

## SAVED!

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Mark 1:14-15 *The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news!* (15)

### INTRODUCTION

A Sunday School teacher had worked hard with her class of five-year-olds in explaining the way of salvation, wanting them to understand that it is not by good works we're saved, but by grace through faith in Christ. So, by way of review, she asked:

"If I sold my house and my car and gave all my money to the church, would I get into heaven?" The class answered with a resounding "NO!"

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into heaven?" Again, the class answered, "NO!"

"How about if I was kind to everyone and did lots of nice things for people, would I get into heaven?" "NO!" they all answered.

"Well," continued the teacher, by now greatly encouraged, "Then how can I get into heaven?" One little boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

Sometimes we miss the obvious, don't we? This morning, as we've had four baptisms and received seven new members into our church family, seemed to me like a good time to go over the fundamentals of just how we enter into this wonderful salvation we proclaim and have the assurance of going to heaven when we die. But we must not narrow it to our personal experience. It certainly must begin there, but salvation is the most comprehensive theme of Scripture. From the first book of the Bible to the last book of the Bible, it is all about God's work in salvation. It involves the human race but also encompasses all of creation— animals, plants, and the world itself. The centerpiece of God's salvation is His coming to us in Jesus Christ.

### REPENT AND BELIEVE

Repentance is the first word of the Gospel. Jesus begins his ministry with these words

*The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news!* (Mk 1:15)

Jesus' last words to his disciples commanded them to preach repentance, the forgiveness of sins and baptize those who did repent (Lk. 24:47 & Mtt. 28:19). Then, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples, giving birth to the church on the Day of Pentecost. In Peter's sermon that day, responding to the question, "What must we do to be saved?" Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins." (Acts 2:38).

"Repent" is a difficult word for us today in our modern culture. It conjures up cartoon images of a crazy looking disheveled man with a beard and long hair holding a sign, "REPENT!" Last week I was reviewing one of our church documents that we have for usage agreements with groups wanting to use our facilities because we were making some changes in it. At the bottom

of the page that lists the various fees is a footer with Jesus' words in our text, *The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news!* (Mk 1:15). I'm not sure when it was placed in this document, but it was before I came. I'd never really thought about that verse being there as a footer and considered whether we should change it to something more positive, more encouraging. The word, "repent" feels a bit jarring. It suggests that there might be something wrong with a person's life. Do we want that there confronting anyone wanting to use our church facilities? Well, I decided I liked it because it stands at the beginning of the gospel, "the good news." Anything less is dishonest. There can be no good news or kingdom of God without passing first through the door of repentance.

Just what do we mean by repentance? Often time we may think of it as "feeling really bad for our sin." While it may include that, it is far more reaching. It is a decision we make. The Greek word literally means to turn around and go in a new direction. It is a fundamental restructuring of our lives, rearranging our lives and goals around the Kingdom. We realize we've been going the wrong way and choose to leave that behind and live in a brand new way. It is choosing to restructure our lives in accordance with God's plans.

Is repentance for everyone, or just for the really bad people we know? The Bible is the only place we find an adequate explanation for our world's problems and the source of those problems that lie within every human heart. No one is exempt.

There is so much in our world that is fantastic and beautiful, it is not hard to believe God created it and pronounced, "It is good." And, when we look at humankind and see nobility, moral courage and greatness, and creative intelligence, it is not difficult to imagine that we are created "in the image of God" as the Bible tells us we are. But, on the other hand, we see terrorists dancing in the streets, celebrating the latest death of an American soldier. We extol love but hatred and prejudice continue to multiply. And, when we begin to see clearly, we see much that is wrong with our world is also wrong with our own hearts. Most of our messed up relationships and problems come back to self-centeredness: "I want it my way at all costs." It resides in our three-year-olds, corporate executives, politicians, and migrant workers. No one is immune.

We tend to want to see our problem as outside ourselves. In the early part of the last century, a London newspaper posed the question to its readers, "What's Wrong With the World?" Christian writer and thinker, G. K. Chesterton, responded with this simple letter:

Dear Sirs:

I am.

Sincerely yours,

G. K. Chesterton

Yes indeed, the problem lies within the heart of every single human being. Another writer, Carl Sandburg put it,

"There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud."

Only Christianity offers the solution. Christ's death and resurrection is sufficient to overcome (even kill) the hippopotamus and release the eagle. Jesus came to provide the only way out of our

predicament, and that involves a transformation of our hearts that begins with repentance. In response to our turning, our decision to follow Him, He offers us an incredible miracle— a transformed heart.

And, here's another compelling signpost to let us know we're headed in the wrong direction. Even when things are going our way, and there seems to be absolutely no reason we wouldn't be happy and fulfilled, there is a nagging emptiness in our souls. Tom Brady, the quarterback for the New England Patriots, expressed it poignantly in an interview on *60 Minutes* last November. He said to Steve Kroft, who was interviewing him,

“Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what is. I reached my goal, my dream, my life.’ Me, I think, ‘God, it's got to be more than this.’ I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be.

“What's the answer?” asked Steve Kroft.

“I wish I knew,” Brady replied. “I wish I knew.”

Those questions are the ones, as a pastor, I long to hear expressed, because Jesus came as the answer to them. Those questions are a doorway into the fulfillment Jesus came to give us. The longing for purpose and meaning is something this world will never satisfy. It is because we are created for God and will only find true fulfillment in relationship with Him. Jesus came to provide entrance into that kind of life. He summarizes it saying, *I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.* (John 10:10). That is what the kingdom of God offers— abundant life, life in all its fulness and satisfaction.

