

What is God really looking for?

1: Concepts from the Sacrificial System

Olympia, WA. October 2, 2009

Main text: Isaiah 1

Additional Texts: Bring no more futile... offerings. Isaiah 1:13 NJB.

Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifices. [1 Sam. 15:22]

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart. [Psalm 51:17]

To do justice ... is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. [Psalm 21:3]

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices? I delight not in the blood ... of lambs! [Is. 1:11]

I gave them also statutes that were not good. [Eze. 20:25]

Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet to me. [Jer. 6:20]

For I spake not ... nor commanded ... concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices: but this I commanded ... obey my voice. [Jer. 7:22]

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy. [Mic. 6:6-8]

I will have mercy and not sacrifice. [Matt.9:13]

Introduction

So what's the answer? What is God really looking for? This is at the heart of all religious systems—how God relates to us, and how we relate to him. Let's think of some brief answers to this vital question that have been given over the centuries...

Obedience

Compliance

Servants

Sacrifice (Gifts, payment, animals, humans, blood, death)

Pleasing/satisfying/placating

Honor

Respect

Reverence

Worship/Praise

Love

Friendship

Relationship

Let's begin with one of the main group of ideas that have so dominated our ideas of what God wants—sacrifice. In this I include all kinds of gifts, presents, offerings, and rituals that are done to “give” something valuable to God. A sacrifice is a giving up of something costly to show God how much he is valued, and to “please” him or even pay him (“propitiate” etc)

Illustrations

I was visiting a church member in hospital. On the next bed lay a lady, who could hardly talk and couldn't move after suffering a massive stroke. She called me over. “I see you're a minister,” she began. “I'm really sick. Do you think if I gave God all my money he would heal me?”

How would you answer?

The idea of sacrificing to God to get something in return is such a familiar idea that we hardly see anything wrong in this bargaining. We do it all the time!

So I explained my ideas about God. But it seems she had already made her mind up. “If he gets me out of here, he can have all I've got,” were her last words to me.

Next time I visited, she was gone. I feared the worst, and asked the church member what had happened to the lady in the next bed.

“Oh, it was amazing, She got better really fast. She was sure it was God healing her because of her promise. And isn't it great? She's going to donate all her life savings to our church.”

Never saw her again. No donation! Not that I think we should have accepted it either. But maybe there's running through your heads at this moment that she won't do well because she didn't do what she promised...

Is God like that?

Ted Turner, founder of CNN, tells the story of losing his sister to lupus. He prayed long and hard, really seriously, promising God all kinds of things, ready to make all kinds of sacrifices, if God would heal his sister. She died an agonizing death. After that, Ted Turner turned his back on God.

What would you say to Ted Turner? How would you say it?

What about when we say that God is testing us? That he wants us to sacrifice to show our faith? That God has told us to give everything we have to him? Why? What is it for?

Let's use the Old Testament sacrificial system and God's comments about that to try and understand what God is really looking for...

What's the point?

What's the point of the sacrificial system? God himself raises the question:

"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?" Isaiah 1:11 KJV. Especially in the context—of those who believe all that is required is to go through the ceremony. Why sacrifice? To repeat the old bumper sticker: "God has said it. I believe it. That's all there is to it."

God certainly did initiate the sacrificial system. He told the Israelites what to do—in great detail. In his instructions regarding the construction of the Tabernacle, the movable sanctuary in the wilderness, God specifies the kind of wood and textiles, their color measurements (see the precise details in Exodus 26 and on). It must have seemed to those receiving such a blueprint that God was more of an interior designer...

Whatever. Since God said it, they did what they were told. No matter as to the reason why, it seems. If God wanted a tent in the wilderness, who were they to argue? So they followed the instructions carefully, mindful that this God seemed ready to impose punishment for any infraction. The process was begun, and they concluded that this God they worshiped wanted blood to be spilt, fat to be burned on the altar, and that the smoke of an animal sacrifice smelled good to him. He even said so.

Noting all the various procedures and protocols, they slavishly followed every command, and then they were sure God would be satisfied. The concentration on the "nuts and bolts" led them to conclude that this is what God wanted.

Trouble was they got caught up in the system, the mechanics of salvation, and failed to see the point of it all. So eventually God himself had to intervene, and explain that what they were doing is not what he wanted!

What are you doing? He asks. What are you thinking? What is the point of all this ceremonial stuff? Most of all: what kind of God do you think I am that you should act this way?

God puts it bluntly:

"I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep and he-goats. Whenever you come to enter my presence—who asked you for this?" Isaiah 1:11-12 NEB.

The ritualistic worshiper may be forgiven for being surprised. After all, isn't he doing exactly what God told him to do? "Who asked for this—well you did, God!" The one doing the sacrificing can point to chapter and verse, declaring "See, it says so right here!"

But now God is saying that's *not* what he wants: "Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough..." Isaiah 1:11 TEV.

More than enough. Because the religious systematizers of Isaiah's day had reduced the sacrificial system to just a mechanical process. Sinned? No problem—just sacrifice, and it's all taken care of! So easy... Sinned again? Same answer—another sacrifice. More sins, more sacrifices. It's an easy payback system—you get into debit, and so you gain credit through sacrifice. Simple!

Of course, the worshiper might wonder about the God who set up the system—what kind of person was this blood-and-fat demanding deity? But hey—he was the one who asked, so you did what you were told, right?

So God has to fix the misconception: "I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats." Isaiah 1:11 NIV. *What were you thinking? That I was some kind of bloodthirsty ogre who could only be satisfied with blood and the violent death of animals?*

Missing the point

The sacrificial system was designed by God to teach us. That sin kills. That without God's healing salvation we inevitably die, die eternally. That sin impacts our whole lives, and those of others, and that no amount of good intentions will change us. Only God can save and heal. And what do we do with the whole system? Decide it's not for us, but for God, and since he wants all these rituals and sacrifices, then we can do this for him and having kept our side of the bargain then he will keep hi. It's a sin-removal system based on blood and animal flesh. No need to worry if it doesn't make sense—if that's what God wants, then no matter how bizarre it may seem to us, then just do it!

