

Well, Sick, or Dead?

Rick Peterson

Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:1-10.

There is a core principle within the gospel of Christ which is so absolutely essential that its absence means the absence of the gospel of Christ. And yet, the prevailing theology within 80% of evangelicalism rejects this principle. And that principle is: Salvation is of God, and God alone. The New Covenant promise is grounded in this principle (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-29). And the New Testament witness is vividly clear that salvation is of God alone (Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-31; 9:14-16; I Corinthians 1:26-31; II Corinthians 10:17; Galatians 5:4-6; Ephesians 2:1-9; Colossians 1:12; 3:21-23; Titus 3:4-7; Hebrews 10:38-39). Let me begin by summarizing for you the saving gospel narrative of the New Testament:

God in Christ has acted so as to secure your future justification, which is then received in accord with grace alone through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

There is coming a day at which time God will “judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16; see also Acts 17:31). For those in Christ, that future justification has been predicated upon something that has already occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on their behalf, which is received by faith alone. And by faith alone we do not at all mean a faith that is barren of good works, but a faith which has as its object the person and finished work of Christ to which nothing can be added. And nothing does not mean a little something; it means not one thing. The word “alone” is an exclusionary word, and the exclusion refers to any deluded notion that one can or must contribute anything to the finished work of Christ in order to be reconciled with a just and holy God.

Now this principle is critical to you because the Christian life is about conformity to Christ, first, conforming to his gospel, and then, and only then, conformity to his image. If one begins his¹ Christian walk by assuming a works-based reference to justification and reconciliation with God, in even the slightest manner, then the whole of one’s Christian life will be built upon an erroneous foundation of sand, and not rock (Matthew 7:24-27). The principle of

¹ I am well aware of the gender concerns in reference to salvation, but for simplicity sake, I will be using the male pronoun; the principles stated herein most certainly apply to both genders.

salvation in God alone is therefore no mere academic concern, but a matter of life or death for every unbeliever and professing Christian alike. And for the Christian, fidelity to this principle is a matter of simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For above all, the Christian is a person in relational union with Jesus Christ, and that relational union must be characterized by fidelity and purity. The notion that one can or must add anything to the finished work of Christ on their behalf is tantamount therefore to spiritual adultery (II Corinthians 11: 1-2).

Okay, with that introduction, let's look closer at Scripture, beginning with Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in the hope of the glory of God.

These two verses represent a summary conclusion to what Paul has said in the previous four chapters. The issue in Rome was separation between Jewish and Gentile Christians, especially over the matter of observing days and food laws. Some scholars believe there is evidence that Jewish and Gentile Christians were actually worshipping separately.² This was of great concern to Paul, so he writes his letter to the Romans with the emphatic point that both Jew and Gentile are equally in need of justification, not according to the works of the law, but by faith in the finished work of Christ. Both Jew and Gentile, having been reconciled by God on the basis of faith alone in Christ alone, must now worship and glorify God with one voice as a new humanity in Christ Jesus.

So then, justification, that is to say, the absolutely necessary status which both Jew and Gentile must gain in order to escape the just wrath of God, is secured on the basis of faith, apart from Jewish observation of days, or dietary laws, or circumcision; and, justification by faith means apart from any inherent moral ability or contribution on the part of either the Jew or Gentile. Neither the Jewish history with the Law, nor does the pagan idolatry and religious history of the Gentile have anything to contribute to their justification. The big point Paul makes in Romans is that if his readers do not get this essential point of justification by faith, apart from any human contribution whatsoever, then they do not have the gospel. But if they do understand this essential principle, they must unite and worship with one voice as the people of God, saved by a gracious action on the part of the triune God, alone.

² See Gordon D. Fee, "Lectures on Romans," available through Regent College, Vancouver, B. C.

