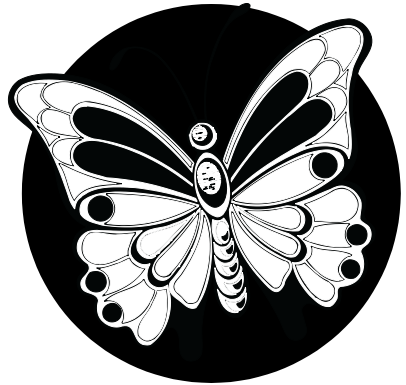


*When we accept  
God's love for us,  
we become new  
persons!*



## Session Nine We Are Saved By Faith

When you ask most modern Christians, including many clergy, for adjectives which define a Christian, you get terms such as loving, compassionate, active, faithful, obedient, joyful, peaceful, concerned, believing, happy, etc. Even though all of these terms do define a Christian, none of them get at the unique core of what it means to be a Christian. Any of them can be equally applied to a concerned pagan, a loving and compassionate Moslem, or a dedicated but concerned Communist.

If you press us further and ask for those adjectives which “uniquely” define a Christian, most of us have to struggle before we begin to focus on terms such as saved, reborn, delivered, restored, freed, liberated, rescued, etc. And yet, the concept of salvation and rebirth is the unique central core of Christian belief.

Much of our reluctance to use terms such as “saved” or “reborn” stems from abuse of the terms in modern society. The hawking of salvation by flamboyant television evangelists and the splattering of “Jesus Saves” on everything from billboards to sequined ties has caused us to be skeptical in our general understanding of some of our most sacred terms.

In addition, the traditional understanding of salvation has been based on a thorough understanding of the bondage of sin and the fear of dying without going to Heaven. Even though these are still functional ideas for many persons, they are significantly less meaningful for many of us than they once were. The awareness of sin as a theological concept and a sense of guilt about being sinful is much less functional for most of us today than it was for past generations.

In our society, the frequency of violence and death in media and our death-denying funeral practices help to enforce our generally casual attitude toward death and to minimize our fear of separation from God after death. Being saved from the bondage of sin and rescued from eternal punishment in Hell was once a meaningful concept for most of Western society but it is less so today. Stimulation of the fear of Hell was a primary focus of most evangelistic preaching. Today, the hope of a meaningful life on earth and the promise of Heaven is frequently lifted up as the primary reason for being saved rather than the fear of Hell. For many of us today, the primary consequence of sin is meaningless existence so we do not feel any great need to be saved from Hell. For many of us, being saved “for” a meaningful life is more realistic than being saved “from” eternal punishment.

### **Justification**

Nearly all theories about salvation begin with humans trapped in a state of sin by our own excessive self-interest resulting in a broken relationship with God. We suffer loss of meaning and alienation from God, from ourselves, and from others. Our basic need is to be saved from this state. The technical term for that is justification.

When a line of type on a printed page is justified, it is moved or adjusted so that it lines up neatly with the other lines of type on the page. It is put into a “right relationship” with the other lines of type. Such is the need of persons in a state of sin. Our deepest need is to be justified, to be put into right relationships with God, with other persons, and with ourselves.

Virtually all Christians agree that our ultimate need is justification and that God has acted decisively in history to make justification possible. Caught in the bondage of our excessive self-interest, we are no more able to justify ourselves than a crooked line of type on a printed page is able to justify itself. Therefore, God made justification possible through the

Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ, concepts which we have examined in the two preceding chapters. Because of Christ's meritorious life and undeserved suffering, a renewed relationship — a justified relationship — is possible for every person.

Exactly how this justification takes place is viewed in many different ways. For some of us, it is a gradual change spread over months, or years, or a lifetime. For others of us, it is an instantaneous event through which a person seems to be literally reborn as a justified being with a brand new relationship with God and a brand new outlook on life.

Some of us view justification entirely as the result of faith or trust in the idea that the atoning work of God in Jesus Christ is sufficient for our justification. All that is necessary to be justified is to acknowledge our sinfulness, to be willing to change, and to put our absolute trust in the idea that the death and resurrection of Jesus has made new life a possibility for us.

Others of us believe that justification comes as a result of cooperation between God's grace, our faith, participation in the sacraments of the church, and our meritorious efforts. Justification comes gradually to all who partake of the sacraments of the church – especially Holy Communion – and who reach out in acts of goodness and kindness toward others.

Still others of us understand justification to be a combination of the above in which we are first justified solely by faith and then we grow in that faith through a combination of participation in the sacraments, meritorious works, and God's grace.

Because the Atonement of Christ is viewed by some of us as being a possibility for every human being and by others of us as limited to only those people pre-selected by God, justification is viewed similarly. Some of us believe that God has selected a limited number of people who will accept God's grace and be justified. Others of us believe just the opposite, that justification is a possibility for every human being.

## **Grace and Faith**

What we believe about the process of justification is conditioned by what we believe about two very critical concepts: God's grace and our faith.

