

Salvation By Faith – Alone?

Romans 3:9-20, 21-31 June 8, 2008

Wouldn't it be nice to have a set of rules so that life would be easier and less confusing? You know, something a little more specific to who I am and where I live than the 10 Commandments? Well, someone has developed such a list and it's making the rounds on the internet. Actually, there are several different versions out there, but here are a few of the ones on the list I've most recently seen:

- 1) There are only two tools required: WD-40 and duct tape. If it doesn't move and it is supposed to move, squirt it with WD-40. If it moves and it is not supposed to move, wrap it in duct tape.
- 2) The five most essential words for a healthy, vital relationship are "I apologize" and "You are right."
- 3) Everyone seems normal until you get to know them.
- 4) If someone says that "you are too good for me"...believe them.
- 5) Learn to pick your battles: ask yourself, "Will this matter one year from now?"
- 6) When you make a mistake, make amends immediately. Crow tastes better when it is still warm.
- 7) Work is good, but it's not that important. Money is nice, but you can't take it with you. Statistics show most people don't live to spend all they saved.¹

So, there they are: a new set of rules that if we abide by them will help us through life. Do you think you'll do any better job remembering these rules than any of the others you've been told will help you live a happy life? I'm confident I won't.

Norman Vincent Peale told a story in one of his books about a young man in North Carolina named Samuel Mann. Mann was hurriedly walking through the countryside one day when he decided to try and save some time by going through a swamp. He had on high hip boots and slogged through the wet ground for awhile until he came upon an area that looked like dry sand. As he tried to cross it, he began to sink. He tried to go back but his legs wouldn't budge and it was then that he realized he was in quicksand. He was horrified as he remembered the natives saying: "Nobody ever gets out of those quicksands alive."

He was paralyzed by panic and began to sink deeper and deeper. He noticed some marsh grass to his left and thought to himself: "If I could just reach that grass, perhaps a handful would have the strength of a rope." He tried and tried but soon realized that it just out of his reach. He knew that if he lunged and missed, the sand would quickly consume him. He also knew that if he did nothing, he was a goner as well.

And then it dawned on him. The sand wasn't holding him but his boots and he was being held back by the boots. He quickly unstrapped the boots from his belt, took a deep breath and flung himself full length out of his boots across the deadly sand. He successfully got hold of a few strands and they were indeed strong enough to allow him to pull himself slowly, carefully, inch by inch out of his boots and onto the solid earth.²

Too many people see the Christian life that way – as something we have to continually work at in order to attain. "Are you a Christian?" many of us are asked and our answer goes something like: "Well, I try to be." "If I just could get my hands on a couple strands of that grass nearby I think I'll make it." "If I just attend a couple more worship services – if I read a couple more of Max Lucado's or Philip Yancey's books – if I read my Bible more frequently – or, if I find one more ministry to the poor or in the church to volunteer with, well, then I'll be worthy of salvation and really be able to think of myself as a Christian."

That's the way Martin Luther once believed as well. In reality if Luther hadn't believed that to be the case, he probably would have never become a priest. The year was 1505 and Luther was traveling to the university at Erfurt, Germany from his home. And he was struggling. He was struggling about his relationship with God. He just wasn't sure that if a vote was taken at the pearly gates of heaven that he would be accepted.

While walking deep in thought, a violent storm developed and lightning struck close enough to him to knock him to the ground. Breathless and terrified he cried out: "St. Anna, save me!" And then he made a vow - a version of which many of us have uttered in similar situations. His vow was that if he lived he would become a monk.

His family had high hopes he would be a successful wealthy attorney. And so, it was with some sadness and apprehension that he made his way to the monastery. Luther left all his worldly possessions and entered the restricted and reverent life of a monk but still was burdened by the feeling that he was not good enough - weighed down by the guilt of his sins. He tried denying himself more, fasting more, praying more, reading the Bible more - and still he had this fear that he was damned for all eternity.

Seven years after he entered the monastery, he was sent to Rome to carry out some business with the pope. He became hopeful again as he thought of being able to be present in the place where the piety and power of his church was centered.

When he arrived in Rome he found things much different than what he had anticipated. He discovered there a corrupt church. One source observed: "His mind and heart went reeling. How often that has happened to idealistic young men and women when they discover that the church they love is not always what the church ought to be."³

Still, there was the Scala Sancta, the "sacred stairs" and he made his way there and began to climb them, kissing each step as was the custom. And a scripture passage began to crowd into his mind: "The just shall live by faith." What was he doing kissing the steps if "the just shall live by faith," he wondered. And thus began the transformation of Luther's heart and life. Out of that experience was born the Protestant Reformation. Later he would write: "It was as if the gates swung open, and I entered into paradise."⁴

In Douglas Steere's book Together in Solitude he tells about visiting the great theologian Karl Barth in his home. He recalls sharing with Barth how vital the role private prayer had been to him - how it put him in the stream of grace. He shared with the learned Barth how impressed he had been by the daily devotional life of the Benedictine monks as a means of expressing that grace.