They miss the point completely and utterly. And we do the same today. We even turn the most incredible gift of God to us—himself—into a way of paying God off! Jesus on the cross, seen in this perverted way, is just another sacrifice demanded by God...

That such a wonderful teaching tool should be so utterly misunderstood is terrible tragic. More than this, it ends up saying the opposite of what God really is. We have a great capacity for misunderstanding.

I remember preaching a sermon in England, and using as an illustration the problem I was having with a particular weed in our garden. Ground elder is an invasive plant, kindly brought to England by the Romans. It has a very extensive root system, and takes ages to dig out. The real problem is that just a tiny part of root left in the ground is enough for the weed to regenerate itself, so you have to laboriously dig the ground and sift through the

soil to make sure you remove every last part of root, or it will re-grow the next year and you'll be back to a weed-filled garden. I used this illustration to point out the problem of how difficult it is to eradicate sin—just like the weed, it's root system is extensive and it's really hard to remove!

Just an illustration of the huge problem of sin. After the service one member stopped me and said he wanted to talk to me about the sermon. I was pleased to get some feedback, and to have a spiritual conversation.

“It's about your weeds,” he said.

“Yes, I said—they're just like sin in our lives.”

“Well, those weeds—you need to use some specific weedkillers.” And he went into a long gardening lecture about which weedkillers to use and when, and how to treat etc. Completely missing the point...

Just like us when it comes to the illustrations God has used about dealing with sin!

God is disgusted

In fact God has to put the whole system on the line, rejecting the gross perversion of what he had intended: “Who asked you to do all this tramping about in my Temple? It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted...” Isaiah 1:12 TEV.

God is disgusted. As we look at the sacrificial system, we're likewise disgusted. This system seems to have more to do with some perverse market-place than the plan of salvation. Which is why Jesus came in and cleansed the Temple—throwing out the God-abusers, the religionists who were so perversely misrepresenting God and his relationship to us.

So what *does* God want, speaking through Isaiah to his people? “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:16, 17 NIV. Instead of relying on some ritualistic system, *do right!* Instead of “taking care of sin” in some legal way, God tells his people to learn and accept the ways of *right doing* and *right being*.

Instead of a preoccupation with legal status, what is far more important in God's eyes is a life that is lived right. He would far rather you spend time in doing right for others than in fulfilling what you believe are significant religious niceties. For you can be wholly wrong even as you try to observe the religious laws. How? Because of the way you are thinking.

What God is looking for is a meaningful relationship. He identifies what he really wants: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” Isaiah 66:2 NIV. Respect, honor, acceptance—a serious attitude that is thinking

Godwards; not a blind following of the rules that will “fix” any problems with this demanding deity.

Pig’s blood

To those who preferred form and ceremony over the meaning, the actual symbols over what they pointed to, God in the very next verse has strong words:

But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig’s blood, and whoever burns memorial incense, like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations. Isaiah 66:3 NIV.

With the wrong perspective, says God, sacrifice is like murder; offerings are just killing animals—even a pet dog. Horrifyingly, God says that your gifts to him are like a present of pig’s blood—a particularly dreadful thought to the Israelites to whom he was speaking. Even burning incense is likened to idolatry. In other words, *the whole system has been so corrupted and perverted that it teaches the opposite of what God intended—because of the attitude of the worshipers*. They have “chosen their own ways”—doing their own thing—and are evil self-centered religionists who use the sacrificial system to take care of the “God problem.”

Worthless worship

This is absolutely worthless worship, says God. As if he really *needed* such sacrifices: “I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens... Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” Psalm 50:9, 13 NIV.

No—such ideas come from paganism: the perverted ideas that claim god needs to be appeased and propitiated and satisfied with violent death, with plenty of blood. Does the true God need blood? Is he some vampire that drinks blood? What kind of God do such ideas portray?

Israel even fell into the trap of those nations around them and thought that if animal sacrifices were good, the human sacrifice must be even better! The logic is that it costs you something to sacrifice your valuable farm animals. But if you were to sacrifice something (someone) even more valuable, wouldn’t that get God’s attention even better, and please him more. In the “blended” worship that seems to be described in Jephthah’s time, the vow to sacrifice the first living thing to cross his threshold must have included the possibility of a person.

And later, Israel if doing exactly that in worshipping Molech, sacrificing their children in his red-hot arms. What a travesty—but in a sense logical, if that is what sacrifice is for.

God condemns the thought—not just because the sacrifice is to a pagan god, but because this is the last thing he would ever want. Indeed, if this is the thought behind sacrificing, then God wants none of it.

The truth is, says David at the end of the same Psalm 50, the kind of sacrifices are those that describe our relationship to our loving Lord, representing the right image of who God truly is, “that I may show him the salvation of God.” Psalm 50:23 NIV.

It was not just Isaiah among the prophets that condemned such futile attempts to manipulate and control God, to try to gain salvation through killing livestock:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them,” says God through Amos (5:21, 22 NIV).

Why? Again God is tired of lip service, and the failure of his people to recognize meaning and significance. They seem quite content to use the “required payment system” of animal sacrifice to balance their sin deficit. As the system became such a routine part of life, the people came to see this sacrificial duty as just another part of life, another habit to go through to placate and satisfy this demanding God.

Instead of meaningless and futile offerings, God wants his followers to realize the situation and look to the deeper meaning and significance of relating to him. It’s not the sacrificial process, but what it signifies:

“But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Amos 5:24 NIV.

Business transactions

Similarly God through Jeremiah inveighed against the failure of the people to even listen as they made their ritualistic sacrifices:

Hear, O earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law. What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me. Jeremiah 6:19, 20 NIV.

“We’re giving God so much,” the people would tell themselves. “Even the costliest incense from Arabia—the land of Sheba—nothing is too good for our God. We pay the highest of prices, so God should fix everything for us!”

Such an attitude reflects a total failure to listen to God, to understand the meaning of his laws. Most of all, it represents a complete rejection of a personal relationship, and turns the whole process into just a business transaction.

And while today we do not physically sacrifice, many still are most comfortable operating the system, transacting business with the One who would rather have our love, not our check books.

