

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 24

Salvation – The Call

Real question, asking for an honest answer: How good are you at forgiveness?

We live in a world where people wrong us. Sometimes, the wrong is a huge violation of trust and commitment; sometimes, the wrong stems from ignorance, indifference, or even a misunderstanding. Sometimes, it is debatable whether a wrong really occurred!

Issues of forgiveness arise between those who are close to each other, as well as between those who are simple acquaintances. Situations among those at odds with each other, those who are “enemies,” can frequently need forgiveness.

We know that the Lord’s Prayer includes the phrase, “forgive us our trespasses (debts) as we forgive those who trespass against us (our debtors).” Yet, even with that prayer readily available in our memory, and so often found on our lips, how good are we *really* at forgiving others? What does it take from others for us to forgive slights or wrongs?

I remember a decade or so when a friend of Becky’s found out that her husband had violated their marital bond, having an affair while out of town on a business trip. He deeply hurt and wronged his wife; there was no question of that fact. He confessed his sin and sought his wife’s forgiveness. He offered to put checks into place to make certain he never repeated his indiscretion.

Ultimately, his wife said she chose to forgive him. Yet before she gave him that forgiveness, she chose to have her own one night affair. To me, the saddest part of this story was not that she had her own violation of the marriage bond, but that it was a retaliatory sin. She was not going to forgive until she evened the score (I should add this was and is a fine Christian woman who truly regretted her own sin immediately.)

Set aside the big and atrocious sins for a moment. While the affair rate in 21st century America is appallingly high, most of us have issues of forgiveness that arise on a near daily basis. Harsh words, coldness, and offensive choices are often part of interactions with acquaintances, friends, as well as family members.

I am convinced that some have more difficulty forgiving than others. While I do not know all the reasons for this, I do believe I can identify a major reason. It stems from our conscious perception and personal understanding of what God has done for us. The Lord set up the link as he taught his disciples to pray (“Forgive us ... as we forgive those...”).

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The Lord is not saying we are forgiven only to the extent we forgive others. But the Lord's saying indicates that as we see ourselves forgiven by God, we will similarly forgive others. In other words, our forgiving of others can be used to see how readily we understand and appreciate God's forgiveness. If we are failing to forgive, we should spend some serious prayer, meditation, and study time before the Lord dwelling on his love and work that forgave us our own sins.

TODAY'S ISSUES

For three class periods, we are going to deal with Paul's theology of how God forgives us. These classes should not only bring us a personal peace ("that passes understanding"), but it should also help us in our daily walks, strengthening our relationships and marriages. It should increase our joy of living, and increase our love for God and our fellow man.

This first class, we explore aspects of God's role in our forgiveness and salvation. Over the two subsequent classes, we will study a number of metaphors Paul uses to teach and explain the forgiveness we enjoy in our salvation process.

SALVATION: GOD'S INITIATIVE

It constantly amazes me when I see in the lives of our children, remnants of what I remember from my own childhood. Some days, our children have come home from school with a wonderful new joke, or a reworded song that they are delighted to sing. While the song or joke is fresh to them, it has been, at times, for me an echo of the same song or joke that we had back in my own childhood. Sometimes what I hear from their mouth is word for word something I uttered to my parents over 40 years ago.

For example, when our children were fussing with each other, it was not too uncommon for me to admonish one only to hear, "But *she* started it!" I used those same words! Many times!!! They are words of great importance in the standards of a child seeking to excuse conduct. While it never excuses poor choices or actions, how something started is often still important. On the issue of salvation, Paul repeatedly makes it clear: God started it!

William Barclay wrote a book entitled, *The Mind of St. Paul*.¹ In that book, Barclay dedicates the entire fourth chapter to what he terms, "The Divine Initiative." His title succinctly sets forth a key foundation for our understanding of salvation. Salvation comes from the heart of God. It is God's will and desire,

¹ Barclay, William, *The Mind of St. Paul*, (Harper & Brothers 1958).

flowing from God's love. It is not something we initiated; it was God's idea and action that happened long before we sought it. In fact, God had planned his salvation even before our creation!

Most people in the evangelical world are familiar with John's passage:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

The core of the John passage includes recognition that the sacrifice of Christ was something that God the Father initiated. "For God so loved the world, that he gave..."

