

Back to the Basics

Salvation: Can't we work this out?

Most men like to talk about themselves because it allows them the opportunity to accentuate their accomplishments and highlight their strengths. However, as my wife will tell you, I am not the “typical” male. I enjoy talking about myself because it serves to humble me. Last week I confessed that I was an avid planner and relished controlling my activities and schedule (perhaps to a ridiculous extent...). Today, I stand before you freely admitting that I, like my father before me, am genetically deformed. I am missing the “play” gene – I believe it was replaced by a duplicate “work” gene. I was reared on a strong protestant work ethic which clearly advocated pulling one’s own weight. Where I grew up a man was measured by how hard he worked to provide for his family, and accomplish his goals. Them’s that didn’t work, didn’t eat was a resounding life philosophy which I adopted early on. Now, before you think this is really just a left-handed way of patting myself on the back for the “virtue” of hard work, let me assure you that I recognize the fallacy of the philosophy. It’s not that there is anything wrong with working hard to achieve goals ...until you take it to the extreme and ignore God. You see, the extreme is that place where we become so self-absorbed (and egotistical) thinking that, if we just work hard enough, we can do or get anything we want. Isn’t that the American dream? Anyone can grow up to be president... we take great pride in pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Yes siree, Just put the old shoulder to the wheel, and nose to the grindstone and we can get what we want. We can work it out! Right? Well, not quite. You see the flaw in this theory is that it ASSUMES that WE have all the power we need to accomplish the goal. Tsk, tsk, there is that pesky PRIDE problem again. We are so full of

ourselves that we lose sight of the FACT that we are not in control. No matter how hard we work, we do not have what it takes to satisfy God's requirements. To put **{Slide 2}** it bluntly, we are simply not good enough to meet God's standard on our own merit. That is why we need a substitute. We need someone who can satisfy God's requirements for forgiveness of our sins. God, in His grace, has provided for us that substitute in the person of Jesus Christ.

Since I seem to be on this track of admitting my personal shortcomings and character flaws, I guess I should also let you know that I am a school-trained Operations Research Systems Analyst, commonly referred to as an ORSApod. We ORSApods love to explain things with processes and flow charts, it is the logical, organized (and slightly warped) way in which our brains work. This morning I intend to take advantage of this particular deficiency of mine to explain the four major issues that address WHY we have a problem and WHY we need a substitute.

The sixth book of the NT is the book of Romans. In the third chapter of this book, you may be surprised to hear that YOUR biography is included. It doesn't actually include your name or your place of residence, but it does tell the story of your personal life. The stuff it mentions isn't very attractive, I should warn you, but it is the truth. And so, this is your life. (Read Romans 3:9-20, 23)

What then ⁸ Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; ¹⁰ as it is written,

“ THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

¹¹ THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,

THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

¹² ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;

THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,

THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”

¹³ “ *THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,”*
“ THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS”;
¹⁴ “ *WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS”;*
¹⁵ “ *THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,*
¹⁶ *DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,*
¹⁷ *AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.”*
¹⁸ “ *THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.* ”

¹⁹ *Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;* ²⁰ *because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*

²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Honestly now, does that sound like your life? Is that a fairly apt description of the inner you...down inside where nobody else can look? I think so. How do I know? Because it describes me too. We are sinful to the core. Even when we try to hide it, even when we put on our sophisticated best, it comes out when we least expect it.

This is the first issue in our process today; **our condition: total depravity.**

Next, I should mention something that will only add insult to injury. God is righteous, perfect, and infinitely holy. That’s His standard. It is sometimes called “glory” in the NT. We looked earlier at Romans 3:23. Let me paraphrase it:

For all have sinned [that’s our condition] and fall short of the perfection, holiness, righteousness, and glory [that’s His standard] of God.

Unlike all humanity, God operates from a different level of expectation. His existence is in the realm of absolute perfection. He requires the same from others.

Whoever hopes to relate to Him must be as righteous as He is righteous. How different from us! To relate to me you don't have to be perfect. In fact, if you act like you are, I get very uncomfortable. But God is not like that. God doesn't shrug, wink, and say, "Ah, that's okay."

God is perfect and for you and me to fellowship with Him, we must be perfect too. Ah, there's the rub! No one qualifies as perfect. Sometimes we have shining moments of goodness, compassion, and kindness, but perfect? Never! Or, Infinitely Holy? How about "pure"? No human being can live up to God's standard – there is no way we can match His righteousness.

This addresses the second issue in our process; **God's Character: Infinitely Holy**

So here we are, sinners by birth, sinners by nature, and sinners by choice, trying to reach and attain a relationship with the holy God who made us. And we fall short. We can't make it because we're spiritually crippled. In fact, the NT teaches that we're "dead in trespasses and sin."

What do we need? Let me put it plain and simple, we need help outside ourselves.

We need some way to become clean within so that we can relate to a God who is perfect. Scripture says, "...and God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). If we hope to know God and walk with God and relate to God, we must be able to stand the scrutiny of that kind of light. But our light is out. We're all dark, and He is all light. We are in a deep, dark hole and we can't get out. Our own sin holds us down. We need someone to rescue us from the hole. We need an advocate in the court of justice. We need someone who will present our case. We need someone to be our substitute. So God provided the Savior.