The gospel of Christ states that justification means we now enjoy peace with God. Wherein we once made ourselves God's enemies, God has reconciled us to himself through the cross of Christ (Romans 5:10). This peace with God does not refer to an emotional feeling, but a change of status whereby hostility has been transformed into a shalom—peace. It is not just a truce, but a completely new status. What is more, the grammar here is in the aorist-participle-passive, which means “having been justified” represents a completed action and for which the party receiving that action was passive. In other words, justification was taken out of your future and accomplished on your behalf apart from any active participation on your part. Now why was this prior action of God necessary? This prior action of God was necessary because salvation belongs to the Lord, and not to the schemes of men. And it is absolutely necessary because apart from a gracious, sovereign action on God's part, no one would come to faith and repentance. Why is this?

Well, Sick, or Dead?

Throughout church history there has been great controversy regarding the true condition of human nature. This controversy revolved around whether the human condition is spiritually well, sick, or dead. At the root of this controversy is whether God really meant it when he told Adam, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will not eat, for in the day you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). A familiar warning which bore a consequence which is rarely taken seriously. And why is it not taken seriously? It is because the persistence of the ancient lie of the serpent, “You surely will not die!” Adam and Eve chose to believe the serpent's lie over and above the word of God, and this choice abides within the mind and will of the children of Adam to his day. And the destructive consequences of this lie reach their depth whenever that lie is incorporated into Christian theology and evangelism. It is this distortion of the gospel in theology and evangelism that I wish to address in this sermon.

Is mankind spiritually well? Are people basically good at the core? The most popular notion within humanism, psychology, and theological liberalism is that human nature is really not fallen at all. This view states that humanity is well, and retains the moral ability to obey God apart from grace; grace is not necessary. Christ is therefore not a Savior, but merely a moral example, and a fine spiritual teacher. This is the most irrational view in that even a casual

observer would note that mankind is not well and that something has gone seriously awry with human nature. Yet, this notion of man's basic core goodness persists. That man is well, and able to attain to moral excellence on his own was the prominent view within the apostate first century Jewish and pagan Gentile communities. This why the preaching of Christ crucified was foolishness to the Greek, and a stumbling block to the Jew (I Corinthians 1:22). And throughout church history, many have sought to redefine the gospel to accommodate the notion that even after the garden fall, man retained his basic moral goodness and is able come to God on his own.

The lying hiss of the ancient serpent was heard once again in the teachings of a 5th century monk named, Pelagius. This man taught that mankind retained basic goodness and was able to obey God without grace. Pelagius did not deny grace existed, only that it was not necessary. In response, Aurelius Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, rallied to refute this error and Pelagianism was condemned by the undivided church twice in 418 A. D., and again at the Council of Ephesus in 431. You should note the cruelty of this heresy, for Pelagianism by necessity leads to tormenting moralism and legalism of the worst, most destructive sort. Heresy is evil because it presumes to add or subtract from revealed truth, and in so doing, diminishes the glory of God and brings Christ into disrepute, and thereby destroys souls. This is why Pelagius was condemned.

But just because an error is condemned does not mean it goes away. The hiss of the serpent's lie was heard again in the teachings of another man named John Cassian. This man sought a middle way between Pelagius and Augustine. In rejection of Pelagius, Cassian taught the reality of the fall and the necessity of grace, but also rejected Augustine by teaching fallen man retained the moral ability to cooperate or not cooperate with grace.

According to Cassian, fallen man is dead, but not so dead that he cannot not by his free will choose to respond with his own faith to grace, which would then lead to spiritual regeneration (being born of the Spirit). The implication is clear, however, that rather than being spiritually dead, fallen man is merely sick and in need only of enabling grace in order to respond and be saved; fallen man retains the moral ability to choose or reject the appeal of grace. This also meant if the sinner did choose to accept the appeal of grace and be saved, the same free will that brought about his initial conversion may later be exercised in such a way as to reject faith and once again become lost. This view came to be known as Semi-Pelagianism, or Cassianism, and was condemned as heretical by the Synod of Orange in A. D. 529. Yet Cassianism was

permanently adopted by the Eastern Church, as is represented today in Eastern (Greek) Orthodoxy. Indeed, within this tradition, Cassian is venerated as a saint. Roman Catholicism has also adopted the Semi-Pelagian view. Shockingly, Semi-Pelagianism has also been adopted by the majority of modern evangelicals, within which this heresy is more widely known as Arminianism. This ought to explain a lot about modern evangelicalism and its worldliness, superficiality, and man-centered preaching.

