

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

SAVED BY GRACE

*"...not by works of righteousness  
which we have done, but according  
to his mercy he saved us..."*


*Titus 3:5a*

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It is a common criticism of the church that it continues to answer questions that people no longer ask. Stung by this criticism, many leaders and spokesmen of the church have determined to abandon the traditional concerns of faith in the interest of making the church relevant to man's political, social and economic needs.

Chafing under the Marxian charge that religion is an opiate of the people, these dedicated members of the body of Christ have sought to make their brothers and sisters fluent in the language of power and visible at the barricades where freedom is on the line.

My concern today is that the rush to be relevant on the large public issues of our time may represent an over-correction rather than a correction. All that plagues and cramps the human spirit does not originate from without. There is a poverty of soul as well as a poverty of goods and cash. Optimum political and social conditions are not enough in themselves to guarantee happiness.

Last November a book by Andrew M. Greeley was released entitled The Persistence of Religion. Peter Berger summed it up in a review by writing: "The thesis of the book is that the basic human religious needs and the basic religious functions have not changed very notably since the late Ice Age; what changes have occurred make religious questions more critical rather than less critical in the contemporary world." A man who has spent a considerable amount of energy trying to understand the dynamics of our youth said recently that many of the disaffected young are suffering from the enormous fatigue of trying to live without religion.

Modern man for all of his sophistication is concerned not only with how he stands on such questions as amnesty, race and war, but also how he stands with God! He may not be using the language of the Philipian jailor and crying out, "What must I do to be saved?" Nonetheless, he is often deeply concerned about establishing peace between himself and the One with whom we have to do.

Man is incurably self-justifying. You may remember that the parable of the Good Samaritan was triggered by a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" This he said "seeking to justify himself." That need is no less prevalent in our time than it was in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry.

The question of how a soul may become right with God must not be left to itinerant evangelists and self-styled store-front prophets. The joylessness that marks many of our churches bears unwelcome testimony to our neglect of this fundamental question.

When we wish to establish a right relationship to God on our own, we usually embark on one of three approaches. I should like to describe these approaches in mathematical terms.

\* \* \*

One way by which man seeks to get right with God is by addition. Burdened by feelings of unfitness he determines to add to his life the practice of certain virtues and attitudes which he feels will improve his condition and elevate his standing in the sight of God. The rich young ruler of gospel fame symbolizes this approach. "Good Master," he said to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17) (It is highly significant that he did not ask, "What must I be?" but "What must I do?") In his judgment he had done rather well - at least in terms of conventional righteousness and morality. Now with the advent of this new teacher he might discover something more that

he could add to an already virtuous life. The center of his being would remain the same. He would append a few graces here and there in much the fashion of a youngster appending an ornament or two to an already crowded Christmas tree.

He was hardly prepared for Jesus' reply: "Sell what you have, (because money was his "thing") give to the poor, and come, follow me." What this promising young man needed was an altogether new point of departure. There are people by the thousands both within and without the church who are seeking to establish a right relationship with God by merely adding something to their lives.

There are several weaknesses in this approach. One such is the tendency of people who are on this kind of trip to become highly, if not exclusively, introspective. I know of no man in history who took virtue more seriously than Benjamin Franklin. This statesman-inventor made it a practice to sit down at day's end to examine his life with an eye towards certain virtues and dispositions that he had singled out. He kept a chart that served as a running score card. The virtues that he aspired to were thirteen in number: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility.

Another weakness: People who are interested in adding yet one thing more to their lives without altering the center tend to become legalistic and crave definition and boundaries. "How oft must my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" It isn't enough to know that we should be forgiving. An outside limit must be named. The calculating individual is like the student who comes up on the first day of class and asks how many words the term paper should contain. Anyone who asks that question is not yet caught up in the spirit of the investigation. How oft must I forgive? You are asking me, God, to be a neighbor to other people, tell me who my neighbor is? You name it and I'll do it.

But God is concerned to get at our affections and dispositions and to govern the seat of our motivations. The rich young ruler was prepared for anything but surrender; thus, he was unprepared to be saved.

\* \* \*

Another way by which man seeks to get right with God is by subtraction. This avenue is most tempting during the season of Lent. Finding himself somewhat out of touch with his beginnings and his faith, this person determines to improve his relationship to God by eliminating the negatives from his life. We all have a pretty good idea of what we ought to give up in the interest of a life more pleasing to God.

