

Sermon Text for August 18, 2019

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Deuteronomy 10:12-22, Acts 15:1-5

“What does it take to be saved: Part I”

I read a book this past week called the Tech-Wise family and it focuses on ways in which a family is able to eschew the now cultural norm of children and screen time as being the driving force in raising children. The author states that it takes discipline to make it happen and it requires that as Christians we go against the stream which is so strong in culture today, which normalizes a decay in one on one relationships. But when we open the Bible we can't turn to any Scriptures which talk about social media or gives us rules on how much tech time is enough or too much.

But in our life and in our society there is a whole list of unspoken, and unwritten rules that we abide by and we don't even realize. Culture nudges us in certain directions, and they aren't rules, but advertising and pressure from those around us lay before us certain unspoken rules like: While you are alive you are to profit and hoarde as much as possible, you are beautiful only if you look a certain way, you can and are supposed to walk over someone to get what you want. Oftentimes these unspoken rules not only have nothing to do with our relationship with God but are actually directly contradictory to what God would have us do.

We are going to ask a very simple question today. What must we do to be saved. You notice that today is part 1, and that is not because it has a complicated answer. No, the answer is quite simple, but we have made it complicated so we are going to strip away what we are used to hearing and replace it with the voice of Scripture.

READ SCRIPTURE

This Deuteronomy Scripture begins by asking the question of what actually our sermon title ought to be for today. What does the Lord require? We may have heard it in a different form in a time of crisis as it comes out: What do you want from me? We have lists of rules and regulations that absolutely fill the Old Testament so the answer could be a whole combination of things. Here we have 5 different things that God requires: 1) Fear the Lord, 2) walk in his ways, 3) love him, 4) serve him, 5) keep his commandments. That last one is a biggie because all of these books of the Bible include the commandments of God.

Can we be saved, be a lover of God, if we struggle in our life and don't follow these commandments as God would have us follow them? Well, that brings us to the New Testament and other people in Scripture who ask similar questions. Nicodemus in John 3 asks: what do I have to do, and Jesus says, be born again and he has no idea what that means. The rich young ruler in Luke 18 asks Jesus what must I do to be saved and Jesus says, follow the commandments. The ruler has that one covered, I have done that, well then, now sell all that you have and give to the poor. He couldn't do it.

What do I have to do to be saved? Look at Acts 16:30 and that is the question that is asked to the disciples. Believe in Jesus Christ, that is the answer. It is very simple. But ever since the beginning of the church people have been trying to add commandments, rules and regulations to the formula of salvation that we have always believed to be faith in Jesus Christ = salvation. And it all began with this Scripture here in Acts 15.

Let's back up and remember what our heroes have been up to lately. Remember Paul and Barnabas have just finished their first missionary journey. It was an amazing journey. But it was also a very dangerous journey. Paul almost didn't make it out alive as they had tried to kill him by stoning him to death. But it was also a journey full of hundreds and thousands of people who had come to know and love Jesus Christ because of the work of Paul and Barnabas.

They had come back filled with joy and excitement as all of these formerly pagan party towns were now transformed to excited church people who couldn't wait to tell the love of Christ to others. Paul when he gets back to Antioch is telling the people the stories and you can hear the excitement in his voice as his still pink scars on his face where the stones had cut and torn at his flesh still throbbed. People were really fired up for what God had done. This is where we find ourselves until verse 1 of chapter 15.

Someone puts the brakes on. Some men, or certain individuals come along from Jerusalem to check up on things. The author won't even do them the honor of naming them. But instead of being bystanders they started teaching. Every Wednesday night they got their hands on the new church directory of the Antioch church and began to spread the word: We are going to start a class called: What it really means to be a Christian. All male students were asked to bring along their own very sharp knives.

The message that they were teaching that we hear in this Scripture was that unless you are circumcised, you cannot be a Christian. Or you can't be saved just by the

message that Paul and Barnabas are preaching. For Paul and Barnabas faith in Jesus = salvation. For these men, faith and circumcision = salvation. Paul and Barnabas were outraged. This was a frontal assault on the central doctrine in their ministry to the gentile world. Salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ is what we believe.

It would be as if a church or some pastors would say that your baptism in First Presbyterian Church didn't really count, it wasn't enough because it has to be done a certain way and the way that we do it is the only correct way. Well that didn't sit well with Paul and Barnabas and in vs. 2 we hear that no small disagreement arose, no kidding. Here was a whole region of the world that had come to know Jesus Christ and had a personal relationship with Jesus through a simple teaching and was excited to reach out to others in faith and were now being told, your transformation, the change in your life isn't legitimate unless you are circumcised, it just isn't good enough.

As you can imagine it would not only affect the number of sign-ups for the Antioch new members class, but more importantly it was a false teaching. How many Christians have had their enthusiasm smothered by bickering in the body of Christ? A member comes forward with a great idea to reach out to people in the community and it is shot down because it takes up too much electricity. How many Christians have had the fire of their initial enthusiasm extinguished by ill timed and ill mannered comments. More than I would like to count.

So they decide to take this matter to Jerusalem. Isn't it nice to know that you can take your issues of faith and questions to a body that is considered the keepers of Orthodoxy? They go, and along the way all of the uncircumcised, excited, gentile believers gather and encourage them and send them off with a wave of momentum that was unparalleled. As soon as they get there some of Paul's good friends, the Pharisee Christians, stand up and say, not only do they have to be circumcised, but they have to follow all of Moses' commandments. This is where we leave off. This is where our Scripture ends today.

The reason why we have two parts is because look at the table in front of you, this is a symbol of the grace of God that comes in what Jesus did for us. What must you do to be saved? You don't have to know how many books of the Bible there are or which is written in Hebrew and which in Greek. You don't have to know about predestination or prevenient grace. You need to know that God has chosen you from even before you were born to be loved by him, and he does love you.

A friend of mine went to a church in Atlanta that has a strong program of small groups for brand new visitors; groups that help them discover who Jesus is through a process of reading, study and conversation in a safe setting. In one particular group, a beautiful young woman kept showing up without her homework. She was always apologetic but, when she was asked, told her group that she worked late every Saturday night and had a hard time getting her homework done. The facilitator of the group said, "Oh, so what kind of work do you do?" The woman responded, "I'm a prostitute".

Isn't that remarkable. Remarkable because this young woman felt comfortable enough in this small community to tell the truth. Remarkable because it is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus would have applauded. And remarkable because if that woman told that truth in most churches, she would probably find the welcome mat hastily removed.

Does Jesus want that woman to stay in that lifestyle? Absolutely not. Any more than Jesus wants the adulterer to stay in his lifestyle or the homosexual or the glutton or the cheater or the liar to stay in their destructive lifestyles. When the Holy Spirit takes hold of our hearts, he leads us out of sin and into health. But the amazing thing about God's love for us and God's salvation, is how eager Jesus is to embrace any person in any condition at any time who cries out to him for help.

God's one grace rule is this: IF you are sorry and broken and want to be forgiven and transformed through Jesus Christ, you are welcome. Jesus invites the unworthies to come and join the other unworthies who just wear better camouflage. May this church always be a church of grace that strips away the unnecessary rules that we pile on people and love each other and those who come into our midst as Christ our Lord loves them. Amen.