

What is Salvation?

Sermon 8- Healing our Communities

Passages: Psalm 138

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

The Bible talks a lot about salvation. In fact, it tells us that we all need to be 'saved'. And it tells us that there is only one name given under heaven by which we can be saved...the name of Jesus. He is 'our Saviour'!

But what does He save us from? What is the object of His salvation?

Most of us tend to think of salvation as something in the future. We speak of Jesus one day saving us from hell, from God's wrath and judgment. Salvation is about 'getting into heaven when we die'. But what about 'now'? Isn't there anything that Jesus saves us from in the present?

It's interesting, when you start examining the NT Scriptures, just how much the Biblical focus of salvation involves the present! This is borne out by the fact that the Greek word for 'salvation' (sozo) is the exact same word used for healing! In the ancient mind, salvation and healing were strongly connected to each other. And so, **the early church was not only aware** that Jesus would perfectly heal them from the brokenness of sin when they were finally with Him in heaven; **they also knew** that, even now, Christ's salvation was working in them, healing them from the brokenness of sin in their present life.

That's why we are currently undertaking a series of sermons entitled, "**What is salvation?**" I want to show you how much Jesus' salvation is meant to be worked out and experienced in the present.

Today, we are going to look at the present work of God in the salvation (or healing) of our **communities**.

Let's pray.

Human beings were created to live in community. Back in Genesis chapter 2, God said to Adam, “**It is not good for man to be alone.**” God was saying that He created Adam for community, not for isolation. Adam was created to be a vital part of communal life.

That's because Adam was made in God's image. You see, unlike so many stereotypes, God is not some lonely, solitary figure sitting on a cloud in heaven. God is a community of Three Persons (Father, Son and Spirit), who mutually indwell each other as a divine community of One. This means that when God made Adam “**in His image**”, the implication was that Adam would also live in community. Outside of community, Adam would be incomplete. In the end, all of Adam's offspring were created to live in community.

Back in the early 70's, I was a hippie-- I wanted to go to an isolated spot in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania, be by myself, live off the land. Was I wrong to want to live alone? Isn't it good to be strong enough to be by yourself and not need others around you all the time?

There is some truth in that statement. Yes, it does take strength of character and conviction about who you are to be able to be alone. We admire people who know how to spend time on their own.

Nevertheless, the Bible still says that “**it is not good for man to be alone**”! Why? Here are four good reasons:

1. Only in community can you achieve your full potential (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10- “**Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up.**”)

2. Only in community can you grow as a human being (Proverbs 27:17– “**As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.**”)
3. Only in community can you discover your true identity. Your identity is made up of thousands of relationships– you’re a brother/sister/friend/ nephew/niece/ son/daughter/ student/teacher/neighbour/colleague...In fact, in the ancient Hebrew culture, you would never speak about yourself without reference to your ancestry—even your name would be a reference to your father (Simon ben Jonah, for example).
4. Only in community can you know and experience love. As in the Trinity, love can only take place where 2 or more are gathered together. We need community if we are ever going to know what love is.

And here’s one of the greatest tragedies of the human race!

Ever since time began, God’s good purposes for us to live in community have been under threat. The devil wants to destroy God’s ideal of human community...he wants to divide us and isolate us...through the power of **sin!** Sin, at its simplest, is anything that goes against God’s good purposes for humankind; anything that destroys the overall unity and well-being of this universe. In the end, it is sin that breaks down community; it is sin that causes people to become isolated from each other and lonely! (Sadly, if you go on to the internet and type in the word ‘lonely’, you’ll find literally thousands of website devoted to finding a solution to loneliness—from dating agencies to escort services!) In the end, however, the root cause of loneliness is sin!

Let me give you four examples of how sin breaks down community:

1. **Greed**-- If just one person in the community is greedy and covets more money and more possessions, what happens to community? Greed can lead to theft; theft destroys trust; a

breakdown of trust destroys relationships; the entire community is under threat! (This week, an 81 year old man from Avalon was sentenced to two years in prison. Why? He was addicted to gambling...and so, to feed his habit, he stole from his friends and his church! He even stole from his children! Sin destroys community!)

2. **Gossip**– If just one person in the community starts to gossip...to blame and falsely accuse others... what happens to community? False testimony can lead people to anger; anger can lead to violence; violence can lead to murder... even war! Community is again under threat!
3. **Lust**– If just one person in the community starts to lust sexually after another person, what can happen to community? Lust can lead to pornography and the objectification of the opposite sex. When the opposite sex is just an object of your sexual fantasies, it can lead to things like visiting prostitutes and committing adultery; this can lead to divorce; divorce can lead to psychological issues for the children! Community is again under incredible threat.

It's funny how people will say things like, **“You can do what want as long as you don't hurt anybody!”** The trouble with that incredibly trite saying is that everything you do and say (even how you think) has ramifications upon your community! No man is an island! We are far more connected to each other than we want to admit. It's no wonder why so many people are lonely! Sin has undermined our ability to live in community.

4. **Idolatry**– The sin of idolatry also has the power to destroy communities! From the beginning of time, there has only ever been one God. But as soon as you begin to introduce other gods or false concepts of God, people get divided. (“I believe in Thor!” “I believe in Krishna!” “I believe in Buddha!” “I believe in Allah!”) We divide up human community along religious lines. **But it was never meant to be this way—**

there is only one God and we were meant to find our true community around Him!