Yet, our so-called self-denials frequently do not involve a denial of the self. I read with much profit Dr. J. Carter Swaim's comment in the Riverside Lenten booklet (reading for March 8th) that many who give up ice cream or movies for lent are in fact denying something to themselves but they are not necessarily denying themselves. There is a difference between denying something to yourself and denying yourself.

Besides, some of the things that we are willing to give up carry the fringe benefit of helping us live a little longer. Most of us if we smoke, smoke too much. If we eat, we eat too much. Moderation or abstinence could add up to improved health and the promise of increased longevity.

Surely there is a place for pruning the branch. Even Jesus talked about it. But pruning a branch can only be effective if the branch is already in touch with the vine. It is a pointless exercise to prune a dead branch.

At the end of the day, this approach is too negative. It tries to establish standing before God on the basis of abstentions. Its prototype is the Elder Brother who had not left the father's house, who had not dissipated the father's fortune, who had not spent



his time in riotous living in the far country, but who nonetheless was ever more distant from his father's heart than the prodigal.

If the essence of the good life is to be captured in our negations and abstentions, then the prevailing symbol would be that of a human being in bed - alone.

\* \* \*

There is yet another approach by which man seeks to get right with God: This is by multiplication. The individual who goes this route is aware that he and God are not as close as they should be. He determines that the trouble has to do with a lack of intensity on his part. Consequently, he revs up the motors. He resolves to take on more causes, get underneath more burdens, attend more meetings (God help him) pray more, and read the Bible more. He sees his lack as a quantitative rather than a qualitative lack -- as if he could be heard for his much speaking, or seen for his much doing.

Those who rush down this road tend to become frenzied, exhausted and joyless. Elijah was of this temperament. He had to learn after his showdown on Mt. Carmel what it means to "rest in the Lord." Out there in the wilderness following his victory over the priests of Baal, God had to ground his servant so that Elijah might know that the power at work was not his but that of the Almighty.

Every life needs some slack. I've never been impressed by the tightly wound, highly intense religious types who suggest, whether they intend to or not, that the kingdom will come by their exertions rather than by the quiet offerings of God. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed where he was when he heard the news for two days before moving on to Bethany. The disciples wondered why he tarried. Jesus answered calmly, "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" (John 11:9) The kingdom was not man's to win but God's to give.

Unfortunately, the more sincere we are the more likely we are to be caught up in the quest for intensity. No minister who has been around for a decade or two will fail to recall people in his several churches who burned themselves out and then became angry with the institution that consumed their commitment.

A poet has caught the feeling:

#### SINE NOMINE

I'm tired, Lord.  
I want to sit still  
And not move.

No more meetings  
or questions  
or decisions;  
No more children  
watching me  
and learning;  
No more poor  
hungry  
desperate people  
Standing in front of me;  
No more friends  
expecting me  
to be and do.

A little while ago  
It was different, Lord.  
It was easier.  
We had a comfortable  
Nodding acquaintance,  
You and I.  
I was happy and peaceful.

But you have changed that now:  
You and your mercy,  
You and your incredible love,  
You and your tireless walking  
Around the world.



I tire quickly.  
And I must sleep  
A little.

- Anne Springsteen

Some seek to become right with God by adding something to their life, some by subtracting something from their life, some by multiplying the range of their commitments. All of these ways, separately or together, lack the ability to give certitude to the soul. We never know whether we've added enough. We never know whether we've subtracted enough. We never know whether we've multiplied enough.

\* \* \*

There must be a better way, and there is: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done but according to His mercy He saved us." I can never read those words from the letter to Titus without thinking of those lines from the Epistle to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast." (Eph. 2:8-9) We are simply saved by grace.

This does not mean that there is no such thing as a good work. One of the things that we sorely need in Protestantism is a theology of works. We have been so afraid of the term since the days of Martin Luther that we have never reckoned seriously with the place for works and rewards in Christian experience.

I don't believe that Paul anywhere meant to convey that works could not be good. John Gardner has wisely observed that, "Unless our philosophers and plumbers are committed to excellence, neither our pipes nor our arguments will hold water." 2 We are not to be indifferent to standards. There is such a thing as a good opening and a good closing, a good meeting, a good organization. There is in life good singing, good reading, good acting, good prose, good poetry.