Steere noted that he was expecting Barth to confirm his experience and begin to express how he had been moved by similar vital signs of piety. Instead, he notes, Barth embarked on a lecture that denied prayer or ritual as a means to aid in redemption. He insisted that for he knew "he hung suspended between heaven and hell. He knew that the weight of his sins would most certainly sink him to hell. Only the intervention of the supreme act of grace wrought in Christ would ever be sufficient to lift him. Only Christ could overcome the terrible gravitational force of his sin. He implied that this act of Jesus Christ was enough, that anything else was utterly irrelevant, and that anyone who wasted his time or trust on these practices was to be pitied."⁵

Barth may have overstated it, but it's an important point he made. It's the point Luther and the other Reformers made - our prayers, our worship attendance, our working at doing good, our reading the scriptures, our treating

one another are not what saves us. Salvation is by faith and faith alone. There is really only one prayer to be prayed and that is quite simply, “Yes, I accept my acceptance – my worthiness because of Jesus Christ.”

The good news is not about our desperately reaching out to prove ourselves worthy of God’s love. It is accepting that God reaches out to us in love and mercy and forgiveness. It is God who pulls us out of the quicksands of sin and self-destruction and not anything we can pull off or accomplish.

But, alone? “Salvation by faith – alone?” we ask. What about serving and the spiritual disciplines we’ve been taught – surely they have something to do with it. John Wesley addressed this very issue in a sermon he preached on June 18, 1738 at St. Mary’s, Oxford, before the University. The title of his sermon was “Salvation by Faith.” Someday I think it would be interesting to preach the whole sermon – I mean like he did it – with the introductory outline and the whole bit. It really is an amazingly thought provoking sermon. Besides the piece on the place of works, which I’m going to get to just give me a little time, there was also his thinking about what we call salvation.

Listen to this: “First, whatsoever else it imply, it is a present salvation. It is something attainable, yea, actually attained, on earth, by those who are partakers of this faith. For thus saith the Apostle to the believers at Ephesus, and in them to the believers of all ages, not, *Ye shall be* (though that also is true), but, *Ye are saved through faith.*”⁶

Salvation isn’t just about eternal life according to Wesley – it’s something that we know here and now. We are saved in the present world – from sin – from original and actual – from past and present – from sin of the flesh and sin of the spirit – we are saved from the guilt and the power of the guilt that sin births within us. Now, that my friends is absolutely sensational good news – if, if we would but accept it and live the result of such an understanding and experience.

Which brings us to Wesley’s attitude, teaching, understanding of the place of works in the scheme of things. Wesley actually notes it as the first objection people raise against the concept of salvation by faith alone. Let me share his actual words, perhaps with a little less formal English. “The first objection to this is, that to preach salvation or justification, by faith only, is to preach against holiness and good works. To which a short answer might be given: ‘It would be so, if we spake, as some do, of a faith which was separate from these; but we speak of a faith which is not so, but productive of all good works, and all holiness.’”

And then he went on and noted that it is basically the same argument some raised in Paul’s time when they were concerned that this faith emphasis on Paul’s part might cause some to think the law was null and void. Wesley acknowledged that would be the case if we didn’t at one and the same time emphasize that a result of this saving experience in Jesus Christ is the doing good works – obeying the law out of thanksgiving for what God has done for us – in us – for us – through Jesus Christ.

Both of our former denominations thought this issue important enough to spell it out as it is recorded in The Book of Discipline as noted on the handout in the bulletin: (the former Methodist version) “Although good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and spring out of a true and lively faith, insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by its fruit.”⁷

(And, the former EUB version) “We believe good works are the necessary fruits of faith and follow regeneration but they do not have the virtue to remove our sins or to avert divine judgment. We believe good works, pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, spring from a true and living faith, for through and by them faith is made evident.”⁸

Brothers and sisters in Christ our salvation is by faith in the work of Jesus Christ in us. Our works grow out of the acceptance of that good news or help us come to that understanding. In the coming weeks Wesley’s true gift to the development of Christian thought around grace will help this become even clearer.

It’s been a long practice of mine, although I’ve taken my time to introduce it into the service here, to offer a time at the end of the service for persons to contemplate the call of Jesus Christ on our lives. I’ve chosen over the years to title this part of the service *An Invitation to Christian Discipleship*. I don’t have a one size fits all invitation – neither for all of us nor for all messages. This is a time for us to hear the call of Christ in us in whatever form that might take. It’s a time for us to consider whether there are some new decisions we feel called to make – new beliefs, new resolves, new insight, new disciplines, new awarenesses, new ministries. Our response can take many forms – it can be a simple prayer today in the pew – it might be we feel the need to talk to someone, Jeff or myself or someone else, about a thought you are having about your faith journey or something of a personal nature that seems to be getting in the way of walking with God – trusting God. It might be you want to come forward and kneel at a kneeler. Hear now that you are invited to consider your Christian Discipleship – where you are on your journey of faith – whether you need in a new way specifically this day perhaps to accept your salvation by faith.

Let us pray.

1. Email spam with no author noted.
2. Norman Vincent Peale, Power of the Plus Factor (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1987).
3. King Duncan, “Salvation By Faith Alone,” Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
4. Ibid.
5. Douglas V. Steere, Together in Solitude (New York: Crossroad, 1982) as quoted in King Duncan’s “Salvation by Faith Alone” sermon referenced in 3 above.
6. John Wesley, “Salvation by Faith,” The Sermons of John Wesley (www.gbgn-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/1/) as preached at St. Mary’s, Oxford, before the University, on June 18, 1738.
7. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), pp. 61-62.
8. Ibid., p. 69.