

Our All-Sufficient Savior

Luke 7:36-50

Part Three

Rick Peterson

Let me remind you that when we speak of justification, we are referring to how a guilt-ridden sinner finds acceptance before a just and holy God. And let me press the fact that there can be no greater concern for a person. For how one approaches this issue will determine not only one's spiritual health and well-being in this life, but also whether one will spend eternity in heaven or in hell. What then could be of more importance? Concerns for career, finances, family, friends, country, and physical health, as legitimate as these concerns are, pale into insignificance when measured against this question: Upon what basis does one find acceptance before God? Jesus said it this way, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Many speak of the priority of spiritual living today, especially those in recovery from addiction. But genuine spiritual living cannot even begin until this issue of reconciliation with God has been resolved in a manner consistent with the truth. And the Bible states that the church is to be "the pillar and ground of truth" (I Timothy 3:15). This means that God has deposited his message of saving grace in Christ with the church, and entrusted every believer with proclaiming that truth clearly and accurately. But the crisis in the church today is due to preaching a sentimental view of God that minimizes his righteousness and overstates the role of human righteousness. This form of preaching may be popular, but it is deadly to those who hear it. For when a person adopts a low view of the holiness and righteousness of God, the natural default is to develop a high view of one's own righteousness (see Romans 10:1-3). With this distorted thinking, salvation becomes about what you do instead of what Christ has accomplished on your behalf. The result is that God's gracious provision of righteousness in Christ is then set aside in favor of a man-centered, people-pleasing "gospel" that saves no one.

Therefore, in this series, I have contended vigorously for the necessity and sufficiency of the grace of God in Christ. I have said it is by grace alone we are saved through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone, with all the glory belonging to God alone. Today, I want to speak with you about how the gospel of justification by faith *alone* not only frees the sinner from the

grievous burden of self-justification and brings eternal life, but how this biblical doctrine also sets the course for the daily walk of the Christian in this present life. I want to show you when our spiritual compass is set properly on Christ alone, we may be certain our journey will end in safe harbor. No matter what comes our way, if we are trusting in Christ alone, we may declare with the old hymn, “It is well with my soul.”

Therefore, in previous sermons I warned you that any attempt to justify yourself by religious acts of piety and duty equates to an utter denial of Christ altogether. Listen please, God is not impressed with fallen man’s religious efforts. God does not bless anyone’s natural attempt to be pious. Not only do such acts not gain merit before God, they bring you under the same curse Christ leveled against the man-made religion of the Pharisees.

In the last lesson, we examined how this scourge of man-made, merit-seeking religion has plagued the church throughout her history, and how it remains a threat to you today. I explained to you that the ancient heresies of Pelagianism (the denial of the *need* of grace) and semi-Pelagianism (the denial of the *sufficiency* of grace) did not go away because they were condemned by the undivided church long ago. These Christ-denying, soul-destroying teachings remain alive and well today as practiced within theological liberalism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and most evangelical churches. This means global Christianity is in a spiritual crisis; a crisis which is evaded by most Christian leaders, and who will one day give an account to the Lord of the Church.

The Decree of God in Eternity Past

At the end of our text, the Lord turned to the sinful woman, having just pronounced forgiveness of her sins, and said, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” The questions before you today are these:

How can you know you possess saving faith?

And what are the evidences and effects of saving faith?

Let’s begin first by reminding ourselves of the *source* of saving faith. Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by reminding his readers of the exceeding blessings of being in Christ; a status which came about due to the gracious, sovereign decree of God “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:3-14). And Paul then underscores this truth by adding, “As for you, you

were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1, NIV). In other words, “This is what God did on your behalf, even while you were dead in transgressions and sins and could contribute nothing.” He then expands on this truth by saying not only were his readers once spiritually dead, they were also under the control of the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (2:2), and their previous conduct was, therefore, in accord with their nature as “children of wrath” (2:3).

