

Assurance of Salvation and the Body of Christ *a clarifying instruction*

by Andy Perry
July 23, 2006

Though today's service is more unique and casual than normal, I had planned preaching the next text in the Gospel of Luke. But after last week I received a number of questions requesting clarification on some points I made toward the end of my sermon. I believe the questions and others which rise from them are important enough to speak to them this morning before moving on with our series next week. Therefore, this morning I'm not going to preach a sermon at all. Instead I'm going to spend some time teaching on some connected theological issues which need to be clarified in our minds in order to truly grasp what Jesus has been saying to us, especially in the strong warning texts we've studied the last three weeks.

A. A clarification about the assurance of salvation

To refresh our memories of last week's text, let's read it in Luke 13:1-9 (read). You'll recall that Luke was using the headline news of some recent tragedies in Jesus' day and the subsequent story of a fruitless fig tree to drive home the utter urgency of repenting of our sin and following Christ before it's too late. Spiritual readiness is the theme of this whole section of the Gospel, and, as the next weeks will show us, he's not done with it yet. We need to be ready – not just yesterday – not just tomorrow but today, now, because, as we learned back in ch. 12, Jesus will come back in Judgment at an hour we don't expect - like a thief in the night.

The first half of my sermon was taken up with the shocking news of recent death close to home – Pilate had cut down some Galilean Jews in cold blood in the Temple Courts and 18 people had died in the Pool of Siloam when a great stone tower fell on them. The disciples jumped to the conclusion that their deaths proved they were worse sinners than those still alive, for tragedy is always the result of the judgment of God, right? *Wrong,* said Jesus. Tragedy on the news is not designed by God for us to point our fingers of accusation at those who are suffering. Instead it is designed to sound an alarm in our own hearts and ask some hard questions, *“I, too, could die today. Am I right with God? Have I repented of my sins? Am I trusting Him each hour? Am I living a holy life?”* Tragedy is designed to impress on us the urgency of getting right with God before it's too late.

The second half of my message took us to the feet of Jesus where He told the disciples a parable about a fruitless fig tree with one more year of care until it is cut down. It alerted us to the fact that there is still time to repent, time to believe, time to embrace God's saving grace. That's good news! But it's good news wrapped in a cloak of urgency, for time is running out – therefore, don't rest back on your spiritual laurels, get right with God today while there's still time!

Toward the end of the sermon I directed our attention to the fact that repentance and faith and following Christ does not merely define the beginning of the Christian life but defines our new nature from the point of conversion until Jesus comes. I pointed out that according to Jesus the important thing is not primarily that we repented or placed our faith in Christ sometime in the past but that we are continuing to live an increasingly holy life of faith in the present.

Those comments which I made led to troubling questions in the minds of some. After the service, some people approached me wanting to know two things: *First*, was I saying that it is possible for a Christian to lose their salvation? After all, if what really counts isn't what happened back then when you converted but what is happening now, doesn't that imply that we can undo through unholy living today what we did at the foot of the Cross yesterday? *Secondly*, some people came to me wanting

to know if I was saying that after our conversion if we go through spiritual valleys where our zeal for Christ and holiness wanes, should we question whether or not we're saved?

Those are good questions. To begin with, I want to make perfectly clear my conviction that the Bible teaches that a true Christian can never lose his salvation. Consider with me briefly just a few texts which seem to make that abundantly clear (read Jn. 6:35-40, 10:27-29).

Consider, too, the following points helpfully made by pastor David Cloud. First, consider,

1. The terms used to describe salvation.

- * "eternal life" 1 Jn. 5:11
- * "full assurance" Col. 2:2;
- * "a sure and steadfast hope" Heb. 6:19

2. What we are. All of the following are spoken of as the present condition of each true believer (1)

- * Forgiven Rom. 4:7
- * Justified Rom. 5:1
- * Reconciled Rom. 5:10
- * Risen with Christ Rom. 6:3-6
- * An eternal child of God Gal. 4:4-7
- * Sanctified in Christ 1 Co. 1:2
- * A new creation 2 Co. 5:17
- * Accepted in the beloved Eph. 1:6
- * Saved Eph. 2:8 2 Ti. 1:9).
- * Children of light 1 Th. 5:5
- * Elect 1 Pet. 1:2
- * Sanctified once for all Heb. 10:10
- * Perfected forever Heb. 10:14
- * Passed from death unto life 1 Jn. 3:14

