

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

Acts 16; Romans 10

- 1) Which of these statements do you believe to be true?
- I believe that if I'm active in the church, give regularly, and do my best to help folks in need; God will surely accept me as His child.
 - I believe that if I acknowledge my sin, cast myself totally upon God's mercy, and believe in Jesus as Lord, I am assured of a place in Heaven.
 - I believe this world is a testing ground for all sorts of people. A loving God wouldn't keep anyone from going to Heaven. Ultimately, all persons will be saved.

On any given Sunday, you could hear any one of those statements in many of our churches across America. Some would say we're saved by works, others by faith, and some would question whether personal salvation is even a valid concern.

- But for Reformational Christianity, the doctrine of justification by faith has always been unquestionably at the center of the Christian faith.
- This was certainly the preaching of John Wesley whose heart warming experience (270 years ago on May 24, 1738) happened when someone was reading Luther's preface to the book of Romans which dwells on justification by faith.

2) Long before the Philippian jailer asked the question:

"What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30)

And Paul answered quickly and clearly:

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

(Acts 16:31)

Job asked in the Old Testament,

"How then can man be righteous before God?" (Job 25:4)

This is one of the oldest questions on the mind of man.

It should be a vital concern for every person to know how to get into a right relationship with God. How can we overcome the estrangement and alienation that exists between ourselves and God.

a. The Biblical answer to this question is justification. Paul wrote:

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

The word justify is a legal term and is the opposite of condemn. While to condemn means to declare one guilty, to justify means to declare one innocent, acquitted, righteous, or not guilty. This means that the person who is justified by faith is actually without guilt in God's eyes.

b. Justification, however, is more than pardon. By the life and death of Christ, the demands of God's law have been fully satisfied. God didn't just decide one day that mankind's rebellion doesn't matter after all. Instead, by Jesus' sinless life and obedience He fulfilled the law, satisfying its demands. In His death on the cross, Christ bore the guilt and punishment of all humanity.

c. So, in justification the very righteousness of Christ is reckoned or attributed to the believer's credit. As Paul wrote:

"To one who does not work but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

(Romans 4:5)

As someone said, "The believer's guilt is laid on Christ and Christ's merit is laid on the believer."

3) Justification by faith is central to Christianity. It is little wonder that Martin Luther, who rediscovered this doctrine for the Church which sparked the Protestant Reformation, said, "If the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost."

a. Why is this so? Because, justification by faith demolishes works-righteousness. Justification by faith insists that one is forgiven and declared righteous purely by God's grace and not because of one's own merits or personal efforts. Such teaching strikes at the heart of nearly every false religious system.

- Deep within the human consciousness is the conviction that by doing certain good deeds one can earn credit before God.
- This thinking says, "Surely God can't be too displeased with me in light of the things I'm doing."

b. This is the belief of the ordinary person in the street today. It is popular because it is flattering. It tells a person that if he or she will only pull his or her socks up a bit higher and try a bit harder, he or she will succeed in winning salvation. The great delusion many people must overcome is the unfounded belief that one's own religious activity can earn God's favor.

- The Jews entertained that delusion by taking great pride in their meticulous observance of the law.

- We entertain the same delusion today when we think our church membership, religious heritage, tithing, serving on church committees, faithful church attendance, or other activities can earn us merit in God's sight.

4) The New Testament clearly teaches that forgiveness comes only through Christ's merit, not our own. When some Jews in the early church began teaching that circumcision was necessary in addition to faith in Christ, Paul adamantly refuted them. He was intolerant – that's right, intolerant – of works-righteousness. He opposed any additions to Biblical faith.

Sadly, much of what goes by the name of "Christian religion" in our modern world is often just human self-assertion in religious disguise. It may have a host of similarities to authentic Christianity and even exist in the environment of a Christian community. But at its core, it is still just works-righteousness.

5) This great Biblical truth of justification by faith was at the heart of Methodist preaching from its beginning. Methodists believed that justification is instantaneous. The moment a person truly believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, he is justified – declared not guilty and accounted as righteous.

- Even if the believer serves the Lord for 60 years and dies a martyr's death, he can never be "more justified" than at that hour he first believed.
- For certain, as a person grows in Christ, he should be more holy in heart and life, more Christ-like in character, but when one is "not guilty" he cannot be more "not guilty."

a. One of the great contributions our Methodist movement gave to the Church was its emphasis on works as the fruit of real, Biblical faith.

- Wesley denied that works had merit in earning God's grace.
- Still he taught vigorously that works are the inevitable fruit of living faith.
- He believed that where Christ was dwelling, personal transformation would follow.
- Works of love and service would flow.

And they did – in one of the most remarkable eras of social transformation any generation has ever seen.

b. For Christians who understand the seriousness of sin, the experience of justification unlocks amazing energy for moral and social good.

- Such “amazing grace” leaves one overwhelmed and filled with gratitude.
- As the songwriter put it: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

6) If this wonderful doctrine of justification by faith is being neglected by the church today, we must ask “why?”

- In many places sentimentalism has obscured the seriousness of sin and judgment. There are many leaders in the church today who have embraced a doctrine of universalism, that is, they conclude that all persons will eventually be saved.

a. I told our confirmation class two weeks ago, we believe in universal grace – all persons need to be saved, and all persons can be saved. God’s grace is for everyone. No one is excluded. But that does not mean that all persons will be saved – that’s universalism.

b. In the verse that summarizes the entire Bible and gospel message, Jesus said to Nicodemus,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Notice that it is “whoever believes in him” that “shall not perish.” Jesus on the cross did everything necessary for our salvation, but we have to “believe.”

c. The Bible is clear about what this means. Paul says in Romans, ***“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”*** (Romans 10:9,10)

d. Too many preachers and too many congregations have adjusted their understanding of the Christian faith to make it more pleasing and acceptable to “modern man.” But that doesn’t make it right.

7) Let's remember the Gospel has faced opposition in nearly every age. When Luther began preaching that persons are justified before God by faith and not by works, he encountered violent resistance. Soon he heard the news of the first Protestant martyrs. Several monks had read his work, had turned to his way of thinking, and were burned alive in the Grand Palace in Brussels.

When Luther first heard about it, he began to pace the floor, saying, "I can't go on. I can't do it anymore. Because of me other men are being killed." But as he wrestled and prayed, he decided he would go on. He understood that because justification by faith was the truth of the Bible, he must go on proclaiming it, no matter what the cost.

The result was the Protestant Reformation, and it changed the course of history.

We need a new Reformation today to sweep across America and the world. It could happen, and when it does, it will come when men and women once again discover the great New Testament theme of justification by faith.