By this we understand that every person operates under a spiritual influence, the only question is which spiritual influence, Satan or the Spirit of God? What we will discover later in this sermon is the evidence of spiritual influence is revealed by one’s works. The woman in our text lived a life of moral depravity, but when the time was right, God revealed his saving purpose to her, a purpose that was determined “before the foundations of the world.” But she did not respond in passivity, but in passionate expressions of devotion and good works toward Christ. And by this, we learn that no matter how far down the moral scale you have fallen, the perfect righteousness of Christ is sufficient to bring acceptance before God, and a new life in the Spirit. There is no need for moral preparation or good works of penance prior to coming to Christ. The sinner comes with the empty hand of faith. This is the good news!

God’s Intervention in History

So then, at 2:1-3 of Ephesians, Paul is making it clear that God’s saving purpose came to us at a time in which we were utterly unable to seek it, let alone merit it. And then verse 4 begins with two of the most beautiful words in the New Testament: “But God.” From verse 4 we then read how God, who is rich in mercy and love toward us, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins, made us alive together with Christ in accord with grace. Paul writes of how God raised us up together with Christ and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is breathtaking. For where is Christ? He is at the right hand of the Father. And we are there with him (See also Colossians 3:1). This is our positional status in Christ even now. And God did all this not because we were so lovable, but so “that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

The Gift of Saving Faith

All this leads to my main point: All that God has done finds its application through a faith that is “not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (v.8-9). Even the faith we exercise in Christ comes to us as a gift through the prior, regenerating action of the Spirit upon us while we were yet dead in trespasses and sins.¹ Spiritually dead people cannot produce or exercise saving faith — the Spirit had to first raise us to new life, and then impart the gift of faith.

Now, mark this down: What is important to note here is the *quality* of one’s faith. It is the quality of our faith which matters. And in order for faith to be a saving faith, the quality of faith required is so great that it can only originate with God and come to the sinner as a gift on the basis of grace alone. The point here is this: Saving faith is of divine origin, and not a human contribution to salvation.

The present crisis in most evangelical churches is due largely to the erroneous notion that faith originates within the sinner, and even serves as his or her contribution to make the work of Christ effectual on their behalf. But such faith is a work of the flesh, and not of the Spirit, and cannot, therefore, save anyone (John 3:6). Anyone who insists they are saved because of a faith that originated in them, which they contributed to make the work of Christ effectual on their behalf, is walking in delusion.

The Effects of Saving Faith

Having now concluded that the *source* of saving faith is God, we can now consider the effects of saving faith, that is to say, how can you know you possess saving? I want to give you two ways you can you possess saving faith.

The first effect of saving faith is that it *rests* itself in Christ alone. The quality of one’s faith is best measured by the object of that faith. When the sinful woman entered into Simon’s house, she didn’t come to listen in on a religious debate. She was not interested in finding

¹ This is not a reference, as some teach, to the so-called “prevenient grace” by which all people, everywhere are at least once brought to a place of neutrality and freedom wherein they have a chance to choose or reject the offer of salvation. This is an Arminian scheme, made popular by John Wesley, which ultimately makes salvation a reward for choosing to believe while others who had the same chance do not believe, and are damned.

In other words, in prevenient grace, there are those who are righteous enough in themselves to choose Christ, over and against those who having received the same prevenient grace nonetheless reject it. This scheme provides those who choose Christ something in themselves by which they may boast.

common ground between Simon and Jesus. Neither was she hoping to form a religious movement to reclaim morality within the Jewish culture. Instead, she was there to express her single-minded devotion to Christ. Her faith was simple and pure, and Christ was the sole object of her faith. She had either heard Jesus teach or heard of him from someone else, and the Spirit of God regenerated her mind and heart so that her focus became Christ, alone. She had been drawn by the Father to the Son in saving faith (John 6:44-45), and she was now at Simon's house to express her repentance, her love, and her undivided devotion to Jesus.

Just as saving faith does not originate with you, neither does it place its focus upon you. To put it another way, one can discern saving faith because it is Christ-centered, not self-centered. Anyone who brags about their faith in Christ as though that faith originated within them is giving solid evidence that theirs is a spurious faith, a work of the flesh, and not the Spirit. As Paul tells the Corinthians, "For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7). So then, whether or not you possess saving faith is measured by whether it produces a single-minded devotion to Christ alone. A faith that relies upon your own power or religiosity, or adds to it a devotion to Mary, or the saints, is not a saving faith. Period.