Paul made this same point to the Galatians writing:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present age, *according to the will of our God and Father*, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Gal. 1:3-4).

The giving of Christ on our behalf was no mistake. It was no accident. God was not trying to make the best of an unfortunate event in a bad political and religious climate. The sacrifice of Christ was a deliberate choice, planned and executed by God.

When Paul speaks of God acting through Christ "according to the purpose of his will" in Ephesians 1:3-10, Paul emphasizes that God made his choice "before the foundation of the world." Our salvation in Christ is the culmination of God's decision made before creation itself.

Before we leave the issue of God initiating the salvation of his people, we should also examine *why* God did so. Repeatedly, we find Paul linking God's decision to save us to God's love. For example, in 2 Thessalonians Paul writes:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who *loved us and gave us eternal comfort* and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work (2 Thes. 2:16-17).

Paul knew that God's initiating salvation served to emphasize as well as demonstrate God's love. He pointed this out in Romans 5:8:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Too many times we have a tendency to see God as harsh and full of wrath, looking to condemn us because of our inadequacies and sins. Paul understood and taught

that God is in the saving business! From before the foundation of the world, God planned on paying the price for our sins so that we would have eternity with him. In love and compassion, for the worst of all sinners, God has sought to bring salvation.

This love of God exceeds every condition that afflicts us. God's love outweighs our darkest moments of sin. It trumps every problem, every concern, and every difficulty. God's love places the believer completely into Christ, with all that results from such a holy and royal placement. The believer is there, not from merit, but solely from the love of God. Paul emphasizes this point in the well-known comfort he wrote to the Romans:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **nor** height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:31-39).

God's love and mercy were behind his saving work. This was not a conditional love that many see lived out among the fallen world. This is a divine love that reflects the very nature and character of God. God's love is intricately connected with his mercy, which reaches into anyone willing to receive it. As Paul told the church in Ephesus:

God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

THE CALL OF GOD

One of the terms Paul uses repeatedly to explain this loving salvation of God for

humanity is the Greek, *kaleo* (καλεω). For example, in Romans 8:30, this is the word Paul used twice explaining:

And those whom he predestined he also *called*, and those whom he *called* he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30).

Let us explore this word!

Kaleo is frequently used in the New Testament and is most always translated “call.” As Paul uses the word, however, it is “usually with a special nuance.”² That nuance is “call” in the sense of a vocation. Much as we might use the term referencing a “calling” into ministry, or a calling into some other occupation, Paul uses the word to set out a divine call on the life of the believer.

We will take some time to consider the many ways and times Paul uses *kaleo* to speak of God’s divine call. As we do so, we do well to think of the expressions as ways God has called us to perform or live our salvation.

It is important before considering these passages to set out three overriding principles behind each passage:

1. Paul uses *kaleo* to speak of God’s call. Like salvation, this is God’s initiative. These are roles and vocations (life choices) that God has determined and initiated for us. In this sense, *kaleo* takes on its traditional meaning of an “invitation” or a “summons.” God has invited the believer to rise to certain responsibilities.
2. A second related point is that the calling is more than a simple invitation. An invitation can be politely refused. Paul does not find these areas of calling as those that the believer should ever refuse. They are areas where the believer is to say, “yes.”
3. While God’s call is a common one for all believers, it is still a very individual and personal call. In other words, God has each believer’s name in front of the call. In the words of Augustine, God loves “each of us as though each were the only one.”³ God’s call, like his saving work in Christ, is individually personal. Barclay wrote, “the call of God is not simply a wide, general call to all mankind; it is God’s personal

² Kittel, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Eerdmans 1965) Vol. III at 487.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, 11,19. (Transl. Maria Boulding, New City Press 1997).

summons and invitation to each individual man.”⁴ Barclay’s note is particularly on point in that the Greek *kaleo* was used for a legal summons as well as an invitation.⁵

With those principles in mind, let us set out to see to what things God has called us! Where has he issued a summons? What “occupations” are we measured and made for? What exactly is our very personal job now that we are believers? There are many! As we consider a selection of God’s calling on our lives, let us remember to make it personal. In this written lesson, we shall do so by emphasizing each point to “you,” (although while writing I am inserting my own name in my head for each lesson and point!):