This addresses our third issue; **our need: a Substitute** and introduces the fourth; **God's provision: a Savior**

(Read Romans 3:24-26)

²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Is that great news? You have been introduced to your substitute. He is Christ, the sinless and perfect Son of God. He is the One who accomplished your rescue. It occurred on a cross. It was effective because He was the only One who could qualify as our substitute before God. Sin requires a penalty –death- in order for God's righteous demands to be satisfied. The ransom must be paid. And Christ fills that role to perfection. You and I need to be washed. We need to be made sparkling clean. And God can't give up on His plan, for He hates sin. Being perfect He cannot relate to sinful things. He couldn't even if He tried, because His nature is repelled by sin. Sin calls for judgment. And that is why the cross is so significant. It became the place of judgment. It was there the price was paid in full.

In verse 24 of Romans 3, the term *justified* appears. Let's work with that word for a few moments. It does not simply mean "just as if I'd never sinned." That doesn't go far enough. Neither does God makes me righteous so that I never sin

again. It means to be “declared righteous.” Justification is God’s merciful act, whereby He declares righteous the believing sinner while he is still in his sinning state. He sees us in our need, wallowing around in the swamp of our sin. He sees us looking to Jesus Christ and trusting Him completely by faith, to cleanse us from our sin. And though we come to Him with all of our needs and in all of our darkness, God says to us, “Declared righteous! Forgiven! Pardoned!

All of that is included in what it means to be “justified.” I come to Him in all my need. I am hopelessly lost, spiritually dead. And I present myself to Christ just as I am. I have nothing to give that would earn my way in. If I could I would, but I can’t. So the only way I can present myself to Him in my lost condition is by faith. Coming in my need, expressing faith in His Son who died for me, I understand that God sees me coming by faith and admitting my sinfulness. At that epochal moment, He declares me righteous.

On occasion, I think of the cross as a sponge...a “spiritual sponge” that has taken all the sins of mankind – past, present, and future- and absorbed them all. At one awful moment, Christ bore our sins, thus satisfying the righteous demands of the Father, completely and instantaneously clearing up my debt. My sin is forgiven. My enslavement is broken. I am set free from sin’s power over me once and for all.

Redemption, another significant word in verse 24, also occurs. I am set at liberty, so as never to come back to the slave market of sin – never again in bondage to it. And remember, the rescue occurred because of what Christ did – not because of what I did. A seasoned Bible teacher once said, “Man is incurably addicted to doing something for his own salvation.” What a waste! Scripture clearly teaches

that salvation is a by faith, not-by-works transaction. Romans 4:4-5 makes this ever so clear:

⁴ *Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.*

⁵ *But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,*

Just think of your paycheck. When your boss brings you your paycheck, you take it without a great deal of gratitude. You don't drop to your knees and say, "Oh, Thank you – thank you so very much for this gift." You probably grab the check and don't give much thought to saying thanks. Why? Because you EARNED it. You worked hard for it. Now, if your boss attaches a bonus of a thousand bucks and says, "Though you're dropping in your efficiency, I want you to know I love you, wouldn't that be great? Great: That would be a miracle! There's a lot of difference between a wage and a gift.

God looks at us in all of our need and He sees nothing worth commending. We have no light, no holiness. In fact, we are moving in the opposite direction, despising Him, living in sin, habitually carrying out the lifestyle of our sinful nature. Realizing our need, we accept His miraculous, eternal bonus – the gift of His Son. He gave us an unmerited gift. Look again at verse 5:

⁵ *But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness*

I love that verse! Because there is no way you and I can get any credit. Even when we try we are like the line out of the country song, we "look for love in all the wrong places."

Many people hear about this gift of eternal life and simply cannot fathom it so they reject it. I can understand the reluctance: “too good to be true.” Sounds great, but if I get to Heaven, I’ll earn it on my own.”

Well, let me give you a little logic to wrestle with. If you plan to work your way in, how much work is enough work to guarantee that you have made it? And, if it’s something you work for, why does God say in His book that it’s for “the one who does NOT work, but believes...? Let me spell it out:

God’s character: infinitely Holy

Our condition: totally depraved

Our need: a substitute

God’s provision: a Savior

When God provided a Savior, He said to each one of us, “Here is my Gift to you.” How often, when folks hear that, they shake their heads and mumble, “I can’t believe it.” In 2 Corinthians 5:20, we find these words:

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

That’s the message of the Gospel...be reconciled to God. Watch that barrier crumble, the one between you and God as you step across by faith. Look at the next verse with the pronouns identified:

²¹ *He [God, the Father] made Him [God, the Son] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, [that happened at the cross] so that we [the sinner] might become the righteousness of God in Him [Christ].*

But how can the sinner in the black hole of his need ever know God in the spotless white of all of His righteousness? Verse 21 tells us, by coming to know Him who knew no sin, the One who became sin on our behalf. Put your pride in your pocket – you need a substitute. You need a defense attorney...an eternal advocate. And you have one – His name is Jesus.

Salvation is simple, but it's not easy. It is simple because we don't have to do anything, but believe on Jesus Christ and Trust Him to atone for our sins. It is not easy because we have to renounce our pride and cede control of our lives to Jesus. As one country preacher put it, "It is difficult to admit you need Jesus; it is fatal not to."

Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, the greatest gift ever given. No, we can't work it out...but, we can accept the gift of forgiveness and eternal life offered to us by the grace of God in the person of Jesus.

