

7. We believe that the only means of being cleansed from sin is through repentance and faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and not of works.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on April 24, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We are living in a nation that has changed dramatically from the nation that our forefathers once knew. If someone would have suggested to them that the day was coming when the Ten Commandments would be removed from a courthouse or that there would even be a debate about taking “in God we trust” off our money, I’m sure they would have deemed such possibilities absolutely impossible. But we know that is the case in a nation that still considers itself a “Christian nation.” But therein lies the problem. The vast majority of Americans, according to a great deal of the polling data that has been collected in recent years, are only Christians in name. Their view of life, the world, and even Christianity isn’t based on the Bible.

But that’s not what troubles me most. I’ve acclimated myself to the fact that we live in a pluralistic society with a variety of views and opinions. But what troubles me the most is what is happening in our churches. Many are filled with people who think they are saved because they have attached themselves to an organization that bears the name of Christ, when that in and of itself does not save the human soul. Furthermore, our churches are filled with people who think they are on their way to heaven because they participate in charity events, do their best to be good citizens and stay out of jail. All of that is fine and dandy, but none of that saves the human soul. Proverbs 14:12 says, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”* There may be lots of ways to San Jose, but there’s only one way to heaven. But the adversary has convinced the majority of the human race that isn’t true.

Man’s Way To Salvation

There’s an old story about two little frogs that fell into a can filled with milk. They both tried to jump out of the can but that was impossible to do, so one frog just gave up and soon died. The other frog was determined to fight to the end so he kept paddling and paddling and paddling—until he eventually churned the milk into a pad of butter and then jumped from the can from his self-made launching pad. Like the determined frog, I applaud people when they never say die. I applaud people who are industrious and never give in. That’s not the issue. The issue is when we try to apply this principle to our salvation. “If I just work hard enough... If I try to be a better person... If I...” But that philosophy, as good as it seems in most cases, is diametrically opposed to what the Bible says about salvation.

History is resplendent with examples of people who have tried to earn their salvation. For example, the Hindus are known for tormenting their bodies in an effort to deliver their souls. But the Hindus aren’t alone. Christianity has a long record of those who have gone on extended fasts, gone on long pilgrimages crawling on their knees...and a host of other things in order to earn salvation. The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, was literally crawling on his hands and knees up the steps of a cathedral in penance to God when he realized that was not what God wanted. Instead God was yearning for Luther’s faith, not his works. The world is filled with people who think that if they do enough good works it will counterbalance their bad works, and then everything will be okay. But even though that may work out in many cases on an earthly level, we must remember that the salvation of our soul isn’t an “earthly” issue, but an “eternal” issue!

The first seven verses of Ephesians 2 describe who we are prior to our salvation and essentially it says we are dead, disobedient, depraved and doomed. And there’s not enough “good works” to be done to clean up that kind of mess! The only thing that can change our innate nature is a transformation on the spiritual level. But we have to be careful, even here. Because folks will say, “Okay, if it’s on the spiritual level, I’ll get spiritual.” So instead of “good works” they “become spiritual.” And they buy into the lie that they can be saved through the sacraments, through baptism, through confirmation or by joining the church. Now all of those things are wonderful, but please be sure that you understand that none of them saves the lost sinner.

One thing that concerns me greatly in our current generation is the subtle teaching that permeates many churches today that essentially suggests that if you are prosperous you are saved. But the balance in your bank account has nothing to do with the condition of your eternal soul. Now I believe with all of my heart that God loves us and wants to bless His children, but I must tell you that I’m concerned with those who proclaim, “I’m okay, you’re okay. Just stay positive and realize that God is a God of blessings.” That kind of “feel good” spirituality grows churches, there’s no question about it, but growth isn’t always the sign of health.

The problem with good works is this: There’s not enough good work in the entire world to make us acceptable to a holy God. The sum total of all our works add up to zero when compared to a holy God. That’s why none of us can boast. Verse 9 of Ephesians 2 says salvation is *“not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* Not a single one of us will be able to stand before God one day and say, “I saved myself.” All of us come to God the same way. All of us come to God at the same level; regardless of our education, abilities, social status, riches or station in life. Psalm 49:6-7 says, *“Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches, none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of their souls is costly...”* So costly that it cost God the life of His Son. We all come to God through a single door, by a single way, because of a single truth:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

There’s another old story about a man who was traveling on his donkey when he came upon a small fuzzy object lying in the road. He dismounted to get a closer look and discovered it was a sparrow lying on its back with its scrawny legs pointing upward. At first he thought the bird was dead, but then he saw the little bird move its tiny leg. He said, “Mr. Sparrow, are you okay?” The sparrow replied, “Yes.”

“What are you doing,” the man then asked, “lying on your back with your legs pointed toward the sky?” The sparrow responded that he had heard the sky was falling, so he was holding up his legs to catch it. The man said, “Surely you don’t think you can hold it up with those scrawny little legs, do you?” And the sparrow, with a very solemn look, replied, “One does the best he can.” Our problem is that of the sparrow. We may try to do our best, but our best simply isn’t good enough! Man’s way can’t get the job done, period!