The second effect of saving faith is that it *expresses* itself in good works, not in order to earn acceptance with God, but because one is accepted in the beloved (Ephesians 1:6; Romans 15:7, NKJV). Look back to the second chapter of Ephesians. As already noted above, Paul states at verse 9 that saving faith is the gift of God, "not of works, lest anyone should boast." But we must not stop there, for he adds in verse 10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

In these two verses we have two differing forms of works. Works by which one seeks to *be* saved in verse 9, which the apostle denies, and works which flow from the fact one *is* saved in verse 10. To put it another way, works produced by the flesh in verse 9, as opposed to works "which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them," in verse 10. This is a very important distinction. So, let's be clear: We are not saved *by* good works; rather, we are saved *for* good works. There is no such thing as a saving faith which is devoid of good works. But good works done before justification are of the *flesh* and contribute nothing; but once reconciled by faith alone, in the righteousness of Christ alone, the new life imparted by the *Spirit* will naturally produce good works.

Over in his letter to the Philippians, we read that told his readers to display their obedience to the gospel by working out their own salvation with fear and trembling; “for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). The works which are in accord with saving faith are produced within the child of God, by God himself and for his good pleasure. What I want you to be clear about is that good works accompany salvation as sure as heat accompanies light. But these works are *indicative* of a new creation, a new nature brought about by the Spirit through grace, alone. The New Testament is clear that the *imperative* of good works is preceded by the *indicative* of saving faith. Just as regeneration precedes saving faith, so also the indicative of saving faith precedes the imperative of good works. Good works are natural for the child of God.

How can you know if your good works are of God? Because they are done in order to glorify God, and not you, and certainly not to earn merit before God. The moment you start thinking your good deeds are earning favor with God or ensuring your entrance to heaven — stop what you are doing — you have lost a biblical motivation for doing good. For a justified child of God longs to glorify his or her heavenly Father, but not to gain merit. A genuine child of God seeks to glorify God by his or her actions, and not merely by their words. In fact, our text does not record that the woman said anything when she entered Simon’s house. But she came prepared to do a good work toward Jesus. Her faith overflowed in tangible acts of repentance, love, and devotion, as her faith was expressed in tangible behavior.

By contrast, the religion of Simon and the Pharisees was a dead faith characterized by saying but not doing — it was religion of all talk, with no walk (Matthew 23:3). And this talk without a walk is typical of man-made religion (Titus 1:16). This is why James gives examples of good works produced by justifying faith (James 2:14-26; 3:13). But James is not teaching justification by works as opposed to faith, as many argue; rather, he is merely defining the works of a living faith as opposed to a dead faith devoid of any good works.

Why then is hypocrisy and moral decadence so common within professed Christianity? It is because of the spurious, dead faith of a man-centered gospel. Wherever moral decadence runs rampant among believers, it is *not* because the biblical gospel has failed, but because the preaching of the gospel has been replaced by some form of man-made religion, and the Bible is clear that man-made religion is useless in restraining the flesh (Colossians 2:23; Matthew 23:25-28; II Corinthians 11:13-15). Whereas genuine conversions, brought about by saving faith, by

necessity produce moral transformation. Therefore, when we profess justification by faith alone, we do not mean a faith devoid of good works, but a faith which rests in Christ's righteousness alone. It is "alone" because nothing can be added to the imputed righteousness of Christ — it is an *all-sufficient* righteousness. And no one born of the Spirit can continue in habitual sin, nor can their character remain devoid of the character of Christ (I John 3:7-9). "He who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk just as He walked" (I John 2:6). What I am saying is growth in true holiness is characteristic of saving faith. And this is because it is God's paramount purpose to conform each believer to the moral image of His glorified Son; indeed, it is this glorious purpose for which God causes all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28-30).

So then, the source of saving faith is the gift of God which comes to the sinner at regeneration. The quality of that faith is known by the fact that its sole object is Christ, and by the fact that it naturally produces good works. And we know those good works are produced by God because they glorify God, alone. There is no such thing as a true faith which remains devoid of good works. That would instead be a dead faith, a work of the flesh, and not the Spirit. In the next and final lesson in this series, I will discuss the source and role of peace in the life of the believer. **AMEN.**

© Rick Peterson. 2020.