Enter James Arminius

The persistence of the subtle error of Semi-Pelagianism is astonishing. In the 16th century a Reformed theologian named James Arminius picked up the Semi-Pelagian banner and after his death, his teaching and followers were condemned at the Dutch Reformed, Synod of Dort in 1619. Nonetheless, what has since come to be known as Arminianism is today the leading view within modern evangelicalism. This proves only the persistence of the ancient lie of the serpent, “You surely will not die!” and therefore the demand of the flesh within fallen men to have God on their own terms. The chief error in Arminian thought is the notion that man’s will is free in the sense of existing in a neutral state between good and evil. Remember, the ancient lie was that Adam and Eve would be able to determine for themselves what is good and evil according to their own standards, and not according to God’s word. If they believed the serpent, they could become as God, possessing an autonomous will. And it is this fallacious notion of a God-like, autonomous will that persists within Arminianism.

The Freedom of the Will

Let us be clear therefore: only God has an autonomous will. Man’s will is free, but does not act independently of nature, and fallen man’s nature wants nothing to do with God. Man cannot choose salvation because he will not choose salvation, and he will not choose salvation because his nature is corrupted, and he loves sin. Therefore, fallen man acts in accord with his own nature and his will chooses accordingly. This is the biblical teaching. Therefore, fallen man’s nature must first be regenerated into new life in order to respond in a saving manner to the gospel of Christ. The Bible teaches fallen man loves darkness because his deeds are evil; that his spiritual parentage is of the devil; and that in this state, he cannot please God, nor can he choose Christ (John 3:19; 8:44; Romans 8:7-8). If this biblical truth seems strange to your ears, it is only

because it has been largely abandoned within modern evangelicalism in favor of a more marketable gospel. It ought to give rise to serious pause for you to realize that Arminianism dominates popular theology and evangelism. After all, the fact that man is fallen does not mean he is not religious; he has invented all kinds of idols and figments of his own imagination that he calls, “God.” It causes me to shudder to think of the numbers of people who have been “converted” under the preaching of an Arminian gospel and therefore on the basis of a spurious, natural faith, which can save no one.

The presence of heresy within Christianity ought not to surprise us. The Bible teaches fallen man actually suppresses the knowledge of the true God revealed even in creation (Romans 1:18-23). What is more, it is common for fallen people to appear very pious and religious. Many even take the name of Christ while denying both the truth of their own miserable condition and their need of the true grace of God in Christ. And they do so not because they remain basically good, or merely sick, but because they are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). And apart from a merciful act of God, they will remain spiritually dead; this is the very sobering reality regarding the human condition. This is because when Adam and Eve rebelled, human nature lost the moral ability to choose the things of God—this is the working definition of spiritual death. It happened, and it was permanent, and this condition then spread to all humanity (Romans 5:12-20).

Fallen man is not therefore evolving toward an enlightened moral renewal, but is daily moving more and more into a degrading, dehumanizing state apart from his Creator. But God has postponed the final judgment of mankind out of mercy, and in order to bring to past his promise of redemption made in the garden. The glorious news is that in the finished work of Jesus Christ this promise of redemption was fulfilled, though it is yet to be fully realized (I John 3:1-3).

“But God”

In the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we find two of the most precious words in all the New Testament, “But God.” After setting forth the bad news of the woeful state of fallen humanity, Paul then brings the good news beginning with these two words of intervention,

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of

His grace toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; and not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them (Ephesians 2:1-10).