Playing the game

A compelling example is that of King Saul as he lost his way. Saul knew that religious observance was a powerful tool, and tried to use the power of religion to bolster his fading fortunes. In his arrogance, Saul usurped the right to offer sacrifices—seeking to play the system to his political advantage. But the result was disaster, as Samuel realized, pointing out that it was not the actual sacrifices God desired, but the right attitude of mind:

But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.” 1 Samuel 15:22, 23 NIV.

Saul lost out precisely *because* he thought he could utilize the sacrificial system. He was not looking for an appropriate relationship with God, rather he simply wanted to manipulate the process to his own advantage.

Despite God’s provision of the sacrificial system for the Israelites (and notice that for a significant part of the Old Testament period the system was not in place), many Biblical passages relate to the inability of the system to actually “work” and achieve what God most wanted. As just one example, take this recognition from David:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.” Psalm 40:6 NIV (alternative reading).

Meaningless

“I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:6-8 NIV.

Jesus is quoting Hosea 6:6, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (NIV). Even the system given by God is not expressing what God really wants, says Jesus. For sacrifice without thought, as a legal and ritual ceremony, brings the worshiper no closer to God, nor to understanding.

For as Hebrews makes clear, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Hebrews 10:4 NIV.

Nor is it a question of Jesus providing a “better sacrifice” to God, in the same way the Israelites came to think that a human sacrifice was better than an animal sacrifice. This is pure paganism!

How we see the Old Testament sacrifices and their meaning are vital for our understanding of God, since they point to the sacrifice of Jesus. If we see sacrifices as paying God off in some way, or trying to propitiate him, then we will see Jesus’ sacrifice in the same way. But as Isaiah makes clear, “we thought” it was God punishing his Son—but this is not true. Nor is Jesus trying to change God in any way, for the Father loves us himself. Just like the sacrifices of the Old Testament, Jesus’ sacrifice is directed at us, not God!

What God is rejecting is meaningless worship, as He told His people through Isaiah:

“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.”
Isaiah 1:11-14 NIV.

Enough! says God. You do not get the point. For no amount of sacrificial blood or ritual observance provides what I want—a true relationship with each one of you!

What does God want then? David answers in the same psalm, pointing to the relational aspect, the love of salvation:

“But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, ‘The LORD be exalted!’” Psalm 40:16 NIV.

What God really wants: answers in the sacrificial context

Even the very last Old Testament book once again concludes with the vanity of meaningless offerings, the futility of sacrificing without thoughtful recognition, and the desire for a true relationship with God. In fact, God is so moved that he wishes the temple to be closed to such pointless actions that achieved nothing:

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.” Malachi 1:10 NIV.

Divine displeasure—not because of the wrong rituals, or inappropriate sacrifices, or even the defective system, but because the worshiper is just going through the motions, acting a part, fulfilling obligations. There is no attempt at understanding, no desire for a close connection with this God—their chief concern is “just make the payment!”

What God truly seeks is made clear earlier in the book:

“‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’” Malachi 1:2 NIV.

God wants true love and agreement, true obedience that is based on recognizing right rather than blind, uncaring ritual.

Only God can heal the damage of sin—and systems are no substitute for a deeply personal relationship with our loving Lord, which is what God has wanted all along.

© Jonathan Gallagher 2009

What is God really looking for? 2: Systems, Rules, Observances

Olympia, WA. October 2, 2009

Main text: Romans 10:1-4

Introduction/ illustration

In one church I pastored I met the quintessential rule-keeper. He was truly obsessed by his law-keeping, and absolutely convinced he had achieved salvation on merit. Not that he would say he was perfect, since he knew that would be viewed as a sinful act. So he encouraged others to say that about him!

He preached a sermon on the evils of vinegar. He complained about a young girl wearing patterned hosiery. He objected to about anything you could think of—from the symbol of the cross to Christmas to

His was the religion of “true grit.” If it wasn’t hard and painful, it wasn’t the true way.

Once I visited him and asked how he saw salvation. This is a summary of what he told me:

“We can only please God by keeping his law. So the Bible says. So I have done what I am required to do, and now God has to do his part. It’s nothing to do with all that cheap grace nonsense. I have done my part, and so God has to let me in. Obedience to the law is the only way. If we do not walk the way of the cross there can be no reward.

“God is my only repose through all of life’s trials, my only consolation. No, I’m a true Christian. Called to suffer and bear all this mistreatment. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. That’s what it’s all about. Drinking from the cup of bitterness and woe, just like the Master. But I shall endure just as He did. For he that overcomes to the end shall be saved.

“We have to work out our own salvation. That’s what the good book tells us. The more we suffer, the more we prove to God that we merit salvation. Our pathway is along the rough way bedewed with tears, and our heavenly reward is just compensation for all we’ve had to endure here. Being happy is a tool of the Evil One to lead us into pleasure-seeking and worldliness. I have set my face against all the allurements of unrighteousness and look to the stern justice of the Returning Judge. Then we’ll see whose right—oh yes, then we’ll see. When all those who’ve done wrong get their just deserts. Oh yes, that will be the day!”

God's salvation isn't meant to be Nasty Medicine—the idea that if it's to do you any good it must be distasteful and unpleasant. Nor do we have to make sure we suffer like a fakir on a bed of nails. (Maybe that was why he thought kneelers and padded pews were so wrong. If praying and sitting in church were painful activities, then surely they were doing you some good, right?)

Self-preoccupied “true grit” salvation? Never in a trillion years! We should be happy with our God and his offer of rescue and redemption, of re-creating us in his glorious image to live with him forever in fullness of joy.

But this rule-keeping believer just didn't want to know. He wanted to suffer and be depressed. He gloried in his misery as if God's gift of free and full redemption and healing was the most unpleasant thing imaginable. Just another brand of upside-down salvation that strikes at the heart of what God really wants!

Demonic opposition

The truth of Jesus brings demonic opposition that tries to blot out not only Jesus as individual but also the God he reveals. For the reason the religious leaders want Jesus dead is because his message of grace is totally opposed to their teachings of ritual and requirement.

For them, the freedom offered by Jesus is heresy of the worst kind—for it undermines their elaborate structure based not on grace, but on rules and observances and traditions. Such a system blinds such believers and provides a justification for hatred and anger—for Jesus is seen as the destroyer of all they value.