God’s Way To Salvation

Verse 8 of Ephesians 2 sums it up this way: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God...”* So first, we are saved by grace, which literally means “unmerited favor.” In other words, we didn’t do a single thing to deserve God’s favor or God’s kindness. His benevolence toward us is simply an act of love; not a result of anything that we deserve. We don’t deserve grace! For that matter, God help us if we truly received what we “deserved.” The Bible says that none of us are righteous—no, not one. Thankfully, He doesn’t respond to us on the basis of what we deserve, but on the basis of this marvelous thing called grace.

Secondly, we are saved through faith. There are three attributes of faith and the first is knowledge. Faith must have some root in fact; there must be an object to our faith. And the object of our faith is Christ. The second attribute of faith is appropriation. It’s not enough for me to know that Christ died; I must believe that He died for “me!” And the third attribute of faith is commitment. This is when I open my heart to Him and trust that His Word is true. So faith and trust in Christ and His atoning work at Calvary is our part of the equation, if you please. We have nothing to do with grace, but that grace doesn’t become a reality in our lives until we exercise our faith in what Paul calls “a gift of God.” That’s exactly what grace is, a gift of God.

Now let’s say that I come to you one day and say, “Here’s my Bible, it’s yours. I give it to you as a gift.” Is it yours yet? No. Before it becomes yours a few things have to happen. First, you have to believe that I mean what I say and that I have the ability to give you my Bible; and two, you have to reach out and receive it. And those are the two key elements to salvation. John 1:12 says, *“As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”*

Now instead of receiving my Bible, you could say, “I don’t believe you... I don’t want it... It doesn’t interest me... I don’t need it...” Now if that’s your attitude, what happens to the gift? It never becomes yours! That’s why we must exercise our faith. That’s why we must say, “Not only do I believe, I also receive.” But between the “believing” and “receiving” there is one essential element that people are afraid to talk about in our generation and that is called “repentance.” That is why this fundamental truth doesn’t say: We believe that the only means of being cleansed from sin is through faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and not of works. But instead, it says: We believe that the only means of being cleansed from sin is through repentance and faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and not of works.

Back in 1976 during our nation’s bicentennial, there was a very popular Christian musical that was based on 2 Chronicles 7:14. And though it was a beautiful and moving musical, I’ll never forget what someone pointed out to me one day. He was a young evangelist and he said, “Notice the brochures, notice the banners, notice the promotional materials. They all quote 2 Chronicles 7:14 this way: ‘If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face...then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.’ But that’s not what it says. It says, *‘If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins and heal their land.’*” Now I don’t know if the producers of the musical thought that might be a “turn off” to people so they omitted it from the publicity, but the fact remains to this day: Repentance isn’t popular, and that’s why you hear it less and less from pulpits. Repentance means to change the direction of our life 180 degrees, and frankly, most people don’t want to change.

I’m afraid Wilber Rees was right when he said that most people want ecstasy, but not transformation; most people want the warmth of the womb, but not new birth; that most people want a pound of eternal in a paper sack. “May I have three dollars worth of God please” is the expression he used.

We’ve already talked about Psalm 51 a time or two in this series, but it’s virtually impossible to talk about this subject without looking at this Psalm because it’s the most powerful prayer of repentance found in the Bible. And if repentance means to change, this Psalm tells us what needs to change.

First, there needs to be a change of heart. Psalm 51 begins like this: *“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”* And carefully note verse 3; it says: *“For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”* The Greek word for the word “confess” means: “To say the same thing about this matter that God says about this matter.” When we confess our sins we are saying that same thing about our sins that God says about our sins. We treat it like He treats it! Confession means “I view this as ugly as God views this. I view this as awful as God views this.” Sin may not seem like a big thing to many people, but I can assure you, it’s a big thing to God. And because He takes it seriously, we need to take it seriously.

The whole idea of true confession means that the moment you think a thought or perform a deed that is outside the character of God, you should bring that specific thought and that specific deed to the Throne of Grace and get that cleared up on the spot. And why is that so important? It’s because between the time of that sin and the confession and clearing of that sin you have been out of

fellowship with God. 1 John 1:6 says, *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”* If that sin hasn’t been brought to the light, confessed, cleared up, cleaned up—you aren’t in fellowship with God. And that’s because God can’t have fellowship with sin. God can’t have fellowship with microscopic sin. He can’t have fellowship with any level of sin. Therefore, when I think a bad thought I need to confess it right then and there. When I do an evil deed, I need to confess it as soon as the Holy Spirit makes me aware that I did something that was not pleasing in the sight of my Heavenly Father. Now, that doesn’t mean I’m not saved. I’m still saved, but I’m out of fellowship with God. And that’s where confession comes in. Because even though God knows about your sin—and you know about your sin—until that thing is put on the table and forgiveness takes place, fellowship can’t happen. True repentance means we have a change of heart. We see sin for what it really is. It’s not minor; it’s major. It’s not insignificant; it’s incredibly significant. It’s not dust; it’s filth. And that’s why David said, *“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”* *“Make me zestfully clean!”*