3. Where we are

- * God has already seated us in the heavenly places with Christ Ep. 2:6
- * He has already transferred us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son Col. 1:13

4. What we have.

- * Eternal life Jn. 3:16
- * Peace with God Rom. 5:1
- * All spiritual blessings Eph. 1:3
- * The sealing of our hearts by the Holy Spirit Eph. 1:12-14
- * Eternal glory 2 Ti. 2:10
- * Eternal redemption Heb. 9:12

5. What is past

- * Condemnation Jn. 5:24
- * Death and wrath Col. 3:3
- * Night and darkness 1 Th. 5:5

6. God's promises to us

- * We shall never perish Jn. 10:27
- * We shall never die Jn. 11:26
- * We shall be saved from wrath Rom. 5:9
- * We shall appear with Christ in glory Col. 3:3-4
- * We have been delivered from the wrath to come 1 Th. 1:10
- * We already have an eternal inheritance in heaven Heb. 9:15

Suffice it to say that the NT seems to teach overwhelmingly that when God applies the saving blood of Jesus to a sinner, it is an eternal transaction which none can change. Therefore, I believe the Bible teaches eternal security.

But, perhaps some of the confusion that arises when Christians think through these issues is the unhelpfulness of some of our terms, one of them being ‘eternal security.’ Technically, eternal security is not a theological doctrine at all but is a by-product of the doctrine called the perseverance of the saints.

The *perseverance of the saints* teaches eternal security by claiming not only the truths I’ve just outlined but by maintaining that every truly regenerate believer will persevere in their faith in Christ to the end. Perhaps the clearest expression of this doctrine is Romans 8 (read 8:1-2). And how do we know that we will persevere in that freedom? (read 8:11 & 29-30, 35-39) Our hope for persevering in our faith till the end is ultimately dependent not on us, but on God – not on our conversion, but on His regeneration which makes our conversion possible and our sanctification inevitable.

And I believe that helps answer the second question some of you asked of me: If our salvation is dependent not primarily on our conversion in the past but on our fruit in the present, does my current lack of fruit or zeal for Christ automatically mean I’m not a Christian? No, it doesn’t automatically mean that. All Christians will experience spiritual highs and spiritual lows.

Sometimes we will find ourselves having more faith, bearing more spiritual fruit and living a more consistently holy life than other times. When the lows come, we shouldn’t automatically question our salvation. If I happen to die in a low point, that doesn’t mean I’m going to hell. Why? Because my salvation is not based on my performance, but on my ultimate trust in Jesus’ performance on the cross.

And, if the Holy Spirit is truly living in me, then I will repent, my zeal will return and I will continue growing in Christ – the Bible guarantees it. At the same time if I’m in a spiritual valley I’d better take heed that unless I wake up and resume loving Christ, trusting Christ and living for Christ, I might prove at the end of the day that I was never saved. That’s Peter’s point in 2 Peter 1 where he commends his readers to **‘be all the more diligent to make their calling and election sure.’** How were they to confirm that their conversion in the past was genuine? By bearing spiritual fruit in an ever-increasing manner now. The issue isn’t being saved in the past and then being careful not to lose your salvation in the future. The issue is living for Christ today to prove that you were ever saved at all.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that one’s conversion in the past is unimportant. Though my conversion back on Feb. 22, 1987 may be very significant, Jesus is saying that unless it has led to a lifestyle of on-going repentance, faith in Christ and holy living, it means nothing. In fact it may be worse than nothing, for it may be giving me a false assurance of a salvation I don’t have. And what about the Christian who cannot point back to a specific day and time they converted? They can’t remember a ‘Feb. 22, 1987’ like I can. Where is their assurance that they are truly saved? The notion that our assurance comes from some point of conversion we can remember is not biblical, and, I believe, we as a Christian culture have emphasized it to the harm of many. Where does Jesus point for assurance? To present fruit. Note carefully the parable Jesus told. The owner of the fig tree did not care if the tree had born much fruit 5 years before. His judgment was based on the present. That doesn’t mean that if the fig tree of your life is currently barren you are certainly doomed or never were a believer. But if you remain barren, that’s exactly what it means. Therefore, wake up, repent and get holy, for time is running out.