The emphasis of the scribes and Pharisees—in fact all of the religious establishment—on legality and form of religion is the very opposite of Jesus' life and teachings. Their attitude led to the killing of Jesus precisely because he did not appear to obey the letter of the law.

You who call yourself a Jew and rely on the written law—you claim to have a special relationship to God. You say you know what he wants you to do and how to choose what's right from what you've been taught from the law. You're absolutely sure that you're a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, someone who can set ignorant people straight, a teacher of “children”—knowing from the law all the truth there is to know. So if you're teaching others, why don't you teach yourself? Romans 2:17-21
FBV.

Fatal logic

Take a “for instance”:

Around that time Jesus was walking through the fields on the Sabbath day. His disciples were hungry and started to pick ears of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw it they said to Jesus, “Look at your disciples—they’re doing what isn’t lawful on the Sabbath! Matthew 12:1, 2 FBV.

Jesus is confronted by incensed and offended religionists. Their belief structure is one based on what is lawful. That’s the first question “Are you allowed to...?” This is not legalism necessarily, but a stress on legality—the first point of reference is to ask what the law says. So the disciples’ action of simply picking and eating grain is to them a violation of Sabbath law. They see no farther than what they perceive to be a clear breaking of a holy law. Nothing more needs to be said. The law is beyond debate.

Theirs is a fatal logic. Since picking a head of grain is to be equated to reaping, and rubbing the grains between hands is the equivalent of threshing, the disciples are working on the Sabbath. They do not think to ask if this is real work. They would not even dare to inquire why work on the Sabbath was prohibited by God in the first place. If they had done so, they might have decided that picking and eating a few ears of grain was not the same as everyday manual labor. For why did God say not to work? Was it not so we could spend time with Him? And the disciples were already with God in Christ, speaking and listening to him throughout the Sabbath day.

But this is not the absolutist logic of the Pharisees.

In his answer Jesus points to the higher “law” of fulfilling not legal requirements but rather fundamental principles, referring them to the actions of David and of the “work” done by priests on the Sabbath, concluding that:

But I tell you that someone is here who is greater than the temple! If you’d know the meaning of this Scripture, ‘I want mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you wouldn’t have condemned an innocent man. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Matthew 12:6-8 FBV.

The Pharisees, the self-proclaimed keepers of the law—already incensed—would hardly have taken such words easily. Jesus is claiming to be more important, and to supersede, the very temple—the shrine of the law. And he even claims supremacy as Lord of the Sabbath.

Those Jesus spoke to who were so observant about legal trivia they would strain out gnats, but could not recognize and accept Jesus as God in their presence. They missed the point that:

Clearly whatever the law stipulates applies to those who are subject to the law so that every objection is silenced, and to make sure everybody in the whole world is answerable to God. For no one is made right before God by doing what the law says. The law only helps us understand what sin really is. Romans 3:19, 20 FBV

Mercy not sacrifice

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” Hosea 6:6 NIV.

Jesus quotes this verse in responding to the Pharisees’ complaint that he does not observe the laws of not associating with “known sinners”:

As Jesus left there he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth. Jesus said to him, “Follow me!” He got up, and followed Jesus. While Jesus was eating at Matthew’s home, many tax-collectors and sinners came and sat down at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this they asked Jesus’ disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?”

When Jesus heard the question, he replied, “People who are well don’t need a doctor, but those who are sick do. Go and find out what this means: ‘I want mercy, and not sacrifice, for I didn’t come to call those who do right, but sinners. Matthew 9:10-13 FBV.

Those who see themselves as keepers of the faith, observers of the law, and guardians of the received truth—they do not see themselves as sinners. And they are offended by any suggestion that they are not “righteous,” since they are the ones who have defined what is “righteous.” But the truth is very different:

We’re convinced that people are made right through trust in God, not from legal observance. Romans 3:28 FBV.

For God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants that the world would belong to him was not based on his law-keeping, but because he was made right through his trust in God. For if the inheritance is law-based, then the issue of trusting God is not valid, and the promise is pointless... Romans 4:13, 14 FBV.

Is it Lawful?

But back to the Sabbath story. After saying he is the Lord of the Sabbath and more important than the Temple, the shrine of the law, Jesus goes ahead and proves it:

Then Jesus left and went to their synagogue. There was a man there with a crippled hand. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” they asked him, looking for something to accuse him with.

“If any one of you has a sheep and it falls into a hole in the ground on the Sabbath, don’t you grab hold of it and pull it out?” Jesus asked them.

“Surely a human being is worth much more than a sheep! So then it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” The man held out his hand, and it was cured, just as good as the other hand. Matthew 12:9-13 FBV.

The law-based believers are only looking for a cast-iron example of Jesus’ flouting of their religious regulations. The test question is a reflection of their preoccupation: “Is it lawful?”

Jesus’ response is not a rabbinical debate, but a practical demonstration that *really* upsets the law-minded Pharisees. For Jesus goes to the heart of the question—not dealing with their perceptions of what is or is not acceptable, but what is the purpose of the Sabbath and the meaning of any laws surrounding it. Pointing out the hypocrisy of permitting the saving an animal—a valuable possession—but rejecting the saving of a human being from illness, Jesus shows that customs, regulations and rituals must be judged by the clear principles of right and compassion. “Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath,” he concludes, as if that needed to be said at all!

To prove the point Jesus does just that. He does good. He performs a miracle of healing.

The reaction of the legally-preoccupied is not of joy in the man’s healing, but bitter outrage at this deliberate infraction of Sabbath rules. After all, could Jesus not have waited until after Sabbath, they might have argued. It was not as if a deformed hand was a life-or-death emergency. One more day was not going to make any difference.

It is this attitude that Jesus deliberately confronts. Because Jesus wants to point out what is the right approach to God. Not a contractual law-observance, but a free acceptance of transforming grace.

But they see things very differently, and are furious at this affront to their methods. They see Jesus’ action as a direct attack on their very basis for divine acceptance. Consequently, they just want him dead:

But the Pharisees met together to plot how to kill Jesus. Matthew 12:14
FBV.

Killing Jesus

Here is revealed in complete clarity where obsession with legality leads. Jesus in his deliberate act showed the consequences of such beliefs, and how different this thinking is from God and His gracious salvation. The reaction of the self-appointed defenders of the law is to demand retribution, to exact vengeance, to require that the ultimate penalty be paid.

