Salvation Story

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Titus 3:1-8

Sermon Series:
The Life You’ve Always Wanted

...salvation is more than a get-out-of-hell free card.

Warren Buffett, the CEO of Berkshire-Hathaway, was the second richest man in the world in 2006. In a New York library, with Bill and Melinda Gates at his side, Warren pledged a gift of 30 billion dollars to improve health, nutrition and education. It remains the largest single gift ever given to charity. It’s hardly surprising that Bill and Melinda are standing with him, since 80 percent of his gift was earmarked for the Gates foundation. In his speech announcing his gift, he said, “There is more than one way to get to heaven but this is a great way.”

I don’t know where this Presbyterian-turned-agnostic finds biblical support to arrive at his sweeping pronouncement that there is more than one way to get to heaven. What is particularly galling is his statement, “This is a great way to get to heaven.” I don’t want to make too much of Buffett’s off-the-cuff remark, but it seems to fit with his swashbuckling, I-can-solve-anything-with-money approach to life.

I don’t read anywhere in the Bible or any other sacred writing for that matter, where donating money will insure your name in the roll called up yonder. Everything I read in Scripture convinces me that charity alone won’t get it done. Jesus is emphatic on this point. Sharing your wealth is certainly admirable but doesn’t qualify you for heaven.

Today, I want to think with you about salvation. We reference this word a lot in the church. When we talk about salvation, most often we speak about what we are saved from—things like sin, death and hell. But we don’t talk much about what we are saved for. Surely salvation is more than a get-out-of-hell-free card. God saves us for another kind of life.

Our focus this summer is the theme, “The Life You’ve Always Wanted.” Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). It’s the kind of life all of us long and yearn for.

Our sermons this summer are based in large measure on Paul’s letters to the early church. Thirteen of the 27 books in the New Testament consist of Paul’s letters. The early portions of his letters are chiefly concerned with Christian doctrine, a word that has
Belief drives behavior.

fallen out of favor in our day. We often confuse it with the more pejorative word doctrinaire, meaning inflexible. Doctrine is just a fancy word for what we believe.

The latter portions of Paul’s letters transition from matters of doctrine to address ethical issues. At the end of his letters, Paul seeks to apply what Christians believe to how we behave. Belief drives behavior.

Paul takes up this doctrine of salvation in his letter to Titus. He puts forward three central themes related to salvation: the basis of salvation, the means of salvation and the goal of salvation.

The basis of salvation is laid out for us in verse 4: “He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we had done, but because of his mercy.” Salvation is not our doing. We are saved by God’s mercy.

People will often insinuate, in so many words, that we go to heaven for being good people. But if we go to heaven for being good then how good do we have to be? This is where it gets dicey. How do we know if we’re good enough? Can we ever be sure?

I’m helped by something Pastor Tim Keller says about salvation. He calls this people-go-to-heaven-for-being-good approach a “moral improvement narrative.” This world view essentially believes “I obey; therefore, I am acceptable to God.” Salvation, then, is based on human merit and achievement.

Keller contrasts this moral improvement narrative with a “grace narrative.” This world view embraces the premise that I’m accepted by God; therefore I obey. Do you see the difference? God’s favor isn’t based on human merit. It is based entirely on divine favor. “He saves us…by his mercy.”

During a conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to Christianity. They began by eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had various versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of returning from the dead. During the debate, C.S. Lewis entered the room. “What’s the rumpus?” he asked in typical British manner. When he heard they were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution to world religion, Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

My read of world religions is that they fundamentally embrace a moral improvement narrative. Whether it’s the Jewish conception of law, the Buddhist eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma or Muslim code of law, other religions believe our salvation is somehow the result of human achievement. Christianity stands alone in its offer of a grace narrative. “He saved us by his mercy.”
We are not saved by good works, we are saved for good works.

The basis of salvation is divine mercy, not human works. The second doctrinal point Paul makes, the means of salvation, is expressed in verses 5-6: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

This is where Paul lost me this week. What on earth is he talking about here? What intrigues me is that all three members of the Trinity are mentioned in this sentence. Jesus Christ is described as Savior in verse 6. Verse 5 tells us that the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts. Even though there is no explicit reference to God the Father in these verses, the phrase “he saved us” reverts back to God the Father mentioned earlier in the passage. In other words, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all participate in our salvation. This triune God makes spiritual birth possible. The Biblical language of “born again” has gotten a bad rap in our day. It means literally a birth from above. When we come to faith in this triune God, we are reborn into new life with God. We are being continually renewed in this new life as we seek God.

First, the basis of salvation is God’s mercy, not our good works. Second, the means of salvation is accomplished through the saving work of our triune God. And third, the goal of our salvation is laid forth in verses 7-8. A purpose clause in English expresses a cause or a result. Paul often identifies his purpose clauses with the words “so that.” This is Paul’s way of addressing our so-what question. I’m not the only one who asks the so-what question.

The first purpose clause occurs in verse 7: “So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Eternal life isn’t merely a place we go after we die. This triune God ushers us into a new way of living and relating to each other. It’s the life you’ve always wanted.

The second purpose clause appears in verse 8: “So that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” Earlier, Paul told us we are saved by God’s mercy, not our good works. Yet now he tells us we are saved for good works. We are not saved by good works, we are saved for good works. Good works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of salvation.

This subject of good works is central to Paul’s letter to Titus (1:8, 16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14). Paul opens this third chapter by reminding his readers “to be ready to do good works” (3:1). Paul supplies four examples of good works in verse 2: “To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show true humil-
“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”
- C.S. Lewis

ity to people.” If ever there was a so-what section to his letter, this is it!

Speaking evil of no one is huge. Talk about the life you’ve always wanted! Can you imagine life in this community based on this principle! What would it be like not to speak evil of each other?

Herbert Taylor wrote four questions on a piece of paper in 1932 to serve as an ethical yardstick for his employees. It has come to be known as the 4-Way test, so revered by Rotarians. Is it true? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build good will and friendship? Is it beneficial to all concerned?

Avoid quarreling. For some among us, it doesn’t much matter what we are talking about; we are prone to picking a fight about something. I’ve never known a single person who has been won to Christ through arguing.

Be gentle and peaceable. The Bible doesn’t teach that peace is the absence of conflict. It teaches peace as a reconciling spirit. Ask yourself whether you are inciting conflict or working to eliminate it?

Show humility to all people. Humility is huge!

I enjoyed watching the Olympics. But by the end I began to tire of self-adoring people. Kobe Bryant announcing, “I’m the best post player on the court, period” or Usain Bolt, (I almost hate to single him out given how likeable he is) who declares after his sprint final, “I’m now a legend.” How about a little humility?

Kirani James won the first Olympic gold medal for Grenada in the 400 meters. When Kirani won his semi-final heat, he crossed the finish line and looked for Oscar Pistorius, who finished last in the race. James exchanged bib numbers with Pistorius as a gesture of respect. Pistorius is the South African double amputee sprinter who failed to qualify for the final. That’s humility!

David Boudia was a surprise gold medal winner in 10-meter platform diving. He barely made it into the finals, finishing a disappointing 18th place in the prelims. When he was asked about his poor showing, David said, “The coolest thing about this is that I know God is perfect and sovereign and if I made it, great and if I didn’t, great. So I was totally content.” Most athletes give God credit for their victory. I find the depth of David’s faith to be impressive.

C.S. Lewis said humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. How about a little humility?