already in a synergistic, semi-Pelagian system, it is an easy leap into another synergistic, semi-Pelagian system of Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. One need only add the smells and bells, icons and statues to your denial of the sufficiency of Christ.

But such conversions represent a descent into damning religion. For in Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, justification is not the gift of God which comes by faith in the finished work of Christ, but a life-long process of participating in the sacraments and adherence to fasting, feast days and good works in hope of attaining (earning) final justification. And because it is up to you, you can never know if you are truly saved. All four: Pelagian Protestantism; semi-Pelagian evangelicalism; Roman Catholicism; and Eastern Orthodoxy, are teaching a false gospel to billions of people who are bewitched by these systems (Galatians 3:1).

These systems of self-justification are no less oppressive and destructive than the Pharisees against whom both Jesus and the apostles leveled divine curses. In these systems, grace is free, but only as an enabler because salvation is up to what you do. It's crazy making. This desire to justify one's self before God is a fleshly compulsion as real as any other form of addiction, and more deadly, for it bears eternal consequences. As early as the opening chapters of the book of revelation, the risen Christ warned of "removing the candlestick" of churches who embraced false teaching (Revelation 2-3). And let me be crystal clear:

Jesus curses these systems of self-justification today no less than he did the Pharisees. To one degree or another, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestant liberalism, and evangelical Arminianism all tout self-justification, and are therefore, to be cursed, not joined.

In the next sermon, I will offer you a biblical and theological framework within which you can find safe-haven against the internal and external forces which tempt every believer to desert Christ in favor of a self-justifying religion. AMEN.

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