In Mark’s account, the attitudes and feelings of Jesus to the stubborn Pharisees are apparent:

“Is it legal to do good on the Sabbath, or to do evil? Should you save life, or kill?” he asked them. But they didn’t say anything.

After looking around at them in exasperation, very disturbed by their hard-hearted attitude, he told the man, “Stretch out your hand.” The man stretched out his hand, and it was healed. The Pharisees left and immediately began plotting with the Herodian party as to how they might kill Jesus. Mark 3:4-6 FBV.

Mark adds this mention of the Herodians—the ruling political party. Interesting how religionists and politicians, traditional enemies, join forces to destroy Christ...

Luke gives the feelings of the Pharisees as they reacted to the situation, and the immediate turning to less than spiritual thoughts in dealing with Jesus:

But the religious teachers and the Pharisees became completely mad with rage, and began planning among themselves what action to take against Jesus. Luke 6:11 FBV.

Killing grace. For when the challenge comes to your religious prejudices, the usual response is to strike back. For you feel you have invested so much in the system, you dare not even consider the possibility it could be wrong. Instead you would rather destroy the challenger.

So when grace is displayed for all to see, the controlling religionists take it upon themselves to plot to kill such grace, grace that they see as license and compromise. For if they let Jesus continue, they argue, then they will lose everything.

John explains the telling story, one of subterfuge and expediency that leads to rejection and betrayal. Immediately after the amazing resurrection of Lazarus—proof if ever it was needed of Jesus’ life-giving power—the reaction is plot and intrigue and conspiracy.

As a result, many of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary and saw what happened put their trust in Jesus. Others went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

The religious rulers and the Pharisees met in a council and wondered, “What shall we do? This man is doing many convincing miracles. If we let him continue, everybody will put their trust in him. Then the Romans will take away both our religious system and our nationhood.”

“You don’t understand a thing!” said Caiaphas, high priest for that year. “Don’t you realize that it’s better for you that one man die for the people so that the whole nation isn’t destroyed.” (He didn’t say this just on his

own behalf, but as chief priest for the year he was making a prophecy that Jesus was about to die for the nation. And not just for the Jewish nation alone, but for all God's people scattered abroad, that they might be brought back together into unity.)

From then on they plotted to kill Jesus. John 11:45-53 FBV.

They try all they can to make a legal case against him. The recourse is to law, to their concept of punitive penalty, and they are willing to compromise honesty, truth and justice to accomplish their objective. Strange how such observers of the law could so easily sacrifice such fundamental principles.

So when the end comes, the religious leaders accuse Jesus of law-breaking, even though they have a hard time getting false witnesses to agree, and even though pagan Pilate cannot find any basis for such charges (see Matthew 27:12, Mark 15:3, John 19:7). Jesus dies an outlaw, one who is paying the penalty for legal infraction. Having disposed of the Lord of the Sabbath by making sure he dies before the Sabbath, the law-keepers then go to their homes to keep the Sabbath.

If they had listened to the Sermon on mount, if they had taken to heart Jesus' "you have heard that it was said... but I say to you," if they had seen the foolishness of a religious system that made observance more important than relationship, they would not have crucified their Lord. Jesus's message illustrated how the stress on legality must transformed into the acceptance of grace through the graciousness of God. As Paul says later: "There's no way I can turn God's grace into nothing, for if we can be made right by keeping the law then Christ died a pointless death!" Galatians 2:21 FBV.

Set free

The truth is that Jesus came to set us free from all of that. The law is not bad, it just reminds us how we are enslaved to sin. Jesus' mission is to release us from sin's power, to heal us from its damage, and to set us free to make true choices, willing us to choose God and his truth for all eternity.

But now we've been set free from these legal obligations, and have died to what bound us, so that we can serve in the newness of the spirit and not the old letter of the law. What should we conclude? That the law is sin? Of course not! Even so, I wouldn't have known what sin was unless the law defined it Romans 7:6, 7 FBV.

We are set free from the system, this misguided approach to God that says all he wants is legal observance and for us to follow the obligations of the law. Instead there is a new law operating:

The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus set me free from the law of sin and death. What the law couldn't do since it was powerless due to our sinful human nature, God was able to do! Romans 8:2, 3 FBV.

System or Salvation?

This is the sad story of killing grace and the immense dangers of setting up a system of ritual observance and legal contract. The Pharisees thought they were special, repositories of God's system of salvation. But theirs was no system of salvation at all, rather a means of enslavement that led to mechanical worship and personal guilt. That's why Jesus reserved his strongest condemnation for such "true followers of God," calling them hypocrites and white-washed sepulchers. For there is nothing life-giving in such a crippling system of punishment and penance.

To save their system they were willing to sacrifice one man for the sake of the people, to forfeit the principles of truth and right and love, and to engineer the cruel death of an innocent man.

Their merciless plotting illustrates just how far we will go to defend our own systems of salvation. In the process, we kill grace, and crucify afresh the Son of God and put him to an open shame (see Hebrews 6:6).

Strange how often we forget, and how we take out our sharpened knives of criticism and condemnation, especially to deal with those in theological opposition. How often come the stories of individuals cut down by other members, of fellow workers mistreated, of characters assassinated, all in the name of some 'system' that demands such tributes, such pagan sacrifices.

Even our own theological systems are marred by the 'judicial' concepts that led to the rejection of Jesus. That God demands appeasement. That the relationship is based on legal contract. That rule-keeping is more important than understanding.

The terrible danger is not that we may have an imperfect and incomplete awareness of truth, and especially of salvation, but that we seek to make our faulty and even totally wrong concepts the definition of truth. False ideas of God, His character and nature, and the way in which He saves, led the religious systematizers to kill Jesus. The risk for us is that we do the same. Doing evil in the name of good is the ultimate blasphemy.

To reduce God's wonderful offer of free and full salvation to a set of mechanical concepts, to make a loving relationship into a legal contract, to turn truth into error—all of this is as easy as setting up a system based on human concepts of appeasement, satisfaction, penalties, payments, retribution, justification, punishment, and reparation.