I don’t believe anything happens by accident. Why do we just happen now to be passing through this section in Luke where Jesus is so adamant in His warnings? Because some of us have gotten spiritually sleepy and wake up! Because some of us are spiritually deceived, thinking we’re Christians when we’re not – we need to give up our ‘Christian façade’ and run to the Cross while there’s still time. And some

of us need to learn to be more like Jesus in our witness – do we warn our kids, our spouses, our neighbors and relatives and co-workers with the urgent adamancy Jesus does? We need to. God is saying something to us, and we'd better listen and get ready for action.

B. How to listen to a sermon

A corollary issue which I think would be helpful to address in light of the questions I received this week regards the nature of a biblical sermon and some requisite elements in listening well. First, I want to be very clear that I always welcome feedback from my messages, especially questions for clarity and points of correction which I may need to make. Therefore, I don't want anyone who asked me questions after Sunday to get the impression that that was wrong. At the same time I think some questions arise from time to time which could be clarified in your own minds first by remembering the nature of a biblical sermon and how preaching in community was designed to function.

First of all, it's important to know that the purpose of a sermon is to preach the specific message of a specific text, emphasizing what it emphasizes. The sermon is a message, not a systematic theology. Systematic theology seeks to understand the entire scope of Scripture and present it in a balanced, systematic way that makes sense of the parts in light of the whole picture.

There are no contradictions in the Bible and it is the job of systematic theology to work out the tensions we sometimes feel between different parts – the tension between Law and grace, between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, between living on earth and living for heaven, between God's demand for spiritual fruit and His promise to ultimately save those He's regenerated. There's tension, and systematic theology helps us make sense of it all and figure out how it all fits together.

But the function of a sermon on Sunday morning is not to use a text as a springboard to develop a systematic theology. The Puritans 400 years ago were experts at doing that and, though their books are some of the richest theological meat ever written, they rarely do justice to the biblical text at hand. The function of a sermon is to explain, illustrate and apply the message of a given text and drive that one message home so those listening understand it, see what it looks like and know how to go out and live differently. And sometimes the result is an apparent clash with other texts and a seeming contradiction with other parts of the Bible.

As a preacher I need to anticipate those and assess them, asking myself if the apparent clash is great enough that I need to pause while preaching the text's point in order to balance it with other, seemingly competing points elsewhere in the Bible. Sometimes that's what I do. But if I do that too much or spend too much time balancing, what will happen to the message of the text I'm preaching? It's theological volume, so to speak, will get turned down and it will neither sing nor sting with the force for which the text was written.

We're in a section in Luke where Jesus is warning us in the strongest terms to bear fruit today or face judgment. Spending my time balancing that last week with what the Bible says elsewhere about the perseverance of the saints would have taken its intended force away. Sometimes such a balance is necessary, but most of the time I intend to simply preach the text and let its message stand. Jesus didn't constantly qualify what He said and neither should I when my commission is to repeat His message.

Therefore, what should you do when you hear me preach a text that seems to clash with other parts of the Bible? Three things. First, and most importantly, let the message of the text have its effect on your heart. If the text is on God's sovereignty, then don't take the wind out of the sails of the text by worrying about how it jells with human responsibility. Let the message have its effect on your heart and leave worshipping and trusting God more than you came in. If the text is on human responsibility don't quickly run to balance it in your mind with God's sovereignty – let the text have its effect and fire you up to go do what it's calling you to do. First, let the message have its intended effect on your life.

Second, don't automatically assume a given text contradicts others. Rather, assume it agrees with others and then search the Scriptures, reading relevant texts until you come to a place of greater,

balanced understanding. I love it when you come to me with Bible questions – I wish you did more often. But don't come to me until you first try to work it out yourself.

Third, when something I preach seems to clash or contradict something else in the Bible, come back next week and keep listening. Though it is not the design of a sermon to unfold a systematic theology of what the whole Bible teaches, that is the long-term function of sitting under the exposition of Scripture over the course of years and decades. If something I say in a sermon one day sounds unbalanced then come back next week and keep listening – before long I'll get to another text which will balance it. The Bible balances itself. We should not expect every sermon to be theologically balanced – Jesus' and Paul's sure aren't. But if you read everything they wrote it begins to fit together. It's the same with sitting under a preacher you trust and respect – be it me or someone else.

What's required in a good sermon is not only faithful preaching but faithful listening. That responsibility is yours. Let me make two practical suggestions that can help get you there.