What I hope for you is that you will begin to grasp the wonders of God's grace toward you as outlined in the above text. I can give personal witness to the cruelty of heresy. I labored under a Pelagian/Semi-Pelagian view of salvation for over 20 years. Church attendance, personal Bible reading, even prayer failed to relieve the nagging fear and mental confusion regarding my standing with God. I knew in my heart what I was and my mental and actual sins haunted me day and night. My denomination was theologically superficial and experience oriented; moral failure and chaos was widespread. It was only after my own reading of church history that I discovered the gospel of grace was deeper and greater than I had ever imagined. I was set free by the message that it was not any good thing I did that made me the object of God's intervening grace; rather, it was an act of pure, sovereign mercy, grounded in God's great love with which he loved me (the gospel is personal or its nothing). I read my Bible with new eyes, and discovered my salvation was a result of an act of pure grace. I realized God had acted when I was altogether dead in trespasses, and thus had no inherent ability to respond, but he made me alive together with Christ, and seated me with him, in the heavenly places.

Whereas, I who once had only a downward trajectory, had been raised from spiritual death and seated with Christ in the heavenly places. And this grace was effectual, meaning it accomplished what God intended. This was no probationary action on God's part; God saving me from death and eternal destruction was not left for me to choose—dead people cannot choose—the choice had been made for me. Long before I was ever born, God acted to reverse the death into which I was born, and in which I resided, and it was replaced with new spiritual life. What is more, even the faith necessary to lay hold of this new life in Christ was a gift to me. I learned regeneration precedes saving faith, not the reverse. From start to finish, salvation is of the Lord. This is the truth of the gospel of my salvation, and of your salvation as well. Anything less is simply a man-made fabrication designed to produce worldly outcomes of popularity and so-called success.

Saved for Good Works

Finally, at Ephesians 2:8-10, notice the contrast between works of merit and works of faith. In verses 8-9, Paul makes its exceedingly clear it was not our works which prompted God's saving action. This is foundational to the gospel. And yet, Paul says in verse 10 that we are God's workmanship in Christ Jesus, and we are created for good works, "which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." What this means is we are not saved *by* good works; rather, we are saved *for* good works. The difference is merit. The good works for which we are saved are not meritorious, meaning they do not earn God's saving action. But it is God's prior saving action that is applied through the gift of saving faith, a faith that produces good works, and the difference is the same as between night and day.

By the way, that saving faith naturally produces good works is the whole point also of James' argument (James 2:14-25). Contrary to the arguments of ignorant people, there is no difference between Paul's view of justification and James' view. All the apostles taught that saving faith brings about new life as evidenced by good works.³ What James denounced is dead faith, that is to say, a faith that says it is alive, but is in fact dead, being without good works. It is a demonic faith, says James, a dead faith grounded in a "wisdom" which originates from below, and not, from above (James 2:19; 3:15).

The works produced by saving faith are indicative to the new life within the Christian. Imagine a vertical line with the word "imperative" written on it. Then at the basis of that line is a horizontal line with the word "indicative" written *before* the vertical line, and then again *after* the vertical line. When you place the word indicative before the imperative line, you have the gospel regarding the role of works in saving faith. If you place the word indicative after the imperative line you have the cruelty of heresy. The point is the indicative precedes the imperatives of the commands of Christ, and all good works performed by the regenerate child of God. God makes good works an imperative for his children in Christ because good works are indicative of the new life birthed within you at regeneration by the Spirit.