Those who reject the "legal satisfaction" system are easily denounced as heretics, and as easily disposed of, since "right" is on the side of such a system—and as "justified" as Shylock wanting to collect on his pound of flesh.

The preoccupation with legality and systematized “justice” led to Jesus’ death on the cross, since it was “better” that one man should die than the whole system be compromised. The demonic hatred of the scribes and Pharisees that led to their conspiracy to kill Jesus came from their commitment to a false idea of God and his saving methods. Could it be that we share some of these feelings and purposes that come from our own false ideas about God and salvation?

After all, if God were looking for a people that were meticulously observing the regulations, then it should’ve all been over a couple of millennia ago! As Paul writes about the Jews, his own people:

My brothers and sisters, how my heart longs for the salvation of my own people! That’s my prayer to God! I can testify to their fervent dedication to God, but it’s not based on knowing him as he is. They don’t understand how God makes us right with him, and they try to make themselves right. They don’t accept God’s way of making people right. For Christ is the fulfillment of the law, setting right all who trust in him. Romans 10:1-4
FBV.

God’s grace is supposed to bring happiness and acceptance, not hostility and anger and plotting. If our theological system leads us to fight fellow believers, to use intrigue and deceit to damage others with whom we disagree, to think that the end justifies the means, then we need to think again.

In the end it’s our concept of God that moulds us. If we see him as harsh and stern, arbitrary and legalistic, we’ll be that way too. We try to make our way into his heaven by rigidly observing all he demands.

But if we understand God to be love personified: holy, pure and absolutely right love, then he will always explain his reasons, and want us to agree with him that his way makes the best sense of all. That way we obey out of love, not out of fear or compulsion.

© Jonathan Gallagher 2009

What is God really looking for?
3: Trusting friendship... that lets him make us right

Olympia, WA. October 2, 2009

Main text: Romans 3

What is God looking for? That's the basic question

The answers are so many, because this is the heart of all religion—to explain God and how this God relates to us—most of all, to explain what is required.

We have already examined the answer in terms of ceremonies and ritual. Even some of the Biblical material seems to suggest that—all the procedures that we to be followed, the laws to be observed. We've also looked at laws and taboos, observances and requirements as to what we think God wants.

This idea has at heart the thought that God is very particular, nit-picky even! That's why you MUST follow tradition—God demands it!—so this theory goes...

Not so much obedience, but compliance.

Form and ceremony, liturgy and rite. The ritual of religion so often gets in the way, so that things don't seem to make any kind of sense at all...

As a ten-year-old I went to church with my cousins who belonged to another faith. I asked them why they carried out certain actions. They shrugged, and said it was what you were supposed to do. No reason. No meaning. Just a requirement.

Like the story I heard of an old parish church in England.

A new vicar arrived, and was intrigued that as the choir precessed into church for worship they bowed reverently as they passed a certain point by the wall. Enquiring for a reason, none of the choir knew. They thought it was important, though, since it was a very old custom. Obviously it was very much a tradition of great piety.

Later, an old man in the congregation asked to speak to the vicar.

"I hear you're interested in the way the choir comes into church," he said.

"Yes," the vicar responded. "They have an interesting ritual. They all bow as they pass a certain point. Very reverent. I was just wondering why."

"Oh, that's easy," said the old man. "Before we had the electric light, that's where the old oil lamp-stand was. You had to duck your head as you came in, otherwise you'd hit your head. Course it's not there now, but they keeps on ducking." How that which is not understood becomes venerated...

Like the old Latin mass, in a language not understood by the common people. When the priest spoke the words “Hoc est corpus meum”—Jesus’ statement “This is my body,” the audience heard hocus pocus. Since they had been told bread and the wine became the body and the blood of Christ, they identified what the priest was doing as some kind of spell.

How religion becomes a load of hocus pocus... Or just a bunch of taboos, the things you’re not supposed to do... Taboos and observance. That’s what God really wants. Really?

Some point to evidence. Like in the Old Testament, the ritual cleanliness laws, for example. The way in which God identified some things as being unclean, for example. The people were told—just don’t touch eat, just don’t eat it, just don’t do it! So they didn’t, because God said so.

Of course we have learnt that much of the old ceremonial law was for good reasons of health and hygiene. But that’s not the point to those who live by rituals and taboos. You don’t ask questions, you do as you are told, because God demands it. That’s sufficient answer to those who relate to God in terms of performing the requirements.

[Taboos. The cheese thief story]

On being made us right...

Our friend Robert Schwint tells the story of his mother visiting the Kansas state fair 1915. There a barker was announcing “the most advanced machine in the world”! His mother paid the ten cents admission and went in to find a huge machine that looked like a harvester, with a tractor providing the power.

A “scrub lady” was there in her overalls, cleaning the machine when she “accidentally” fell into it. There was a whirring of gears and a clattering of machinery, and moments later out of the far end of the machine popped this same lady, but now dressed in finest Paris fashions! A scrub lady turned into a lady of high society. This was indeed the most advanced machine in the world!

Rather like what we’re looking for, or even expecting—to but put into one end of a divine machine and come out looking all good at the other!

Wanting to be right

The usual concept of what we need: food, shelter, protection, procreation etc. as described in many models of human drives has been challenged—not as fundamentally wrong, but as failing to describe human behavior as it is observed. Instead some researchers have pointed out a key concept: the need to be right. Even the most superficial review shows us that this “basic drive” is a very real motivator in society and in our own personal interactions. We want to be right, we want to be perceived as being right. We will insist that we are right even when the evidence points the other way!

So as we consider our situation in life, we want to see ourselves as operating rightly—from right principles, thinking rightly, and acting in ways that others consider to be right.

Of course reality tends to intrude into our self-examination, pointing out we think and act wrongly. We are mistaken—worse, we know the truth and yet fail to do what is right. Our mental operating systems are inherently flawed, and the good we want to do we don't do, while the things we don't want to do—that's what we end up doing. Like Paul in Romans 7, we cry out “who will liberate me from this body of death?” In other words, who will help change my way of thinking so I operate from principles that are inherently right, rather than the perverse, misguided, defective and self-absorbed motives that make up most of what we are...