It would be terribly wrong to conclude that Christians should become Philistine or anti-intellectual because of biblical warnings against good works. The important point that the gospel wants us to understand is that our being right with God comes from something in Him and not from anything in us however good.

This sounds like such a truism, yet, the ranks of the faithful are crowded with people who do not understand why the bells ring in the New Testament. They still assume that God is a ruthless moral tyrant who is constantly holding them up to examination. In fact, His name is love and grace is His signature. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done but according to His mercy He saved us."

The Heidelberg Catechism gets to the heart of the matter. Question 86 of that document asks, "As we are redeemed from our plight by grace through Christ without any merits of our own, why should we do good works?" The answer follows: "Because Christ having bought us by his blood, has also renewed us by His Holy Spirit, that we should show ourselves grateful to God for His benefits with our whole lives, and that he should be magnified through us. Also in order that we may have assurance of our faith from its fruits and win our neighbors to Christ by our godly conversation."

God is not hostile to us. God is not indifferent to us. The real problem with one who is hung up on "works righteousness" is that he has a wrong view of God. "So then it is not of Him that willeth nor of him that runneth but of God that showeth mercy."

(Romans 9:16)

Besides, even if from this day on we could add enough and subtract enough and multiply enough, what would this do about the past with which our souls are burdened?

I learned the other day of a youngster who broke an expensive vase. The lad's misadventure produced a biting sense of guilt. His father came over to him,

put an arm around him and said, "It doesn't matter." His mother did better. She went over to him and said, "It matters, but it's alright."

The war of 1812 should never have been fought. Its heaviest battles occurred after an armistice had been declared. Multitudes cannot understand that God is not at war with us. Else, why do they hesitate to trust their souls to his supportive love?

\* \* \*

Soren Kierkegaard has helped me here more than any other man outside the Bible itself. I was in the ministry for ten years or so before I knew the joy of what I'm trying to share with you now. Kierkegaard held it to be the mark of most religions in the world that God has dealings only with the pure. Man, therefore, must scramble by a thousand different techniques to purify himself in order to gain a right relationship with God.

In the same vein he went on to say that the average citizen in Christendom if asked to name the antonym of "sin," would answer "virtue." Once one agrees that the antonym of sin is virtue one is off to a life-time of keeping books with God. That was a sin. This is an offsetting virtue. Another sin, another virtue. Perhaps a virtue first, putting me "one up" with God. It was Kierkegaard's judgment that Christendom as he knew it was peopled by souls who never got beyond a bookkeeping stage with the Almighty. They had never been liberated by faith in the mercy of the Lord.

Then comes the shocker. The Danish philosopher went on to argue that when one turns to the Bible he discovers that the antonym of "sin" is not "virtue" but "faith." That's when the shades began to go up for me and the light came shining in. There is nothing that we can lay against our sins but our faith. Our hope for redemption is not to be found in what we can produce but in what God has covenanted to give!

A boy was given a sail boat by his parents. His mother warned him never to go out into the lake alone. When his mother became ill he slipped down to the lake and sailed alone. He felt guilty about his disobedience and wanted to tell his mother, but she was so ill that he was not allowed to go into her room. He wrote his confession on a slate and at the bottom added, "If you forgive me, rub it out." When the nurse brought the slate out of the sick room it was clean!

Frank Capra, the famed Hollywood producer, spoke to the freedom that all of us should know when he said, "Brotherhood is not just saying 'Good morning' ... it's sacrifice. And happiness is not just a new suit of clothes and a shoe shine. It's getting down on your knees to beg God for mercy and knowing that He hears you." 3

"Not by works of righteousness which we have done but according to his mercy he saved us."

### CLOSING PRAYER

*We bless Thee God that Thou art good  
-- slow to anger and plenteous  
in mercy.*

*If there be within reach of this  
service those who know Thy Power  
but not Thy Grace, let this  
be the day on which they pass  
from mere religion to a living  
faith in Christ.*

*In his strong name we pray.  
Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Springsteen, Anne, "Sine Nomine," The Cresset, Valparaiso University Press, December, 1964
2. From an article in The New York Times, January 18, 1973 by Theodore M. Hesburgh.
3. Capra, Frank, The Name Above the Title, p. 121 The Macmillan Company, New York 1971

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