The technical definition of grace is "favor and kindness freely shown by a superior to an inferior." In Christian belief it is, specifically, the kind-

ness, favor, love and forgiveness of God freely extended to humans. We cannot earn God's grace and, conversely, we cannot do anything that will cause it to cease. God's grace is consistent, universal and extended equally to every person.

For most of us, God's grace is linked absolutely with God's greatest act of love and forgiveness toward us, the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ. God's grace is available to us because of, and only because of, this event. For others of us, grace is an ongoing independent feature of God's nature, and the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ was just one example (the highest example) of God's gracious attitude toward us.

We also hold different views of what grace actually is. For some, grace is primarily an attitude of God toward us — a loving, forgiving, accepting attitude which, when trusted by us, leads to our justification. Others of us, however, believe grace to be a supernatural power or substance which God puts into us when we partake of the sacraments, express our faith in other ways, or reach out in love and kindness toward others. As we are infused with more and more grace, we are gradually justified.

Grace is God's side of the salvation process. Our side is faith. Many of us view faith as trust. When we have faith, our whole being is oriented toward God. When we say that an airplane is safe, we are stating our belief but, when we get on the plane, we are showing our trust, our faith. We trust God's grace and mercy enough to turn our lives over to God. In many ways, faith understood as trust is an activity of the "heart" rather than the intellect. Faith is absolute trust in the benefits available to us in a relationship with God through Christ.

Implicit in this understanding of faith is the belief that it also includes a desire to change called repentance. If faith includes absolute trust in God's ability to change our lives then, necessarily, it also includes a desire for that change to take place. For Christians who affirm faith to be complete trust, nothing more than faith is needed for justification.

Others of us, however, believe faith to be belief. We understand faith to be an intellectual act that begins a deeper relationship with God. Our faith is a conscious affirmation that God's grace is sufficient for our salvation. As our first act in becoming justified, we affirm our belief in certain basic truths.

Still others of us see faith as an acquired habit. Faith is a supernatural virtue that must be combined with the companion virtues of hope and love before justification can be obtained. The interaction of grace and

faith is a cycle. As our habits of faith, hope, and love increase, God's grace grows within us. As God's grace grows within us, our habits – virtues – increase until we are fully justified.

## Two Classical Ideas

Even though there are several different ways in which Christians view the salvation process, most ideas fall generally into two historical concepts: justification by faith alone and justification by the infusion of grace.

The idea of justification by faith — or more precisely — “by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone” — has as its primary focus the unmerited act of God. This idea excludes all thought of our being able to do anything to earn or influence our own justification. When we trust in the Incarnation and Atonement as sufficient for our salvation, we are justified. God's grace and our justification are freely available. They are gifts that are constantly being offered, and our act of faith is our acceptance of the gifts. Faith is, therefore, a condition of justification only in the same way that accepting is a condition of receiving a gift.

Within the basic idea of justification by faith there are several variations which include focus on whether or not justification is available to everyone or just to a predestined group, whether or not it is possible to fall away from grace once justification has taken place, and whether justification is instantaneous, gradual, or both. Also, the degree to which God or the church aids the movement of us to faith, as apposed to our complete voluntarism, is also a matter of varying belief.

Justification by faith is a linear process – God offers grace, we have faith and accept God's gift, and justification happens. On the other hand, justification by infusion of grace is a cyclical process — God's grace and our faith enhance one another in the process of bringing about our justification.

The idea of justification by infusion of grace focuses on our belief in grace as a kind of power or substance that is gradually given to us. This supernatural substance is infused into us in many ways but primarily through the sacraments of the church. The process begins when we are led to sense our need for justification through the infusion of prevenient grace. This special kind of “preliminary” grace produces a kind of “holy uneasiness” about life that leads to desire for change, repentance, and development of the habit of faith.

Next, we believe that a supernatural force or substance called sanctify-

ing grace is gradually added into us, usually through the sacraments of the church. Then, as the quantity of God's grace increases in us, we develop two more habits: hope and love. The degree to which we then use the three supernatural habits — faith, hope, and love — earns merit for us that increases the amount of sanctifying grace we receive from God. More grace means better habits. Better habits means more grace. So, God's grace and our faith are cooperating and moving us to full justification.

Salvation has many benefits. Any of us who has gone through the life change called justification can list our new awareness of persons, the newly found ability to love others, our peace and joy in life, a new sense of meaning and purpose, our commitment to changing society, and our dedication to sharing God's love with others. But, most important, salvation is a newly discovered sense of freedom — freedom from the bondage of self-interest, freedom from the oppression of having to succeed financially, freedom to share materially with persons in need, freedom from the pressures of secular value systems, freedom to take a stand against oppressive systems and evil practices, and freedom to be a whole person in love with God, neighbor, self, and life.

### Reflection Questions

- 1. Is God's grace a meaningful term to you? If so, what does it mean?*
- 2. Do you believe you have been "saved" or "justified"? In what way? And, for what purpose?*
- 3. Can you identify a time or period of time when you went through the salvation process? What was it like? If you had to share what salvation is to another person, how would you begin?*
- 4. Is faith, for you, intellectual affirmation or a life commitment? Or is it both?*