First, work hard not to miss church. Sure, we're all gone sometime, but I preach through books of the Bible, and the more parts you miss, the less you're going to understand the whole and the more unbalanced your theology might be.

Secondly, try to commit to a local church long term. I don't believe God intended for us to spend our lives hopping from church to church putting together a piecemeal, privatized systematic theology. Theology, is designed to be done in the context of a family of believers long term. When we put roots down in a family, in a church and in a community long-term, God's design for a network of multigenerational relationships of care, discipleship, accountability and theological instruction naturally grow as He intended - not just privately but in community. Though there may be exceptions, I believe God designed for us to hear and apply His truth in the context of a church family where commitment is measured not in months but in decades.

C. What about those who appear to have fallen away?

A final question I received both relates to what we've already discussed and raises a crucial issue regarding how the nature of the church intersects with the nature of salvation. The question is this: *'So and so is a Christian. There is proof of it from their past, but now they've walked away from Christ. Is there a time when God's patience with them runs out and grace ends?'* It's an important question.

Here's what I told them: For a true believer, grace never ends, never runs out. God's patience is limitless with anyone truly born again by His Spirit. Why? Because they are justified by virtue of Christ's performance, not theirs. Isn't that good news? And, as we've already seen, for a true believer, the Holy Spirit's leash, as it were, is only so long. It's only a matter of time before He brings them up short, convicts them of their sin and renews their zeal for the Lord. For a true believer, God's grace never ends.

For an unbeliever, though, despite how culturally Christian they may seem, they've never known God's true, saving grace. They may have been raised in a Christian home – they were a good kid in a good church who everyone liked. When they were five they knew Mom and Dad so wanted them to kneel by their bed and receive Jesus into their heart, so they did. They wanted their SS teacher to like them, so they sat quietly and gave all the right answers. They worked hard in AWANA, went through all the books and got all the awards. Years later as a teen they went to a Christian concert and felt moved to go forward at the end to recommit their life to Christ. Once out of high school they started serving in the church, were faithful as the sun and even shared the gospel with their neighbors and tithed 10% of every paycheck to God.

Then how do we explain the fact that, now in their early 40's they haven't been to church in years and recently had an affair that destroyed their marriage and think nothing of it? Perhaps they are

really saved but just backslidden – maybe, but I doubt it. They did and said all the right culturally Christian things – but when we read our Bibles we discover that none of those things are listed as the necessary fruit of new life. We may be tempted to think of such a person in spiritual limbo – we want to believe they are saved but we can't square it with their sinful life. So we pray and we wait but we do little else. And as the church of Jesus Christ, that is our first mistake.

According to the Bible how should we think about such a person? Mt. 18:15ff. gives us the answer (turn and read 18:15). When someone who claims to be a Christian drifts or steps boldly into sin we must go to them and seek to lead them to repentance, renewed faith and restored fellowship. (read v. 16) If he refuses rebuke him again with witnesses, praying for God to wake him up. (read v. 17) In other words, the so-called 'Christian in sin' who repeatedly rejects correction and warning essentially says to the church, 'I'm rejecting Christ and the church and declaring myself an unbeliever.' And that's how we should think of and treat such a person. At that point we should have no illusions about them possibly being a Christian. We should evangelize them like any other God-hating pagan we meet on the street and pray that the Lord would regenerate them.

The reason so much confusion surrounds the spiritual state of so called 'Christians' who drift into sin is our refusal to deal with sin biblically and rebuke those who wander from fellowship and sin, warning them to repent and return. Our lack of courage and their lack of conviction leaves them in a limbo state where nobody knows what they are. But Jesus makes it quite clear that that is unacceptable. The answer, I believe, is greater commitment to the local church – not just in name or membership – that should be a bare minimum. We should be working hard to make our relationships with others in the local church the most intimate in our lives so that other believers will know our walk with Christ and love us enough to courageously call us to account when we're tempted to wander from the Lord.

In a few weeks I'm going to take some time to talk more fully about the nature of the church as God designed it for our good and the costly relationships He expects as a result. One theme runs through all I've said today, that theological clarity and growth as well as personal holiness and perseverance rests so much on trading in once and for all our individualized, privatized version of Christianity for one far richer, truer and more biblical – one binding us together in rooted relationships – relationships in a local church family under the authority and care of Jesus Christ.

As we've heard so much through Luke, Jesus is coming like a Thief in the night, so we'd better be ready. That's not just a personal call; it's designed to be a family endeavor.