Even our basic concepts of what is right are flawed. We rarely use our logic to determine whether an action is correct—we rely on previously learned behavior, societal conventions, and communal views. These tend to make more “sense” to us than what our (admittedly defective) consciences tell us.

For example: You tell a friend, “I cheated on my tax return,” and what's the response?

- “Everybody does that—so it's hardly wrong.” (Community validation)
- “You have to get even with the government some way—they're the greatest swindlers anyway.” (Social convention—the IRS are the bad guys).
- “Not for the first time, right? Done it for years, probably...” (Previously learned behavior).

As a result I walk away affirmed, since I've been told that my sense of doing wrong needs to be modified by the attitudes of those I relate to.

Tell someone something enough times and they'll probably end up believing what you say is true. *Experiments have demonstrated that even the most virtuous will carry out evil if others they respect tell them to.* Like the guards in concentration camps. Like the Milgram experiment in supposedly giving electric shocks to people.

“The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations. I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

“Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are

asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.” Milgram, Stanley. (1974), "The Perils of Obedience." *Harper's Magazine*. Abridged and adapted from *Obedience to Authority*.

Note that 65% of the participants administered the massive 450 volt shock to their “victims.”

[Also check out what people were willing to do as supposed prison guards in the Stanford prison experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo]

So what is truly right? Maybe that’s one thing to admit—we are so far from being good and doing good that we really don’t know. Which is where the Law comes in—not human law necessarily, but the Law of God. It makes it clear where we are defective. Yet in pointing out where we are wrong, it provides no power to become right.

What is God looking for? Observance? Letter of the law? Or recognition of hopelessness? Jesus sermon on the mount makes the “requirements” clear—you have heard it said but I say to you...

Imputed/imparted righteousness. Problem of imagery: Robe of righteousness as cover? Seeing Jesus? Washing/cleansing metaphors—or total change, born again. New from inside. Born from above. Nicodemus.

By beholding we become changed. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. How do we develop in our own personal relationships? How do we grow and change? Reinforcement of positive behavior... not magical transference of perfect character. How does God heal us? What “medicine” does he use? Or does even the sin equals disease metaphor break down too?

Let’s take a look at the book in the Bible that most clearly explains how we *are* made right with God...

I’m certainly not embarrassed about the good news! It’s God’s power to save everyone who trusts in him—to the Jewish people first, and then to the others as well. How God is right has been revealed, and that it’s all about trusting in him—from beginning to end. As Scripture says, “Those who live right do so by trusting God.” Romans 1: 16, 17 FBV.

Those who have persevered, trying to do what is right, will receive glory and honor, immortality and eternal life. But those who are self-seeking, who reject the truth, and willingly choose to do evil—they will receive punishment and furious hostility. Romans 2:7, 8 FBV.

For it’s not just a question of hearing what the law says that makes you right in God’s sight. It’s those who *do* what the law says who’ll be made right. Romans 2:13 FBV.

As scripture says, “Nobody lives right, not even one. Nobody understands, nobody looks for God. Everyone has turned their backs on him; everyone does what is completely wrong. Nobody does good, not a single one. Their talk is death like an open grave; their tongues spread deceit; their lips ooze with the venom of snakes. Their speech is full of bitter curses, and they are quick to kill. Their way leads to destruction and misery; they don’t know anything about living peacefully. Romans 3:10-17 FBV.

But now God’s true character of right has been demonstrated—it hasn’t got anything to do with the law, even though it was spoken of by the law and the prophets—God’s character of right has been demonstrated to everyone who believes and trusts in Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter who we are: everyone has sinned and we miss out on God’s glorious presence. God’s free and gracious gift is to make us right through the salvation of Christ Jesus, whom God presented to bring about reconciliation as we trust in him. He shed his blood to prove he is truly right, for previously he would hold back and pass over sins, but now at this time God proves he does what’s right, and that he makes right those who trust in Jesus. Romans 3:21-26 FBV

There you have it! God is the one who makes us right. It’s not based on performance, or pretentious piety, or anything. It’s based on God’s grace, and his desire to set us right! If you take nothing else away from our time together here, just take this one text!

And before we get proud of what we are, Paul goes right on:

So can we boast about anything? Absolutely not! Why? Because we don’t follow the law of requirements, but the law of trusting in God. We’re convinced that people are made right through trust in God, not from legal observance. Is God only the God of the Jews? Isn’t he the God of other people too? Yes, he is! There’s only one God, and he makes us right through our trust in him, whoever we are. Romans 3:27-30 FBV.

The Basis is Trust

So what is this all based on? It’s based on God, not on us. Our part is to trust the one who *can* make us right:

So the promise is based on trusting God, given as a free gift that is guaranteed to everyone, not just to those who observe the law, but also to those who trust like Abraham, the father of us all. Romans 4:16 FBV.

Jesus was betrayed because of our sins, and was raised to life to make us right. Now that we are made right by God as we trust in him, we have peace with him through our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s through him, trusting in God’s grace, that we’ve been brought to where we now stand, confidently expressing our hope of being part of God’s glory. Romans 4:25-5:2 FBV.

Assurance

The assurance is that God has done all that's necessary to bring us back, to show himself to us as a God worth trusting, who has made us his friends:

So now that we are made right by his death, we can be absolutely sure we'll be saved by him from the judgment to come. When we were his enemies God made us his friends through the death of his Son, so we can be absolutely sure he will save us through the life of his Son. But that's not all—now we can rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ to make us his friends.

Romans 5:9-11FBV.

[See also Romans 5:17-21, 6:11-18]. If we're tempted to look to ourselves, Paul reminds us that there's no hope there. For inside we see ourselves as we are, corrupted by sin, unable to choose as we want because of our sinful natures:

This is the rule I've discovered: if I want to do what's good, evil is always there too. Inwardly I happily agree with God's law, but I see a different law at work within me, fighting against the principles I've decided on in my mind and defeating me, so I become a prisoner of the law of sin inside me. This torment is making me completely miserable! Who will rescue me from this dead body of mine? Thank God—he does this through Jesus Christ our Lord! For while I personally choose with my mind to obey God's law, my human nature is subject to the law of sin. Romans 7:14-25 FBV.