You can see how that any good works done by those residing in spiritual death are works of the flesh, not of the Spirit. Jesus made this crystal clear to Nicodemus when he said, "That

³ See James R. White, *The God who Justifies*, for an excellent, exegetical treatment on James 2:14-24 and the nature of good work within saving faith versus a dead faith that saves no one.

which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Any works done by a dead sinner are works of the flesh, and flesh cannot contribute to regeneration into new spiritual life. This is the folly of the Pelagian and the Semi-Pelagian (Arminian) view of salvation. No one who is spiritually dead can contribute anything to regeneration, and if they think they can, what they are truly contributing is of the flesh and not the spirit. If anyone believes they are converted on the basis of their own contribution to grace, that person is self-deceived and in grave danger. What is more, any “good works” they do are also of the flesh, and will inevitably be viewed as meritorious. Many professing Christians believe that church attendance, charity, and financial giving somehow keep them in favor with God. The television airwaves are filled with preachers telling you if you tithe or give offerings, God will bless you, but if you do not, you will be under a curse. What is this but blatant, shameless, demonic energized heresy? Don’t buy a word of it!

Now, that said, let me say also it is entirely possible, by the mercies of God and his marvelous works, that a person could actually become regenerate and truly saved under the appeal of an Arminian preacher. But such a person will be converted in spite of the theology of the preacher, and not because of it. For instance, an Arminian preacher may declare, “Come to Christ,” and so one comes to Christ; the preacher may say, “Repent and place your faith in Jesus Christ,” and so one will do so. And the person hearing such a call may come to Christ not knowing he is being drawn and moved by the Spirit into a regenerate state and not understand that his faith itself is a gift. All this is good and right, as far as it goes. And if this person ever comes to understand the truth of God’s prior saving action which resulted in his conversion, that person can then repent of his previous, erroneous understanding and rejoice in the truth of their salvation, and offer love and worship to the God who saved him.

But there is also this sobering word of caution: if such a person who is converted under an Arminian view of regeneration and justification comes to hear the truth, and yet insists that it was his free will and natural faith and not God who initiated and brought their conversion to past, and if that person persists in this view even after many charitable and clear appeals to believe the truth, then the authenticity of that person’s Christian faith and standing in salvation would, by necessity, have to be called into question.⁴

⁴ See John H. Gerstner, “Arminianism and the external attack on the Reformation,” on-line lecture *Handout Church History*.

Summary

In his book entitled, *The Plan of Salvation*, B. B. Warfield writes, “There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves.” The current state of Christianity is such that millions of people believe they have been saved of themselves. They believe under false pretenses that somehow, they are saved because of something they did, whether it was responding to an altar call or repeating a simple prayer, and these people are therefore living each day in eternal peril. Such a state represents the most horrible of spiritual conditions, for they believe they have settled with Christ when in fact they are far from having truly done so. Indeed, by subscribing to an Arminian, synergistic view of justification and regeneration, they are in fact deserting the Christ in whom they profess to believe (Galatians 1:6; 5:4). And such people are the hardest people to reach with the truth of the gospel of grace. A rank unbeliever who knows and feels his miserable condition and state before God is far more likely to hear and respond to the gospel of grace than someone who thinks they possess something they do not. This was the folly of the scribes and the Pharisees as recorded within the Gospels, and this folly is widespread within Christendom today.

What can you do? You, and every genuine child of God, thorough Bible study and inquiry into church history, can become reacquainted with the truth of the gospel grounded upon the biblical principle that salvation is of God, and of God alone. You can help others understand that the tragic reality of the fallen human condition as far from well, and beyond sick, but in truth, spiritually and morally dead when it comes to things of God. You can share how God has acted in Christ to remove their justification from their future into their past, and how reconciliation and peace with God is theirs today by faith alone in Christ alone. You can share this truth with both unbelievers, and those professing Christians who have yet to come to know peace with God. You may have to leave a church given over to Arminianism, and hopefully, find a fellowship of Christians holding to the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. And finally, all Christians everywhere can appeal to the Lord of their salvation for a return to biblical preaching within their churches, counseling offices, and if necessary, on the street corners all across the world.

May the King of Love, our Great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, bring about his saving purposes within and among his people each day. **AMEN.**

© Rick Peterson. 2019.