Secondly, there needs to be a change of mind. In Psalm 51:6, David says, *“Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts...”* We are prone to take credit for accomplishments—earned or not—but blame our failures on extenuating circumstances. For example, Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York City, called a news conference in 1980 to address the city’s financial crisis. The mayor knew he was going to be attacked, especially with regards to one point. He had spent \$300,000 putting bike lanes in Manhattan and it turned out to be a fiasco. Cars were driving in the bike lanes, people were walking in them; it was a bust, a total waste of money. And sure enough, one reporter said, *“Mayor, in light of the financial difficulties New York City is facing, how could you possibly justify wasting \$300,000 on bike lanes?”* And all the reporters were primed for 30 minutes of confrontation. But the Mayor said, *“It was a terrible idea. I thought it would work, but it didn’t. It was one of the worst mistakes I ever made. It was stupid idea. It didn’t work.”* And then he stopped, and there was silence. The reporters didn’t know what to say. They had prepared for a 30-minute debate over this issue and now there was nothing left to say. The last thing they expected was a politician to take responsibility for his actions.

The point here is that we have to change our mind about who is in control of our lives. We can’t blame our sin on anyone else. You hear people say it all the time, *“I did this, but only because my father did this to me. I did this, but only because my school did this to me...”* But the problem isn’t finances or budgets or poor teachers or overcrowded prisons or corrupt politicians—the problem is sin! And when we sin, we cut ourselves off from fellowship with the only One who can fix the problem.

David could have said, *“It was Bathsheba’s fault. Look at what she was wearing. Look at what she wasn’t wearing!”* He could have blamed it on the pressures of his office; blamed it on the war; or blamed it on his other wives (he had hundreds of them): *“They’re not sensitive to my needs.”* He could have blamed it on God—that’s seems to be the popular thing to do when you don’t know where else to point a finger! But he didn’t. Why? Because he had a change of mind about his sin, and that’s why he said, *“For I acknowledge my transgressions...against You, and You only, have I sinned...”*

Thirdly, there needs to be a change of direction, because it’s not true repentance until we make up our minds to move in a totally new direction. For example, what happened to this man who slew Goliath with slingshot and a stone? What happened to this man who killed a bear and lion with his own hands by the power of the Holy Spirit? What happened to this man who used to sing songs to God through the night, songs such as: *“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...”*? We’re talking about David. A man after God’s own heart! What happened? What went wrong? The same thing that happens to all of us if we aren’t careful; he started to go in his own direction. He started to do things his way, instead of God’s way. He started to live by his agenda instead of God’s agenda. And when that happens, it’s only a matter of time before we skid out of control, crash, and end up on the side of the road in desperate trouble.

But thankfully, conviction will bring us to a crossroads. And there we have to decide whether or not we want to change the direction we are going. David did. He sincerely wanted a change. And that is why he said things like, *“Cleanse me...wash me...blot out my transgressions...purge me...create in me a new heart...renew a steadfast spirit in me...”* Please remember that you can change your mind, but you can’t change your heart; God can change your heart, but He won’t change your mind. Repentance means that you decide that from this moment forward you’re going in a new direction. You’re going to stop going your way and start going His way. And when you do, you will discover that *“He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

God’s Purpose In Salvation

Verse 10 of Ephesians 2 says, *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”* I think Paul was very careful to write this sentence immediately after the preceding one because though he wanted the saints in Ephesus to know that they were not saved by works, he also wanted them to know that they were saved for works. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 5:16: *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* Jesus saves us so that we can gain heaven and shun hell, but that’s just the beginning. He also saves us so that we can be *“His workmanship”* and that our works will cause others to glorify our Father in heaven. That’s why 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, *“...whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.”* Some people think that faith and works are enemies, but that is not what the Bible teaches. It teaches that true faith and righteous works always go hand in hand.

It reminds me of the story about the fisherman who had a rowboat and two oars. On one oar he had the word *“faith”* carved on it and on the other oar he had the word *“works”* carved on it. One day he was asked why he would do such a thing, so he dropped the oar that said *“works”* on it into the water and started rowing. But he just ended up going in circles. Then he put that oar back into the boat and dropped the oar that said *“faith”* into the water and started rowing with it. But once again, all he did was go was in circles. Then he put both oars in the water and off he went moving straight forward. Then he said to the man who asked him about the oars, *“That’s the way it is in the Christian life. Dead works without faith are useless, and dead faith without works gets you nowhere. But when faith and works pull together, you can go anywhere you want.”*

Years ago one of the major food distributors came out with an instant cake mix that was extremely simple. All you had to do was add water to the mix and bake it. It flopped—big time! Researchers discovered that the buying public was uneasy about a mix that only required water. They thought something had to be wrong if it was that easy, so the company changed the formula and altered the directions, calling for a single egg to be added to the mix with water and sales grew dramatically.

Some people think a salvation based purely on faith and repentance seems too easy. They want to earn it; work for it—that’s the American way! They want to add something to God’s “recipe” for salvation. But the Bible is clear; works can’t save us, and God will never change his formula just to sell it to more people. The only means of being cleansed from sin is through repentance and faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and not of works—period!