Our response must be the same as Paul—only God can do this, only he can deliver us from this body of death! As Paul says later:

So how should we respond to all this? If God is for us, who can be against us? God, who did not hold back his own Son, but gave him up for all of us—how could he not freely give us everything? Romans 8:31, 32 FBV.

This is the God we've discovered, the One who can truly make us right, and who wins us back to love and trust in him. We can have complete confidence in this loving God, who wished to bring us all back into fullest confidence with every other being in this vast universe, restored as one of his loving and beloved children. What an amazing God!

But how will others here on Planet Earth know, unless we tell them? How do we persuade them that God is worth getting to know, that he is the one who can heal them too, that he is utterly trustworthy. As Paul says again:

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how can people call on someone they don't trust? How can they trust someone they

haven't heard about? How can they hear unless they're told? Romans 10:13, 14
FBV.

What kind of people are we to be? Ones that represent God. Ones who make sense as we speak about God. Ones who demonstrate the truth about God in our lives:

So I encourage you, my brothers and sisters, because of God's compassion for you, to dedicate your bodies as a living, holy offering that will please God, which is the logical way to worship him. Don't follow the ways of this world; rather be changed as your mind is spiritually renewed so you can demonstrate God's will: good, pleasing, and entirely complete. Let me say to each of you, through the grace given to me: no one should think of themselves better than they ought to. You should think about yourselves realistically, according to the amount of confidence God has given you. Romans 12:1-3 FBV.

There are many stories in the Bible that help us understand—both the right and the wrong ways of relating to God. I often think of Jonah, and the adventures of this wrong-headed prophet! He was even mad with God because God's goodness to the people of Nineveh made Jonah look bad! Then there's the rich young ruler who asked "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" We even misunderstand that one too, coming to the conclusion that God wants your money! Then what of Micah—and his wonderful summary of what God requires. Not all the sacrifices, or rivers of oil, not even the death of our firstborn children, but ourselves—doing what's right, loving what is right, and walking right with our God!

This is what friendship with God is all about. Think of being friends with God—Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, disciples... Why is being a friend so important? Because it depends on trust, having confidence in God as he is, that he is truly trustworthy and right, and that he is the only one who truly cares and can do something about us and our fatal situation. As Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

God seeks comrades and claims love, the Devil seeks slaves and claims obedience.

What do we conclude?

So in the end, what do we conclude? What is God really looking for? What do we want him to do for us—and the whole universe?

Sometimes people ask, "What's your problem?" So let's ask: What *is* our problem?

It's not a question of God fixing things because we are primarily in *legal* trouble with him. We're in trouble full stop—with ourselves and in every way you can think of. Above all, our problem is that we don't trust the only one who can help us. We don't have confidence in the only doctor who can heal us and save us from ourselves.

It's no coincidence that the word used in the gospels for salvation not only means *deliverance* but also *healing*. Take just one example. Jesus says the exact same words to two women in Luke: in the Greek New Testament the words are absolutely identical. In the first case—the woman

who washed his feet—the words are translated “Your faith has saved you.” (Luke 7:50 NIV). In the second instance—the woman with an issue of blood—the words are translated “Your faith has healed you.” (Luke 9:48 NIV). Identical words. Only one is translated differently—“saved” in one case, “healed” in the other. Why? Because of the context, obviously. But that the word for salvation should also mean healing is no accident. For God’s salvation means far more than rescue, but also transformation—healing by God’s curative power.

We even retain the same meaning in English. In the word *salvation* is that little word *salve*. Like eye-salve, or eye ointment. The salve we put on an infected part to cure it. Salvation is God’s healing from sin, restoring us into his image once more. The salve of God’s salvation. How?

By the process of trusting God. As Jesus said, “Your faith (trust in God) has healed you.” Healing comes from God, and is only possible through that basic attitude of loving, trusting dependence on God. What God really wants from us is the response of accepting and trusting him as he truly is, the divine Physician.

Seeing salvation this way helps us develop that right relationship towards our loving Healer. For only as we trust the Doctor will we respond to his treatment. If we choose to ignore his good advice, if we fail to take the medicine he prescribes, then who is to blame if we die, and die eternally? It’s not the Doctor killing his patient, but the patient’s rebellious distrust!

We respond to God’s offer of rescue and healing because that’s the only way. We love God just for what he is—not from fear of punishment, or desire for reward. In the end we accept God’s salvation for that is all we have, and we agree with God that he is good and true and right. Because he loves us and wants to win us back to love him and trust him.

Sadly so many—even those within the church—refuse God’s offer of salvation, or fail to understand what it truly is. We make up our own versions of salvation, and then try to impose our theory on ourselves and those around us. Salvation consists of doing this or that, or not doing this or that! The result? A dry and dusty experience; a hardening of the spiritual heart; a desert place that is not refreshed and revitalized by God’s healing and living water of eternal life. As Jesus said about the people of his day, quoting the words of Isaiah (6:10):

They have a hard-hearted attitude, they don’t want to listen, and they’ve closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand in their minds; and return to me and I would heal them. Matthew 13:15 FBV.

God’s healing is our salvation.

Final analysis

Jesus says: “This is the absolute truth: whoever hears what I say and trusts the one who sent me has eternal life...” (John 5:24 FBV). If that’s what you want, say Yes to God and his salvation. For salvation comes to you from God, and brings you to God. Not complicated at all! In proving

his nature, in restoring our sinful world, salvation is about God saving you, healing you, restoring you—in the context of all the “righting” that is part of the great controversy.

In the final analysis, what is God really looking for? People so settled into the truth that they cannot be moved. What truth? Too often we equate “the truth” to our body of doctrine. But what is “the Truth” that Jesus came to show us at such incredible cost? *It’s the truth about God!* That’s been the issue all along—that’s what the great controversy is all about. Jesus is the Truth—and he said that if you have the truth, it will set you free. Free from all the wrong concepts of God, free from the lies the Devil has told, free to love and trust him because we know him as he is. This is eternal life—to know God, and Jesus Christ—the God revealer!

What is God really looking for? To have the truth be accepted for what it is, and to have that truth lived by every being in the universe. To be completely and utterly trusted as God—Almighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. To have us all home with him eternally, when he shall be our God and we shall be his people. May that be soon for all of God’s creation. Amen.

© Jonathan Gallagher 2009