- **God has called you to the blessings of salvation.** This is the point made earlier in the Romans 8:30 passage. Salvation is not merely a blessed side result of our walk with the Lord. It is a calling! It is God’s specific invitation and summons to each Christian individually. Paul told the Thessalonians, “God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he **called** you” (2 Thes. 2:13-14).
- **God’s calls you to holiness.** Holiness is not simply something we try to do. It is not merely our responsive effort to “be good.” Holiness is an actual calling for God to the believer! God has declared holiness to be our job! Paul reminded the Thessalonians of this writing, “For God has not **called** us to impurity, but in holiness” (1 Thes. 4:7). Old and young, minister and member, all in the church are summoned to be holy! This means that holiness is available and within reach. We do not mean here that one reaches perfection in this life, but rather that God’s help and power are available to enable one to grow in holiness, to conquer the grip of sin, and to change daily into a greater likeness of the Son. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of this important point expressing confidence that God will see to their sanctification noting, “He who **calls** you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thes. 5:24).
- **God calls you to peace.** While addressing the very personal area of marriage and spousal abandonment, Paul writes the Corinthians about

⁴ Barclay at 48.

⁵ This was a core usage of the word in everyday Greek at the time. We see this usage in the New Testament in passages like Acts 4:18 and 24:2 where Peter and John (4:18) and Tertullus (24:2) were summoned before the court. In Matthew 4:21, the word is used when Jesus invited James and John to leave their father and boat and follow Jesus. See Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2d Ed. (Univ. of Chicago Press 1979).

the results on a believer whose unbelieving spouse leaves. Paul notes that the believer is no longer enslaved and uses *kaleo* to explain “God has **called** you to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). Christian peace is not only for those in such marital turmoil. Paul taught the Philippians to set matters before God in prayer instead of churning internally in worried anxiety. As they did so, Paul explained, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). Our calling is not to turmoil and worry. God has called each believer to a position of peace! The next time life’s difficulties prompt you to worry and fret. Lay those difficulties before the Lord in prayer and claim his peace! It is your “job” to have peace, not worry!

- **God has called you in his grace.** In Galatians 1:6, Paul chides the Galatians who are abandoning God’s grace for a legalism of following Jewish law. Paul points out that no good news is found there! “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who **called** you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7). God has not called us in any aspect apart from calling us in the grace of Christ. We find our salvation in the grace of Christ. We find our holiness in the grace of Christ. We find our peace in the grace of Christ. In Christ we have been “blessed with every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1:3). We can use a Madison Avenue slogan with a slight change, “Want the call of blessings? Get Christ!”
- **God calls you to fellowship with others similarly called and with Christ.** Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians noting, “God is faithful, by whom you were **called** into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). This summons is into a fellowship with the holy one himself. As Lenski put it, “the phrase ‘into the fellowship,’ embraces the entire communion with Christ, including the consummation at the last day.”⁶ In other words, our job is not a nine to five job! God’s call is 24/7 -- for life and beyond! This is a true fellowship, a sharing and common life with our Lord. We share with him into all eternity!
- **God calls you into his kingdom and glory.** Much like our last point, but with a slightly different emphasis, Paul showed the Thessalonians the present implications of our calling into eternal fellowship with God. “We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to

⁶ Lenski, R. C. H., *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, (Hendrickson 1963) at 35.

walk in a manner worthy of God, who **calls** you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thes. 2:12). Because God has summoned us and assigned us with life in his kingdom and glory, we do not live as those who have no such job description!