The word “believe” is what enables this transformation. *The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news!* The combination of repentance and believing the good news is what brings us into the kingdom of God.

Since this word “believe” is so important, I don't want us to assume we understand it. As the desperate Philippian jailor cried out to Paul and Silas, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” *They replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:30-31). What is this saving faith? What the Bible means in using this word is probably more akin to how we use “trust.” It is more than believing a set of facts— it is placing our lives under the control of those truths.

All of you I expect, believe in Jesus Christ— that there was such a person that walked this earth in roughly 30 A.D. Is that saving faith? No. Furthermore, you may also believe that He was the Son of God, born of a virgin, and physically raised from the dead. Is that saving faith? No. Perhaps you believe so much that you are doing your best to live your life in conformity to His wonderful teachings. Is that saving faith? No. Saving faith means trusting Jesus with your life. He is Lord, which means He's in charge, you are letting Him control your life. The name Jesus means “Savior,” so you are trusting Him to provide your salvation. The good news— the essence of the gospel is that through trusting Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and resurrection, we are saved— our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life.

This trust involves letting go of our efforts, plans, and good deeds we might count on to save us and putting everything on Jesus. Thinking about what that trust feels like, I remembered a birthday present Polly gave me a number of years ago when we were still in Ohio. I'd always thought it would be neat to parasail, being towed behind a boat over the water— one of those things that I wanted to do at least once in my life before I died. So, she surprised me with the gift of a parasail ride on Lake Erie. I suddenly found that in theory this was great, but there was a moment of turning total control of my life over to these young guys with their boat. As I'm getting harnessed into the parasail to get launched from the back of the boat, I had second thoughts as they explained the process. I realized, once they opened the throttle on the boat and I began to rise in the wind, I would be trusting them with my life— things were out of my hands. Then, before I knew it, I was airborne. Floating 200 feet above the water, there was nothing I could do but wait upon their will to reel me in. It was an exhilarating experience, and it ended without my getting wet.

Now I could have done research into this parasail-ride company, checked their record to my satisfaction that they'd never lost anybody doing this and said I believed in them. I could have checked all their equipment carefully and said I believed it was good stuff, well maintained. I paid them money I believed would bring about a service. But in none of this was I trusting them with my life, was I? Then, there was that moment of lift-off and I was committed. That's what the Bible means by saving faith— this letting go kind of trust.

## **BAPTISM**

Baptism is the sacrament ordained by God to give witness to that change of direction, and the transformation brought about by trusting in Jesus Christ. Paul, speaking of baptism in Romans 6:3-7, obviously is referring to immersion when he writes,

*don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

*If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*

Note the radical nature of the image. We go under the water, a kind of death to the old self, a killing, a drowning the old sinful nature under the water. We are raised out of the water, reborn, a new creation living a brand new life— the life supernaturally imparted by Jesus Christ. Because of this, Paul goes on to make radical claims. We're dead to sin and alive to God. The old sin-nature inherited from Adam has been drowned in the flood of baptism. *Anyone who has died has been freed from sin* (7). So, *Sin shall not be your master* (14) and, *You have been set free from sin and become slaves of righteousness* (18) Paul writes later in this same chapter. Baptism is clearly the witness to the demarcation between the old way of life and the new— between death and life.

In fact, that five-year-old in Sunday School was right in this sense in saying, "First you gotta die." We are buried with Christ in baptism.

Conceptions of the Christian life that see it as being basically nice people gradually becoming nicer, or a minor tinkering with and a fine tuning of fundamentally good people, miss the clear teaching of Scripture and the power of the Gospel. That is like the little girl coming to the dinner table and being asked if she washed her hands. She says, "No, but I put sweet smelling stuff on them!" Covering over the dirt doesn't take care of the problem, does it? The contamination is still there. Jesus came to deal with the contamination of our sin-bent natures. But, often we treat the Christian life as adding a few missing ingredients to a pretty good person rather than the radical death to life transformation we all need.

It is important to note, baptismal work is something done to us rather than by us. No one can baptize themselves. The baptismal verbs in the New Testament are passive. Baptismal repentance is a gift too, not a heroic act. Rather it is a letting go of all attempts to be heroic, to accomplish our salvation. I like the way William Willimon puts it in one of his books:

*Baptismal repentance is falling back into the waters, submitting to the power of God for better or worse, letting oneself be swept up like a dependent child into the movement of the Kingdom.*

Now, since we've been talking about immersion, let me just take a moment to explain our Presbyterian practice. Baptism can be by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling in our tradition. Since the New Testament gives no definitive guidance, our Presbyterian church, along with many other denominations, accept all three practices that have been used in church history. The main point of baptism is not the quantity of the water, but what we are witnessing to— a decision to enter into a new life in Christ. Those of a Baptist tradition claim immersion as the only Biblical way based upon the Greek word "*baptizo*" which means "to dip." However, according to those who understand the nuances of Greek grammar, tell us it can mean either the object (the person being baptized) is dipped into the water or water is dipped and placed on the person. While we often assume Jesus was immersed in the Jordan, we don't know. He may have knelt in the river as John poured water over him. And, with the shortage of water in Israel, it would seem difficult for every baptism to have been by immersion.

## **CONCLUSION**

Living in the kingdom of God is a glorious adventure. As we witness in baptism, our sins are buried and we rise to a new Spirit-empowered life that can overcome the power of sin and evil. And, in this new life, we live freely, filled with peace and joy, at one with God's purpose in our lives— participants in His ongoing work of redeeming all of creation.