

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Assurance of Salvation"  
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(The Season After Pentecost)

The Gospel reading for the day strikes us with a bold truth that should cause us to ask several questions. Scripture often does this for us, as we seek to understand what is written there and be faithful to the One who caused the Bible to be written and well preserved.

Jesus himself tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that not everyone who addresses Jesus with the proper title will get into heaven. James in his letter at 2:19 says that even the demons believe in God. So believing simply that Jesus is the Son of God does not get you into heaven. But Jesus even goes further than this. He says that even people who minister in Jesus' name and perform miracles may not get into heaven. So who gets into heaven and how does that work? These seem to be the clearest questions that come to mind.

Churches have taken up positions on this question of how do you know you are going to heaven or not? How do you know you've truly received the Gospel? Most churches agree that the Bible clearly teaches that we must accept that we are sinners in need of God. We further must acknowledge our inability to save ourselves, but give our lives over to Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection, could accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. So most churches will encourage a person to pray a "sinners' prayer" to accept the love of God in Christ, turn from our sins, and seek to follow Jesus in every area of our lives. This normally is what people refer to when they refer to someone as being "saved." It means being saved from the death penalty of your sin and your rebellion against God.

So I think it fair to say that most churches will agree on the basics of the Gospel, as outlined briefly above. It is what we believe Paul was referring to as "the Gospel" in Romans 1:16-17. He was not ashamed of this Gospel, for it is the power of God for everyone who believes, who trusts in Jesus. Now not all churches and not all those who teach theology agree. I remember a professor at McGill who took the position that we have no idea what Paul is talking about, when he refers to the "*euangelion*," the Gospel. Strangely enough, I believe the students in that class knew more about the subject than the professor did.

So the Gospel is an invitation to the relationship with the Triune God that we invite everyone we know to consider and to undertake.

The church is generally in agreement on this point. Where we get to the place of disagreement is whether or not and how we can lose that salvation, or lose that relationship. Take, for example, the doctrine of one major denomination in town. It is stated like this: Continuance in a state of salvation depends upon continued obedience to Christ. In other words, if you sin after you have entered into this relationship with Christ, then you cannot really know if you are ever going to be with Christ in heaven. If you are disobedient, then you don't really know if you are saved. At best, you have to go on a roller coaster ride between heaven and hell. This can mean multiple trips to the front of the church during the altar calls for those who aren't sure if they are going to heaven.

On the other hand, are the churches who believe that it doesn't matter what sins or disobedience occurs in your life, you get forgiveness week by week in church, or ultimately by God, and so you don't have to worry about living in such a way that shows you have a relationship with God.

So if the first position puts all the stress on you to live a holy life, the second one seems to say that it doesn't matter at all how you live, God will let you in. The first position has us facing the flames everyday. The second position has us as holders of a very cheap fire insurance. It costs us next to nothing, but completely shields us from the flames of judgment.

So what is a biblical and accountable way to look at this question of how we can have assurance that our relationship with God is firm and stable once we enter into it? Someone I've known for many years has told me that they do not believe anyone can know if they are going to heaven or not. They quote the passage from Romans 3:23 that we read this morning, saying that we are all sinners and that we all fall short of the glory of God. This person is correct in saying that we are all sinners, but is incorrect in saying that we cannot know that we are saved from our sins, and going to go to be with Jesus in heaven, in that great reunion of which he talks about in John 14.

We can know that we know the One who matters when we know we have given ourselves unreservedly to Him. That doesn't mean living a perfect or sinless life. It does mean being accountable to others to grow in that

relationship. It does mean being committed to the Church and to Jesus' mission right here. Never make light of those who want to become a member of the Body of Christ in this place, it is an awesome event. If you're not sure you have given yourself to Christ unreservedly, simply say so in prayer today. I believe it is a simple, but profound act. The main thing is to mean what you say that it is a life-long commitment.

Once we have given ourselves to Him, he holds us in relationship more than we hold Him. That is not to say that we can do whatever we please. But it is to focus on the knowing part of Jesus' words, "Depart from me, I never knew you." That personal knowing is the key to assurance for both salvation from sins and entrance into heaven.

We often tell jokes about St. Peter being at the pearly gate, asking difficult questions or being the gatekeeper in some way for entrance into heaven. Actually, Jesus is the gate. It is our interview with Him that matters, first and last. We will not be able to look Him in the face and tell him how many good things we have done, nor tell Him how hard our lives have been. He will already know. At that point, we simply rest on whether we have already trusted Him with our lives in this life. It is the house that we have built in this life that will be tested in the next. If we have built our lives on Jesus Christ, that will stand. If we have built over things, or with faulty materials, those things will crash.

Jesus himself by what he did in his sacrifice keeps us safe. All we do is trust in what he did. Then we pursue our lives in light of the love relationship with Him, and that relationship transforms us. You might ask whether I believe you can rebel against God after you have trusted God in Jesus Christ to the point where you lose your relationship with Him.

Hebrews 6: 4 - 6 says that "it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss, they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace." (TNIV) Those are harsh words.

What this passage suggests to me is that it is possible to rebel against God to the point where your relationship is lost. But, you might ask, how much do you have to rebel to get to this point? I believe publicly denying Jesus with

your words and living in such way that dishonours Him is one possibility. But really, if you are asking this question about how much rebellion you can get away with and still keep your relationship with God, you need to ask God's forgiveness and start asking how you can get back on God's path, how you can have the power to stop rebelling and start agreeing with God's ways.

Paul puts it another way in 1 Corinthians 3. "If anyone builds on this foundation (of Jesus Christ)...their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. If what they have built survives, they will receive their reward. If it is burned up, they will suffer loss; but they themselves will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." So here is the picture of someone's whole life work burning up, because it was in rebellion to God, but the person escapes that burning structure with their life.

Instead of meditating on what we can get away with, we are encouraged to become more creative in finding agreement with God. So in the end, we have assurance, because we are trusting in what Christ did for us, rather than in our ability to hold ourselves in God. Nevertheless, we try not to test the limits of that relationship.

In the mainline churches, the PLURA, Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic and Anglican, we have a tendency to take our relationship with God for granted and depend on grace. In the Evangelical, Charismatic, and Non-denominational churches, there is a tendency to put too much emphasis on believers easily backsliding or losing their salvation, and therefore not really having much assurance of salvation. There is a balance between these two sets of traditions which would both call us to holiness and righteous living as well as remind us that we completely and wholly depend upon God's grace for salvation and relationship to Him.

We do need each other in the body of Christ. Just as an aside, I had a good time of meeting with the men's breakfast fellowship of the Salvation Army Temple over on Torbay Road. I expressed there what I am about to express here, that we need to cross-pollinate more in the Christian Church. Many of our challenges with regard to mission, outreach, program, youth are shared amongst many congregations within this city. Perhaps as we get more desperate with our numbers, or with our finances, God might encourage us to do more things together, beyond traditional denominational boundaries.

Don't get me wrong. I think it's great we're having a picnic with St. Andrew's next week. It's even more important that those of us within the same tradition are in as constant agreement as possible. I simply enjoy inter-denominational gatherings and hope to promote them as long as I live.

Let us pray.