- **God calls you to belong to Christ.** When Paul wrote to the Romans, he began his letter with a number of phrases that described and identified himself, Christ, and the Romans. Among those phrases are two where Paul used *kaleo*. In verse one, Paul identifies himself as one who was “**called** to be an apostle.” That was certainly Paul’s vocation and ministry. It was not something he simply chose to do; it was what God had summoned him to do. But Paul was not the only one God assigned. Paul describes the Roman believers as those “who are **called** to belong to Christ.” This is God’s call. Like so many other places, Paul makes the emphasis here that God has taken the initiative. God has called people to belong to Christ. This is God’s decision to assign us the awesome responsibility of relationship and belonging to Christ.
- **God calls you to live differently.** I remember 25 years ago when I was a young lawyer at a large law firm, we would take off our suit coats while working at our desks. Yet when we got on the elevator to leave for lunch, we were expected to put our coats back on. We were told, “you are lawyers. You should act/dress like it.” (I do not miss that dress code!) In a more serious manner, the way we walk as Christians is not simply the way the world walks. That God has called us makes a difference daily! Paul told the Ephesians, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the **calling** to which you have been **called**, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were **called** to the one hope that belongs to your **call**” (Eph. 4:1-4).
- **God calls you to freedom.** As Paul was explaining the role of the law to the Galatians, he made the emphatic point that they were not called to bondage of the law, but to freedom. Yet, that freedom opened them up to an obedience that flowed deeper than any simple set of rule keeping. It opened them up to truly serve in love. Paul said, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).
- **God calls you to eternal life.** No one, repeat that with emphasis: NO ONE will have eternal life simply out of his or her own choice and actions. Eternal life is first a foremost a calling. God has taken the initiative and called us to eternity with him. We are not to ever think we

initiated that decision. Late in his life, Paul wrote to Timothy and said, “Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12). God has summoned us to spend eternity with him! That, Paul notes, is worth taking hold of!

- **God calls you because of who he is, not because of what you can do.** Some people actually think God has made a place for them because he has need of them. Others think that while they received God’s grace, they must merit the retention of that grace. Paul sets both those groups back when he explains that God is calling his children because of who God is, because of God’s personal purposes, and not because of what people can do for him. At the end of his days, Paul wrote of this to Timothy explaining God “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

Hopefully, at this point, we can see some of the many ways that God has called his people.

NEXT WEEK

Next week, we will begin taking apart some of the principle metaphors Paul uses when he writes of our salvation. Words like “justification,” “reckoned,” “redeemed,” “adopted,” “reconciled,” and others are worthy of our more careful examination. That is our opportunity over the next two class sessions.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“God has not **called** us to impurity, but in holiness” (1 Thes. 4:7).*

Too many think that God has simply given an opportunity for people to respond in faith to the gospel. While God has given that opportunity, he has never sought simply to provide an avenue for the faithful into his presence. God has called the faithful. God has summoned the faithful. What is more, this is not a general calling into faith; it is a much more detailed and specific calling. It is a calling to holiness, to righteousness, to fellowship, and more. God has plans for each believer. God calls each believer by name and expects each believer to answer that call, and to live worthy of his or her calling!

When Christ called on Peter and Andrew to give up fishing in Galilee and become fishers of men, they both answered the call and “immediately left their nets and followed him” (Mt. 4:19-20). The call of God sets before

each and every one of us. The unsaved can chose to “call on the name of the Lord” and “be saved” (Rom. 10:13). The saved can chose to answer the call and walk in holiness by God’s power. The call is God’s; the response is yours and mine!

2. *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:8).

God initiated his forgiveness for you and me. He did it at a time where those alive today were not yet conceived. Yet for those like Paul who were alive at the time of the crucifixion, he did it before they sought any such forgiveness. That was, understandably, a big deal to Paul. It should be to us as well. It shows God’s love and heart. As we said earlier, God is in the saving business. The Lord is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). But before we leave this point, we should examine it in light of our own lives. Are we ready with forgiveness for those who have wronged us? Are we record keepers who cannot offer forgiveness without first making sure we have evened the score (or required requisite blood)? Do we have forgiveness on our own initiative for those repentant? Are we able to truly pray to the Lord, “forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us?*”

This is Paul’s concern when he admonished the Colossians to, “if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive” (Col. 3:13). God teach us please!

3. *“Walk in a manner worthy of God, who **calls** you”* (1 Thes. 2:12).

How serious do we take our calling? Does it change how we live? If we apply the same diligence to our “job” as God sets it out as we do to our economic job, would that change the way we live? (Admittedly, some do not have that diligence in his or her economic job, so this question is not probative for all!) We should be different. We are set apart from the world. That is the meaning of “holiness.” God has set us apart; he has made us holy. Let us live accordingly, as a “light of the world,” “a city set on a hill” that “cannot be hidden” (Mt 5:14).