Indeed, it was because of the universal spread of community breakdown that, 3500 years ago, God gave **'the 10 commandments'** to His people, Israel. The 10 commandments were basically designed by God to bring people back into community...to restore the community that was broken by sin. They were given as a good gift from God for the healing of broken community! Let me list them for you:

1. There is only one God
2. Don't make idols or false images.
3. Don't take God's name in vain.
4. Keep one day of the week free to worship and fellowship with each other.
5. Give honour to your parents (and support the family).
6. Don't kill
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't give a false testimony about someone.
10. Don't covet anyone's possessions.

In fact, **all** of the Old Testament laws were basically created to maintain or restore community. Most of them demanded recompense for the offended. Most included severe penalties (like death) to act as a deterrent to the destruction of communal life. Most of them protected the innocent and the helpless so that they would be guaranteed a place in community. Even the aliens and refugees (non-Jews) were generously offered a place in community.

It's amazing to me how so many Christians actually think that Jesus was opposed to the Law of Moses. The falsely pit Law against Grace, as if these two ideas are opposites! That's totally false! In Matthew 5, Jesus said, **"I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it."** Indeed, Jesus came to bring us back to the Law of Moses... back to the Law of relationships. He died that the

Law's condemnation might no longer be over our heads, but then He rose and sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to live out these same commandments so that all our relationships would be governed by the supernatural power of God.

Indeed, central to Jesus' mission to heal our community was His promise to build a new community of love...His church... where all humankind might be restored to God's original intentions! This is what we find in today's passage from **Matthew 16!** **According to Jesus, His church would be the new, universal community,** formed through His own death and resurrection!

Let me remind you of the story in Matthew 16: Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter replies—"I know who you are! You are the Messiah; the Christ; the Son of the Living God!" That's a good response... so good, in fact, that Jesus makes the following statement: **"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for it was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven."**

Then, Jesus goes on to speak about His plans to rebuild human community on earth. He says to Simon Peter, **"And I tell you that you are Petros, and on this Petra I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."**

Now, you need to know that this is the very first time in the entire New Testament that we hear the word 'church' being used! The Greek word is 'ecclesia' and it literally means "the called out ones". Jesus is saying that He has come to call a new community out from the old broken one! This new community will not be founded on **Petros** (Peter/ meaning a pebble or stone), but on **Petra** (meaning 'bedrock').

So, who is the bedrock? Think back to Matthew 7 and the story of the wise and foolish builders. What did the wise man build his house on? The bedrock (**Petra**) of Jesus Christ.

When Peter declares (by the Holy Spirit) that Jesus is the Messiah...the Lord and Saviour sent by God...Peter is setting in motion a new movement of universal proportions. Insignificant Peter is placing his little stone (Petros) onto the bedrock (Petra) of Christ. As he does this, Peter (followed by the rest of the 11 Apostles) is, quite literally, the first building block of the church.

St Paul picks up this truth in Ephesians 2 when he says to the new Christians in Ephesus, ^{Eph 2:19-22} **“Consequently, you are (now)... God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone...being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** Do you get it? Jesus came to reverse the fall. He came to restore us to true community. He is **the Saviour/Healer of Community!**

Once you understand this, you’ll be better equipped to understand what He meant in the next verse (verse 19) when He said to Peter, **“And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** The first Kingdom of Heaven was in the Garden of Eden. But it was lost at the fall. Now, in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of heaven has come to earth again—it is “at hand”! Jesus has come to restore it **by building His church**, using Peter as the first stone amongst many! That’s why Peter has the keys-- simply because he’s the first to go through the doorway of Jesus Christ and to lead the rest of us onward into the blessings of community.

But the keys don’t stay with Peter! You and I now hold the keys of the kingdom — that is, we hold the power of the keys **to open the door of faith for others...** to lead them into this same, universal, community of faith into which we have been led.

Of course, Jesus goes on to tell Peter that he has the power **to bind and to loose.** What does this mean? It’s still about the construction of Christ’s new community! In the parallel passage in John’s Gospel, binding and loosing are connected to forgiveness-- (*Jn 20:23* **“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are**

forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”) You see, forgiveness is the only way to bring reconciliation and restoration back into a broken community. And so, Jesus is telling Peter that he will be the first to start the ‘ball of forgiveness’ rolling! Peter will be the first of many agents of Christ’s healing community on earth. And as long as they keep ‘binding’ Satan from deceiving them...’binding’ the spirit of discord and division; as long as they keep ‘loosing’ (forgiving) sins in the same way that Christ forgave them (ie. 70 times 7); then, they will be setting people free to be in community. Binding and loosing will become the perpetual habit of the church as, in the Spirit of Jesus, it expands healing community out to the world.

Of course, we have yet to mention **the one thing that poses the greatest threat to community**– Do you know what it is? **Death!**

Paul Lockyer was an ABC TV journalist for many years, well-known in the industry and amongst ABC viewers. On Friday morning, I turned on ABC morning news and I heard sad reports about a tragic helicopter crash in which he and two of his colleagues were killed. Suddenly, the tight-knit community of the ABC was broken, despairing, and filled with grief. Their little community had been infiltrated by an enemy called ‘death’. And everyone knew that there would be no remedy—nothing that would bring those three men back to them!

Nothing, except Jesus! Jesus is the healer of community, even when death tries to destroy it! That’s because, in Jesus Christ, there is life...community...beyond the grave. **“Death, where is your victory? Death where is your sting?”** Through His own death and resurrection, Jesus has conquered death forever...and we shall be reunited with those who now sleep in Him.

Let me finish by encouraging us all to really pursue community. Don’t waste your life on earth with selfish things. You and I were created for others...for community. And so, please listen to the words of the Apostle Paul taken from Romans 12:1–8, asking yourself whether how much you’re living as an integral part of Christ’s community.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

Let’s pray to Jesus, the healer of community.